

# Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

## Chapter 11

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 11 -

## Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams - 11

Chapter 11

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When Lucas saw that Stella was awake, his face brightened. Dressed in matching shark pajamas, he gave her a quick kiss before she could even speak.

“Morning,” Stella murmured, pulling him close. Still half-asleep, she rested her head on the pillow, her hair a mess around her.

Snowball nudged a small board with its nose. Scrawled on it were the words: [Hungry. Food.]

“Where’s your father?” Stella asked.

Lucas tilted his head, thinking. A moment later, his face fell.

He pointed a small finger up toward the ceiling, and the sky beyond.

Stella misunderstood, thinking he meant Sebastian, who was upstairs. It made her think of his strange, unanswered question from the night before.

While she was lost in thought, Lucas gave her sleeve a gentle pull.

She looked down to see Lucas holding up a small whiteboard. On it was a drawing of a cute little arrow pointing toward Snowball, who was currently trying to catch the end of his own tail.

The whole scene reminded Stella of a puppy playing.

[Snowball is my friend,] the board said in Lucas's careful writing.

Lucas had found Snowball in the backyard when he was three.

Sensing the attention, Snowball stopped its little game. A large, pale head rose slowly from beside the bed, fixing Stella with a steady gaze.

There was something almost shy in the way it looked at her.

It was the first time she had really looked at the creature. Its scales shone with a soft, pearly sheen, and the skin beneath held a faint blush of pink. They clearly took very good care of it.

It didn't smell like a snake at all. There was something oddly elegant about it.

Against all logic, she had to admit it was strangely endearing.

Snowball stretched out the very tip of its white tail toward her.

Stella reached out and touched it. The skin was cool, just like Sebastian's.

"Do you smell that?" Stella asked suddenly, pausing to take in the air. The scent was faint, but it made her

uneasy.

Lucas shook his head.

12:09 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 11

86

E55 vouchers

Without another word, Stella rushed through her morning routine. Once she was done, she scooped up Lucas and headed out, trying to figure out what felt off.

As they neared the stairs, Lucas tapped her shoulder.

She looked down and saw Lucas pointing toward the private elevator.

'Of course. A private elevator. Just another part of the luxury life,' she thought.

The gardens outside the villa were immense.

Stella had known Sebastian lived on his own island, but only now, standing in the open air, could she fully grasp the sheer scale of its luxury.

It felt like a realm of impossible beauty.

The estate was perfectly centered on the island, ringed by mountains and sea. The whole place had a storybook quality to it, with even small, graceful deer wandering through the grounds.

“Ms. Carter.” John was standing behind her before she even noticed. “What are you looking for?”

His words snapped Stella out of her concentration.

She turned her head slightly. “Do you smell any particular fragrance?”

She had caught a trace of it in the air and followed it here, but a breeze had carried it

away.

“Ms. Carter, this is a garden,” Job

said simply, his tone suggesting the scent of flowers was only natural here.

“Lucas is upset in the dining room. Mr. Gray requests your presence,” he added.

“Right away,” she said.

Stella decided to forget the strange scent for now and followed John inside.

They walked into a kitchen that looked like a tornado had hit.

Lucas was in the middle of it, hurling plates and bowls.

Sebastian sat in his wheelchair nearby, silent and cold, his anger filling the room.

It felt just like what had happened in Lucas’s playroom several days ago.

“Lucas!” Sebastian said sharply, but his voice only seemed to make Lucas worse.

Lucas let out a frustrated growl, smashing anything within reach.

John moved anxiously to step in, but Stella held him back.

12:09 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 11

“Wait,” she said quietly, sensing something was wrong.

86

E55 vouchers

She studied Lucas’s sweet face, now twisted in distress. It was the second time she’d seen him like this, and it didn’t feel like a tantrum. He was trying to tell them something.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, please stop!” Jake pleaded, his large frame making a comically small, helpless target as he ducked another plate. It shot past his shoulder and shattered against the wall.

“Mr. Gray!” Jake gasped in alarm.

A thin line of blood appeared on Sebastian’s pale face, trailing slowly down his skin.

It only made his cold, handsome features seem more dangerous.

“Tie him up,” Sebastian ordered, his voice low and chilling.

As he spoke, Stella caught the faint scent once more. And in that moment, she remembered what it was.

“Lucas.” She moved quickly, gathering him against her.

Lucas froze for a second. Then she struck his back twice, firmly.

A sudden wave of sickness hit him, and he retched violently onto the floor.

Within moments, the floor was soiled with pale, sickly streaks.

“What did he eat?” Stella asked, turning to Sebastian.

He knew what she meant. “My oatmeal,” he answered flatly.

A heavy, frozen silence filled the room.

“Jake, bring me some lab mice,” Stella said, her voice sharp.

Lucas lay limp in her arms, drained from being sick. His large eyes were red and swollen.

He was clearly in pain, his head hurting, until Stella pressed a point near his neck. Within seconds, his body went slack, and he was unconscious.

Jake brought the mice and fed them the leftover oatmeal as Stella directed. Everyone watched the cage, waiting.

After a long while, the mice were still fine.

“Ms. Carter, the oatmeal is clean,” Jake said, unable to hold back.

Beside them, Sebastian sat utterly still, a silent storm brewing inside him.

“Jake... No, John, go to Lucas’s room. Find a white flower that grows in clusters like wisteria, with silver edges. Bring it to me now,” Stella ordered.

12:09 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 11

86

55 vouchers

She then gave a short, cold laugh. But before John could move, everyone turned toward a soft rustling sound. Snowball was gliding forward, something held carefully in its mouth.

With a soft sound, it deposited a cluster of flowers that matched Stella’s description perfectly into the mouse

cage.

The moment the scent of the flowers reached them, the mice that had been peacefully active moments before went wild. They turned on each other like frenzied animals, biting and clawing viciously.

Inside the cage, pure chaos erupted, a small, violent hell where the sharp smell of blood soon hung in the air.

Stella looked up at Sebastian and spoke with deliberate clarity, “It’s called Frost Bell. Its seeds can be ground into a powder that is colorless and odorless. But if someone ingests it regularly over time, it causes permanent damage to the nerves and internal organs.

“The poison is colorless and scentless, almost impossible to notice. But everything in nature has a reaction.

“Here, the Frost Bell’s fragrance reacts with its seeds. Together, they release a fast-acting neurotoxin, causing terrible headaches and violent madness. That was why Lucas lost control.”

## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 12**

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 12 -

### **Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams – 12**

Chapter 12

86

E 55 vouchers

“Look into it,” Sebastian said, the order cut short by a harsh cough. The cloying flower scent was getting to

him as well.

The taste of blood bloomed in his mouth as pain, sharp and sudden, split through his skull. It made the cold darkness in his eyes turn truly dangerous, but he held it back by force of will alone.

“Tell me he’s going to be all right.” Sebastian’s voice was low, his gaze fixed on Stella with a piercing, almost unnerving focus.

Stella didn’t answer.

The Frost Bell here was likely just bad luck. Its seeds were a slow poison, the real danger. Taken over years, they wasted a person away from the inside until their body just gave out.

Sebastian had his own urgent troubles to worry about, far beyond Lucas's situation.

"I promise you, he'll be fine," Stella said.

She added silently in her mind, 'And so will you.'

Stella's beautiful eyes grew cold. She wouldn't let anyone harm Sebastian, not while she was here.

"Mr. Gray, Bianca took poison. She didn't make it." John reported grimly as he returned.

Bianca had been the island's cook for years.

In his palm, John held out a small glass vial filled with dark brown powder.

