

Chapter 35

The Apex team's pit garage was a hive of frantic, high-stress activity. The deafening rat-tat-tat of pneumatic impact wrenches echoed off the walls as the crew rushed through their final tire pressure checks.

Underneath the car, Blaze Jankowski was completely still.

He was lying flat on the creeper board, holding a flexible, fiber-optic endoscope. He carefully threaded the tiny camera lens up through the dense, greasy maze of the car's undercarriage, navigating toward the blind spot behind the brake manifold.

Anissa stood right beside the car, holding the wireless tablet that was synced to Blaze's camera. Her eyes were glued to the screen. Her breathing was shallow. Every second that ticked by felt like a physical weight pressing down on her chest.

Forrest stood next to her, his arms crossed. He was confused, but he trusted Anissa implicitly. When his crew chief had tried to drag Blaze out from under the car, Forrest had physically blocked him, ordering his team to stand down.

00:30:00

Thirty minutes to the green flag.

The image on the tablet was a blurry, gray landscape of metal pipes and hydraulic fluid lines. Everything looked perfectly normal.

Forrest shifted his weight nervously. "Nissa, are you sure about this? The league inspectors cleared this car an hour ago. If we don't get it to the grid soon—"

"Wait," Anissa whispered fiercely, cutting him off.

On the screen, the camera lens twisted sharply to the left, illuminating a dark, recessed corner of the braking system.

"Gotcha, you son of a bitch," Blaze's muffled, raspy voice echoed from beneath the chassis.

Anissa pinched the screen, zooming in on the image.

Her stomach dropped into her boots.

0.0%

15:51 

There, on the thick, reinforced wall of the primary hydraulic brake line, was a microscopic black line. It was a laser cut. It was so incredibly thin and precise that it was practically invisible to the naked eye.

The cut had sliced through ninety-nine percent of the metal, leaving a membrane of material less than a millimeter thick. It was enough to hold the fluid during a static pressure test in the garage. But the second Forrest slammed on the brakes at top speed, the hydraulic pressure would blow that membrane to pieces.

It was a flawless, invisible death trap.

Forrest leaned over Anissa's shoulder, looking at the screen. All the blood instantly drained from his face. His freckles stood out starkly against his pale skin. A cold sweat broke out across his forehead.

He was a professional driver. He knew exactly what he was looking at.

"That's..." Forrest choked out, his voice trembling. "That's murder."

He grabbed Anissa's shoulder, spinning her around to face him. His eyes were wide with horror and desperate confusion. "How did you know? Nissa, how could you possibly know that was there?"

Anissa's heart skipped a beat. The secret of her rebirth was locked tight in her chest. She couldn't tell him the truth.

She forced her eyes to widen. She let her lower lip tremble, channeling the genuine terror she had felt when she watched him die in her past life.

"I had a nightmare," Anissa lied, her voice cracking perfectly. "A horrible, vivid nightmare last night I saw you hit the wall at the hairpin turn. I saw the car catch fire. I woke up screaming, Forrest. I just... I couldn't let you get in this car without checking"

Forrest stared at her tear-filled eyes. The sheer, irrational panic of a sister terrified for her brother's life was all the explanation he needed. He pulled her into a crushing hug, burying his face in her hair.

"You saved my life," Forrest whispered, his voice thick with emotion. "Thank you."

"We're not saved yet!" the crew chief yelled, running over with a clipboard. He looked at the tablet screen and cursed loudly. "Track closes in twenty minutes! We have to drop the entire transmission to replace that brake assembly! It's a four-hour job! We have to forfeit!"

If Forrest didn't race today, he would lose enough points to be eliminated from the championship. The assassin's backup plan would succeed.

Blaze slid out from under the car. He spat his unlit cigarette onto the concrete and wiped his greasy mouth with the back of his hand.

"Who said anything about replacing the assembly?" Blaze sneered.

He popped open his black tool chest. He pulled out a heavy, unmarked aerosol can and a roll of thick, woven black tape.

"Aerospace-grade liquid metal sealant and thermal-cured carbon fiber wrap," Blaze said, his eyes gleaming with mad genius. "I spray this into the cut, wrap it tight, and hit it with a heat gun. The patch will be three times stronger than the original steel pipe."

Forrest's eyes widened. "Is that legal?"

"It's highly illegal," Blaze grinned. "But it will keep you alive."

Blaze dove back under the car. His hands moved with terrifying practiced speed. The hiss of the aerosol spray was followed by the intense, localized hum of a high-powered heat gun.

Eight minutes later, Blaze rolled out. "Hit the pressure tester!"

The crew chief hooked up a portable hydraulic pump to the brake reservoir. He pumped the handle violently, pushing the system to three times its normal operating pressure.

The needle on the gauge shot up into the red zone and held perfectly still. Not a single drop of fluid leaked. The fix was flawless.

The track loudspeakers crackled to life. Ten minutes to green flag. All cars to the starting grid.

The garage erupted into a frenzy.

Forrest grabbed his fireproof balaclava and pulled it over his head. He strapped on his custom-painted helmet. His eyes, visible through the visor, were no longer filled with shock. They were burning with absolute, murderous fury. Someone had tried to kill him, and he was going to take it out on the asphalt.

He gave Anissa a sharp thumbs-up, then vaulted through the window of the race car.

The V12 engine fired up with an apocalyptic roar, shaking the concrete floor beneath Anissa's boots. The red and white car shot out of the garage, tires spinning merging into the roaring river of cars heading for the track.

Anissa stood in the cloud of exhaust fumes. She let out a long, shuddering breath. The timeline had been broken. Death had been

defeated.

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