



Season Two:

Episode Two

Maintenance Director Phillip Hedd was on his way to the woods. After a couple shovels of dirt, it occurred to him that he was setting himself up to be caught. Of course the first thing they would do was check his property. And with Percival having witnessed him leaving with the chest, there's no way they wouldn't put two and two together.

No, better to take the chest (and Cordelia inside it) to a location no one would ever think of. Some place remote, like the Chance County Nature Preserve. It was late enough in the day and only an hour south of his property. He could take a maintenance road, find an untended spot, and dump her there.

Luckily, he had a lot of tools and pulling Cordelia out of the hole he'd prepared proved easier than he'd thought. One of the sides of the chest was terribly scored by rocks and roots as it was dragged out, but Phillip figured there was no reason to worry about that.

Now only 20 minutes from the preserve's maintenance road, he was feeling very pleased with himself. The Count would be impressed by his ability to handle himself and take care of problems, which also meant that he might put in a good word with the Senator. Who knew where this alliance could take him?

Just then, he heard a muffled pop and felt the pressure go out of one of the tires. He pulled over onto the shoulder and stepped out to assess the damage. A flat tire.

Grumbling, he began the process of changing the tire. As he was positioning the jack, he heard a car pull up behind him before he saw its flashing lights. He stood up, wiped his hands on his jeans and waved at the officer, who stepped out of the cruiser.

Phillip's heart raced as the patrolman swaggered his way. Phillip tried to keep his cool. *He's just stopping by to help, that's all. Nothing suspicious here.*

He prayed that Cordelia was passed out or that if she were still awake, she wouldn't be able to hear him talking to someone. *It's fine, it's fine*, he told himself.

"Got a flat?" the officer asked.

"Yes, sir. Won't take but a moment to change," Phillip replied. Could the man tell he was sweating? Phillip looked down, then back up at the officer, then down again. *Stop acting shifty*, he told himself.

"Happy to help. How about you turn on your hazards and we'll get this changed in no time?"

"Yeah, sure," Phillip said, giving the cop what he hoped was his most genuine "aw, shucks" grin. But as Phillip flipped the lights' switch, he saw the man leaning over the tailgate, looking at the chest.

"Got the hazards on, haha," said Phillip. "Thanks for reminding me." He wiped sweat from his forehead. He needed to calm down.

"Say, this chest is pretty nice. They don't make 'em like this anymore. My mother would love that!"

"Thanks. It's been in the family for ages. I'm actually on my way to get it appraised."

"Oh! Well, we need to get you ready and on your way then."

But even as he said this, Phillip noted with alarm that another cruiser was pulling up behind them. Had he misjudged the cop's intentions? Was the talk of the hope chest just a way to draw his attention until they were able to catch him, release Cordelia, and take him to jail?

The cruiser idled for a moment, and then a woman stepped out. Hands on her gun belt, blonde hair pulled back and reflective shades obscuring her eyes, she strode forward. Phillip found her much more menacing than the other officer.

"What's up, boys?" she asked. "Everything okay?"

Phillip thought he was going to have a heart attack. *Just. Keep. Smiling*, he told himself.

“This young man,” the officer smiled at Phillip, who had at least a decade on him, “had a flat tire. He’s on his way to see an antique appraiser...”

“Oh, my goodness!” the other officer exclaimed, taking her shades off, her attention drawn to the last place Phillip wanted her to look. “What a beautiful hope chest! My mother would love that!”

“Um, thanks,” Phillip said. “It’s seen some damage so I figured I might as well see what it’s worth before I decide to repair it.”

“I will happily take it off your hands. What would you want for it?”

Phillip literally gulped. “I have to get it appraised.”

“Let me escort you,” she said, smiling brightly. “Bet you never had a police escort before, have you?”

Phillip shook his head. He was certain he was about to throw up. Or pass out. Perhaps both. *How do I get out of this?*

But Phillip didn’t need to worry about that. Because at that very moment, Cordelia woke up. She wasn’t sure when she passed out from fear, but she instinctively knew that something was very different. Things didn’t seem so muffled.

He didn’t bury me after all, she thought. Which meant that she could still find a way out of this. She was breathing relatively easily, so air was still making its way into the chest. She told herself to keep calm and to avoid breathing too deeply. She didn’t want to risk hyperventilating.

She could even see some light peeking in from one corner. Being tossed head over heels earlier had obviously weakened the chest. And then...

“Aw, I couldn’t ask you to do that. Don’t want to take advantage of taxpayer dollars,” Phillip said.

Phillip! Cordelia ran down a mental list of curse words that would adequately describe that snake, then paused. Taxpayer dollars. Phillip was talking to a public servant of some kind. And he sounded nervous. She listened closely. Yes, she definitely heard the sound of cars passing. They were on a road.

A cop! She whispered to herself, then with a deep breath, she began to beat her fists and kick her feet against the sides of the chest. She couldn’t move much, but she hoped there was enough force behind her movements to draw their attention.

Phillip could swear that even the trucks on the highway paused when the chest began to rattle.

The officers, who had been so friendly just a few moments earlier, suddenly turned serious. “Sir, what’s in the chest?” the female officer asked.

“Um, nothing,” Phillip said, knowing even as he said it how futile the answer was.

“Help!” a muffled voice cried out from inside. Both officers took a step back.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to open the chest,” the first officer said, hand drawing to his firearm.

Phillip raised his hands. “I can explain everything officer.”

The female officer rushed forward as Phillip stepped back. The clasps were thrown back and with a loud grunt, the chest’s top was pushed open. Cordelia Buttons sat up, blinking in the sudden light.

“Officers, I might have a few things to add to his statement,” she said.

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