Stella opened the vial and inhaled lightly. It was undoubtedly Frost Bell seeds, ground into a fine powder.

"Tell John what you need. He'll take care of it," Sebastian said, his voice low and strained.

Those familiar with him knew this cold silence was more threatening than any rage.

Stella was the first to notice Sebastian faltering. His eyes seemed sharp, but their focus was slipping. His will was strong, but his body was pushed to its limit.

The next second, blood welled at the corner of Sebastian's lips.

"Mr. Gray!" came their alarmed cry.

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Storm clouds gathered outside the master bedroom as Sebastian's condition deteriorated sharply. The attack had left him weak, but the villa was prepared.

It had a full medical suite with equipment rivaling a hospital's.

12:09 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 12

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Stella sat at his bedside, her beautiful face a mask of icy calm.

86

55 vouchers

Lucas hadn't absorbed much poison. Medicine and a few days of rest would heal him. Sebastian was different. Toxins had been poisoning his organs for years.

He had always pushed through the pain with sheer willpower. Today, the Frost Bell's scent shattered that control. The deep, bone-deep agony now came rushing back, fiercer than before.

Unconsciousness was a small mercy. It was his body's way of shutting down the pain.

"Are you sure about this, Ms. Carter?" John asked nervously, eyeing the row of acupuncture needles beside

her.

"Quiet," Stella said.

Stella reached for the buttons of Sebastian's shirt, her expression unreadable. Before her fingers could reach his collar, his hand shot out and locked around her wrist.

She winced at the sudden, crushing grip.

Seeing how strong Sebastian's reflexes remained even in his unconscious state, Stella sighed softly.

"Sebastian, it's me," Stella whispered close to his ear, one last try to get through to him.

If he didn't let go, she'd have no choice but to use the needle.

Just as she found the needle, the tension seemed to drain from Sebastian's body. His tight grip on her wrist loosened and fell away.

John watched, completely taken aback.

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He knew firsthand how dangerous his boss's reflexes could be; Sebastian had once broken his wrist while

unconscious.

Stella's usual casual ease was gone, replaced by a serious, focused calm.

Her hands moved quickly as she unbuttoned his shirt, exposing a well-defined chest. A delicate line of tattoos followed the curve of his hip and disappeared below his waistband.

He had a good physique, but it was marred by a scattering of old scars.

Stella averted her eyes. "Tell Jake to brew the medicine exactly as I listed. It must be ready to administer the instant my needle reaches his heart."

She chose the finest needle as she spoke.

It was no thicker than a single hair. John watched, thinking a gentle breeze might be enough to blow it away.

Yet Stella held it steady between her fingers. The delicate silver needle remained perfectly still in the quiet air, its point shimmering faintly.

12:09 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 12

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86

55 vouchers

The sight made John frown, stirring a memory from his training days. He recalled a story about a legendary master of acupuncture known as Paul Penn.

Paul was said to be the greatest of his craft. His most famous feat was using sheer focus to drive a needle as fine as a silk thread straight through solid steel.

Stella took a quiet breath to center herself. With her eyes closed, she placed her fingertips over Sebastian's

heart.

His heartbeat beneath her touch was faint and unsteady.

She knew the moment had come. Her eyes opened, clear and resolved. In one fluid motion, she inserted the needle.

Then, a phone rang out, sharp and sudden, breaking the deep silence that held the room.

John felt unsettled, uncertain whether to pick up the phone.

The constant ringing was getting on her nerves. "Just answer it," Stella said impatiently.

John picked up. After he listened for a few seconds, his expression shifted.

It was one of Victor's men calling.

"Mr. Quinn's grandson collapsed an hour ago. High fever, convulsions. He's in the hospital now, but..." John began.

The hospital had gone into full emergency mode, running test after test, but every result came back clear. They couldn't find anything wrong with the boy.

With the boy getting worse by the minute, Victor suddenly remembered Stella's warning from yesterday. He sent his men straight away to bring her to the hospital.

Stella felt the weariness of another crisis piling onto the last.

"Tell him to wait," Stella replied, not looking up from her work.

John's face, usually a mask of calm, now showed clear unease. Normally, he wouldn't hesitate to send someone away, but he couldn't risk offending Victor's men.

Stella knew from John's hesitation that the caller was important. Without a word, she took the phone, said, "Meet me at the dock in thirty minutes," and hung up.

"The medicine's ready," Jake said as he entered, holding a bowl of dark, bitter liquid. The pungent, medicinal smell was strong enough to make anyone recoil.

"Try to get him to take a few sips first," Stella directed.

Jake looked nearly tearful as soon as she finished speaking. "Ms. Carter, please don't put me in that position. Look at my neck. Mr. Gray could snap it with one hand."

12:09 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 12

Stella then turned to John, who merely shook his head in response.

36

55 vouchers

With a quiet sigh, Stella decided she might as well do it herself. Lifting the bowl, she scooped a spoonful of the medicine and carefully brought it to Sebastian's lips.

Just as she expected, his lips remained tightly closed in unconscious resistance, and the medicine dribbled uselessly down his chin.

"John. Jake whispered, shuffling closer to John. "In those romance dramas, wouldn't Ms. Carter have to feed him with her own mouth at a time like this?"

"Be quiet, John replied sharply. No sooner had he spoken than Stella selected another slender silver needle.

With a precise insertion and a gentle pinch of her fingers, she skillfully pried Sebastian's lips apart.

Her bluntness left them both speechless, sharing a look of stunned understanding.

## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel**

### **Chapter 13**

## Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams - 13

Chapter 13

86

55 vouchers

Stella forced the dark, foul-tasting medicine down Sebastian's throat with quick, practiced motions.

Jake almost stepped forward to stop her, but something in her firm manner held him back.

"That's it," Stella said, rolling her shoulders as she let out a tired sigh.

As Stella moved to stand, Sebastian's hand clamped tightly around her wrist, anchoring her to the spot.

If she hadn't known he was unconscious, she'd think he was doing it on purpose.

She tried to pull her hand away, but his grip only tightened.

"Ms. Carter," John said, his eyes on his buzzing phone. The Quinn family's men were still waiting at the dock, and the constant calls were a clear sign of their growing desperation.

"Any idea how to make him let go?" Stella asked, raising a brow. But only silence answered her.

The moment she looked their way, John and Jake shifted their gaze elsewhere, feigning distraction.

A wave of frustrated resignation washed over her. It was clear neither man would be of any help.

Stella was on the verge of sticking Sebastian with another needle when she stopped herself. It would be unwise to antagonize a man who was funding her work.

John stared at his buzzing phone, his expression growing tense.

The Quinn family was getting desperate. If pushed, they would invade the island. And if they discovered Sebastian was still unconscious, there would be no stopping them.

“Sebastian,” Stella said, keeping her voice low and even. “Lucas will be awake by tomorrow.”

Certain this was the one thing that would reach him, she waited for his grip to loosen. But it didn't. A second stretched into three, and his hand remained firmly locked around her wrist.

“Ms. Carter,” Jake whispered, a note of amusement in his voice. “Wrong answer.”

She ignored him, dismissing his remark as pointless chatter.

The money Sebastian offered had briefly appealed to Stella's better nature, but that feeling was fading fast. Just as she prepared the needle, a new idea made her hesitate.

“I'll be back tonight,” Stella said, trying the words out on the unconscious Sebastian.

She hadn't expected it to work, but then Sebastian's hand slowly relaxed its hold on her wrist.

Her casual mask slipped for a moment, her expression turning thoughtful. ‘He really is unpredictable,’ she thought to herself.

