

Until You're Mine / Humble Ex-wife is Now A Brilliant Tycoon

The Humble Ex-wife is Now A Brilliant Tycoon

Chapter 171:

Christina tilted her head slightly, her smile deepening. “I mean, you’re just jealous.”

Claude scoffed, his voice a sharp blade. “Jealous? Of you? You’re just some cheap whore! What’s there to be jealous of?”

The senior sales assistant quickly followed, her words equally crude. “Exactly. At best, you’re a mistress. But everyone knows the truth—you’re just a disgusting prostitute.”

Christina’s expression didn’t falter. She simply raised a finger and pointed at Claude. “You once tried to be someone’s boy toy. You pitched yourself to a wealthy boss—remember? But your charm didn’t make the cut. She passed.”

Color rushed into Claude’s face. “Lies! That’s a filthy lie!”

“Is it?” Christina asked with a light laugh. “Shall I ring up Ms. Carter? Should I say her full name for the room to hear?”

Claude opened his mouth, but no words came.

“I still have the video you sent her,” Christina added, her voice almost playful. “Your private audition, remember?”

Silence swallowed the room. Claude dropped his gaze, every trace of defiance gone. He didn’t dare meet her eyes now—not with the threat of that video looming. What unnerved him most wasn’t just that she knew—it was how she knew. That incident had been buried in the past. Or so he thought.

As Claude stood mute, the senior sales assistant broke the silence, her voice pitched in disbelief. “Mr. Palmer, really? You’re letting her rattle you? She’s obviously making things up—trying to frame you!”

“I haven’t forgotten about you.” Christina turned toward the senior sales assistant with a slow, deliberate grace. “Remember that delivery you made not long ago? To that glamorous estate on the west side? You weren’t just dropping off packages—you were

busy seducing the husband of that wealthy lady. He promised you a hillside villa, didn't he? And you laughed behind the wealthy lady's back, calling her a withered has-been. Said she couldn't keep up with you—in or out of the bedroom.”

The senior sales assistant flinched, lips quivering, breath caught in her throat. “How... how do you know that?” she muttered under her breath. Fear shimmered in her eyes now—raw and real. Who was this woman? Had she peeled open their lives layer by layer beforehand?

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“The truth has a nasty habit of crawling out, no matter how deep you bury it.” Christina let out a quiet, almost mocking chuckle. “You accused me without a shred of proof. But me? I've got evidence. I don't invent stories—I expose them. And I kind of tend to spread these juicy stories.”

Christina had done her homework. Claude and the senior sales assistant weren't exactly masters of discretion, and she had stumbled upon more than enough to weaponize. If they'd simply walked away and kept their mouths shut, she might've let it go. But they chose to push her—so now, they'd feel the sting of their own recklessness. They played dirty. She wouldn't play nice. She had extended grace, more than once. But they had stomped on every opportunity she offered. Now, they had only themselves to blame.

“You're just making things up!” the senior sales assistant snapped. “Keep this up and I'll take you to court! Apologize now, and maybe—maybe—I'll drop it.”

Christina sighed, almost with pity. “There it is again. That tragic inability to recognize a chance when it's handed to you.” She tilted her head. “You're really going to make me put the evidence on the table, aren't you?”

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The senior sales assistant sneered, clinging to arrogance like a crumbling shield. “Go ahead! Let's see this so-called evidence!”

Christina gave a slow, deliberate clap. Her smile never reached her eyes. “Impressive. You’re bold—I’ll give you that,” she said. “But this... this is your final chance.”

Watching that Christina didn’t immediately present any proof, the senior sales assistant felt her nerves relax ever so slightly. Relief flickered across her face as she convinced herself she’d guessed right about Christina’s lack of evidence. Chances were that Christina had merely picked up a bit of gossip—surely she had nothing substantial.

“That wealthy lady was right in the thick of it,” Christina said, a playful smile appearing on her lips and amusement coloring her voice.

Her statement sent a ripple of conversation through the crowd. Interest peaked among the onlookers.

“Things are getting wild. Never imagined I’d catch this juicy gossip.”

