Many Careful Owners

One Careful Owner is a story of a second-hand car sale that goes deadly wrong!

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Mike sprawled across his living room sofa, watching dust motes dance in the afternoon sunlight. The newspaper lay folded across his chest, but his mind wandered to that impossible dream—finding a 1954 Bel Air, preferably in blue and white, with those iconic whitewall tyres. He knew it was foolish. Cars like that were museum pieces now, locked away in climate-controlled garages or passed down through generations like family heirlooms.

With a resigned sigh, he lifted the newspaper and flipped to the classified section. His eyes drifted past the usual small-town offerings: lawn care services, appliance repairs, guitar lessons. The mundane rhythm of rural offerings filled the columns until he reached the vehicles section.

Suddenly, his world stopped.

FOR SALE: 1954 blue and white Chevrolet Bel Air. Single owner. Good condition, minor restoration needed. Serious inquiries only.

The words seemed to burn into his retinas. Mike sat bolt upright, the newspaper tumbling to the floor. His hands trembled as he reread the advertisement, certain that his eyes were playing tricks on him. This couldn't be real—not here in the town of Lefor. His phone. Where was his phone?

Panic set in as he tore apart the sofa, cushions flying in all directions, his movements becoming increasingly frantic. The kitchen counter yielded nothing. He bounded up the stairs two at a time, checking nightstands and dresser tops. Finally, in the bathroom beside the sink, he found it.

Racing back downstairs, he nearly stumbled in his haste. The newspaper sections were scattered across the living room floor. On his hands and knees, he frantically gathered the sheets until he found the classified section again. There it was—the same incredible advertisement, complete with a local phone number.

His finger hovered over the keypad, his heart hammering against his ribs. The phone rang once, twice, three times. Each ring seemed to stretch into eternity.

"Come on," Mike whispered. "Please answer."

A thin, elderly voice finally responded, crackling through the connection. "Yes, hello? Who is this, please? Who's calling?"

Mike's throat suddenly felt dry. "Hi, I'm calling about your ad in the Gazette—the Chevrolet Bel Air you have for sale. Is it still available?"

"I'm sorry, dear, could you speak up? My hearing isn't what it used to be. Who is this? What do you want?"

He raised his voice, trying to contain the excitement that threatened to spill over. "The car advertisement in the paper—the 1954 Bel Air. Do you still have it?"

Static crackled through the line before she answered, her voice growing softer, more distant. "Oh yes, I still have Charlie's car. Been sitting in the garage since, well, I don't know..." Her words trailed off into something that Mike thought might have been a sob.

"Would it be possible for me to come take a look? I live right here in town."

"Well, I don't know about strangers coming by. You see, that car was my husband's everything, his pride and joy. Every weekend, we'd drive the back roads, stop at produce stands for corn and fruit, and watch sunsets from the bridge over the creek. That car holds fifty years of memories, you know."

Mike shifted his weight, fighting his impatience while his heart continued its frantic rhythm. "I do understand, ma'am, of course I do. I just want to see it. My father had one just like it when I was young."

"Charlie always said it was worth something special, but I wouldn't know how to price such a thing. It's been under canvas for a few years now, since the accident." Her voice caught. "Maybe it would be good for someone to appreciate it again, someone who understands."

"When might I be able to visit? I could come whenever it's convenient for you."

The line went quiet except for the faint hum of the connection. Mike waited, counting his heartbeats.

"Ma'am, hello? Are you still there?"

Silence stretched on between them until the line went dead.

"Damn," Mike muttered, immediately hitting redial. The phone rang again at the other end, each tone adding to his anxiety.

"Hello?" The same frail voice answered.

"Ma'am, it's about the car. We got disconnected. May I come see it?"

"I suppose so, dear. What did you say your name was?"

"Mike. Mike Peters. I live on Old Creek Street, but I can come whenever works for you."

A long pause stretched between them, filled only by the whisper of static.

"You could come now, I suppose. You'll be alone?"