12:09 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 13

(86

55 vouchers

The normally bustling dock was quiet and eerily still, under a security detail that felt more like a siege. Black armored SUVs were parked in a tight line, engines off.

Henry, the man leading the team, stood motionless, his eyes fixed on his watch. The tension around him was so thick that it seemed to swallow all other sound.

There were only two minutes left on his deadline. If Stella didn't appear, he was prepared to lead his men onto the island by force, and the situation would quickly turn violent.

Just as he was poised to order the island breach, a black Bentley approached down the long drive.

The window lowered to reveal Stella's flawless, makeup-free complexion.

Her long hair, worn loose down her back, framed sharp, elegant features that held a cool, detached beauty.

When their eyes met, Stella's gaze was unwaveringly cool and carried a hint of impatience.

Henry paused for a beat, momentarily struck silent by her direct look.

Despite having met her yesterday, he still couldn't picture her as a skilled healer. She was, however, their only remaining option.

"Ms. Carter, this way please," Henry said, swallowing his reservations as he gestured toward the open car door.

Inside the car, Henry sat in stiff silence, his frown and rigid posture broadcasting his clear disapproval.

His silent judgment reached its height when he watched her calmly unpack a takeout container and begin to

eat.

"Ms. Carter, we're not here for a picnic," Henry said, his politeness tight.

It bothered him to see her eating so calmly with the boy's life at stake.

Stella met his gaze. "So it was you at the café."

That surprised him. He'd made sure to stay out of sight at the café, but she had apparently noticed him

anyway.

She offered no further explanation and just went back to her food.

As he watched her, the only word he could think of was unhurried.

Her slender fingers handled the fork with a slow, methodical calm as she ate.

Her unhurried pace made it very clear she wasn't in the mood for conversation.

He checked his watch. Even with top-level clearance from his superiors, they were still at the mercy of rush hour traffic.

12:09 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 13

86

E55 vouchers

Full from her meal, Stella pulled the hood of her black sweatshirt up, hiding her face. Only then did she offer a lazy afterthought. "He'll pull through."

"What was that?" Henry frowned.

"Just stop the treatment. Have someone get three slices of valerian root ready for the boy," she replied casually. "I'll handle it when I'm there."

Stella yawned, her voice soft with fatigue. She offered no further response to his questions, and soon, the steady sound of her breathing made it clear she was asleep.

Henry pressed his lips together, swallowing his frustration as he made the call.

Meanwhile at the hospital, the city's top medical experts had gathered, urgently trying to diagnose Victor's grandson, Logan.

Despite their efforts, they had no answers. Logan's condition was deteriorating rapidly, and his heart rate was plummeting.

"Valerian root. Get three slices of valerian root," the guard next to Victor announced suddenly, his voice cutting through the doctors' frantic debate.

All eyes went to him.

"Henry..." the guard began.

Victor looked up, and the young guard quickly amended his report. “Mr. Carroll’s orders. Place three slices of valerian root in the boy’s mouth and halt all emergency care. On Ms. Carter’s authority.”

Victor was quiet for a long moment. Then, with a brief wave of his hand, he sent a guard to see it done.

The ICU was a scene of focused urgency as the team worked over Lucas.

Then the guard entered. His bearing alone quieted the room.

“We are in the middle of a procedure. You must leave,” Emily snapped, her proud face etched with clear irritation. She was one of the country’s top surgeons, called in specifically for this case.

She had wanted to shine here, but failing to diagnose Logan was a blow to her reputation.

Failure was foreign to her, and this was her second major setback in a short time, the first being the Annette

case.

The guard paid her no mind. He went straight to the bedside, opened Logan’s mouth, and inserted three slices of valerian root.

The blaring alarms from the machines fell silent.

On the monitors, the flickering numbers began to steady, leaving everyone in the room in a state of shock.

“Stop all emergency treatment, effective now,” the guard announced, his tone firm as his eyes swept the room.

## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel**

### **Chapter 14**

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 14 -

## **Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams – 14**

## Chapter 14

( 86

55 vouchers

Just over ten minutes later, a group of black armored vehicles raced into the hospital complex.

“Ms. Carter, we’re here,” Henry said, reaching over to wake Stella.

But before he could touch her, her eyes flew open. The harmless look was gone, replaced by a cold, dangerous glare.

Even Henry, a man hardened by years of tough training, felt a spike of unease.

“Can I get a wheelchair?” Stella asked with a yawn, making no move to get up herself.

Henry was at a loss for words.

Letting out a sigh, Stella finally pushed the door open and got out.

They had an easy trip through the hospital, but the moment they left the elevator, everything fell apart.

Aloud argument was happening just outside Logan’s hospital room.

“Why did you stop Logan’s treatment?” Logan’s mother sobbed. She leaned into her husband for support as she confronted her father Victor, who remained silent on the bench.

“Answer me!” she pleaded.

“Because if you keep treating him...” Stella’s weary voice called from the hallway, drawing everyone’s attention.

Emily, standing among the other senior doctors, frowned as a familiar voice caught her ear. Her gaze tracked the sound and landed on Stella, who stood there in a plain black hoodie, jeans, and canvas shoes.

“He’ll die,” Stella continued flatly as she pushed her hood back, revealing her striking features.

Emily's expression tightened in recognition.

"What are you saying?" Logan's mother shrieked, her voice breaking with fear.

"Mr. Quinn, this is the expert you found?" asked a senior doctor, his voice heavy with doubt.

The whole situation was beyond him. Where he saw an unqualified girl, Victor saw someone worth trusting.

"We meet again," Stella said, ignoring the old doctor as she gave a small wave to Victor.

She was exhausted. All she wanted was to finish this and get back to the island.

"Yesterday, you said Logan was dying," Victor said, his voice rough but his eyes sharp on her. "How did you know?"

"Do you really want to talk about that now?" Stella replied. She knew Logan's time was almost up.

12:09 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 14

Henry, unable to contain himself any longer, snapped, "Show some respect."

86

55 vouchers

Stella gave a cold laugh of impatience and simply plugged her ear with a finger, shutting him out.

Victor signaled for Henry to stop, his attention shifting to Stella. "So, what's the plan?"

"Surgery," Stella replied.

"This is insane," the old doctor snapped, his mustache quivering with anger. "Are you even a licensed doctor?"

"I'm old enough. Just not licensed," Stella said, fighting back another yawn.

She found herself missing Sebastian, who never wasted words on pointless talk.

“You have two minutes to decide,” she stated flatly. “After that, the child’s condition will get worse.”

She left them with that, walked past the group, and sat down on a bench. The decision was theirs.

The hallway was packed, yet a profound silence had settled over the space.

“How sure are you?” Victor asked, his voice steady.

“One hundred percent,” Stella answered, her voice cool and completely confident.

A heavy silence fell over the group. The sheer boldness of Stella’s claim left them all wondering who could possibly believe it.

“Utter nonsense! Mr. Quinn, tell me you don’t believe a word of this,” the old doctor demanded, his voice shaking.

Stella’s gaze wandered disinterestedly around the room until it settled on a familiar face in the crowd.

Their eyes met for a moment before Stella gave another weary yawn.

Emily couldn’t help but roll her eyes, convinced that Stella had no idea who she was dealing with.

She found it hard to believe Victor would fall for this, but the doubt nagged at her.

“It’s not a complicated surgery,” Stella said. “You open the chest, remove the object, and that’s all.”

Giving in to her irritation, Stella leaned against the wall, her entire demeanor cold and restless.

This was her version of being polite.

“Open his chest?” Logan’s mother, who had been crying earlier, gasped, and then fainted into her husband’s

arms.