“Who would have guessed that the saleswoman is a mistress? Yuck! She delivered a handbag to me just last week.”

“She’s hardly young herself. Calling her client old behind her client’s back—she’s got some nerve.”

“Imagine dropping thousands on handbags, only for that tramp to set her sights on your husband and make out with him behind your back. Talk about bad luck!”

“Ugh! I bought bags from her too. The thought that my purchase helped someone like her get a commission makes me sick!”

Fear gnawed at the senior sales assistant, who desperately tried not to look at the wealthy lady in question. Sweaty palms twisted together, her thoughts raced in panic. Absolutely not! She had to leave this place right away! Making for the exit seemed like her only hope.

Christina, however, had no intention of allowing an easy escape. Responsibility had finally come knocking—this was what the senior sales assistant had brought on herself.

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In a flash, Christina caught the senior sales assistant by the wrist, leaving her shocked and scrambling to get free.

“Let go! Let go of me!”

“Isn’t this what you were after? I’m just helping you get what you wanted,” Christina retorted, her voice icy and laced with mockery.

Pure terror drained the color from the senior sales assistant's cheeks, but no amount of struggling freed her. Desperation made her try to bite Christina's hand.

That effort failed as Christina yanked her arm away, avoiding the bite entirely. A quick twist sent the senior sales assistant stumbling aside, landing her out of reach.

A calm, unwavering voice rang out from Christina. "Mrs. Frazier, you've spent years supporting this woman—piling up commissions with every purchase—yet she's been sneaking around with your husband behind your back."

Color drained from the senior sales assistant's cheeks, leaving her looking ashen. Desperate, she shook her head, hoping Leona Frazier wouldn't believe it. "Please, that's not true! She's framing me!" she hastily said, her voice trembling as she knew exactly what fate awaited the mistresses of Leona's husband, Clifford Frazier. No mercy ever came for those women—just years of misery.

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Trust shattered inside Leona as the truth unfolded so publicly. Humiliation and betrayal fanned the flames of her fury, making her seethe. She had always backed the senior sales assistant's efforts, and even on days when she had no intention of making a purchase, she found a way to lend support just to help out. Whenever the mood struck her, she would surprise the senior sales assistant with luxury items—sometimes jewelry, sometimes designer clothes, or even high-end handbags. Discovering she had been pampering a traitor left her feeling sick.

Without warning, Leona's anger erupted. She strode over and delivered a ringing slap, snapping the senior sales assistant's head to one side. Sophistication and grace defined Leona, age never seeming to dull her radiance. Anyone seeing her would guess she was decades younger. Yet all the skincare in the world could not restore lost years.

"Mrs. Frazier, please! I've been loyal to you! I swear, I would never do something like this!" the senior sales assistant said, reaching out desperately as her voice grew louder.

“You heard her say there’s evidence. If there’s proof, then you’re still lying! How dare you protest? You’re nothing but a traitor!” Leona’s glare was sharp as a knife, her fury spilling over as she kicked the senior sales assistant and knocked her to the floor.

Wails of despair filled the store as the senior sales assistant hit the floor, sobbing for mercy. Tears streamed down her face as she doubted that Christina might actually have proof.

“Mrs. Frazier, please, don’t let yourself be taken in by this woman’s lies.”

Pointing at Christina, the senior sales assistant continued, “Just look at her—she’s far more attractive than I am. She’s probably the real mistress here. How else could she have gotten her hands on that exclusive black card? Maybe many of your husbands have already fallen for her! You can’t let yourself be fooled by someone like her. Mrs. Frazier, she’s just trying to turn us against each other so you won’t have any allies against her. I beg you, don’t trust a word she says.”

Christina hadn’t expected the audacity—the senior sales assistant still had the nerve to slander her? Bold. And foolish.

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Christina said, her voice cold and clear as she gazed at the senior sales assistant, “I don’t have Mr. Frazier’s number, but you do, along with a trail of flirtatious messages and damning evidence. Sure, maybe he deleted them, but I’d bet good money you didn’t. After all, if the wedding doesn’t happen, you’ll need something to hold over him, right?”

