

Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

Chapter 141

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“After getting played that hard last time, you really think they’re gonna let Stella walk away tonight?” Allan raised an eyebrow. ‘No chance. If they don’t try to mess her up, that’ll be a miracle. This whole thing screams trap,’ he thought.

As he spoke, Allan leaned against the wall with his usual laid-back air, pulling a few gold-embossed invitations. from his pocket. “Let’s sneak in tonight and freak Stella out.” Just thinking about it had him fired up.

Sebastian rolled his eyes.

“This guy’s seriously got a screw loose, he thought.

“Get Manny over this afternoon to glam Stella up,” Sebastian said flatly.

Allan almost choked on air.

Manny was a legendary makeup artist who only worked with international superstars. For a simple dinner party, wasn’t that overkill? ‘Is Sebastian really treating the Lane family like royalty?’ Allan wondered.

Sebastian shot Allan a cold look. “If she wants to play, let her have her fun.”

Allan rolled his eyes.

‘Man, if Stella ever said she liked diamonds, would you go dig up a whole mine for her?’ Allan thought.

At the Carter residence, Camilla had just brought her precious daughter home.

She was frantically sprinkling salt at the doorway, trying to ward off bad luck. Just thinking about Stella locking Hazel up for five days made Camilla want to tear her apart.

“Mom! You and Vera have to teach her a lesson tonight and make her pay for messing with Lila and me!”

Hazel could barely sit still, already itching to see Stella humiliated. ‘If she’d just let us walk all over her, we never would’ve messed with Nova Group, and none of this would’ve happened,’ she fumed.

‘It’s all Stella’s fault!’ Hazel thought.

“Don’t worry. Tonight, we’re not letting her off the hook,” Camilla said, her voice dripping with malice.

Camilla snarled, “Just wait until we get Stella into David’s bed. Her whole life will be ruined.”

On Sandridge Island, Stella stood in the courtyard, watching little Lucas toddle around with a straw hat on his head and a tiny basket in his hands.

When her phone rang, she glanced at the caller ID: Vera. She picked up, figuring it was about time they made their move. With a cold smirk, Stella drawled, “Vera?” Her tone was lazy, laced with sarcasm.

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“Stella, don’t forget about the Lane family’s party tonight,” Vera said. The moment she heard Stella’s voice, she had a nasty feeling. “There might be trouble, Vera thought, frowning.

“Is Lila home?” Stella asked.

“Ah!” Not far away, Lucas stuck his butt out as he picked bright red cherry tomatoes from the vine.

Snowball slithered over and dropped her big white head into Stella's lap, looking completely at ease. The moment Stella opened her mouth, fluffy little Eggie started chirping nonstop.

Vera grabbed Hazel, who looked ready to explode, and shook her head, signaling her to calm down.

"Lila's just being a kid, so let me apologize for her," Vera said sweetly. "Do you need me to send a driver tonight? Make sure you dress up. I'll introduce you to some of Haliville's top VIPs."

Stella sounded bored. "No need. I'll drive myself."

Vera smiled. "Alright. I'll send the e-invite to your phone."

It wasn't until after she hung up that Vera suddenly realized, 'Wait, she's driving herself? How does Stella, a girl who got kicked out of school and doesn't even go home, even have a car?'

Stella tossed her phone aside and idly stroked Snowball's cool, smooth fur. She leaned against a pillar, looking detached. The breeze lifted her hair, revealing a faint bite mark on her neck.

"How can you be so shameless?" Celia's furious voice rang out behind her.

Stella blinked, confused. 'What the hell is going on?' she thought. 'Is she seriously picking a fight for no reason?'

Rapid footsteps soon arrived near her, and Stella hadn't intended to acknowledge her, but the next second, someone grabbed her collar. Instinct kicked in.

She slapped the hand away with a smack.

Snowball lifted her head. Normally gentle around Stella, she arched her back and hissed at Celia, who was clutching her wrist in pain, looking ready to lunge.

Celia glared at Stella. "What's that on your neck?"

Stella's eyes were cold and impatient. "None of your damn business."

"Is it Mr. Gray? How old are you? He pays you to watch Lucas, and you have the nerve to climb into his bed?" Celia stayed put, clearly intimidated by Snowball, and tried to humiliate Stella with words instead.

Stella was speechless.

‘Who’s sneaking into whose bed, exactly?’ Stella thought.

She narrowed her eyes at Celia, a dangerous glint flashing. Anyone who knew Stella could tell her patience was wearing thin. “Celia, don’t get ahead of yourself.”

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Stella glanced at Celia’s neck, noticing the obvious reddish marks now that she was worked up.

“I looked you up. Eighteen, expelled, rebellious, terrible grades. How could Mr. Gray trust someone like you around Lucas?” Celia sneered, her voice full of contempt. ‘You’re completely useless, she thought.

‘Why does she get to stay on Sandridge Island whenever she wants, while I only come a few weeks a year?’ Celia burned with envy. Every time she asked Sebastian to let her stay longer, he shut her down without hesitation.

‘Why her and not me?’ Celia thought bitterly, the unfairness gnawing at her.

“Everyone at school says you’re always hanging around random guys. Is that where you learned your tricks?” Celia sneered, her voice thick with scorn. “You’re trash.”

Stella laughed suddenly and patted Snowball’s head. “You done running your mouth?” She shot Celia a sideways glance so chill that even the animals nearby froze, sensing the danger.

But Celia still did not know when to quit. As she started to speak again, Stella’s smile did not fade. “Snowball, go hang out with Lucas. Don’t let him see this mess,” she said, cutting Celia off without missing a beat.

Snowball, who was usually a complete menace around Celia, suddenly turned sweet, nodding her big white head with fluffy little Eggie perched on top, then trotted off toward Lucas, who was still busy picking cherry

tomatoes.

‘Man, I, Snowball, really do way too much to keep this family peaceful and drama-free,’ Snowball thought, feeling quietly smug.

Stella kept smiling as she watched Snowball leave, making sure Lucas was led away and could not see what came next. The instant he was out of sight, her smile vanished, and her expression froze over.

Celia’s eyes widened before her mind could even catch up. Stella grabbed a fistful of her long hair and yanked it hard into her palm.

“Ah!” Celia shrieked in pain.

Stella’s voice was ice-cold. “Looks like my last warning did not get through to you.” Her fingers twisted in Celia’s hair, her presence restless and dangerous, her eyes rimmed with a sharp red edge.

Her face blank and cold, she dragged Celia straight into the house by the hair.

‘Celia really has me all wrong,’ Stella thought. ‘When did I ever look like someone who just takes it? If that is what she believes, I am more than happy to give her a reality check.’

“Let go of me! Help! Mr. Gray! Allan!” Celia screamed, her scalp burning as if it might tear loose. Once inside, she reached toward the staff, begging for help.

“Ms. Carter...” The servants froze in fear, but Stella’s cold stare stopped them before they could take a single step.

“All of you, back off. If anything happens, I will take responsibility,” Stella said calmly. She was not aggressive at all, yet that calm was so chilling it made everyone’s skin crawl.

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With a loud thud, Stella kicked open the downstairs bathroom door.

She locked it with a click from the inside.

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“Messy? Man-stealer? Trash?” Stella said coolly as she plugged the drain and turned on the faucet. She watched the sink fill, her expression completely unmoved.

“Let go of me!” Celia screamed, struggling desperately to break free.

Her scalp throbbed with pain as tears streamed down her face, her hands clawing at anything she could reach.

The servants, terrified that something bad was happening, kept pounding on the door. Stella barely spared them a glance, scoffing, “Celia, do you really think I’m that nice?”

The next second, Stella’s expression turned brutally cold as she shoved Celia’s face straight into the water- filled sink.

Panic slammed into Celia from every direction, swallowing her whole.

“Ste... Stella...” Celia gasped as her hands clutched the edge of the sink, and her mouth opened in blind terror with a gurgle, water rushing in and choking her.

She hacked and gasped, clawing desperately for air.

“Stella what?” Stella asked coldly as she yanked Celia’s head up, letting her steal a breath before forcing her straight back down, dragging her from brief relief into hell again.

Again and again, Stella repeated it, merciless and unrelenting.

Upstairs in the study, a servant rushed over and knocked urgently on the door.

“Mr. Gray, something is wrong! Ms. Carter and Ms. York are fighting!” the servant blurted out, completely panicked.

Allan rolled his eyes.

‘No doubt about it. Celia must have started something with Stella again. How does she never learn?’ Allan thought.

Sebastian paused and frowned. “Is she hurt?”

The servant froze, at a loss for words.

‘Which one does he mean?’ she wondered.

To be safe, she mentioned both. “Ms. Carter seems fine, but Ms. York... it sounds like she is really getting it.”

Allan just snorted.

He clapped a hand over his mouth, but there was no stopping the laugh that slipped out.

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Hearing that, Sebastian simply turned his gaze back to the paperwork on his desk. “Just make sure Stella is not disturbed.”

The servant stood there, speechless.

Now she was certain. Sebastian only cared whether Stella was hurt, not Celia.

Downstairs, Celia slumped to the floor, soaked through, her long hair disheveled. Stella popped the drain open with one hand, letting the water rush out of the sink.

Celia collapsed into coughing fits, her face ghostly pale as tears streamed down her cheeks. She looked like a pitiful, trampled flower, though inside she was cursing Stella with everything she had.

“Celia, what did you get up to last night?” Stella crouched in front of Celia and asked casually, her smile sharp with sarcasm as she wiped her fingers with a tissue.

Celia’s eyes widened, her pupils shrinking in terror.

“You stayed out all night and only dragged yourself back this morning. So what did you get up to?” Stella asked lazily, clearly uninterested. If it wasn’t her business, she’d not have any intention of thinking about it at all.

But Stella just didn't get it. 'How do people find the nerve to judge others when they cannot even clean up their own mess? If you are that desperate, maybe I should help you cut the line to the afterlife,' Stella snarked inwardly.

Celia kept her mouth shut, her lips pressed tight, hatred blazing in her eyes. The innocent act she had put on earlier was long gone.

Stella did not care anyway.

There were plenty of people who hated her. Celia was just another name on the list.

Stella let out a quiet, cold laugh. "Not talking? Fine. I will answer for you."

There was a harsh tearing sound,

Stella yanked open Celia's collar, exposing pale skin marked with red and purple bruises that told the whole story.

"Ah!" Celia clutched her collar, feeling as if her dignity had been torn apart and ground into the floor.

Stella's face was icy. "Conrad did that to you?"

Celia could not say a word.

Shame crashed over her, her eyes bloodshot with fury as she glared furiously at Stella, who hadn't even let her keep a shred of decency.

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'If Stella had not shown off at Edenbury Academy, I wouldn't have kept screwing up one thing after another. It is all her fault,' Celia seethed.

Stella stood and slipped back into her usual lazy indifference. She straightened her clothes unhurriedly, then flicked the used tissue straight at Celia's face.

“Before you go playing moral police, make sure your own hands are clean,” Stella sneered.

With that, she did not spare Celia another glance. She stepped right over her, opened the door, and walked out, leaving Celia slumped on the floor, staring after her with bitter hatred.

Stella went upstairs, changed into a fresh outfit, grabbed her keys, and headed out. On the way down, she ran into Allan.