“You’ll answer for those words,” her husband bit out, his anger finally snapping.

“An object? You haven’t even reviewed the scan, and you’re diagnosing a vascular obstruction?” The old doctor was certain Stella was talking nonsense.

12:10 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 14

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“Something isn’t right with this young girl,” another doctor muttered.

“What, can her eyes see better than the machines now?” someone else said.

The panel of senior consultants took turns criticizing Stella.

86

EL 55 vouchers

Stella simply leaned back, mentally counting down the seconds while ignoring their

## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 15**

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 15 -

## **Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams – 15**

Chapter 15

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86

E55 vouchers

The medical community was buzzing on Lilac Medical Forum, the country’s leading online hub for doctors. A live surgical broadcast had just gone up, shattering the usual quiet and grabbing everyone’s attention.

[Which hospital is this? Talk about chasing fame.]

[It's Westwell Hospital.]

[They're opening a child's chest for a febrile seizure? Have the doctors there lost it?]

[Emily is the lead surgeon?]

[Actually, she's listed as the first assistant.]

[Wait, am I seeing this correctly? The country's top surgeon is the assistant? Who has the influence to have her serve merely as an assistant? This just got very interesting.]

Most people, however, saw it as a farce. They shared the link in their work chats, pulling in more viewers.

The news spread like wildfire. Before the first cut, the entire medical field was talking about Westwell Hospital's controversial plan to open a child's chest for a febrile seizure. Tens of thousands soon filled the live stream.

In the operating room, Stella stifled another yawn behind her mask.

"You're completely mad," Emily said, her heart hammering. Under the harsh surgical lights, she felt the same paralyzing nerves as her first solo operation.

Emily's gaze drifted upward to the observation room, where faces pressed against the curved glass wall.

"Any other questions?" Stella's voice was soft with fatigue.

A viewer commented, [Her voice is so sweet and gentle.]

Another added, [Look at Emily's face. She's completely outmatched.]

The chat on the Lilac Medical Forum livestream scrolled rapidly, buzzing with reactions.

"Mr. Quinn mentioned you predicted this child was dying," Emily said, keeping her tone steady. "How could you have known?"

[Is this the Mr. Quinn I'm thinking of?]

[There was a rumor this morning from General Military Hospital about an important man's grandson being rushed to Westwell Hospital. Could this be the same case?]

For several full seconds, the chat fell completely silent.

Victor was a true national hero, a pioneering figure in nuclear physics. In recent years, he'd been living quietly

12:10 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 15

in his hometown, away from the public eye.

86

55 vouchers

The question Emily had asked was precisely what everyone in the observation room wanted to know.

They all wondered what gave Stella such absolute certainty that Logan was dying.

Just then, the anesthesiologist raised a hand, signaling that it was time to begin.

Stella took the scalpel. "It's in his leg," she said, and began the cut.

"His leg?" Emily paused. She hadn't seen anything wrong with Logan's leg beyond the convulsions.

Stella looked up. In the bright surgical light, her face was calm and distant.

"I saw him at a café yesterday," she replied. "In ten minutes, his leg jerked six times without him knowing. That kind of spasm usually happens at night, when he's asleep."

A drop in breathing made the brain believe the body was shutting down. The resulting spasms were its desperate attempt to sound the alarm, a signal that it had detected a lethal threat.

"His parents missed it," Stella added.

[Guys, check her control. She's holding a conversation while her blade stays perfectly steady over the heart. Where did she train?]

[She's not even looking at what she's doing.]

[Unreal.]

A thick silence filled the observation room. Every senior doctor there was staring, eyes wide.

From that first cut, they knew they'd been wrong about Stella. She looked barely old enough to be in medical school, yet her hands moved with a master's certainty.

"Curved forceps." Stella's voice cut through the tense silence.

The procedure was at its most critical moment. Under the unforgiving glare of the operating lights, Logan lay exposed, his vital signs faint. In the silence of the livestream, a million viewers held their collective breath.

Emily handed over the instrument with a sinking feeling. She couldn't follow Stella's logic and had no idea what she planned to do next.

Standing at the operating table, Emily, the celebrated prodigy, felt utterly lost for the first time in her career.

"There it is," Stella murmured, a trace of a smile visible above her mask. Even through the screen, her quiet triumph was palpable.

[Holding my breath.]

[Perfect thoracic separation.]

12:10 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 15

Then came a concise, technical note: [Superior vena cava.]

86

55 vouchers.

The chat went silent. It slowly dawned on the audience that the person who had posted that comment was Emily's own mentor, the internationally revered surgeon, Samuel Miles.

He had retired from practice years ago after passing on his skills to his final student, Emily.

His appearance in the livestream was completely unexpected.

As the comment went live, Stella had already plucked a sliver of glass from Logan's vein, a piece so small that it was barely visible.

The moment she lifted the fragment for everyone to see, the entire room was struck speechless with shock.

That tiny shard had slipped past every scan and almost killed Logan.

"Flush and close. You can finish up..." Stella said to Emily, her voice relaxed.

Dropping the instrument onto a tray, she turned from the table. "My first assistant," she added over her shoulder.

Emily watched her go, heart hammering in her chest.

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At the coffee machine, Stella knew she had a tail.

A hand reached for her shoulder, but she spun and had the person pinned before they could touch her.

"Ow! Stella, what are you doing?" yelped a girl with spiky, dyed hair.

Hearing her name called, Stella eased up.

Upon getting a clear look at Stella's face, the girl gaped. "Did you... did you get work done?" she stammered.

Stella now looked stunning, like something out of a fantasy.

Stella looked back at the girl, a vague memory surfacing. She recognized Evelyn Murphy, one of the party friends from before she'd been expelled.

"Do you need something?" Stella's voice was cool and dismissive.

“I told Hazel you were taken the other day,” Evelyn said, shifting her weight. “I asked if we should call the police. She told me not to.”

She pulled a garish phone covered in pink plastic gems from her pocket and handed it over. “You dropped this.”

Stella stared at the gaudy device, trying hard to suppress the desire to throw it in the trash.

“Also...” Evelyn’s voice trailed off.

12:10 Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 15

“Go ahead,” Stella said, taking a slow breath as she accepted the phone.

86

55 vouchers

“Hazel stole your in-game crush. They’re having a virtual wedding tomorrow. Maybe stay offline.” Without waiting for a reply, Evelyn turned and hurried away.

Stella took a moment to process the absurd news about Hazel and the stolen in-game crush.

Then she remembered that Hazel was her so-called sister, the Carters’ real daughter.

## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 16**

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 16 -

## **Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams – 16**

Chapter 16

82

55 vouchers

Henry and Victor found Stella standing by the coffee machine. That faint, unnerving smile on her lips sent a chill down Henry's spine.

"The surgery was successful. Victor said, his voice quiet and heavy with the lingering weight of the day.

"Uh-huh," Stella replied as she ordered an iced coffee from the machine. She needed it to cool down.

"About that piece of glass..." Victor started.

Your grandson was in a car accident before, right?" Stella cut in, her patience thin.

Victor was quiet for a moment. "I owe you a favor," he finally said, letting out a long sigh.

Beside him. Henry stiffened; he knew better than anyone what a promise from Victor meant.

"I don't want anyone coming after me because of that surgery," Stella said, her voice flat. She drained her iced coffee and tossed the empty cup toward the trash can, sinking it with a perfect throw.

Ever since she'd heard her in-game partner had been stolen, a tight ache had settled in her chest, some stupid physical reaction that just made her angrier.

"I'll make sure of it," Victor promised.

Victor had barely finished speaking when Henry extended a card.