Christina turned to Leona with a pointed look. “Check her phone. It’ll all be there. And if she refuses? Well, that says more than enough. Wouldn’t you agree, Mrs. Frazier?”

Leona didn’t hesitate and held out her hand toward the senior sales assistant. “Give me your phone. Now.”

The senior sales assistant flinched, panic flashing across her face. “I didn’t bring it.”

Leona’s eyes narrowed, her voice rising with fury. “Don’t insult my intelligence. You use your phone every day to chase clients and pad your numbers. You expect me to believe you left it behind?”

Leona was pissed off. Did this saleswoman take her for a fool? She might not be young anymore, but senile? Not even close.

“I—I’ll show you my phone, I swear, but my stomach—it really hurts—I need to use the restroom—”

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The senior sales assistant didn't get to finish. The sharp crack of a slap silenced the room.

Leona's eyes blazed with fury, her voice cutting through the room like a blade. "You still think you can fool me? Do I look like an idiot to you?" She stepped forward, her glare unrelenting. "Hand over your phone. Right now. If there's nothing incriminating, I'll apologize in front of everyone—and I'll even give you a house as compensation."

The senior sales assistant's jaw clenched, her teeth digging into her lip. But she didn't move. She couldn't. The messages between her and Clifford were still there. Their exchanges weren't just explicit—they were dripping with contempt for Leona. She'd mocked Leona in the worst ways and said things far crueler than what Christina had hinted at. If those messages were seen, it wouldn't just ruin her career—it might destroy her.

The senior sales assistant's hands trembled, her eyes darting around the room like a trapped animal searching for an escape. Then, suddenly, she bolted. Rushing toward the entrance, she let out a desperate, theatrical scream. "Help! Someone help me! They're attacking me!"

Gasps rose in the room, but Leona didn't chase after the senior sales assistant. She didn't need to. Everything was clear now. The panic, the refusal, the shameless performance—it all pointed to one undeniable truth. That saleswoman must have really had an affair with her husband. The weight of betrayal struck Leona like a physical blow. She swayed as her knees buckled, and her vision blurred at the edges.

Christina reached out just in time, steadying Leona before she could collapse. "Easy now, Mrs. Frazier," she said gently.

"Thank you," Leona murmured, clinging to Christina's arm with more than just physical support—there was genuine gratitude in her eyes.

Moments ago, Leona had nearly defended that vile saleswoman. If not for Christina, who had intervened, she might have wrongly turned on Christina. The weight of that near-mistake pressed heavily on her chest, like a stone.

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“I’m grateful, Miss Jones,” Leona said earnestly. “You’ve helped me see certain people’s true colors today. If you ever need anything—anything at all—just say the word.”

Christina smiled. “Right now, the best thing you can do is go home and take care of your household matters. You may not be able to win your husband’s heart back—but don’t let go of your wealth.”

The words hit like a quiet thunderclap. Leona exhaled. At her age, if divorce had been an option, she would have taken it years ago. She knew she couldn’t control her husband’s wandering heart, but Christina was right—she could certainly control the purse strings. For herself. And for her children.

“Thank you for the advice,” Leona said softly, looking at Christina with newfound respect.

Christina smiled. “And take care of your health, Mrs. Frazier. That’s your greatest asset, after all.”

It sounded like a casual remark, almost too casual. But something about the way Christina said it—the glint in her eyes, the subtle weight in her tone—made Leona stiffen. She felt as if Christina’s clear and sharp gaze had seen through something.

Lately, Leona had been constantly tired, brushing it off as stress, poor sleep, and age. But now, unease prickled along her spine. She couldn’t ignore it. Not anymore. If she didn’t get an answer, she feared she wouldn’t find any peace tonight.

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“Miss Jones, I take it that you’ve noticed something is wrong with me? Do you have any experience with medicine?” Leona asked quietly.

“Absolutely. A veterinarian is just as much a doctor as anyone else,” Christina said, a soft laugh slipping from her lips.

Leona smiled, thinking Christina was merely joking. “You certainly have a sense of humor.”

“I’m not kidding—I practice veterinary medicine, and I have the license to prove it,” Christina replied, her expression turning solemn as her smile faded.