Allan looked surprised. “Stella, you heading out?”

“Mm,” Stella replied lazily, waving him off. She paused, glanced back, and added casually, “Let Sebastian know. I roughed up Celia.”

Allan rolled his eyes.

He was about to say Sebastian already knew, but Stella did not look back and walked straight out.

Moments later, the roar of an engine echoed through the house as Stella took off on her Lightning LS-218.

Allan was watching after her.

‘Damn. Stella has quite a temper today,’ he thought.

Upstairs in the study, Celia had changed into a fresh white dress. Her eyes were swollen and red, making her look like she had been wronged by the entire world.

She played the innocent victim well, but Sebastian, seated across from her in his wheelchair, was colder than ice. When the engine roared below, his gaze hardened even further.

“Celia, pack your things. You’re leaving the island tomorrow,” Sebastian said, idly spinning prayer beads, voice sharp and merciless.

There was no room for discussion.

Celia was stunned. “Why?”

Ever since her sister died, she had come to the island every year around this time. Her sister and brother-in-law were buried there, and Sebastian had always allowed her to visit.

For years, she had been the only one given that privilege.

‘Is this because of Stella?’ Celia could not accept it. She was the one who got hurt, so why was Sebastian taking Stella’s side? ‘Fine. I will not fight back next time. I will just take it, alright? Is that enough?’

Fueled by anger, Celia marched straight toward Sebastian.

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“Celia, if Stella hit you, she had a damn good reason,” Sebastian said coldly. “She is not the type to lash out without cause,” Sebastian said, his cold, sickly face radiating an intimidating aura.

Celia’s eyes widened. “So you are saying I deserved it?”

Without even blinking, Sebastian just said, “Yes.”

Celia stood there, completely stunned.

She honestly could not believe what-she had just heard.

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Celia swallowed her sobs before she found her voice. “Don’t you think it’s cruel to say something like that to me?” She looked at Sebastian, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Anyone else would have felt sorry for her, but Sebastian did not. He sat there, cold as ice, completely unmoved.

“Tomorrow morning, I’ll have someone escort you off the island,” Sebastian said, his tone final and absolute.

Celia turned away. “If my sister and her husband were still alive, they’d never let you treat me like this!” She wiped her tears hard. “You’re going to regret this!”

With that, Celia slammed the door behind her and stormed out.

Sebastian watched her leave, his gaze dark and icy.

John slipped in quietly at Sebastian’s side. “Mr. Gray.”

“Tonight at the Lane family’s party, replace everyone inside with our own crew. You understand?” Sebastian rolled the prayer beads between his slender fingers, lifting his eyes to John, cold enough to freeze him in place.

John nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Sebastian pressed his hand to his forehead, the black prayer beads dangling loosely from his fingers. Because Celia had brought up the people he had lost, his already pale face turned paper white, the blue veins beneath his skin standing out sharply.

He dismissed John with a cold flick of his hand.

Soon, the room was empty.

Sebastian's electric wheelchair rolled up to the floor-to-ceiling window. His reflection stared back at him, eyes cold, brooding, and faintly fragile. Five years. The deal he had made with those people in Jaffina was almost up.

Meanwhile, Stella answered the call and parked her motorcycle outside the pool hall.

Blake headed upstairs.

At the entrance, several burly men blocked the doorway, their arms nearly as thick as Stella's waist. When they saw her approaching, they smirked and pushed the door open. "Go on in," one of them said.

Stella shot them a cold look. Dressed in an all-black zip-up jacket and jeans, her pale skin made her stand out even more, striking and impossible to ignore.

She did not hesitate and walked straight in.

The moment Stella entered, she heard several men near the pool table struggling and making muffled noises.

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Their mouths were gagged, so no one could tell what they were shouting.

It turned out to be Blake and those spoiled chads from the street race that night.

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At the moment, they were trussed up like turkeys, hands and feet bound tight, rags stuffed into their mouths.

They had been playing pool when they were suddenly ambushed and tied up by these men.

At the pool table, Joey, dressed in hip-hop gear with dreadlocks, grinned wickedly as Stella walked in. He tapped the cue ball, sending it straight into the pocket with a sharp crack.

“You got here fast,” Joey said, leaning both palms on the pool cue. When he saw Stella clearly, he let out a sleazy whistle.

Joey looked her up and down with a cocky, shameless gaze.

“Well, look who it is. We meet again,” Joey said.

The door slammed shut behind her. Several men holding steel pipes swaggered out from the corner, grinning with bad intentions. Joey was itching to see fear on Stella’s face.

Unfortunately for him, he got nothing he wanted.

All he saw was cold, endless indifference.

“Let them go,” Stella said coolly. She had just argued with Celia, so her mood was already foul.

Her eyes were icy, and there was a wild, dangerous edge to her, though the men in front of her had no idea what kind of trouble they were facing.

Joey laughed. “You think I’ll let them go just because you said so? Where’s my pride in that?” He grabbed a pool cue and tossed it to Stella. She caught it without blinking. Joey flashed a cocky grin. “You know how to play, princess?”

Stella remained silent. Under the shifting lights of the pool hall, her sharp features looked even colder and more mysterious.

Someone quickly reset the balls on the table.

Joey took a shot, scattering the balls with a loud crack. Whether intentional or not, every ball landed in the worst, hardest-to-reach positions. “Sink a ball and I let them go. Miss, and you strip,” Joey leered.

He chuckled, his eyes gleaming. “Fun game, right?”

Blake, tied up and helpless, could only stare in silence.

The entire scene felt painfully familiar; even that cocky look on Joey’s face was just too recognizable.

Blake swallowed hard.

Seeing how confident Joey looked, Blake thought, 'If nothing goes wrong, that means something is definitely

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about to go wrong.

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Suddenly, Stella bent over the table and began sinking balls one after another, one every second, without even blinking.

When the last ball dropped, Stella lifted her eyes and fixed Joey with a cold stare. "Let them go."

Joey was stunned, completely speechless.

His men gaped, too shocked to react.

Blake froze.

The other Chads just stared, mouths hanging open.

The pool hall fell into dead silence.

Joey stood there, dumbfounded. "Wait... you... uh..." He stared at the table, with only the cue ball left. 'Did I even say start? How the hell is it already over?' he thought, totally lost.

"Let them go," Stella said again, her voice calm and indifferent.

Joey was stunned, completely speechless.

He had intended to humiliate Stella, but now his expression twisted into a chaotic mix of disbelief and frustration. After a moment, he finally forced out a response. "What if I say I'm not letting them go?"

Stella did not answer. She simply fixed him with a steady, unbothered stare, without the slightest trace of panic.

The pool hall was silent as a grave.

“Not letting them go?” Stella tilted her head, giving it real thought. “Works for me.” A wild glint flashed in her eyes as she cracked her neck, dangerous energy rolling off her. “Isn’t this what you wanted? To see me strip?”

There was a harsh tearing sound.

She yanked down the zipper of her jacket, shrugged it off, and tossed it aside.

Stella was already in a foul mood and had zero patience left for these clowns. She locked Joey in a cold, amber-eyed stare, and his entire body tensed as the suffocating fear from the street race slammed back into him.

“What are you all standing around for? Get her!” Joey only remembered he had backup when he felt the man behind him. He straightened up, suddenly full of swagger. “Take her down!”

Stella smirked.

‘You’re right on time!’

She was seriously pissed off right now.

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‘So what do you do when you’re pissed off?’ Stella mused.

Just fight it out, that’s all,’ Stella thought.

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As seven or eight burly guys charged at her with steel pipes, grinning like they were about to have a good time, Stella planted one hand on the pool table and vaulted clean over it.

In a split second, she clamped her hand around the throat of the guy in front of her, and with a nasty crack, the dude, easily twice her size, collapsed to the floor, twitching uncontrollably.

Joey's crew froze on the spot, mouths hanging wide open.

Blake, tied up in the corner, could only stare, completely at a loss for words.

It was déjà vu all over again.

Blake almost wanted to cry; it felt so painfully familiar.

'Why the hell did you guys have to go and piss her off?' Blake thought, on the verge of tears.

Stella snatched the steel pipe from the fallen guy like it was nothing, her face blank and unreadable. Her eyes swept slowly across every face in front of her, and wherever her gaze landed, fear rippled visibly through the crowd.

"All together?" Stella cocked her head slightly, asking with a faint hint of politeness.

Joey's crew just stood there, burning with humiliation.

Joey hid behind his own muscle and shouted, "Get her! All of you, move!" He refused to believe that with this many guys, they couldn't take down one tiny chick.

At Joey's command, the thugs let out a messy battle cry and rushed in. Blake and the others, still tied up in the corner, started wailing and stomping the floor like their lives depended on it.

Stella was speechless.

'Seriously, could they be any louder?' Stella thought, irritated.

With a sharp swing, Stella smashed the steel pipe straight into the nearest guy's knee. The sickening crunch echoed through the room, and the guy dropped instantly, curling up and howling like a wounded animal.

Stella didn't even blink. She went to work, cracking knees left and right like a one-woman wrecking crew. Wherever she moved, bodies hit the floor, their screams slamming into the walls.

Joey watched in horror as his muscles went down one after another. Then his eyes locked onto Stella as she closed in on him, slow and steady, like a boss coming to collect her dues.

Joey froze, completely freaked out.

When the last thug hit the ground, Joey's legs turned to jelly and he dropped to the floor with a hard smack.

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"When are you coming back?" Sebastian's voice came through the line, cold and deep. Before Stella could answer, Blake and the Chads' eyes went wide. "Stella, look out!"

Sebastian said nothing on the other end of the line.

The thug trying to sneak up behind her froze, the steel pipe jammed against his throat. His eyes narrowed to slits in shock. 'How did she even notice me? She didn't even turn around!' he thought, completely spooked.

Stella replied calmly, "Soon."

She jumped off the pool table, forced the would-be attacker into the corner, and with one brutal swing, cracked his head open. He dropped instantly, eyes rolling back as he collapsed right on top of Joey.

Joey was about to scream when Stella shoved the steel pipe against his mouth, cutting the sound off before it could escape.

Stella silently mouthed "shh," her expression completely unreadable. "Just playing some pool," she said.

She knocked the pool ball into the pocket with the steel pipe.

Yeah, she wasn't lying.

"What are you doing?" Stella asked, completely unfazed, tossing the question right back at him.

Down in the dungeon, Sebastian stared stone-faced at Conrad's assistant, who was tied up on the floor and shaking with fear. Snowball, the massive white snake, was lazily coiled in front of him, radiating a deeply sinister presence.

Ivan stood quietly off to the side.

Conrad's assistant slowly came to, and the first thing he saw was a giant white snake's face inches from his own. Its mouth was wide open, two razor-sharp fangs fully exposed.

There came a hiss.

He went completely berserk, thrashing wildly like a lunatic.

'Snake! Snake!' he screamed inside his head.

'That's a freaking python!' he panicked, totally losing it.

'Help! Somebody save me!' he shrieked mentally.

Sebastian said evenly, "Just taking the snake for a walk."

Seriously, neither of them was lying.

Stella said nothing.

Snowball, who had been trying hard to look terrifying, froze in place.

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Ivan said nothing either.

'Legendary!' Ivan thought, utterly stunned.