Stella's irritation vanished the moment she saw it, her beautiful eyes fixed on his hand.

How obvious can you get, Henry thought.

"Pin's six zeroes," Victor said.

"I'll take it," Stella said, accepting the card without hesitation. She'd earned it, after all.

“Henry will drive you home,” Victor said, clearing his throat as a faint smile touched his lips.

In the car, Stella turned the sparkly pink phone over in her hands, cringing at her younger self’s questionable taste.

Much to her surprise, the phone turned on right away. She had to hand it to Evelyn for keeping it charged.

But what she saw next made her go quiet.

Henry glanced sideways at Stella. A low, simmering anger seemed to radiate from the passenger seat.

“Need any help he finally asked, his voice cautious.

Stella slowly turned her head to look at him, her expression saying everything.

That evening at the Tech Plaza, Stella and Henry stood out from the moment they arrived.

Stella, in her oversized black hoodie and with a cool, detached expression, was strikingly beautiful.

Henry followed a step behind her, tall and straight-backed, looking every bit the professional bodyguard. Together, they

12:11 Tue, Jan 13 G

Chapter 16

chat look like they were there to shop They looked more like a princess and her guard on a detached our of the commo world

That one that and that one too, Stella said, pointing at the items on the shelf

The shopkeeper first tried to sell her some overprices, fancy puits, thinking she was just a kid who wouldn’t know better, But when he saw the components she asked for, he stopped underestimating her

She clearly knew exactly what he was doing, and he was good at it

Why not just buy a pre-built computer? Henry asked puzzled

Nothing about Stella matched the report he had read

According to the report, he was a rebel who kipped school and caused trouble. Even her own parents called her a handful.

her now. Henry wacht so

The report had her pegged as rebellious and difcat, and that much was true. But Henry still had no idea what she'd actually been doing all those days she skipped class

The memory of her standing over an operating table, cutting open a patient's chest without a second thought, only made the question loom larger

The specs aren't good enough. Stella said with her hands in her pockets, barely glancing his way. The fact that she'd bothered to answer at all was for her, a sign of patience.

After leaving Tech Plara, Henry went to the parking lot to get the car.

Stella waited where she was pulling her hood up until most of her face was hidden in shadow

The memory of what she'd seen on her phone soured her mood further.

She clicked her tongue in annoyance, and then stilled at the sound of a scuttle from a nearby alley.

Stella glanced toward the noise, her attention sharpening in the dark.

Down the alley, a group was cornering someone.

"Got you now," a voice taunted from the shadows.

A young man with a buzz cut lay on the ground, silently enduring the blows

Blood ran down his face from a cut above his eye, but the fierce set of his jaw showed he was no less tough than the ones beating him.

"Hey Stella's bored voice cut through the noise. The group froze, turning toward the alley entrance.

Stella stood at the alley's mouth, the deep shadow of a black hoodie hiding her features except for the faint line of her jaw. Her hands were in her pockets, her whole posture a silent warning.

"Mind your own damn business..." one of the guys snarled.

He didn't get to finish. A sudden kick to his chest sent him sprawling before anyone could move.

"Be polite," Stella said, her voice cool as she lowered her gaze slightly.

Another one stepped forward, retorting. "Polite my-

The word choked off as she grabbed

throat and

ned

wainst the wall. His head cracked against the

Tue, Jan 13

Chapter 16

brick three times before he could even lift a hand.

Stella's face stayed hidden beneath her hood, blank and cold as stone.

She let go, and the man dropped to the ground, unconscious.

(82)

55 vouchers

"Anyone else?" Stella asked, her eyes moving over the group.

The thugs all took a step back.

"You'll pay for this!" one of them shouted, the kind of empty threat villains always make on their way out, before they all scrambled from the alley.

The boy with the bloody face coughed weakly. Then he saw a pair of canvas shoes in front of him.

His hand was still pressed flat against the ground when she crouched before him. A light, fresh scent drifted into the air around them.

Then her hand gripped his chin and forced his head up. Her face under the wide hood was beautiful, sharp, and cold, the only things he could make out through the pain in his head.

“An ambulance is coming,” she said, her voice flat, and let him go.

Hearing Henry call her name from the street, she stood up and slipped back into her usual careless posture.

The boy was too weak to lift his head. The last thing he saw was her back, fading into the darkness as she walked away.

The dock was awash in light.

“Ms. Carter.” Henry’s voice was low, pulling Stella from her light sleep. He didn’t look at her, his attention still on the black Bentley parked ahead in the dock lights.

Stella opened her eyes and murmured in reply. As she moved to get out, Henry spoke again, “You should know Mr. Gray is a dangerous man.”

Henry had no idea what Stella’s connection to Sebastian was, or why she of all people was allowed on his private island. It made no sense to him.

Most people knew better than to go near that island or its solitary owner.

Even today, with everything at stake, ordering a forced landing there would have been Henry’s last resort.

Stella looked back at him, her gaze cool and steady.

“Just a friendly warning,” Henry added.

## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 17**

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 17 –

# Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams – 17

Chapter 17

82)

55 vouchers

A slow, deliberate smile touched Stella's lips in the dark car. Her expression was unreadable, but her eyes were sharp with a warning she made no effort to conceal.

"Then you should know," she said, her voice low, "I'm far more dangerous than he is." With that, she collected her things, got out, and walked toward the waiting car.

She tried the passenger door, but found it locked.

Stella's eyebrows rose sharply, her expression clearly asking what that was supposed to mean.

She tapped on the dark window. Instead of the front one, the back window slid down, revealing a pale, strikingly handsome face.

Sebastian's fine features looked almost unnaturally pale, the corners of his eyes tinged with a faint, dangerous red. His expression was lost in the shadows.

"Mr. Gray?" Stella could hardly believe it. She hadn't expected him to come himself.

"Get in." Sebastian's voice was low and rough, followed by a quiet cough.

She got into the back seat beside him, and the car started to move.

Stella let out a lazy yawn, a slight, unreadable smile on her lips. She didn't even notice how her mood had lifted the moment she saw him again.

"Were you afraid I wouldn't come back?" she asked, sinking into the leather seat and glancing at him, her voice light and teasing.

Sebastian kept his eyes on the road, his face blank. His gaze was cold and distant, his whole bearing pale and restrained.

“You are overthinking things,” he said in a cold voice without even looking at her.

Stella let out a slow, unconvinced “oh” and stifled another yawn, her attention drifting toward the window as sleep pulled at

her.

“Stella...” Sebastian called.

The car entered the underwater tunnel, plunging them into darkness.

“What?” Stella murmured, already half asleep.

“About earlier...” Sebastian began.

Before he could finish, he felt the weight of her head settle against his shoulder. At the same moment, the Bentley emerged from the tunnel, and light flooded back into the car.

Jake, who was driving, glanced into the rearview mirror and flinched.

In the back, Stella was asleep, her head resting against Sebastian,

Oh, damn. Mr. Gray hated being touched. If he lost his temper...‘ Jake’s mind raced. He ducked his head, only to meet a pair of ice-cold eyes in the rearview mirror.

He snapped his gaze forward and pretended he’d seen nothing.

Sebastian didn’t move her. She slept on, unaware, her head drifting closer to his neck.

GR

12:11 Tue, Jan 13 G G

Chapter 17

82

E55 vouchers

Her face, free of any makeup, looked all the more defined against the black hoodie. From where he sat, he could even see the faint blue veins beneath her skin, and her whole face seemed to nestle within the span of his hand.

Sebastian's low voice cut through the quiet. "Jake."

Jake immediately let the car coast, smoothing out the ride so Stella wouldn't wake.