A flicker of awkwardness crossed Leona’s face, but she didn’t think Christina was playing her. After a moment’s hesitation, she sincerely asked, “Miss Jones, have you sensed something? I trust your judgment.”

“Make an appointment at the hospital for a full examination—and be mindful of everything you eat and drink,” Christina replied, her words measured yet straightforward.

Christina had picked up on a faint trace of poison clinging to Leona, a hidden odor that no one else seemed to notice. Had Leona not stood so near, even Christina might have missed it, which meant the poisoning hadn’t reached a dangerous stage yet.

Christina understood medicine and toxins equally well, fully aware that with the right skill and dosage, a substance could heal just as easily as it could cause harm.

Leona initially assumed Christina was simply worried about routine health concerns. The mention of being careful with food and drink, however, jolted her. Eyes wide, she struggled to process the grave danger. A terrible suspicion crept in. Was someone targeting her? Her voice unsteady, Leona sought a clear answer. “Are you suggesting...?”

“Yes. Get screened for toxins and be wary of those around you,” Christina leaned in close and whispered. Whoever was slipping poison to Leona had to be someone she counted on completely. When it came to the culprit’s identity, that was a mystery only Leona could solve.

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Christina knew her responsibility ended with the warning. She wasn’t about to involve herself in Leona’s family matters. If Leona lacked the resolve to handle it, it wasn’t her concern.

Love, after all, could make even the sharpest woman blind to danger, regardless of age. Some women managed to save themselves from their troubles. Others waded in willingly, or chose to remain lost in denial.

Leona’s color drained, her fists curling slowly as dread settled over her. Could it be the person she suspected? After enduring for years, this was what she got?

Steely resolve glimmered in Leona's eyes, even as heartbreak lingered beneath the surface. Refusing to endure any more betrayal, she made up her mind to fight for herself at last.

Years of surviving as Clifford's wife had taught her more than enough strategy. Compassion had always been her weakness, leaving her unable to act with the necessary ruthlessness. Countless sacrifices from her family had kept her husband's name afloat when everything else had failed. Now that kindness had been repaid with cruelty, she saw no reason to continue being the bigger person.

"I understand, Miss Jones. Thank you. I owe you a debt of gratitude," Leona said, a sense of calm washing over her.

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"Make the hospital your first stop," Christina said, her voice gentle yet unwavering.

Leona answered with a simple nod. "I will."

Soon after Leona's departure, Valerie pushed Chloe's wheelchair forward and stepped closer to Christina, her voice thick with gratitude as she offered thanks again and again.

"Don't waste this chance Christina's given you. Give it everything you've got," Chloe said, her smile warm and full of support. Valerie nodded vigorously. "I will give it my all!"

A spark of curiosity prompted Chloe's next question. "What were you and that lady talking about, Christina?" Distance had kept her from catching the conversation.

"Oh, Mrs. Frazier was just saying her houseplants had gotten a bit wild and needed some trimming," Christina replied poignantly.

"Oh," Chloe responded, missing the point entirely, her expression the picture of innocence. "Leona is truly something else! I can't even keep a cactus healthy."

A sly smile tugged at Christina's lips. "Certain things have a way of being prickly..."

Before anyone noticed, Christina slipped the exclusive black card back into Chloe's hand. Earlier, Chloe had secretly handed it to her. From then on, Brad stuck by their side, eager to impress and share everything he knew about the company's long, storied past.

Suddenly, a security guard rushed in, breathless and shouting, "Mr. Cohen! There's an emergency!"

Brad had just been lavishing attention on Christina and Chloe when a sudden, frantic cry from a security guard cut through the atmosphere. His expression tightened immediately. What could possibly warrant such panic?

"Excuse me for just a moment," Brad said to Christina and Chloe before pulling the guard aside and lowering his voice. "What's happened?"

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The guard wasted no time. "Miss Jones' car got smashed!"

A wave of shock hit Brad, nearly making him lose his balance. "Are you certain it was her car?"

"Without a doubt! That cute Mini car stood out among all the Rolls and Bentleys. Plus, security footage shows Miss Jones parking it herself," the guard explained breathlessly.