"Alright, have fun walking the snake," Stella said.

"Alright, you have fun too," Sebastian replied.

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Neither of them mentioned the chaos unfolding on the other end of the line. They both knew exactly what was happening and chose to keep it to themselves, sharing a silent understanding.

After Stella hung up, her expression turned icy. She slowly looked down at Joey. With a heavy thud, he dropped to his knees in front of her. "I'll pay!" Joey cried out. "I'll pay whatever you want!"

Blake froze again.

'Even the way he's groveling is freaking déjà vu!' Blake thought, a strange sense of familiarity washing over him.

"How much?" Stella asked, looking down at Joey. Her presence was so overwhelming that it felt like the air had been sucked out of the room.

Joey raised one trembling finger. "O-One hundred?"

Stella kept her face blank and casually dragged the steel pipe across the floor with a screech.

Joey hurriedly raised another finger. "T-Two hundred?"

Stella smirked, her eyes flashing with cold, dangerous amusement.

Joey clenched his teeth, desperation etched all over his face as he raised a third finger. "Three million!"

'That's my limit! No way I'm going higher!' he panicked inwardly.

"Deal!" Stella stepped right up to Joey and crouched down until they were eye to eye. Her presence pressed down on him until it was almost suffocating.

"Five hundred thousand for each of us," she said evenly. "Call someone to bring the cash. No checks or cards."

Joey was completely floored, unable to speak.

'Why the hell did I have to be such an idiot and pick a fight with her today?' Joey thought, instant regret crashing down on him.

'My money!' Joey screamed inside his head, watching his bank balance go up in flames.

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Three million dollars, packed into six suitcases, was hauled into the pool room.

“Boss-” The bodyguard pushed the door open, but the words died in his throat.

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The tough girl lifted her cue, her eyes icy, and sent the ball straight into the pocket with a thud. Nearby, Joey and his crew knelt in a neat row, hands raised high while clutching steel pipes.

Then they chanted in unison, “Civility, harmony, equality, justice...”

“Is that all you’ve got?” Stella did not even glance at them, her expression blank as she calmly chalked the tip

of her cue.

Joey and his crew exchanged stiff, awkward looks, completely at a loss.

After a brief silence, they shouted again, twice as loud as before.

Joey and his crew chanted, “Rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity...”

The black-clad bodyguard dragging the cash-filled suitcases could only stand there, utterly speechless.

Blake tightened his grip on his pool cue and said nothing.

The Chads just stared, not daring to make a sound.

At that moment, the silence said everything. Everyone's thoughts were practically screaming.

"B-Boss, the money's here," the bodyguard stammered, looking completely overwhelmed. Joey snapped his head up, his eyes instantly filling with tears, like he had just seen his long-lost family. He was a second away from sobbing, crying, "What took you so long?"

Joey pleaded miserably, his voice trembling. "The money's here. Can I go now?"

'Just let me go back to wasting my life as a useless rich kid, please!' Joey begged inwardly.

'Please!'

Blake froze again.

No one would have believed it, but in that moment, Blake felt a strange sense of solidarity with Joey. It was like they were trapped in the same disaster.

Not even sparing him a glance, Stella lined up another shot with a thud. The atmosphere in the pool room was beyond bizarre. After sinking the ball, she kicked the suitcases full of cash straight toward Blake and his crew. "Your money."

Blake froze again.

The Chads just stared, not daring to make a sound.

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'Wait, this is our money?' Blake and the Chads all freaked out inwardly.

Stella shot them a lazy look. "Compensation for the mental stress you put me through."

Everyone stood there, dumbstruck.

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Joey, slumped against his bodyguard, could not help cursing inwardly. ‘Seriously, no one’s mental damage today is worse than mine!

‘But yeah, I totally did this to myself,’

“Stella...” Blake choked out, clutching the suitcase, his eyes burning.

Before he could say another word, Stella tossed her cue onto the table, grabbed her motorcycle keys, and strode out the door. “Later.”

Watching her leave, Joey straightened up and flipped her off. Just then, Stella stopped at the doorway and turned around.

“Oh, by the way...” Stella said, letting her voice trail off.

Their

eyes met.

Stella paused, her expression completely blank.

Joey gulped.

His mind raced. Then, with a crooked grin, he started twirling his middle finger, showing off with exaggerated flair.

‘Don’t even think about falling for me. It’s a lost cause unless you can outdo my middle finger skills!’ Joey joked inwardly, desperately trying to stay upbeat.

Stella was speechless.

Everyone else stood frozen in painfully awkward silence.

Stella looked past Joey and locked eyes with Blake. “See you tonight.”

With that, she turned and headed downstairs without looking back.

Moments later, the roar of an engine echoed from below.

Joey was completely floored, unable to speak.

‘Shit.’ Joey swore quietly.

Stella rode her bike straight back to Sandridge Island. As she pulled in, she met eyes with Lucas, the soft, fair little boy holding an overflowing basket of bright red cherry tomatoes.

Stella removed her helmet with one hand and gave him a small wave. “Hey.”

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“Hi!” Lucas chirped in his baby voice, lifting the basket over his head. His eyes sparkled as he stared at Stella, her long, silky hair spilling down her shoulders.

‘He’s way too cute.’ Stella thought, her heart instantly melting.

She hopped off the bike, scooped Lucas up, and planted a loud kiss on his squishy cheek.

Lucas rolled his eyes.

‘Stella kissed me!’ Lucas screamed inwardly, completely overwhelmed with happiness.

Upstairs, Celia watched the entire scene, her eyes burning with jealousy and resentment. She slammed her freshly packed suitcase onto the floor, fuming.

‘I’m his aunt! Why does he lose his mind every time I try to touch him, but Stella gets to hug and kiss him like it’s nothing?’ Celia seethed.

Celia was nearly driven insane by jealousy.

She opened the door and headed downstairs, only to wander into the guest room she used to occupy. The entire floor had been turned into Stella’s storage space. Celia was stunned.

‘How much stuff does she need to take up an entire floor?’ She thought, completely baffled.

‘Doesn’t Mr. Gray think this is ridiculous?’ she muttered inwardly.

Celia just pushed the door open.

She froze, her eyes flying wide.

Thousands of outfits, shoes, handbags, and accessories were meticulously arranged by color, displayed with military-level precision. Just standing in the doorway made her heart pound.

She swallowed hard and stepped inside despite herself.

Her fingers brushed the clothes, each one sealed in a clear dust cover. She recognized DenimKraft and other luxury brands. These were exclusive pieces that had never even hit the market.

Celia felt like her heart was on fire.

Her gaze was glued to the racks, equal parts obsessed and furious. “There is no way Stella could afford this. So Mr. Gray bought all of it for her?’ Her jealousy spiraled.

‘Even Lucas likes her!’ Celia thought.

‘Even that disgusting snake is into her!’

‘John and Jake treat her like royalty too!’ Celia muttered, feeling even more annoyed.

‘And even Mr. Gray...’ Celia thought, totally speechless.

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She could come and go on Sandridge Island whenever she pleased, like she owned the place. No one ever stopped her.

‘Why does Stella get everything?’ Celia thought bitterly with envy.

Her jealousy and resentment burned so fiercely that her eyes nearly turned red. Years ago, her sister used to say the Gray brothers were loyal to love.

Once they chose someone, it was for life. They would move heaven and earth for her. Celia still could not understand why.

‘Does Stella even deserve any of this?’ she fumed, her heart twisting with envy.

Celia staggered out of the walk-in closet in a daze and nearly collided with Lucas, who looked like a porcelain doll.

‘What am I even doing?’ she thought, shaken.

Lucas, heading upstairs alone, cocked his head, clearly confused about why Celia was coming out of Stella’s

closet.

“Lucas...” Celia froze, caught off guard. Her heart raced, but then she remembered he could not speak and relaxed slightly. “Let me give you a hug, okay?”

She awkwardly leaned in, trying to coax him closer.

Lucas stayed silent, but his discomfort was obvious. He stepped back, pulling away from her hand. That small rejection snapped the last of Celia’s restraint.

“I’m your aunt! Why won’t you let me hug you?” she demanded, her voice tight with frustration.

Her frustration boiled over as she raised her voice.

Lucas flinched, his eyes wide, frozen in place.

“Come on, Lucas, listen to me. I’m your aunt, and we’re family. You should want to be close to me!” Celia took

a deep breath and forced a smile, but had no idea how weird and fake it looked to Lucas.

Lucas kept retreating, step by step.

Celia kept pressing forward, completely unaware that Lucas had backed all the way to the top of the stairs, just one step away from falling.

“Come here!” Celia called, her arms stretched wide as she tried to force a hug.

“No!” Lucas cried out, his small body tipping backward like a kite with its string cut.

A single terrified tear slipped from the corner of his eye, suspended in midair.

Celia’s heart nearly stopped as she lunged for him. “Lucas!” Her fingers closed on nothing but air. A wave of pure terror crashed over her as she slowly sank to her knees at the top of the stairs, bracing herself for

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disaster.

Suddenly, someone charged up the stairs like lightning.

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Lucas felt himself scooped up, wrapped in that familiar, comforting scent, but the momentum sent Stella’s right shoulder slamming hard into the white banister.

Her shoulder popped out of its socket with a crack!

But that was not even the worst part. Lucas had fallen at such an awkward angle that, even though Stella rushed

up in time to catch him, she could not stop herself from being dragged down with him.

In other words, Stella was about to tumble down the stairs with Lucas in her arms. There was no way out of it. They were going down together.

Yet even in that split second, Stella did not flinch. She shielded Lucas with her uninjured arm, her face perfectly calm. Knowing she could not avoid getting hurt, she closed her eyes and ran through her options.

She calculated the best way to hit the ground so she would take the least possible damage.

But in the very next second, a pair of powerful arms swept in at the last possible moment and caught them both in a firm bridal hold, stopping the fall just before impact. The strength was unmistakably male.

Stella heard the familiar click of prayer beads.

She opened her eyes and met Sebastian's gaze, cold and razor-sharp, dangerous enough to cut.

He stood there backlit by the light, his flawless features carved in shadow, his presence radiating an icy chill. He appeared calm, but the way his arms tightened around Stella and Lucas said everything.

Danger rolled off him in waves.

Sebastian lifted his eyes to Celia at the top of the stairs. His gaze was cold and hollow, as if she were already dead.

Allan stood beside him, gold-rimmed glasses in place, every inch the perfect gentleman. The menace lurking in his eyes betrayed him.

Celia clutched the railing with one hand, her eyes blown wide with shock, like she was staring straight into a nightmare.

'Mr. Gray... His legs were supposed to be crippled. He was supposed to be stuck in a wheelchair. So how is he standing right now?' her thoughts spiraled wildly.

She was completely stunned. This could not be real.

'Has Sebastian really been pretending all these years?' Celia's thoughts collapsed into chaos.

'Why? What was the point?' Her heart pounded violently in her chest.

So consumed by shock was she that Celia failed to notice John had already cleared everyone out. The villa

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had fallen completely silent, with only them left.

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“No!” Lucas cried, tears pooling in his eyes and spilling like tiny pearls. He was not crying for himself, but for Stella. He pointed frantically at her shoulder, sweat beading on his forehead in panic.