The jarring ring of a phone pulled Stella from sleep. Irritated, she kept her eyes closed and fumbled toward the noise.

"Hello?" she mumbled, her voice thick with sleep and an unmistakable chill.

Nothing but heavy silence came from the other end.

"Who's there?" she pressed, her tone sharpening.

"What the hell?" Allan Reed, Sebastian's friend, exclaimed. "This is Sebastian's number, right? Why is a woman answering his phone? And you sound like you just woke up?"

Before Stella could form a reply, Sebastian's hand reached over and took the phone from her.

"Allan, enough." Sebastian's voice was like ice, and it instantly silenced Allan.

That was when Stella finally opened her eyes and sat up.

The room was decorated in stark black and white, cold and impersonal, exactly like its owner. She had only been here once, but Stella knew immediately she was in Sebastian's bedroom.

"I'm coming back from Rexland now. Don't leave the island." Allan's was urgent, and the line went dead before Sebastian could reply.

Quiet settled back over the room.

"Mr. Gray.." Stella said, her tone languid and familiar.

She leaned back against the headboard as if it were her own. She looked perfectly at home in Sebastian's bedroom and showed no curiosity about how she'd gotten there.

“Since we’re here, take your shirt off,” Stella said, her voice calm and direct.

Sebastian just looked at her, speechless.

He watched her yawn, her captivating eyes glazed with sleep.

She didn’t seem to realize how startling her request had been.

A strange silence hung between them.

Snowball slid out from the shadows. It looked first at Sebastian, then at Stella.

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Without another glance, it turned and slipped into Lucas’s room, nudging the door shut with its tail.

When Sebastian remained motionless, Stella raised an eyebrow, wondering if she hadn’t made herself clear,

“There’s still a needle in your chest. I need to remove it,” she explained.

Only after she spoke did it occur to her that she’d forgotten to mention that part. The thought crossed her mind that he must have thought she was a total creep.

12:11 Tue, Jan 13 GGO.

Chapter 17

82

55 Vouchers

With a pale and impassive face. Sebastian reached for the collar of his black shirt. He undid the buttons one by one, each movement deliberate and slow.

His eyes remained fixed on hers as the scars across his chest and torso came into full view. They were a complex lattice of marks some shallow, others deep.

The pattern was stark against his skin, like cracks marring a once flawless surface.

Stella stepped quietly across the carpet, her feet bare

The air around him carried a faint, clean scent that grew stronger as she neared.

Standing before him now, Stella spoke softly. This will hurt. Try to stay still.”

He acknowledged her with a low hum.

Her hand was warm against the cool skin of his chest, and he tensed slightly at the touch.

Then, she drew out a slender silver needle from near his heart.

A wave of sharp pain spread through him, tightening his already severe expression. His hands, resting on the arms of the wheelchair, gripped them until his knuckles whitened.

As Stella withdrew the needle, a shudder ran through Sebastian’s body, leaving him rigid.

His face, however, stayed still and expressionless, lips pressed into a pale, tight line. It was the quiet resignation of someone who knew pain too well.

“Don’t bite yourself” Stella said, her thumb coming to rest lightly against his lower lip.

Sebastian looked up at her, his handsome face covered in a layer of cold sweat.

His lips parted leaving her thumb damp in a way that felt deliberate.

You’ll have a fever tonight,’ she said. “But when it breaks, the pain will be half what it is now.”

“How long?” he asked his voice low and rough with pain as his hair fell across his eyes. Even now, he looked unsettlingly handsome.

“Two weeks.” Stella answered, her tone soft and a little weary. It was easier when he understood.

The process would need to be repeated every two weeks, on and on.

“Stay here tonight,” he said.

He could feel the heat spreading through him. Sweat clung to his hairline, lending him a worn, solitary air.

“Mr. Gray Stella leaned closer, her hands on either side of him. A faint smile touched her lips as they drew close enough to

share a breath

“As you wish,” she murmured.

## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 18**

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 18 -

### **Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams - 18**

Chapter 18

Sebastian’s fever spiked not long after.

82)

55 vouchers

A flush warmed his usually pale cheeks, and his breath came out hot and short. There was a tense, almost violent stillness about him.

His black shirt was loose and creased, hanging open in a way that made him look both attractive and fragile.

Stella didn’t usually think of men as beautiful, but Sebastian made her reconsider. He lay against the dark bedding, his striking features a perfect picture of dangerous allure.

The moment she stirred, his eyes snapped open, cutting through the fog of pain.

His gaze was dark and distant, blurred with sickness.

“Mr. Gray- His name was barely out of her mouth when his hand closed around her wrist, pulling her firmly into the scorching heat of his embrace.

Stella bit back a sharp reply. She had learned the hard way that struggling was useless, so she went still, letting his arm lock

around her waist.

Exhaustion finally caught up with her. She let out a soft yawn, closed her eyes, and began to drift off, surrounded by the clean, subtle scent of him.

In that hazy space between sleep and waking, she felt Sebastian tense up with pain. Without even opening her eyes, Stella reached over and stroked his back.

“It’s all right,” she whispered. “I’m here.”

Early the next morning, Sebastian’s bedroom door opened a little.

Lucas, looking like a little doll, crept in barefoot. His eyes were red, as if he’d been crying.

A jolt of panic had shot through him the moment he woke and found Stella wasn’t in bed.

His lip began to tremble just as he saw Sebastian and Stella lying together. The tears stopped before they could fall.

Sebastian opened his eyes. He’d woken the moment the door moved.

He turned his head, saying nothing. Lucas stared back, his own face just as blank.

After a pause, Lucas held out his arms, asking silently to be picked up.

Sebastian pretended not to notice and made no move to invite him up. He simply leaned back against the headboard, and with his height, Stella looked small and secure nestled against him.

His gaze stayed on her sleeping face.

Since that accident years ago, real sleep had been nearly impossible for him. Sometimes he needed strong medication, but it still only granted him a few restless hours.

Yet the last two times he’d slept, truly slept, had been with her beside him.

Lucas made a low sound in his throat, his little arms still held out in hope. He wanted to climb in with Stella.

12:11 Tue, Jan 13 G GR

## Chapter 18

Stella shifted slightly, still asleep.

Sebastian frowned and put a finger to his lips, signaling Lucas to be quiet.

55 vouchers

Lucas nodded, his sweet expression enough to melt anyone's heart, but he didn't drop his arms. He was determined to get his cuddle.

Just as Sebastian reached down to pick him up, Stella's eyes opened. For a brief moment, her gaze held a flash of sharp irritation before softening into sleepy indifference.

"You..." she mumbled, her voice still thick with sleep, as she looked at Sebastian leaning over her.

She reached up, her hand resting against his forehead. "The fever's gone," she said softly, feeling his normal temperature beneath her palm.

Now that the fever had passed, his skin had returned to its usual cool temperature, like Snowball's.

A gentle pull on her sleeve finally drew her attention. She looked over to see Lucas peeking from beside the bed, his soft little face a picture of sad longing.

Sebastian was still lingering in the memory of her warm touch when he saw her gather Lucas into her arms and press a drowsy, loving kiss to Lucas's cheek.

Lucas's frown turned into a sunny smile, but Sebastian's expression soured just as quickly.

Later, Sebastian and Lucas sat facing each other at the dining table, arms crossed and faces set in matching scowls.

In the corner, Jake whispered excitedly to John about Stella leaving Sebastian's room that morning.

John ignored him, his attention caught by Sebastian, who actually looked rather pleased for once.

