

Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

Chapter 1

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 1 –

Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams – Anthony Hall

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Chapter 1 Wake Up To A New World

Icy water drenched Stella Carter, shocking her awake. She shook her aching head, and as her vision cleared, a deep frown settled on her face.

“She’s awake, boss,” a male voice said.

Stella glanced around the derelict warehouse, finding herself surrounded by a group of muscular thugs, their eyes cold and dangerous.

“Just bad luck,” the boss said. “Once we get the money, we’ll take care of you both.” He then walked out with his crew to smoke and play cards outside.

Hearing that, Stella turned and met the wide, frightened eyes of a little boy tied up next to her.

The boy was small and pale, maybe four or five years old. A cloth gag filled his mouth, and tears welled up under his long lashes, falling in heavy drops as he stared at her helplessly.

Stella took a long, steadying breath.

Even for someone sharp like her, waking up in a new life to this was beyond belief. She was kidnapped, and to make it worse, she had no memory left.

Stella searched within herself, but her past was a blank slate. She knew her name. She knew she was clever and strong. But that was all.

There was a soft pop-pop as Stella dislocated her wrist and slipped her hand free of the ropes.

The boy next to her paled, forgetting to cry as he watched her reset the joint with another quick, precise twist.

Without a word, Stella reached over and untied him.

Her gaze shifted to the steel pipe the kidnappers had tossed in the corner. A sudden coldness filled the air around her, dropping the temperature in the warehouse with it.

A deep, restless anger tightened in her chest. She needed to move, to let it out.

“At least there’s one good thing,” she murmured to herself, striding over to lift the steel pipe before turning toward the door.

Far away, on Sandridge Island, the sky hung low and gray.

A hall stood crowded with people, every gaze nervously fixed on the young man seated alone on a leather sofa. He was Sebastian Gray, and no one dared look away.

He wore a simple black shirt, open at the collar. A cigarette glowed between his fingers, its smoke softening the lines of his face.

A string of black prayer beads hung from his wrist.

In front of Sebastian, a man was pinned to the floor.

“Who told you to do this?” Sebastian asked, his voice cool and even.

At his feet, a massive white python slid in slow, silent curves across the floor, its tongue flicking out. The scene was cold and unnatural, a mirror to Sebastian himself.

While he spoke, the python moved onto the sofa and rested its broad head on his thigh.

The man on the floor seemed to collapse in on himself, too terrified to speak a word.

Sebastian’s expression didn’t change as he slid the beads from his wrist. The simple action sent a chill through the room, and no one dared to make a sound.

He reached down to stroke the python's head, totally unaware of the suffocating weight of his presence.

"Are you hungry?" Sebastian asked, his voice quiet.

The moment he finished speaking, two men stepped forward and hauled the prisoner away.

"Mercy, Mr. Gray. Just one chance..." the voice pleaded desperately, trailing off until nothing remained but silence.

"Mr. Gray, we've got a location," said a bodyguard in black as he stepped quietly to Sebastian's side.

Sebastian's only nephew was missing, and this was the kind of trouble that could turn the world upside down.

When Sebastian looked up, a cold, sharp fear shot through the bodyguard, freezing him where he stood.

"We'll be there in thirty minutes," Sebastian said coldly.

In the old warehouse, the brief but brutal fight was just over.

Stella sat in the only undamaged chair, working the stiffness from her neck with a blank expression. The steel pipe in her hand scraped slowly across the concrete floor, the sound grating and sharp.

She was quiet, her eyes fixed on some distant point.

The once-bold kidnappers now were sprawled on the floor with their hands up, their faces bruised and tear-streaked. They flinched visibly each time the pipe scraped against the ground.

They never thought she'd be this tough. Now they just felt stupid.

Stella sat where the light barely reached, which only made her seem more formidable.

Suddenly, a quiet shuffling sound came from behind her.

It would stop, then start again, full of hesitation.

Then she felt a small, hesitant pull on her sleeve.

Stella went still and looked down to meet the boy's eyes.

He gave her a shy, hopeful smile. With his eyes still red from crying and his long lashes, he looked utterly precious. Sensing his own charm, he leaned his cheek softly into her palm.

"What's your name?" Stella asked, gently pinching his nose.

He didn't answer. Instead, he smiled again, took her hand, and began to write letters carefully on her palm.

"Lucas Gray?" she read his name, realizing he couldn't speak.

When he heard his name, Lucas's face brightened. He quickly held out a tiny phone to her.

He had somehow kept it hidden all along.

The moment Stella took it, the phone rang, the screen flashing "Gray." Without thinking, she pressed it to her ear.

"Had enough fun?" came the low, smooth voice from the other end.

Stella's eyebrow lifted slightly. "Mr. Gray," she said, clearing her throat. "Your kid is with me."

There was only silence from the other side.

Stella, lost in the call, took no notice of the men sprawled on the floor ahead of her. They were staring past her now, their faces ghostly white.

"Is that so?" The words were quiet, but the air in the room grew heavy and still.

"Of course..." Stella began to reply into the phone. Then she paused when she realized that the voice hadn't come from the receiver. It had come from directly behind her.

She turned, and her eyes met a cold, steady gaze.

Stella had to admit, Sebastian was the most striking man she had ever seen.

He stood backlit, a cold outline against the light. Men in dark suits flanked him, but he alone seemed carved from ice, distant and utterly untouchable.

As he lifted his hand, she noticed the black prayer beads around his wrist.

A piercing headache tore through Stella's mind, shattering her focus.

"John," Sebastian said, his voice a cold whisper.

Before Stella could react, a shadow moved behind her. A sharp strike landed on her neck, and she fell, darkness swallowing her whole.

The next morning, Stella stirred in her sleep, feeling something cool and smooth slide against her leg.

A soft, threatening hiss sounded in the quiet room.

She reached out sleepily to push it away, but the moment her fingers touched its skin, her eyes shot open.

She froze as her vision cleared. In the soft morning light, she was staring directly into the black gaze of a huge white python lying right next to her on the bed. It flicked its tongue with a quiet hiss.

"You're awake," Sebastian said.