“Are you hurt?” Sebastian asked, his voice low and husky.

Stella raised an eyebrow and carefully checked Lucas with her uninjured hand. Once she confirmed he was unharmed, frost crept into her expression. “Lucas is fine,” she said flatly.

She let out a quiet breath of relief.

Sebastian’s tone tightened. “I’m asking about you.”

“Put me down first,” Stella said. Her face had gone pale, and a thin sheen of sweat covered her forehead. Sebastian’s gaze darkened. After a long pause, he finally set her down on her feet.

Stella looked up at Celia at the top of the stairs. A storm brewed in her amber eyes, so heavy and dark it seemed to weigh down the air itself.

Without a word, she started up the stairs.

“I... I didn’t mean to...” Celia muttered, her voice shaking as she tried to excuse herself.

Stella seemed wrapped in darkness. She grabbed her dislocated right arm with her left hand and, with a sharp crack, forced it back into place. Her face never twitched, not even her eyebrows.

Allan, watching from downstairs, hissed through his teeth. “Yikes...”

‘Just watching that makes my skin crawl,’ Allan thought, grimacing.

Celia wanted to run, but her legs had turned to jelly, refusing to budge. Suddenly, a dark shadow fell over her. Stella was standing right in front of her, silent and overwhelming, looking down at her with eyes that promised nothing but trouble.

“Stand up,” Stella said, her voice flat and cold.

Celia sobbed, “I really didn’t mean to...” Before she could finish, Stella lost patience and yanked her up by the collar. Celia felt weightless as her back slammed against the edge of the stairs,

Her eyes flew wide as Stella suddenly shoved her hard with both hands.

Celia was sent flying, completely airborne.

Just like Lucas had been moments earlier.

Celia went crashing down the long white staircase, screaming without pause. Unlike Lucas, she was not so lucky. No one even tried to help her.

She barely managed to shield her head as everything dissolved into pain and panic.

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She tumbled straight to Sebastian's feet, her hand shooting out to grab the toe of his shoe. "Mr. Gray, I..."

A suffocating terror seized Celia, stealing the air from her lungs.

Celia still did not understand why Sebastian had kept up the act for five long years, but one thing was obvious now. He did not care if she learned the truth because she was not walking out of here alive.

With regal indifference, Sebastian calmly pulled his shoe free from her grasp.

Those shoes would never be worn by him again.

Sebastian spoke coldly, his tone devoid of mercy. "Allan."

Allan's smile was ice-cold as he lifted Lucas into his arms, pressed the boy's face against his chest, and covered his ears.

Sebastian crouched in front of Celia. His face was deathly pale yet wickedly handsome, every inch of him radiating murderous intent, with no effort made to hide it.

The cold fingers Celia had dreamed about so many times closed around her throat. It was real this time.

Celia let out a strangled gasp.

His grip felt like an icy serpent, tightening inch by inch around her neck, squeezing the air from her lungs. Celia thrashed wildly, desperate to escape the monster looming over her.

She saw clearly that Sebastian's eyes held nothing but murder, with no mercy and no hesitation.

Blood from her forehead splattered across Sebastian's pale hand, veins standing out as if ready to burst. The pressure was so intense that Celia swore she could see the gates of hell opening just for her until Stella appeared.

"Sebastian." No one had noticed when Stella came downstairs, but now she was right beside him, her palm pressing firmly against the back of his hand. Her voice was cool and authoritative. "Let her go."

Sebastian looked up, and his mere presence made the entire villa feel suffocating. Rage burned at the edges of his

eyes, so intense it looked like they might bleed, his stare a storm of cold menace.

"She hurt you and Lucas," he said, his voice pure ice. There was not a trace of humanity left in it.

Stella met his gaze without retreating an inch, even as darkness and cruelty churned in his eyes. She let out a quiet breath, then wrapped her arms around Sebastian while he remained crouched, patting his back gently

to calm him.

"I know. Easy. Let her go for me, okay?" she coaxed, her voice soft but firm. "We still need her for the Conrad angle." Stella's expression remained ice-cold, and the look she gave Celia was every bit as chilling as

Sebastian's.

Sebastian stared at Stella. Under her steady, calming touch, he finally loosened his grip and reluctantly released his hand from around Celia's throat.

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Celia collapsed onto the floor in a limp heap.

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She coughed violently and dragged in ragged breaths, her face flushed deep red, her thoughts scattered and spinning.

Allan spoke up, his tone grave. “Stella, she saw things she wasn’t supposed to see.”

That icy aura still clung to Sebastian as his gaze slid past Stella and settled on Celia, cold and merciless, like the Grim Reaper choosing his next target. “Go get Nathan.”

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“No need,” Stella said with effortless calm, her eyes lowered. She stopped Allan just as he was about to make a call. Phone still pressed to his ear, Allan raised an eyebrow at her words.

Stella released her hold on Sebastian and moved toward Celia.

Celia, still trembling from her brush with death, looked terrified as she scrambled backward until her back pressed against the wall. "I didn't see anything. I won't say a word..." she whispered.

Celia pressed her hands together, nervously rubbing them as she begged for mercy, her gaze fixed on Stella, who stood silhouetted against the light.

Allan started, "Sebastian, Stella-" But before he could finish, Stella slowly crouched down right in front of Celia, her deep amber eyes locking with hers.

Celia's voice cut off abruptly.

Her once-clear eyes began to lose focus, her expression turning vacant as she appeared dazed and unresponsive.

A few seconds later, Stella snapped her fingers near Celia's ear.

Celia collapsed to the floor.

She was out cold.

"All done," Stella said as she stood, slowly shooting Allan a look. She was clearly not in the mood to explain anything.

Allan was watching after her.

'Nathan always makes a great show with his pocket watch, aromatherapy music, and all that, but Stella just snaps her fingers and it's done?' Allan thought, still a bit stunned.

Lucas peeked out from Allan's arms, his baby-faced features timid and fragile, like a little stray ragdoll kitten. He made a soft, whimpering sound, silently begging to be taken in.

"Just in case, I'll take Lucas to get checked out. Why don't you and Sebastian have a chat?" Allan said, tossing the words out before Lucas could reach for him. He turned and headed out, giving them some space.

Stella was speechless.

Before she could process what was happening, the familiar, intense, masculine scent of Sebastian enveloped her. In one smooth motion, he scooped her up in a princess carry, his arms radiating dangerous power.

“I can walk on my own,” Stella said, feeling slightly out of place.

Sebastian ignored her protest, keeping her close in his arms as he carried her upstairs without hesitation.

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Once they disappeared upstairs, John and the others began dealing with the aftermath.

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On the nightstand, the plain plant swayed gently, filling the room with a drowsy scent that affected neither of them.

“Take off your coat,” Sebastian said, carefully setting her down on the bed.

Stella was speechless.

Seeing no movement from her, Sebastian, still cold-faced, reached out and yanked down the zipper of her coat with a sharp sound.

“I can do it myself,” Stella said, blocking his hand. She shrugged off her black coat and tossed it to the floor. Sebastian frowned, his dark eyes deepening. “Go on.”

Stella was speechless.

She glanced at him, sighed, and removed her black T-shirt as well.

Now she was left in only a black camisole.

The ugly bruise on her right shoulder, left from when she’d dislocated it crashing into the stair railing, was exposed, glaring against her fine, flawless skin.

“It just looks worse than it is. Honestly, it doesn’t bother me,” Stella said calmly. Back on the island, old-timers had subjected her to brutal rounds of training, and she’d endured injuries far worse than this.

Sebastian reached out, brushing Stella’s long hair over her left shoulder.

“I-” Stella began, but the words caught and faded.

Her long lashes trembled.

At that moment, Sebastian’s cold lips pressed gently to the bruise on her shoulder, his touch almost reverent. His eyes lowered, icy and self-controlled, almost ascetic, yet somehow dangerously seductive.

He wrapped his arms around her from behind.

Stella’s heart skipped a beat.

“You really scared me just now,” Sebastian said softly, his chin resting on her head. His voice carried a hint of hurt and lingering fear, emotions she could feel vibrating through his chest.

No one had ever said that to her before. Stella paused for two seconds, then said softly, “I’m sorry.”

Sebastian shook his head, pulling her close with one arm. His cool lips brushed her ear in gentle, scattered kisses. “Do you have anything you want to ask me?” he asked. ‘Just ask, and I’ll tell you anything,’ his tone suggested.

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Stella paused a few more seconds, then quietly stood, walking to the bathroom. When she returned with a damp towel, she knelt before Sebastian and gently extended her hand, palm up, inviting him to give her his.

Without a word, Sebastian hesitated, then placed his hand, stained with Celia’s blood, into hers.

“I’ve always known,” Stella said softly, her voice steady. From the moment she first checked his pulse, she had understood everything. There had never been a doubt in her mind.

She took her time, carefully wiping every trace of blood from his long, elegant fingers, making sure his hands were perfectly clean. “Like I said, my patron is always right, no matter what he does.”

With Stella, reasons were never necessary, and her trust was absolute.

So she never questioned him.

Stella looked up, her eyes clear, calm, and pure. The light hit her face just right, giving her a soft, creamy glow, like a natural beauty filter. The tiny mole in the hollow of her collarbone only added to her charm.

Sebastian’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed.

His now-clean hand lifted on its own, gently cupping Stella’s face and brushing his thumb across her cheek. “But I’m bound to mess up sometimes,” he said, his voice low and rough.

Stella remained relaxed, letting out a soft laugh. “Just keep moving forward. I’ll make sure the world bends for your mistakes,” she said. To her, it was never a problem.

The next thing Stella knew was that Sebastian’s arm swept around her waist, and before she could react, she was off her feet, ending up straddling him.

He buried his face in the curve of her neck, the sheer difference in their size impossible to ignore, and it was a total visual shock.

Sebastian’s grip was possessive, holding her so tightly it felt like he never wanted to let go.

As he moved, her black camisole rode up slightly, revealing her slim waist and the curve of her lower back. Against the black fabric, her skin seemed almost dazzling.

Eyes closed, Sebastian inhaled her clean, addictive scent just like Stella herself, impossible to resist. He couldn’t help but whisper, “You’re no exception either...”

“Hmm?” Stella murmured, her fingers curling around the back of Sebastian’s head, her reply barely above a whisper.

Sebastian looked up, locking eyes with Stella above him. "It's always you. You're my number one, always."

His eyes burned with loyalty.

He was just like a lone wolf.

Then came the sound of someone knocking at the door.

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Sebastian rolled his eyes.

Stella was speechless.

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Stone-faced, Sebastian reached out and covered Stella's ears.

He blocked out the sound, refusing to listen.

Stella was speechless.

Another round of knocking came. "Mr. Gray, Manny's here," John called from outside.

Sebastian glanced toward the door, his eyes still dark and intense.

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"Who's Manny?" Stella asked, her attention immediately shifting. She turned her head, her lashes flickering.

Not happy about being ignored, Sebastian gripped her chin, forcing her to look at him. "The makeup artist," he said.

Stella was speechless.

'Makeup artist?' Stella blinked, completely thrown.

With a chill in his voice, Sebastian called toward the door, "Tell him to wait." Then he pulled Stella even closer, refusing to let her go.

Stella was speechless.