"What's going on here?" Stella asked as she walked into the dining room, fresh from her shower. Then she saw Sebastian and Lucas locked in a silent standoff.

Lucas's eyes lit up when he saw her. He clinked his spoon against his plate, as if lodging a formal complaint.

Right on cue, Snowball nudged a writing board into view, its surface scrawled with Lucas's clear handwriting: [I'm sleeping with Stella tonight.]

Having stated his case, Lucas crossed his arms again and fixed Sebastian with his most indignant glare.

"Lucas, you're five now," Sebastian said, his voice cool. "That's too old for a bedtime buddy."

Lucas held up the writing board, puffing out his cheeks defiantly. [You're thirty,] he wrote, refusing to back down.

"Mr. Gray is thirty?" Stella said, her voice slow and teasing. She paused, then finished, "That makes him twelve years older

than me."

Sebastian's expression darkened, though Stella remained completely unaware.

"Is that considered old?" he asked, his voice low and his eyes sharp.

"You feel like an uncle," she replied casually, brushing off the question without a second thought.

Sebastian's face grew stormy.

"Mr. Gray, the team reports the courtyard is clear," John said, pressing a finger to his earpiece as he relayed the message. "They found two Frost Bells. Likely from stray seeds."

12:11 Tue, Jan 13 G GR

Chapter 18

Stella kept her relaxed posture, but her eyes narrowed with sudden intensity.

82

55 vouchers

Frost Bells were hard to grow. Finding two was unusual. If the poisoner had waited this long, they wouldn't slip up now.

"Bianca has no family left," John added, his tone making it clear that the lead had gone cold.

Stella gave a cool, knowing laugh and looked over at Sebastian.

She vowed to repay every ounce of suffering Sebastian had endured.

She was the kind of person who always evened the score.

"Mr. Gray, should we hire a completely new staff?" John asked.

"Getting rid of Bianca won't stop them. There will always be another," Sebastian said, his voice cold and final. He knew the people who wanted him dead wouldn't give up. Replacing the staff changed nothing.

"Let it be known that Bianca died of sudden illness," he added, his eyes sharp. He was waiting for their next move.

Now that the courtyard's free," Stella began, her casual tone turning thoughtful, "could I use part of it for a garden? And maybe a small room for a lab?"

Sebastian studied her for a long moment before replying, "As you wish."

"If you could make a list of what you need, Ms. Carter," John said, his usual sternness now tempered with a new respect.

"Ms. Carter, you left this in the car yesterday," Jake said as he walked in, a box of computer parts in his hands and curiosity all over his face.

Before he could voice his question, an unfamiliar ringtone broke the silence.

Stella pulled out her phone. A slow, sarcastic smile appeared when she saw Hazel's name on the screen.

## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel**

### **Chapter 19**

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 19 -

# Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams – 19

## Chapter 19

Stella motioned for quiet, answered the call, and switched it to speaker.

“Stella, where have you been?” Hazel’s sharp, nasty voice demanded from the other end.

Sebastian’s face darkened immediately, his already pale features turning cold and distant.

His eyes, now icy, shifted toward the phone.

But Stella just gave a cool, knowing laugh.

82

E55 vouchers

“Hazel, you knew I was kidnapped,” Stella said calmly as she absently ran a finger along Snowball’s tail, her smile thin and

cold.

“How should I know what kind of people you hang around with?” Hazel snapped back, her voice rising defensively. “If you got kidnapped, it’s your own fault. Don’t blame anyone else.”

Stella didn’t bother to reply. Leaning her chin on her hand, she looked utterly bored.

Lucas, however, was fuming, his cheeks puffed out in a silent, childish sulk.

“I’m sure you’re crushed I’m still alive,” Stella said, the two sharp taps of her fingers on the wood signaling her dwindling patience.

“Why would I be? It wasn’t my idea to have you kidnapped,” Hazel shot back, but the unease in her voice was plain to hear, even through the phone line.

Lucas let out an angry little huff and stomped over, his eyes blazing. Before he could make another sound, Stella reached over and pinched his lips together, molding his mouth into a flat, duck-like shape.

Lucas blinked, the picture of wounded innocence.

“Get to the point, Hazel,” Stella snapped, her voice and expression turning to ice. She was done with the pleasantries.

“Arrogant Wind and I are getting married tonight,” Hazel announced, pride dripping from every word. “Eight o’clock on Destiny Isle, in Nova Legends. You should log on and give us your blessing.”

Sebastian’s attention sharpened at the mention of Nova Legends, a glint of sudden interest breaking through his usual icy demeanor.

Nova Legends was more than a game; it was a national obsession, dominating the online scene for a full decade.

The sheer scale was undeniable. Its parent company, the Nova Group, had earned 17.6 billion dollars from this single game alone. That was wealth on par with the entire economy of a small country.

What really fueled the gossip, however, was the mysterious Nova Group.

It was founded ten years ago by three partners bound by life-and-death loyalty, and only Allan was ever seen managing the company publicly. The other two founders had never made an appearance.

A slow, sarcastic smile spread across Stella’s face. “And you’re sure you want me there?”

“Stella, you’re not still bitter about me taking Arrogant Wind, are you?” Hazel’s voice was cloyingly sweet.

A knowing smile touched Jake’s lips. This was shaping up to be a classic love triangle drama in his eyes.

“I know he was your in-game obsession, but it’s just pixels. Surely you’re over it by now?” Hazel taunted.

12:11 Tue, Jan 13 G GR

Chapter 19

Arrogant Wind was a classic pay-to-win player, having bought his way to the server’s number two spot.

B58 vouchers

His character was always a spectacle of dazzling virtual gear, which had earned him a devoted following of female players.

The original Stella had been one of them.

The reason he was only ever second was simple. In the game Nova Legends, there was only one undisputed top player, and that was Moondust, ID 00001

He hadn't logged in for seven years, but within the world of Nova Legends, he remained a timeless legend who commanded respect from all.

"Why would I bother getting angry over a pair of losers?" Stella said flatly.

She let out a soft, unamused breath, her lashes sweeping down to veil her eyes. Her whole posture was one of cool detachment.

"Still acting tough, Stella? Everyone knows you were Arrogant Wind's biggest simp," Hazel mocked. "Destiny Isle, eight o'clock tonight. Don't be late."

Having said her piece, Hazel quickly hung up the phone, as if afraid Stella might actually refuse.

Bored, Stella dropped her phone on the table. She lifted her gaze, only to find Sebastian watching her.

"Simp?" Sebastian said, the single word cold enough to chill the air in the room.

"What if I told you I don't remember a thing about it?" Stella asked, a teasing glint in her eye. "Would you believe me?"

She tapped a finger against her temple. The move was pure, careless defiance.

The truth, hard as it was to believe, was that Arrogant Wind had been the desperate simp.

Stella's phone was proof, still clogged with the countless messages he'd sent her.

Whenever she logged into the game, Arrogant Wind would find her. That, combined with some mixed signals, led the whole server to believe she was just another one of his obsessive admirers.

Sebastian's eyes grew dark, but he stayed silent.

"What's got you in a mood now?" Stella asked, her eyebrow arched. She couldn't keep up with his volatile temper and had no clue what had upset him this time.

"Ms. Carter..." Jake said, looking up from his phone with a strange expression. "Your username isn't Starfall, is it?"

Both Stella and Sebastian looked up at him immediately.

"You should probably see this," Jake said, holding out his phone.

"Put it on the screen," Sebastian said, his cold stare making Jake's hand shake.

Jake quickly mirrored the display to the television on the wall.

The headline was pure drama. It read, "Nova Legends' Most Shameless Fangirl, Starfall, Goes to Wild Lengths for Server's Number Two Player, Arrogant Wind!"