"Yes, ma'am. Just me. I'll be right over."

She gave him an address located on the outskirts of town, her voice growing fainter with each word. Mike scribbled it down, grabbed his jacket, and headed for the door, his pulse thundering in his ears.

The house sat on a small rise, weather beaten and sad, with peeling white paint and sagging gutters that spoke of years of neglect. A steep gravel driveway led to a detached garage that faced the road. Mike parked his pickup truck and approached the front porch, noting the overgrown flower beds that had once been someone's pride. He knocked and waited. Silence. He knocked again, and through the frosted glass panel, he glimpsed a small shadow moving toward him, accompanied by the slow creak of old floorboards. The door opened just a crack, revealing a sliver of a woman's face.

"Yes? What can I do for you?"

"Mrs...? I'm Mike Peters. We spoke on the phone about the car."

The door opened wider, revealing a small woman with snow white hair and a slight stoop. Despite her fragile frame, she was dressed immaculately—a pressed floral dress, pearl earrings, sensible shoes. Her pale blue eyes studied him with an intensity that seemed at odds with her frail appearance.

"Agnes Boone," she said, extending a thin hand. "Hello, sonny. You're younger than you sounded on the phone."

"Thank you for allowing me to come, Mrs Boone."

She stepped past him without another word, moving with surprising purpose toward the garage. Her keys jangled as she fumbled with an old padlock on the weathered doors.

"My, I haven't opened these in years," she muttered. "Charlie always handled the garage."

The lock finally gave way with a metallic click. The doors groaned open on rusty hinges, revealing darkness punctuated by a large shape under a faded green tarp.

"You'll need to remove the cover, dear. It's more than these old bones can manage."

Mike stepped into the garage, breathing in the scent of old motor oil and decades of memories. He found the edge of the tarp and gave it a careful tug. The heavy canvas slid off the car, releasing a cloud of dust that made them both cough. When the dust settled, Mike stood transfixed. There it was—a 1954 Chevrolet Bel Air in powder blue and cream white, identical to his father's car right down to the chrome trim and whitewall tyres. Dust dulled its finish, and rust had marked the wheel

wells, but underneath the neglect, he could see something magnificent.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Agnes whispered behind him. "Charlie bought her new in '54. Said she was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen besides me, of course." She chuckled softly.

Mike walked around the car slowly, his fingers trailing along the chrome bumper, the hood and the roof. This was it. This was his chance to have what he'd always dreamed of.

"Mrs Boone, what would you want for her?"

The old woman's eyes misted over. "Oh my, I don't know, dear. Make me an offer. I just want her to go to someone who'll love her the way Charlie did."

They settled on a price that seemed almost too good to be true. Mike wrote a check there and then with shaking hands, and Agnes signed over the title with tears welling in her eyes.

"Take care of her, sonny," she whispered as Mike prepared to leave. "She's been good to us. Real good."

Mike's garage was spacious enough to accommodate the Bel Air with room to spare. He'd had the car towed home and spent the first day simply walking around it, admiring it, opening doors and the hood, letting fresh air circulate through the musty interior. The red leather seats were cracked and dry, the chrome dull with age, but the potential was undeniable. In the glove compartment, he found a black-and-white photograph with yellowed edges. It showed the car in its prime with a tall, proud man standing beside the driver's door—someone who looked genuinely happy. Mike flipped the picture over. Faded blue ink revealed: Charlie Boone, 1954.

"Well, hello there, Charlie," Mike murmured, studying the face in the photograph. He propped it on the now cleaned dashboard while he continued his inspection of the car.

That evening, as Mike locked up the garage, he heard something that made him freeze—the distinctive horn of a Bel Air, two melodic notes echoing in the still air. He turned back toward the garage, frowning. The sound had seemed to come from inside, but that was impossible. The car's battery had been dead for years. Shaking his head, he chalked it up to wishful thinking and headed inside.