He was acting just like Lucas when he got clingy.

Actually, even Lucas wasn't this needy.

John had been slouched against the wall outside the bedroom, bored out of his mind for a good twenty minutes before the door finally swung open. Sebastian rolled out in his wheelchair, shooting John an icy glare.

John was shocked.

'Next time, I'm dumping this job on Jake,' he swore to himself.

Downstairs, the floor gleamed, no trace of blood anywhere.

A tall, fashionable man turned around, and when he spotted Stella coming down, his eyes lit up like he'd struck gold. "Mr. Gray, just give me an hour," he said, his excitement barely contained.

He swore he'd make her look absolutely jaw-dropping tonight.

Stella was speechless.

'Honestly, I'm just here to stir things up. Do I really need all this glam?' Stella thought, feeling speechless.

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But Manny was already raring to go, eager to work his magic.

An hour later, Manny stepped back, arms crossed, marveling at Stella.

"Done!" he announced, excitement written all over his face. "Unbelievable!"

Stella opened her eyes, calm compared to Manny's dramatic reaction.

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'If only... Sebastian hadn't been holding my hand the whole time,' she thought, glancing at her hand still firmly clasped in his.

"Mr. Gray, are you satisfied?" Manny asked, fishing for compliments as he looked at Sebastian. From the mirror, he had seen the usually cold man unable to tear his eyes from Stella, not even for a second.

Sebastian, sitting in his wheelchair, said nothing and just gave a tight-lipped look.

While Manny was busy packing up his makeup kit, Sebastian took the chance to sneak a poke at Stella's cheek.

Stella was speechless.

She turned to meet his eyes.

"Is it really that fun to poke?" she teased lazily. Sebastian nodded before even realizing it.

He had never known her cheek could be so soft.

Like a marshmallow.

'Did he really just nod?' Stella thought.

"Your dress is all set," Manny announced, again clearly floored by her stunning appearance as she raised her head.

Stella finally relaxed and headed into the back room to get changed.

The door cracked open a little.

Lucas's chubby, adorable face peeked out.

He let out a soft "Wow", dressed in his favorite shark pajamas with a tail. Clutching the tail, he glanced around, looking like a lost little kitten, totally insecure.

Big Ben, who'd been hibernating for another upgrade these past couple of days, poked his head out too.

"System detected Stella is right here!" Big Ben announced, placing his hands on his super squishy, round belly. When he spotted Sebastian, he made a heart gesture at him.

Sebastian rolled his eyes.

Manny was stunned, since he had never seen a robot this smart before.

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Lucas looked around, and when he spotted the back room door, his eyes lit up. He began toddling over as fast as his little legs could carry him. Before he could reach the doorknob, a pair of cold hands grabbed him by the back of his collar.

“Wow?” Lucas blinked, completely confused.

“She’s changing,” Sebastian said.

Lucas rolled his eyes.

He tilted his head, clutching his shark tail and poking at it for comfort.

Big Ben said, “Lucas is scared.”

Lucas pouted, looking even more pitiful, and poked at his tail again.

Big Ben said, “Lucas wants Stella to give him a hug.”

“He’s way too cute!” Manny felt like he was about to burst from the sheer adorableness as she thought, ‘How could there be such a soft, squishy little guy in the world?’

“Lucas, should I kidnap you in a gold sack or a silver sack and take you home?” she said.

Lucas rolled his eyes. “What do you mean?”

He tilted his head, looking completely confused and lost.

Manny let out another dramatic squeal. He was totally melted by the cuteness overload.

Sebastian glanced over.

Lucas rolled his eyes again.

Big Ben kept making heart gestures.

“Wait until she comes out,” Sebastian said.

Hearing that, Lucas obediently hugged his shark tail and plopped down right in front of the door. He propped his chin on both hands and waited sweetly for Stella to come out.

Big Ben tried to sit down just like Lucas, but he couldn't.

His chubby, squishy belly got stuck hanging in midair.

Big Ben laughed.

Sebastian glanced over.

Manny was confused.

‘Seriously, what’s up with that “Hehe”?’ Manny thought, completely thrown off. ‘Is this robot for real or what?’

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The lock in the back room clicked open, and Stella, now dressed in her gown, slowly pushed the door open and walked out. The very next second, Stella smiled helplessly.

Stella looked down, only to find Lucas, that tiny little bandit, clinging to her leg with a soft plop.

Lucas tilted his head up at her, his eyes unfocused and a little dazed.

In no time, his soft, pale cheeks flushed pink, and he looked completely flustered.

Lucas typed on his watch.

Big Ben cupped his own blushing cheeks and chirped, “Stella, you’re so pretty!”

Stella was speechless.

‘Try saying that again when you can actually talk straight,’ Stella thought, amused.

Lucas froze, completely spaced out. “Wow!”

The black gradient dress with traditional frog buttons completely concealed the bruise on Stella’s right shoulder, making her fine and smooth skin look even more flawless. The black embroidered flowers along the hem looked so lifelike they seemed ready to bloom.

Even Manny couldn’t stop himself from gasping in amazement.

This was DenimKraft’s newest signature piece of the year, so exclusive that even top celebrities couldn’t borrow it from headquarters. On Stella, it looked like it had been custom-made just for her.

“Do I look pretty?” Stella turned her pale face toward Lucas and fluttered her long lashes at him.

Lucas nodded so hard it looked like his head was mounted on a spring.

Stella lifted her gaze toward Sebastian.

At that moment, Sebastian said nothing.

He was already regretting it.

He was already kicking himself for bringing Manny in. Now that Stella looked this stunning, his possessiveness was spiraling out of control. “You look good,” he said coldly.

His eyes were clouded and unreadable.

Stella was speechless.

Looking at his stoic, icy expression, Stella thought, ‘Doesn’t look like he’s impressed at all.

“I’m going to grab the accessories!” Manny exclaimed, nearly vibrating with excitement. “This kind of modern French-style dress absolutely needs pearls to look perfect!”

“I mean those white pearls,” he added loudly. “Big, round ones that look innocent but totally irresistible!”

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He shouted over his shoulder as he hurried out, unable to wait another second.

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Sebastian watched as Stella poked Lucas’s cheek. His long lashes lowered, as if he were waiting for something. He absently rolled his prayer beads, feeling oddly stifled and irritated.

“I’ll have Jake take you there tonight,” Sebastian said, his voice low and muted. Stella responded with a casual “Mm”.

Sebastian glanced over.

‘Is she seriously not going to invite me?’ Sebastian thought, irritation creeping in.

Manny rushed back with a jewelry box in hand. Before he could say a word, Sebastian lifted his hand coldly. “I’ll do it.”

His tone left no room

for

argument.

Manny was confused

He had really wanted to be the one to put the jewelry on Stella.

With a regretful sigh, Manny handed over the box to Sebastian, who snapped it open and cast Stella a cold, unreadable look.

“Come here,” Sebastian said, his voice low and commanding.

His face was blank, cold as ice. Manny couldn’t help thinking Sebastian was being an absolute ice king to Stella. Just then, Big Ben, standing nearby, tilted his head in confusion.

“Sir,” Big Ben said, “my system detects your heart rate is approaching 120 beats per minute. Should I call your family doctor for you, sir?”

Sebastian rolled his eyes.

Both Stella and Manny were stunned.

Lucas was the only one who tilted his head innocently, all soft and squishy and unbearably cute. “Wow?”

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Until the night fell, Sebastian kept waiting for Stella to invite him, but even after she got in the car, that invitation never came.

As he watched the car disappear into the distance, Allan could instantly feel Sebastian’s mood drop. The air was thin and icy, like frost was about to form. Allan let out a loud sneeze.

Sebastian shot Allan a frosty look that made his skin crawl.

Allan rolled his eyes. John stood there like a post, completely unmoved.

Snowball, with a little flower clamped between his jaws, wandered right onto the battlefield. It was still riding high on the thrill of clocking out from the dungeon.

Snowball'd managed to scare some jerk human so badly that it nearly split his pants.

'This family really can't function without me,' Snowball thought smugly. He was feeling pretty pleased with himself.

With the flower still clamped between its jaws and its eyes squeezed shut, Snowball was feeling super proud of itself, showing off its signature S-drift across the floor, until its big, snow-white head smacked right into a pair of legs.

Snowball opened its eyes and looked up. Two icy, soul-piercing eyes were quietly staring down at it.

Snowball was stunned for a moment. It gulped, its nerves shot. It jolted, its whole body shivering.

Sebastian gave Snowball a cold, piercing stare, fixing his gaze on the flower in Snowball's mouth.

Snowball was quiet for a couple of seconds, then offered up its precious little flower onto Sebastian's lap. It rubbed its big head against Sebastian's fingers, trying its best to look cute, and grinned widely.

It flashed a big, toothy smile. 'Life's rough, so this snake's gotta put on a show,' Snowball thought, trying his best to entertain.

Sebastian delicately picked up the little flower. "She doesn't even spare me a thought."

Allan rolled his eyes. Snowball was stunned for a moment. John was shocked.

Allan shot Sebastian a weird look. "S-Sebastian..."

'Wait, did Stella and Sebastian have a falling out or something? That can't be right. They were totally fine just now, weren't they?' Allan thought, baffled.

Their eyes met. Sebastian's gaze was dark, his sickly pale face half-hidden in the shadows. "She doesn't even ask if I'm coming anymore."

Allan rolled his eyes. Snowball was stunned for a moment. Allan and Snowball exchanged a look.

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If there was a world record for being speechless, they'd just smashed it.

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No one dared to actually complain out loud. Allan just coughed twice and said, "If Stella doesn't ask, we'll just crash the party ourselves."

They had the invite anyway, and honestly, even if they didn't, there was nowhere they couldn't get into.

Sebastian's eyes grew even darker, his face totally blank. "Not going."

Allan rolled his eyes. "You sure about that?" Allan drawled, fanning himself with the invitation in a lazy, almost mocking way.

Sebastian was dead certain. "Positive."

"Alright, suit yourself." Allan shrugged, not bothered at all. He shot Sebastian a sideways glance.

He added, "Too bad, though. Stella looks absolutely gorgeous tonight. Wonder if she'll run into someone her own age who can actually keep up with her."

The word "her own age" hit Sebastian like a sting. He was left speechless.

Allan kept going, his tone slow and teasing. "She's only eighteen, you know. At that age, she should be out there meeting people.

"Wouldn't want her to get swept off her feet by some old guy before she even gets a taste of the real world, right, John?"

John let out a long sigh. He thought, 'Man, life's rough!

Sebastian sat in his wheelchair, looking like an emotionless ice statue. Dark clouds had gathered above him, and it felt like a storm was brewing: thunder, lightning, the whole works.

Allan just smiled back.

“Eggie,” Sebastian said suddenly, his voice cold as ice.

Eggie, jolted awake, popped its head out of Sebastian’s chest pocket. Sebastian lifted a finger and aimed it right at Allan’s face. “Bite him.”

Allan rolled his eyes. Snowball was stunned for a moment. John was shocked.

Two seconds later, Allan’s agonized yell rang out across Sandridge Island, sending a whole flock of birds flapping away in panic.

Half an hour later, a black Maybach slowly rolled out of Sandridge Island.