The clip showed Starfall acting pathetically desperate as she trailed Arrogant Wind's character.

When her usual tactics failed, she began stripping her virtual clothes off in the town square, vowing to crash his wedding to a player named Hazelight.

12:11 Tue, Jan 13 G GR

Chapter 19

82

55 vouchers

As her game character began to undress, Stella reached over and covered Lucas's eyes. Her own gaze stayed fixed on the screen, a sharp, calculating look hardening in her eyes.

There was no question about who "Hazelight" was.

"That video is all over the internet now," Jake said.

Nova Legends had its own category on every short video app. Someone had clearly posted this to start drama, and it quickly went viral. Soon, everyone online was talking about it.

# Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

## Chapter 20

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 20 -

## Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams - 20

Chapter 20

“Sebastian” a man shouted, “Quir hiding. I know you’re home”

Stella listened to the approaching commotion, one eyebrow lifting with interest.

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The man who appeared in the dining room doorway seemed utterly unconcerned by the summer heat, draped in a pristine white fur coat.

His looks were striking, almost unnervingly perfect, and the gold-framed glasses he wore did little to disguise the sharp, calculating gleam in his eyes.

Under the table, Snowball immediately abandoned its attempt to knot itself into a bow. It went utterly limp, flattening itself against the floor in a flawless impression of a lifeless coil.

“Well, hello there, gorgeous,” the man said, his voice smooth.

Stella expected him to stride over to Sebastian. Instead, he simply stepped over Snowball and made a direct path toward her.

She could only stare as he approached,

“Are you actually real?” the man asked, studying her openly.

The look in his gold-rimmed glasses was more fascinated than offensive, like he’d just found something rare and interesting.

He lifted a hand, his finger moving toward her cheek as if to test this theory.

Stella kept her expression carefully blank. There was something unsettlingly forward about this man, and her fingers itched to simply bat his intrusive hand away.

Just as she was about to do exactly that, Sebastian's cool voice broke in. "Allan."

Allan turned, irritation clear in his tone. "What?"

Then it clicked. Stella finally recognized the voice. He was the caller from last night, the one who had been so worked up on the phone.

"To her, and you lose the hand," Sebastian said, his voice quiet and utterly dangerous.

Allan's finger, which had been inches from Stella's face, instantly jerked away in another direction.

Allan's smile didn't waver. He simply treated the awkward moment as if it had never happened.

"So, he said smoothly, turning his bright gaze back to Stella, "I'm Allan. Allan Reed."

Allan watched Sebastian and Stella with a sly, amused look.

He then turned to Stella and extended his hand in a gesture of polite charm.

She gave his slender fingers a cursory glance. "Stella Carter," she stated plainly.

Suddenly, Allan felt a light slap on his palm. He looked down to see Lucas staring up at him with puffed-out cheeks, his delicate face the picture of wounded pride.

"My little treasure!" Allan exclaimed. He scooped Lucas into his arms and covered his cheeks with kisses before settling the boy atop his shoulders.

Stella observed as Lucas responded with a subtle roll of his eyes and a firm tug on Allan's hair.

12:11 Tue, Jan 13 G G

Chapter 20

82

55 vouchers

I've bought you a new estate in Rexland, my dear," Allan told Lucas cheerfully. "It will be ready next year, and your uncle will take you there. I've even arranged for a real brown bear to live on the grounds."

Stella's gaze, cool and assessing, drifted toward Sebastian. "Uncle?" she echoed softly.

Both Sebastian and Lucas turned to look at her.

Lucas tilted his head, his expression sweet and earnest.

He pointed a small finger toward Sebastian in the wheelchair, as if that explained everything.

"So you're his uncle?" Stella asked, her voice dry.

Sebastian met her look, his own expression as cool and unreadable as ever. His gaze felt like it could see straight through her.

"Yes," he replied.

She lifted an eyebrow. "And you let me believe otherwise all this time?"

You never asked," Sebastian replied.

Stella was silent for a moment. Then, with a mental shrug, she acknowledged that it didn't matter. Father or uncle, he was still the one signing her checks.

The tension left her shoulders, and she slipped back into her usual careless slouch.

"Don't mind me," she said, scooping up the box. With a casual wave, she walked out of the dining room, her exit as relaxed and unconcerned as ever.

Allan stared after her, baffled. "Why did she think you were..."

He glanced at Sebastian, and the question died on his lips.

Sebastian sat motionless in his wheelchair, his eyes cold and his face like stone.

Allan shivered, the fine fur of his coat doing little to ward off the sudden chill.

“Come with me to the study,” Sebastian said.

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In the study, Allan broke the silence with a quiet question. “Is she of age?”

He’d removed the extravagant fur coat and stood in just a white shirt. Pouring himself a whiskey, he listened to the soft chime of ice in the glass.

Sebastian sat motionless in his wheelchair by the great windows, his eyes fixed on the distance.

The sweeping view beyond the glass revealed all of Sandridge Island below.

“To business, Sebastian said.

Allan lifted his glass slightly. “It’s done. The private air routes between Shaviston, Laviston, Naviston, and Dorestan Exchange are secured. The last barrier is gone.”

Allan was not a man who played games with serious matters.

Sebastian offered no reply. The heavy silence in the room grew deeper.

12:11 Tue, Jan 13 G GR

Chapter 20

“You do look less pale,” Allan observed, his tone shifting. “Sleeping again?”

He took a sip of his drink with his usual polished ease.

82

55 Vouchers

Sebastian’s next words came without warning. They were so startling that Allan choked, spraying the whiskey he had just sipped.

He coughed, his eyes wide. “Say that again?” he said, certain he had heard wrong.

Sebastian watched Allan from his wheelchair, his eyes cold enough to kill.

“Why mention that now?” Allan asked, baffled.

“It’s been sealed for seven years. You...” His shock soon dissolved into pure excitement. Without another word, he called his assistant, his eyes locked on Sebastian.

Once the transfer was complete, he immediately sent the login details to Sebastian’s phone.

“Do one more thing for me,” Sebastian said.

His profile was sharp in the sunlight as he looked out into the courtyard.

Allan followed his gaze and saw Stella sitting in the gazebo with Lucas and Snowball. Even at rest, there was a defiant, untamed air about her, her skin almost luminous in the light.

“Anything,” Allan said, his tone serious. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for Sebastian.

After a long pause, Sebastian finally told him what he needed.

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The courtyard was still bare from the recent work, and the gardener had started planting new greenery.

Snowball lay sunning itself next to Lucas, a single black butterfly resting on its white head.

Stella worked intently on the collection of parts in her hands. Her skin seemed to glow, and her thick hair was swept back by a simple white ribbon that fluttered in the breeze.

Her fingers moved with efficient speed. The outline of a custom laptop was already clear, its form slimmer and lighter than any off the shelf.

Lucas reached out a small, careful hand and gave Stella a tentative poke.

Stella glanced over at him, though a part of her mind was still on the newly planted greenery in the courtyard.

“What’s the matter?” she asked. Her voice was soft, carrying a patience he seemed to uniquely inspire.

Lucas beamed as he held up his little whiteboard. It read: [Stella, are you angry?]

He had drawn a small, cartoon version of himself next to the words. It was impossibly cute.

“Angry? I’m not angry,” Stella replied, genuinely perplexed. It was impossible to imagine being upset with such a sweet little boy.

The next line on the board clarified: [Angry with Uncle Sebastian.] A frowny face was drawn beside it.

‘With Sebastian?’ she thought, surprised.

12:11 Tue, Jan 13