The next weeks blurred together in a haze of work. Mike threw himself into the project with an obsession that surprised even him. He worked every evening after work and all weekend long, methodically removing rust, polishing chrome, and conditioning the leather seats with careful attention to every detail. The car responded beautifully to his efforts. The engine, though old, was remarkably clean and well maintained. The engine started on the first try every time, settling into a contented purr that reminded Mike powerfully of his father's old Bel Air.

But there were odd moments that made him pause. Tools would be in different places than he'd left them. The radio would sometimes whisper static even though he'd never turned it on. Once, he could have sworn he saw movement in his peripheral vision while working under the hood, but when he looked up, nothing was there. He told himself it was just the excitement of owning such a

beautiful car, the way intense focus and work could play tricks on the mind.

Three weeks into the project, during a hard rain that drummed against the garage roof, Mike was deep in the engine bay when he noticed something strange. Despite the car's age, the engine was immaculate, cleaner than it should be after sitting for so many years. Every component looked as if it had been lovingly maintained right up until Charlie's death. Mike slid into the driver's seat to turn the ignition. As usual, the engine roared into life immediately, settling into that familiar, satisfying purr. He picked up Charlie's photograph from the dashboard, intending to keep it in the glovebox as a gesture of respect.

It was time to call it a day, but when he turned the key to shut the engine off, nothing happened. The motor continued to hum contentedly. Mike frowned and tried again, turning the key firmly to the off position. The engine purred on, unchanged. Confused now, he tried several more times, but the ignition seemed to not affect the running engine. A prickle of unease crept up his spine as he reached for the doorknob. It wouldn't budge. Mike pulled harder, his confusion rapidly escalating to concern. The chrome handle felt solid in his grip, but the door remained firmly closed. He slid across the bench seat to try the passenger door. That too was locked tight.

A cold panic began to weave through his chest as he tried each door in turn. All of them were sealed as if welded shut. The engine's purr was growing louder now, deeper, and Mike became aware of a new sensation, the whisper of exhaust fumes being pulled into the car's interior through the ventilation system. The acrid smell of carbon monoxide began to fill the enclosed space.

"No, no, no," Mike gasped, throwing his full weight against the driver's door. The chrome handle came away in his hand with a sharp crack, clattering to the floor under his feet. The engine's growl was rising now, no longer the gentle purr of a well-tuned V8 but something hungrier, more sinister. Shadows seemed to writhe in the corners of the garage as the car pressed itself against the closed garage doors, sealing off any hope of fresh air. Mike pounded on the windows, but the glass held firm. His vision began to blur as the toxic fumes invaded his lungs. The last thing he saw before consciousness slipped away was Charlie's photograph on the dashboard, the man's proud smile seeming to shift and change in the gathering darkness.

Then, suddenly, silence. Just the tick-tick-tick of cooling metal.

The doors clicked open with a soft sigh.

The police investigation found nothing mechanically wrong with the vehicle except for a broken door handle on the driver's side floor. Mike's wife discovered his body later that evening, slumped peacefully over the steering wheel as if he'd simply fallen asleep. There was no sign of a struggle, no evidence of foul play. The garage was clean and organised, and all the tools were in their proper places. The investigating officer, making his final notes, opened the glovebox to check for any registration papers, anything that might give a clue as to what happened. Inside, he found a photograph, a new colour photograph showing Mike Peters standing proudly beside the driver's door, smiling with the satisfaction of a man who'd found his dream. The officer flipped the picture over. Fresh blue ink spelt out: Mike Peters, May 2024. He stared at the photograph for a while, then quietly slipped it back into the glove compartment and closed his report.

Six months later, Mike's widow couldn't bear to look at the car anymore. The sight of it under its tarp in the garage brought back too many painful memories of her husband's final obsession. After much anguish, she decided to place an advertisement in the local paper.

FOR SALE: 1954 blue and white Chevrolet Bel Air. Single owner. Good condition, minor restoration needed. Serious inquiries only.

Somewhere in town, another dreamer would soon be opening the classified section.

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