A Mercedes-Benz was tucked away in the shadows, the pitch-black bulletproof windows making the whole car look menacing.

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Inside, the AC was cranked up, and Stella, with a shawl draped over her shoulders, sat there deep in thought, scrolling through her phone.

The Lane Group was one of the country’s pioneers in the power battery industry, thanks to the Lane family’s backing.

They cashed in big on the first wave of power batteries and were the ones who started the whole PowerCell Alliance thing. Right at that moment, they were riding high.

The Lane family was also a key battery supplier for Ion Wing Drones. But Xander had been getting real chummy with them lately.

If Stella's guess was right, this was where Xander was planning to hit Blake where it hurt first.

That was why Stella made sure Blake was coming tonight.

"Ms. Carter, we're almost there," Jake said, keeping his eyes on the road.

Thanks to the Lane family's party, the cops had the roads locked down early, and the place was packed with rare luxury rides.

The Lane family's muscles were out front, checking every guest as if they were guarding Fort Knox. Everyone had to hop out and walk in from there.

It was at the entrance. "Mom, is that bitch here yet?" Lila, in a champagne-colored cocktail dress, scanned the crowd, teeth clenched. She looked ready to skin Stella alive.

Vera wore a polite smile. "Shut up."

Beside her, Camilla and Hazel were both at their first fancy event, looking stiff and awkward, like fish out of

water.

Vera glanced at them out of the corner of her eye, clearly unimpressed with her sister-in-law.

"At a place like this, don't go throwing around words like 'bitch. You're better than that." Vera shot Lila a warning look.

"So, what are we hanging around for?" Camilla couldn't hold back anymore.

Vera gave Camilla a sharp look. "The e-invite I sent Stella? Totally fake."

The other three were stunned. "Fake?"

Vera let out a cold laugh, her eyes glinting with calculation. "Yep, fake. Everyone has to get out at the main entrance and have their ID checked.

"We'll just wait here and watch Stella embarrass herself at her first high-end party. When she's panicking and desperate, we'll swoop in and pretend to help her out. Then, once we're inside-

She turned to Camilla. “She’ll be putty in our hands, won’t she?” Vera made a grabbing motion with her hand, her eyes glinting with satisfaction.

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Vera refused to believe she couldn’t put Stella in her place. ‘No way a little brat like her can get the better of me,’ she thought.

“Mom, you’re savage.” Lila shot her mom a wicked grin and a thumbs-up. Just imagining Stella making a fool of herself had Lila practically buzzing with excitement. She couldn’t wait for the show to start.

“Someone needs to put her in her place,” Camilla snapped, her voice full of spite.

A Mercedes-Benz cruised up from a distance. Inside the car, Stella was chilling in the backseat, the AC blasting.

She pulled her shawl a little closer. “Just drop me off by the curb.” As she shifted, the pearl earrings dangling by her cheeks swayed, and honestly, she looked drop-dead gorgeous.

Stella hadn’t even bothered to glance at the e-invite Vera sent her.

“Does the Lane family really deserve Ms. Carter to step out of the car herself?” Jake sneered, tapping the horn.

Instantly, the black-suited bodyguards lining the road parted like the Red Sea, and the fancy iron gates, normally locked up tight to outsiders, swung open from the inside as if by magic.

Forget checking the invite; they didn’t even roll down the window. The black Mercedes just cruised straight through the gates like it owned the place.

Not a single thing in their way. Everyone watching was totally stunned.

“Why do they get to drive right in?” one of the Haliville elites grumbled, stuck at the gate.

The bodyguard just shot him a cold look and snorted, “Who are you compared to them?”

'Who on earth was in that car?' The crowd was left scratching their heads, totally confused.

Vera and her crew had seen the whole thing and were just as shocked. Vera might have landed a decent marriage, but the Morris family only barely made it into the fringes of Haliville's high society.

After all that guessing, the four of them just kept waiting for Stella.

So for the next twenty minutes, every guest who got out to have their ID checked had to walk past these four women, sweating like crazy in the heat, just standing there looking lost and out of place.

Honestly, the whole scene was pretty hilarious.

At the entrance, Blake and his crew of rich kids, usually known as the dudes, were actually dressed up in proper suits for once.

Their usual rainbow-dyed hair was slicked back with hair wax, making them look almost respectable, as if they were trying to pass for real gentlemen.

The high-society ladies arriving in their little shuttle buses all kept their distance from them.

They looked at Blake and his crew like they were something you'd scrape off your shoe, afraid that even

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Another group of rich heiresses arrived in their shuttle buses, laughing and chatting.

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But when they spotted Blake and his crew, they shot them a look of disgust. "Ugh, why are they even here?" one of them said, dripping with disdain.

The heiresses just strutted straight into the party hall, not even bothering to look back. After a long, awkward silence, Blake finally muttered, "Our reputation's pretty much in the gutter."

Even in the world of the rich and spoiled, there was a brutal social ladder, and Blake's crew was stuck at the absolute bottom, with no hope of ever climbing up.

If Stella turned her back on them right now and made it clear she wanted nothing to do with them, none of them would hold it against her.

A moment later, Stella started up the steps.

Her posture was graceful, shoulders and neck aligned in effortless elegance. Jake, her bodyguard for the night, followed close behind.

Blake and the dudes walked with their heads bowed. No one said a word.

Suddenly, Stella called out in that breezy, no-big-deal way, "You coming or not?"

"Stella," Blake said.

Blake, who'd already steeled himself for Stella to keep her distance, jerked his head up, eyes going red and watery. He looked just like a stray finally finding its person.

Just as he was about to reach out, he caught Jake behind Stella, lifting his head, those eyes wide and cold, staring at him like he was eyeing a slab of pork.

Blake was frozen. 'Better chop that hand off. Chop it off right now,' Blake thought, his heart pounding.

Stella looked up at the entrance of the party hall. "The more people look down on you, the more you have to stand up for yourselves. Stop slouching and hanging your head. Straighten up."

Behind her, a sea of lights sparkled.

The soft glow outlined Stella's figure, her face cold and stunningly beautiful. But the words she spoke were warmer than any winter soup, sinking deep into their hearts.

"Yes, Stella!" The dudes, who were usually rowdy and careless, suddenly yelled out together, making everyone turn and stare.

But they couldn't care less about dirty looks. They straightened up and followed Stella, heads held high.

'Just shut up,' Stella thought.

The whole crew marched into the party hall as if they owned the place.

As soon as Stella showed up, Giana spotted her from the second floor. “So, that’s the girl the Carter family

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kept talking about?” she said, giving Stella a good once-over.

“Yes, ma’am,” the old servant replied, instantly catching that Giana was pretty satisfied.

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But then Giana’s brows knitted together. “Why is she mixed up with that bunch?” She eyed Blake and his crew trailing after Stella, looking a little annoyed.

‘That girl’s way too good-looking for her own good, just asking for trouble, Giana thought, not too happy about it.

“Maybe Mr. Pierce just thinks she’s pretty?” the old servant guessed.

Giana didn’t say another word.

“Why do I feel like someone’s staring at us?” Blake muttered, half-wondering if he was just being jumpy.

‘Guess this dummy’s got sharper instincts than I thought,’ Stella mused.

From the moment she stepped in, Stella could feel a few unfriendly eyes on her. She didn’t bother reacting. Let them look. Whatever drama came her way, she’d handle it, no sweat.

Stella coolly snagged a glass of champagne off a passing waiter’s tray.

‘Let’s see who’s got the nerve to step up to me first,’ Stella thought, her eyes glinting with cool amusement.

At the entrance, Vera’s phone rang. It was the old servant.

“What did you just say?” she nearly shouted, her voice cracking with disbelief. Sweating like crazy, she drew stares from the nearby bodyguards. “Stella’s already inside the venue?”

They were all drenched in sweat, and when they heard the news, they were about ready to lose it.

After waiting here forever, plotting to give Stella a hard time, she’d already waltzed right in before they could even blink.

They looked at each other, their makeup melting off in the heat, and felt like they were about to blow a gasket.

‘Did she just make fools out of us again?’ they all fumed.

“Tell Giana we’ll be there in a minute,” Vera forced out through gritted teeth, slapping on a fake smile for the old servant on the other end of the call.

After all, that servant worked for Camilla. Yet the moment Vera hung up the phone, she couldn’t help but

scream.

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Vera couldn’t help but scream, “You bitch!”

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Lila was speechless. They rushed to hand their invitations to the bodyguard for checking, but he gave them a weird look, sizing them up from head to toe.

Vera's heart sank. "I'm a VIP guest invited by Giana," she stressed, putting extra emphasis on "VIP."

The bodyguard let out a cold laugh. "Just wait."

They had to stand there for another ten minutes before the bodyguard finally let them through, clearly dragging his feet on purpose.

Vera kept her mouth shut, thinking to herself, 'Giana must be pissed at me.' She grabbed the other three and hustled them onto the shuttle.

By now, all four of them were drenched in sweat, and Lila and Hazel's makeup was a total disaster. They'd tried to pull a fast one and ended up worse off than before.

Looking at Vera's face, so dark it looked like a storm was brewing, everyone was fuming inside but too afraid to say a word.

Inside the party hall, as soon as Blake walked in, Xander's friends spotted him. "What's he doing here?" Leslie, one of Xander's friends, spoke up, clearly defending Xander.

He was distantly related to the Lane family and looked full of himself. "Isn't he embarrassed enough already?"

"Grandpa just wants him to make more friends," Xander said gently, but that only made Leslie even more pissed off.

"I think your grandpa's just lost his mind," Leslie snapped.

Xander had been running Pierce Group like a pro, but that loser got to swoop in and take all the credit.

Xander just smiled softly and kept quiet.

"No way, I'm gonna set him straight for you," Leslie said, seeing his buddy looking so bummed. He couldn't let it go, so he picked up his champagne and marched right over to Blake.

Stella was chilling with her champagne, her gaze drifting past Blake's shoulder toward the commotion nearby. "Trouble's coming your way," she said lazily.

Blake was frozen. He looked up, looking totally lost.

Stella shot him a sideways look, unbothered. “If you let someone pour wine all over you again and just stand there like last time, I’ll tie you up and toss you out to sea for the sharks.”

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Blake said, “Always joking around, huh, Stella?”

Their eyes met. Stella smiled, but her eyes stayed ice-cold. “Ha.”

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Blake was frozen. When Blake realized Stella was serious, he swallowed nervously. Right then, Leslie’s voice cut in, “Well, look who it is, the infamous Blake, our resident dude and troublemaker.”

Leslie’s snarky tone got everyone laughing. The party hadn’t even started yet, but everyone was down for some drama.

“The Lane family’s party isn’t for riffraff,” Leslie sneered, flashing a smug grin as his bodyguards closed in, stone-faced.

He said, “Blake, if you’ve got any self-respect, get out before you dirty up the Lane family’s floor.”

Blake’s face darkened. “Leslie, don’t go too far.”

“Yeah, I’m bullying you. So what? If you’ve got the guts, hit me,” Leslie taunted, shaking his head like Blake was nothing.

The other dudes looked ready to jump in, but Stella just gave them a look, and they froze.

Without warning, Blake threw a punch.

Leslie was still grinning when, out of nowhere, he was sent flying and landed hard on the floor, still holding his champagne glass, though all that was left was the stem.