Brad asked, "Was it parked in the INQ lot?"

"Yes! And we've already detained the culprits," the guard replied quickly.

"Who in their right mind would dare wreck a car in INQ's lot? Are they begging for trouble?" Brad could hardly believe it. Everyone in the city knew INQ belonged to the Scott family. Trashing a car parked in the INQ lot was the same as spitting in the Scotts' faces. Whoever pulled this stunt must have a death wish.

"Beats me," the guard replied, just as bewildered as anyone could be. Brad waved the guard away and made a beeline for Christina. "What happened?"

Chloe's head turned in every direction, her sightless eyes searching for the source of Brad's voice.

"Miss Jones, your car... It's been vandalized," Brad said cautiously. Although he bore no blame, a wave of unease swept over him as he dreaded that Christina would hold him responsible.

Chloe jolted upright, shock etched across her face. "The car was wrecked? Who did it? Do they have a death wish? The nerve of pulling this at INQ!"

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Chloe couldn't process this. That Mini car was no ordinary ride—it was a precious gift from her brother to Christina. Whoever did this had nerves of steel or a death wish.

Each INQ branch across the country had been handed to Chloe by her parents. It wasn't just a chain of stores—it was the Scott family's way of showing just how much she meant to them. And now, unbelievably, someone had the audacity to stir up trouble on her turf.

Brad didn't waste a second. "Security has already apprehended the two responsible," he said, his words tumbling out in haste.

"Let's go take a look first," Christina said, her voice hiding the storm of anger building underneath.

"Let me help you with that, Miss Jones," Brad suggested, stepping forward to take charge of the wheelchair Christina guided. Christina nodded her thanks. "I appreciate it."

Her unexpected politeness threw Brad off. "Don't mention it. It's the least I can do."

Waving Valerie over, Brad instructed her to gather up their shopping bags before ushering the entire group toward the exit.

At the Scott Group's regional office, Edwin Green, Dylan's secretary, walked into the CEO's office and quietly placed a file on the desk.

"Mr. Scott," he called out.

Dylan glanced up, eyes cold as steel, the sharp edge in his stare unmistakable. "What is it?"

Edwin's tone was grave. "Just got word—Miss Jones' car was vandalized in INQ's parking lot."

Dylan froze. In an instant, the air in the office turned cold. His dark eyes turned glacial, devoid of any warmth. Fingers clenched tight around his pen, knuckles straining as if he might snap it in half.

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Edwin couldn't help but shiver. One glance at Dylan's stormy face already told him what fate awaited those idiots who had messed with the Mini car. Dylan rarely looked this deadly, but when he did, the ones responsible always ended up regretting it. There was no mistaking it—Christina meant more to Dylan than he ever let on.

"Did Christina get hurt?" Dylan asked, a subtle furrow cutting across his brow.

"She's fine," Edwin replied. "Security nabbed the vandals—two men. They went straight for her car, but it's obvious they're just the hired hands. Both are keeping their mouths shut. We haven't managed to get a word out of them."

A quiet breath left Dylan, tension easing only a fraction with the news that Christina was unharmed. But as he thought of the very first car he'd gifted her being wrecked, his eyes darkened dangerously. His next words were cold and absolute. "Get to the bottom of this—immediately."

"Understood!" With a crisp bow, Edwin made his exit from Dylan's office.

Beneath the bright lights of the INQ parking lot, Christina stood in silence. What had once been her favorite car now lay twisted and mangled, the sight stirring anger in her usually unreadable eyes. Luxury vehicles filled her garages, but no other car had meant quite so much—this one was special because it was a heartfelt gift. Had it been any other high-end ride worth millions being wrecked, she wouldn't have batted an eye. But this one was different.

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"Christina, how bad is the damage?" Chloe asked, her voice quivering with worry as she struggled to understand what was happening due to her sight issue.

A gentle smile touched Christina's lips. "It's nothing serious. We'll get it fixed."

Truthfully, the damage was nearly total—whoever had done this clearly wanted the car beyond saving. Replacement would have been the easy route. Most people would have demanded payment and found a new toy.

But not Christina. Even if she claimed damages, she wouldn't swap it out—this was the first time she'd ever received such a cute little gift. Teasing about deducting the car costs from her salary had only been half-serious. The sentimental value of the car was what truly mattered. A faint tremor ran through Christina's hand as she pressed her thumbnail into her finger, holding back her frustration.

"The culprits have already been turned over to the police," Brad said, his voice cutting through the silence.

The manager of INQ Mall had assured them that the mall would take full responsibility for Christina's loss, regardless of whether the culprits could afford the compensation.

"What did they say? Is there someone behind this?" Christina asked, her tone edged with curiosity.

A quick shake of Brad's head followed. "Nothing like that. They insisted it was just about the car—they trashed it because they hated the way it looked."

Chloe asked, "Christina, do you believe someone hired them to do so?"

"Just a passing thought," Christina replied smoothly. "Let's head back now."

"Alright," Chloe agreed. "I would ask the driver to pick us up."

"Let me give you a lift," Brad suggested, his eagerness to help clear in his voice.

Accepting Brad's offer without hesitation, Christina gave him a polite nod. "Thank you for your kind offer. Sorry to trouble you."

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"No trouble at all! Really, it's an honor," Brad said eagerly, grinning from ear to ear.

With practiced enthusiasm, he escorted them to a sleek black SUV, holding the door open with a small, respectful bow. "Please."

Helping Chloe settle in, Brad made sure the wheelchair was folded and stored with care before climbing into the driver's seat.

Rolling out of the INQ parking lot, he could hardly contain his excitement. Not only did he get to be their temporary driver, but he'd also managed to get Christina's number. The thrill nearly had him pressing the gas too hard.

"If there's anything you ever need, Miss Jones, just let me know," Brad said earnestly.

Her response was short and unruffled. "Alright."

Brad wasn't the least bit bothered by her aloofness—if anything, he found it fitting for someone of her stature.

When the black SUV finally arrived at Bayview Estates, Brad watched as Chloe and Christina made their way up to a villa perched partway up the hillside. The choice of neighborhood matched everything he'd come to suspect—Christina was a person of influence, someone who belonged in the city's upper circles.

Only after Christina disappeared through the door did Brad pull away, feeling luckier than he had in years, Christina's contact details saved safely in his phone.

Elsewhere, a pink convertible roared down the street, wind whipping Thea's hair. A scowl creased her face.

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"You told me that woman was just your brother's useless ex. Then why does she have an exclusive black card?"

"I—I have no idea! She can't really own it. She must've borrowed the card or stolen it just to show off!" Katie said quickly.

Snatching off her sunglasses with one hand, Thea kept the other tight on the wheel. "And you're positive that car was hers?"

"Yes! I memorized that license plate—I'd recognize it anywhere," Katie insisted.

An icy chuckle slipped from Thea's lips. "Wrecking her car was only a warning. Next time, it won't just be the car."

Katie opened her mouth to respond, but then her eyes widened in horror. "Ah... Watch out!"

Some thoughtless idiot had decided to park a damn truck sideways across the entire road. Sure, it wasn't exactly a high-traffic area, but one careless driver barreling through could end up in a wreck.

Screeeeech! Thea slammed the brakes, the tires screaming in protest as the car lurched to a halt, just feet from disaster. Her breath caught in her throat. For a moment, all she felt was pure panic—then fury surged in its place like a tidal wave.

Beside her, Katie flinched and instinctively threw her arms up. Slowly, she peeked through her fingers, her pulse hammering in her chest, eyes wide as saucers. What kind of psycho would block the road like that? Thea was already out of the car, seething. Her heels clicked against the asphalt like war drums as she marched straight toward the truck.

"Hey! You up there!" she shouted, her voice sharp enough to cut glass. "Are you trying to kill someone today, or are you just terminally stupid? What kind of idiot parks a truck across the whole damn road?"

Her anger only escalated. "You got a death wish? Fine! But don't turn the rest of us into collateral damage, you reckless jackass! Or what—are you an orphan with no one to mourn you if you crash and burn? Find some other place to die in! Somewhere far away from me!"