Blake didn’t even blink. “You all heard him. He asked for it.”

The silence dragged on. Leslie was speechless. With a nasty gush, blood streamed out of Leslie's nose like a busted dam.

Leslie clutched his busted nose, gaping at Blake, totally stunned. "You..."

Blake shot back, "Yeah? What?"

Leslie stammered, "I..."

Blake cut him off again, "Yeah? What?"

As he spoke, Blake stepped up and kicked Leslie hard. "I've been dying to kick your ass for ages, you little shit."

Leslie never thought Blake would actually throw down on someone else's turf. "Are you guys just standing there doing nothing? Can't you see I'm getting my ass kicked?"

He yelled at the bodyguards, dodging Blake like a madmaniac.

The bodyguards really didn't want to get involved. They barely tried to block him, and Blake's punch accuracy shot up from 70% to a perfect 100%. In no time, Leslie's face was completely wrecked.

The dudes were all stunned speechless.

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"Stella, are you sure this is fine?" one of the dudes asked in a timid voice.

Stella looked totally unfazed as she drawled, "Yeah, there's definitely a problem."

"W-What problem?" the dude stammered, totally lost.

Stella let out a cold laugh. "Should've hit him harder."

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The dudes were speechless. "We're definitely getting kicked out," they moaned, looking miserable.

Stella took a sip of her champagne, sounding totally chill. "Nope."

She glanced at the super pessimistic dudes and smirked. “Not only that, but the Lane family will be begging Blake to stick around.”

The dudes exchanged glances, totally baffled. ‘Did Stella get tipsy after just one drink or what?’ one of them thought, half-suspecting she was drunk.

‘Blake just wrecked Leslie, and the Lane family is gonna beg him to stay?’ They couldn’t believe it. ‘Have the Lanes lost their mind?’

“Don’t believe me?” Stella caught their skeptical looks and just shrugged, her pearl earrings swaying by her cheek. “Just wait and see.”

The dudes were speechless.

Xander stepped forward first. “Blake, stop it.” The next second, a fist crashed into his right cheek, landing hard.

Xander and Blake both blinked, stunned for a second.

‘If I said it was just a reflex and I didn’t mean it, would he even believe me?’ Blake thought.

“Leslie was just messing around, Blake. You totally overreacted,” Xander said, looking all righteous and serious. “Leslie’s family. How do you think this makes the Lane family look?”

Inside, Xander was losing it. ‘Damn, that hurts like hell,’ he cursed to himself.

“We all saw it. Blake threw the first punch,” someone else shouted, finally getting a chance to stir the pot.

They always thought hanging out with the dudes was beneath them, so they finally had an excuse to make a scene.

The dudes started shouting back, all riled up. “Are you guys blind? Leslie was the one who started it.”

Now the Lane family had to get involved, whether they liked it or not. “What’s all the noise about?” Westin strutted in wearing his tux, looking down at everyone, not even sparing Blake a glance.

“Westin, throw him out,” Leslie yelled, blood all over his face. As he spoke, he spat out a tooth that bounced across the floor, leaving everyone gaping.

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Westin just stood there, at a total loss.

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Westin frowned. “Blake, you might be used to causing trouble everywhere else, but don’t think you can pull that crap in the Lane family’s house.” His tone was pure disdain.

Blake just slouched, totally unfazed. “And?”

Ever since he started throwing punches, it was like he’d leveled up. His adrenaline was off the charts.

“Sorry, but the Lane family doesn’t have room for someone like you, Blake,” Westin said, raising his hand.

Behind him, the Lane family’s hired muscles started rolling up their sleeves, shooting Blake nasty grins. “So, are you gonna walk out on your own, or do I need to have my guys ‘escort’ you?”

The dudes were speechless. They instinctively glanced at Stella, but she looked totally unfazed, not a hint of worry on her face.

Blake let out a cold laugh. “And if I say I’m not leaving?”

He was the heir of the Pierce family, one of the three top families in Haliville. Just because he was a dude, the Lane family and these people really thought they could walk all over him.

Just because he’d let them slide before didn’t mean he’d let it happen.

“Blake, even for Grandpa’s sake, he just handed Ion Wing Drones to you. Don’t keep embarrassing yourself.” Xander’s words instantly painted Blake as the unreasonable one.

“Wait, Mr. Pierce actually handed Ion Wing Drones, that money-burning dumpster fire, to Blake?” someone blurted out.

“Blake’s the new CEO of Ion Wing Drones?” another person gasped.

“A loser for a loser. Did Mr. Pierce finally give up on Blake?” someone else sneered.

The dudes were totally floored. They never thought their ringleader would actually end up as a company CEO.

Whispers buzzed all around, and Blake’s face grew colder by the second. But his mind was a total blank, all brawn, no brains, and he couldn’t think of any way to make a comeback.

‘Why am I such a loser?’ Blake groaned to himself.

Suddenly, Blake heard footsteps behind him. High heels hit the floor, sounding just like war drums kicking

off.

“Blake, are you seeing their true colors now?” Stella’s voice was soft as a whisper, but it gave Blake the same comfort as if someone finally had his back.

He felt a wave of relief wash over him, his voice catching as he managed a quiet, “Yeah.”

Stella looked around, her gaze sweeping over every face. “What you need to do now is remember each and

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every one of them.

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“Remember how they’re all about kissing up to the powerful, trampling the weak, and clinging to anyone with

status...”

She spoke just loud enough for only the two of them to hear. Blake's fists at his sides slowly tightened.

Stella smirked, "Feel like putting them in their place?"

Blake didn't even hesitate. "Hell yeah!"

"Alright, you got it." Stella gave Blake a quick pat on the shoulder, signaling him to chill for a sec.

Suddenly, a rush of footsteps echoed from upstairs.

Frank and Giana, the hosts, came rushing down the stairs, looking totally panicked. They didn't even bother with pleasantries, heading straight for the entrance.

Frank was practically bowing as he called out, all excited and humble, "Stetson, what brings you here?"

'Stetson?' everyone thought, their minds racing.

Everyone in the party hall froze for a second. When they heard that name, the first person that popped into their heads was Caleb's top secretary, the one everyone called the "Number One Secretary."

Everyone watched as a middle-aged man in black-rimmed glasses walked in, briefcase in hand, radiating authority. He smiled and shook Frank's hand. "Sorry to bother you. Caleb just gave me a last-minute task."

"Oh, no need to apologize, Stetson..." Frank said with a smile. "Are you here to see someone?"

Stetson pushed up his glasses, gave a polite smile, and acted like the chaos around him didn't even exist. "Yes, I'm here to see Mr. Pierce."

Everyone instinctively turned to look at Xander.

Blake was the hottest name in Pierce Group, young, successful, and everyone figured Stetson had to be looking for him, "Mr. Pierce".

Xander was sure Stetson was here for him. His heart was racing, but he kept his poker face, already picturing the envy on everyone's faces as he walked confidently toward Stetson, totally ignoring Leslie.

“Xander, come on over!” Frank called out, grinning and waving him over like they were best buds. Instantly, all eyes locked on Xander. He was the center of the universe.

Just as Xander was about to reach him, Stetson flashed a smooth, polite smile. “Actually, I’m here for Blake,

guy who’s about to take over Ion Wing Drones.”

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Everyone was speechless.

All

eyes that had been glued to Xander just a moment ago now slid over to Blake, not a word spoken.

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‘Who the hell is this guy?’ Blake thought, totally lost.

Stella, cool as ever, said, “Why are you just standing there? Go.”

Blake was frozen.

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He walked over to Stetson in a daze. Meanwhile, Xander’s smile froze on his face. He instinctively glanced at Stella, and his gut screamed. She was definitely behind this.

Stella raised her glass to him, flashing a smile.

‘Poetic justice, huh? Guess karma really does come around,’ someone thought, watching the scene unfold.

Blake quickly walked up to Stetson, a little confused. “You mean me?”

Stetson smiled politely, but his tone was way more respectful than anyone expected. “Mr. Pierce, I tried calling you, but couldn’t get through.”

Blake was frozen. He thought, ‘Yeah right.’

His phone had been in his pocket the whole time. He’d know if anyone called.

Stetson, lying through his teeth without missing a beat, totally ignored Blake’s skeptical look and kept it all respectful.

He said, “The paperwork for the other plot in the South District is all done. Mr. Pierce, we just need your signature, and the city will transfer it to your name right away.”

Everyone in the room was floored.

The faces that had been full of snark just a second ago were now frozen in shock, like they couldn’t believe what they were hearing. Xander whipped his head around, staring at Blake in utter disbelief.

‘Land?’ everyone thought, their minds racing. ‘Wait, land in South District? You mean the South District, the priciest real estate in the whole city?’

‘That South District plot every big shot in Haliville has been chasing for years, but the city never let go?’

One piece had already gone to Sebastian, and the other was Blake actually getting it.

In the dead silence, Stetson’s eyes flashed with a sharp glint behind his black-rimmed glasses. He caught Stella’s eye from across the room and gave her a subtle nod, like they were in on some secret together.

Blake was frozen.

Everyone just gawked, totally lost, as Stetson pulled out a contract from his briefcase, grabbed a pen, popped the cap off, and handed it to Blake like he was serving royalty.

This was Stetson, Caleb’s most trusted right-hand man. And he was acting like Blake was some kind of big

shot.

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The guests who'd just been mocking, snubbing, and trash-talking Blake were suddenly regretting every word they'd said.

At that moment, they were staring at Blake as he'd just turned into a gold mine, eyes practically sparkling with greed and calculation. Dude, that was South District land.

Even a fool could throw up a shack on that plot and swim in cash. It was money falling from the sky.

As Blake signed his name, Stetson smiled and tucked the contract into an envelope. "Mr. Pierce, on behalf of Mayor Caleb, I wish you a wonderful evening at the Lane family's party. I'll take my leave now."

He made sure everyone heard "wonderful evening" loud and clear, but to the crowd, it sounded more like a threat straight from Caleb.

Everyone was speechless. 'Since when did Blake, the infamous dude, get connected to Caleb?' Everyone was totally stunned.

Everyone was left wondering, 'What the hell happened in between?'

Blake was frozen. He wanted to know, too.

Suddenly, Blake stiffened, and it suddenly clicked for all the dudes. They all whipped their heads around to stare at Stella, who'd been standing there the whole time, cool as ever.

Stella said, "Feel like putting them in their place? Alright, you got it."

Just her words, and in an instant, Blake went from the guy everyone thought was a joke to flipping his whole reputation on its head. His life did a total 180 right before their eyes.

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No one spoke. Leslie gaped, stunned.

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He thought, ‘That useless loser from the Pierce family actually got close to Caleb?’

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‘And he managed to snatch up that hot property in the South District that everyone’s been scrambling for, year after year? Seriously, what kind of dumb luck does Blake have?’

“Blake, right?” Frank, who hadn’t even bothered to glance at Blake earlier, was now beaming. “I’ve heard your grandpa mention you all the time. Seeing you now, you really are quite the impressive guy.”

The people around him quickly chimed in, echoing Frank’s words.

Blake was frozen. ‘Just a moment ago, they were giving me the cold shoulder,’ Blake thought to himself.