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Her tirade died mid-sentence. Her hands shot up, her face draining of all color. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out.

Katie, who had just stepped out of the sports car, frozen with her own fury ready to explode, locked eyes with a chilling sight—a gun aimed squarely at Thea's head. Her breath caught. Oh no. Was this a kidnapping?

Katie's instincts screamed for her to run. But as she turned around, she felt the cold, unmistakable press of steel against her forehead. Fear flooded through her, paralyzing her in place. Her arms jerked into the air, her eyes widening in primal terror.

"M-mister! L-let's... Let's talk, okay?" she stammered, her voice cracking under the weight of her fear.

Her body trembled violently, her knees threatening to buckle. Only sheer willpower kept her upright. "I-I-I..." she tried to breathe, but each gasp came out shallow and ragged.

Why her? Why today? Of all the reckless adventures with Thea, why did this have to end like a horror movie?

Tears blurred Katie's vision, pooling in the corners of her eyes. "I-I didn't curse at you guys, right? P-please, don't shoot... If it's money you want—I have money! L-lots of it, I swear!" The words tumbled out, a sob-laced plea wrapped in panic.

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Next to her, Thea was breaking. Silent tears streamed down her face as she stood frozen, her mouth clamped shut in terror. "I-I've got money too," she whispered finally, her voice barely audible. "Please... Please don't shoot..." Thea's voice trembled as she pleaded, her hands raised in surrender.

Suddenly, a shadowy figure stepped forward—clad entirely in black, his face concealed beneath a ski mask. The cold steel of his gun pressed firmly against Thea's forehead.

"Ahh!" Thea gasped, the scream ripping from her before she could stop it. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I shouldn't have yelled at you like that—please, don't kill me! Please!"

Her panicked cry triggered Katie's own terrified yelp.

"Shut it!" The figure's voice cut through the chaos like a blade—icy, sharp, with no room for mercy.

Both women snapped their mouths shut instantly, though tears streamed freely down their cheeks. Ransom or no ransom, the gnawing terror of death eclipsed all else. They knew too well the stories of kidnappers who took the money and still killed the hostages. They needed an escape, but their legs felt like lead. Running was impossible. Even if they could somehow flee, outrunning a bullet wasn't an option.

"L-look, my family's filthy rich! Just—please—let me go, and I swear, you can have anything you want!" Desperation clawed at Thea's throat as she threw out her most valuable bargaining chip, her voice breaking.

“Enough with the chatter—move it! Into the car!” the figure shouted, waving his gun with growing irritation.

Thea startled, fear tightening her throat. “No—okay! I’m going! I’m going!” she stammered.

Desperation painted her face, tears carving fresh tracks down her cheeks as she shuffled closer to the truck.

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A sharp blow from the gun barrel caught her off guard. “Not that one!” the figure yelled, rapping her head to drive the point home.

“Please—don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” Thea yelled, her voice breaking as panic sent her nearly to the ground.

Trembling, Thea asked, “If not that one, then where do you want me?”

The figure’s cold reply came quickly, “Your own car.”

Realization dawned, and Thea bobbed her head in frantic agreement. “Right, right! I’ll get in—don’t shoot!” She scurried toward her sports car without looking back. A wild urge screamed at her to bolt, but with a gunman shadowing her and another keeping Katie under the muzzle, escape wasn’t an option.

Defeated, the two women raised their hands and climbed back into the low-slung car, compliance their only weapon.

Once behind the wheel, Thea’s mind raced—she considered slamming the car in reverse and mowing these men down. It would have been a brilliant plan, except fate wasn’t on her side. Her car keys were somehow missing.

A growled command cut through the tension. “Seatbelts. Now.”

Both women fumbled nervously, buckling up with shaking hands. They couldn’t guess what these men wanted, but for now, compliance seemed like their only hope—maybe if they stalled long enough, someone would spot the danger and intervene.

Just as the last seatbelt clicked, one of the men snapped, “Now!”

At his order, several burly figures in black masks leapt from the truck bed. Without hesitation, they started hauling down massive blue plastic barrels—each one sending a new chill down Thea’s and Katie’s spines. What was in the barrels?

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