“Just now, this guy was ready to kick me out!” Blake scoffed, his tone full of mockery. With Stella backing him up, he finally had some backbone.

Stella had told him to remember how fake these people were. He wasn’t about to forget a single one.

Frank shot a look at the butler. The butler's legs started shaking, and all that arrogance earlier vanished.

He was dying inside. 'It was Frank who told me to kick Blake out. Who could've predicted this mess?' he thought.

"I deserve whatever I get! I was blind to your greatness," the butler wailed, slapping himself hard across the face without hesitation.

The sound echoed through the room. He wasn't holding back. "Blake, just treat me like dirt and let me go. Please, have mercy."

Blake was just about to say something when a chill ran down his spine. He snapped his mouth shut in a hurry.

For a moment, the only sound in the party hall was the sharp slaps echoing through the room.

Stella calmly took a sip of her champagne, watching as Frank's face grew darker and darker. Only then did she tap her fingers on the table.

Blake strode up to the butler, whose face was now swollen like a pig's head. It was honestly hilarious. He shoved the gold-embossed invitation right in the butler's face. "Take a good look. It was the Lane family who invited me here."

Blake looked down at him, full of superiority.

In that moment, Blake felt something awaken in his blood, something that had been asleep for ages.

It was the dignity he'd lost long ago.

Blake looked up, his gaze landing squarely on Xander. For the first time, he saw jealousy and bitterness

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simmering in his cousin's eyes. "So, the Lane family's reputation matters, but the Pierce family's doesn't?"

Xander froze. He just couldn't reconcile the proud, defiant man standing before him with the old Blake, the useless dude who only knew how to party and mess around.

'Blake's changed, Xander thought, stunned.

"Weren't you all watching just now? Who was the one who started it?" Blake let out a cold laugh, his gaze zeroing in on those few who'd twisted the story and tried to cover up the truth.

Right at that moment, Vera and her crew showed up.

Hazel instantly spotted Blake, who was totally owning the room. Her heart was thumping out of her chest. Her imagination was running wild.

"Look, it's Stella," Lila hissed, yanking Hazel's arm, her teeth clenched. She was practically seething with hatred for her cousin.

'It's all her fault I got locked up for five days,' Lila cursed inwardly. 'Tonight, I'm going to make her pay for

this.'

Hazel shot a look that way. Her heart instantly burned with envy.

Stella was drop-dead gorgeous tonight, like a fairy come to life. The pure white pearls she wore made her cold, otherworldly beauty even more striking.

She looked untouched by the real world, beautiful in a way that left a mark on your soul.

"Her dress is gorgeous," Hazel said in a soft voice, instantly getting Lila riled up about that obviously pricey gown. "Isn't that a DenimKraft exclusive?"

Lila's temper snapped. "Does she even deserve to wear something like that?" she spat, then threw in a nasty jab, "Bet she had to sell herself for it."

The more she stewed, the more pissed off she got. Lila grabbed a glass of champagne off a passing tray, shoved Hazel's hand away, totally ignoring her fake concern, and stormed straight toward Stella.

“Stella!” Lila called out, a malicious grin curling on her lips as her heels clicked across the floor. She was just about to fling the champagne right at Stella, when suddenly Lila came to an abrupt halt.

Cold sweat trickled down her forehead in fat drops. She was frozen stiff, not daring to move a single inch, only her eyes darted around, trembling with fear.

The dudes were speechless. They’d just watched Stella coolly finish her champagne, slam the empty glass down on the table, and then, without missing a beat, hold the jagged edge right to Lila’s throat, all in one cold, fluid motion.

‘Whoa, that was intense, one of the dudes thought, adrenaline pumping.

“Lila!” Hazel cried out, hiking up her skirt and darting straight to Blake. She clung to his arm, shooting him her most desperate look. “Blake, help me, please.”

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Blake blinked, looking at her like she was a total stranger. “Uh, who are you?”

Hazel blinked back, face flushing with embarrassment. “It’s me, Hazelight.”

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E55 vouchers

Blake was frozen. He couldn’t bring himself to ask, ‘What happened to her face? How did she end up looking like this?’

Her makeup was a total mess, like she’d just been dunked in water. Her eyeliner was smeared everywhere.

Blake hesitated, then said, “Uh, maybe you should check yourself in the mirror first?”

He swore he was just being honest, not trying to be mean, but Hazel was stunned.

“Stella!” Camilla barreled over like a madwoman, finally laying eyes on her beloved daughter. Vera just wanted to crawl under a rock from embarrassment. Everyone was whispering, and Giana looked downright mortified.

But before Camilla could even reach her, a sharp pain shot through her knee. Next thing they knew, she dropped to her knees with a heavy thud, hitting the ground so hard her bra pads nearly flew out.

Hazel was so mortified that she wished the ground would swallow her up.

All Vera could do was freeze, utterly speechless and humiliated.

Lila stared in disbelief.

‘God, could this get any more humiliating?’ All three of them wanted to disappear right there and then.

Stella glanced over at Jake, who was lurking in the shadows, and he shot her a smile that looked way too innocent for someone who’d just caused all that chaos.

“Lila, looks like those five days in jail didn’t teach you anything,” Stella drawled, her eyes glinting with a light that made it crystal clear.

She wouldn’t hesitate to jam that jagged champagne glass right into Lila’s throat if she had to.

Lila stared, face burning, not daring to make a sound. She didn’t dare make a sound.

Lila felt like the jagged glass was already cutting into her skin. Her hand, still stuck in mid-air as if she was about to throw the champagne, was trembling so badly she could barely keep hold of the glass.

Ciana gave Vera a sharp, unhappy look. Vera rushed over, quickly helping her embarrassed sister-in-law up before shooting Stella a glare. “Stella, don’t push it.”

Stella met Vera’s eyes, and even at her age, her stare had a kind of force that made Vera squirm.

“Out of respect for you, Aunt Vera,” Stella said with a low laugh, moving the jagged champagne glass away from Lila’s throat.

“Go to hell!” Lila, still reeling from her near-death experience, flung the champagne at Stella. But Stella, cool as ever, in one smooth, lazy move, pulled Camilla in front of her as a shield, so effortlessly she didn’t even blink.

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Lila's champagne splashed all over Camilla's face, not a single drop landing on Stella.

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Camilla was left speechless. If it weren't for the setting, she would've gone full drama queen and started yelling at everyone, making a total scene.

Not far away, Giana's face went dark. She leaned in and whispered to the stern-faced housekeeper, who quickly walked over and said coldly, "You, come upstairs and change your clothes."

Camilla was about to say something, but the housekeeper, stone-faced, just reached out and covered her mouth with his hand.

Vera broke out in a cold sweat. 'Giana was really not in the mood now,' Vera thought, her heart pounding.

"Stella, go upstairs with your mom and change your clothes," Vera blurted out, but when she met Stella's not- quite-smiling eyes, she involuntarily shuddered.

Vera always felt there was something uncanny about her niece, as if Stella was always one step ahead, knowing things she had no business knowing.

Vera tried to steady herself, thinking she must be imagining things. 'No way Stella could actually know,' she reassured herself.

"Sure," Stella replied, her tone casual and indifferent. Vera was just relieved Stella agreed, not daring to push her luck.

Stella sauntered over to Camilla, her hand dropping onto her shoulder, light as a feather, but the pressure was anything but gentle. "Let's go."

Camilla's face went white as a sheet. Her shoulder felt like the bones were about to crack. She was in so much pain, and she couldn't even get a word out.

Upstairs, the housekeeper closed the door from the outside.

The moment the door shut, Camilla pounced at Stella, looking like she was ready to tear Stella's face apart.

But before she could even get close, Stella, cold as ice, just raised her foot and kicked her right in the stomach. With a heavy thud, Camilla went down face-first onto the floor again. She yelped in pain.

Stella stood over her, cold and unbothered, her gaze frosty and merciless.

"You bitch!" Camilla spat, her voice shrill with rage.

Stella's heels clicked against the floor, cold and sharp, as she stopped right in front of Camilla. She crouched down, grabbed Camilla by the hair, and jerked her head up, making her look at her.

Their eyes locked. Stella's whole vibe was pure darkness and menace as she gave Camilla a chilling, wicked grin, so scary it nearly stopped Camilla's heart.

"Do you have any idea why I came upstairs with you?" Stella sneered, her slender fingers buried deep in

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Camilla's hair, not even pretending to care about their so-called mother-daughter bond.

Camilla thrashed, shouting, "Let go of me."

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55 vouchers

Stella leaned in, a sly smirk curling on her lips, and whispered right in Camilla's ear, "Did you know? For the past six months, Brantley's taken out seven huge accidental injury insurance policies on you. The total payout is-

As Camilla's struggling slowed, Stella fluttered her lashes and finished, "eighteen million dollars."

Camilla's pupils shrank, her whole body going rigid in shock. Stella sat in silence for a while, lost in thought. Stiffly, she turned her head to meet Stella's eyes.

"You're making this up!" Camilla retorted, refusing to believe Stella. She was just eighteen. "I don't believe you."

Stella gave a cold little laugh. "Whatever. I'm not the one with a target on my back." The pearls dangling from her ears caught the light, and to Camilla, they looked just like the countdown to her own funeral.

"Got your phone on you? Go ahead, check it yourself online."

Stella released her grip. Camilla was speechless.

She snatched up her phone, frantically searching through her accounts. As the list of insurance policies under her name appeared, her eyes went wide with shock, and her breathing grew rapid and shallow.

"Eighteen million, and every single policy lists..." Camilla's lips quivered as she stared at Stella, terror creeping into her voice. "The beneficiary is my husband, Brantley."

Stella just smiled faintly, saying nothing.

Camilla sat on the floor, even with the air conditioning on full blast, she was drenched in cold sweat. "Don't be ridiculous. You're just a kid. What could you possibly know? My husband would never hurt me!"

"Who can guarantee a man will never change? Just like my dear father. He dropped 300 thousand dollars on a necklace for some other woman, and you didn't even know."

Stella sat gracefully on the edge of the bed, her head bowed, but her words cut deep, stabbing right into Camilla's heart.

Camilla shook her head, her voice trembling. "You're lying. You're just making things up."

Stella just shook her head with a faint, mocking smile, then flung the photos Jake had handed her on the way upstairs right in Camilla's face, one by one.

Camilla was left speechless.

In the photos, Brantley was front and center, holding up a necklace, his eyes full of that sly, flirty vibe only an experienced guy could pull off. The woman had her back to the camera, her face totally hidden.

But from the selfie angle, you could clearly see her foot sneaking under the table, hooking around Brantley's

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it, she was already backed into a corner, no way out.

"Vera's scheming against you," Camilla said after a long, heavy pause, her voice cold and dark.

Stella didn't flinch at all, her voice calm and collected. "I know."

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55 vouchers

"You know?" Camilla sneered, obviously not believing her. If she really knew, she wouldn't dare to show up. But she just turned her hand over, revealing a tiny glass vial nestled in her palm.

She said, "Vera told me to make you take this when you weren't paying attention."

"Frank cut a big deal with the Morris family, and whether it goes through or not, it all hinges on tonight," Camilla added.

'Vera gets all the perks, and I'm left holding all the risk. Now she's even helping her dear brother plot against me. Fine. The Carter family, every last one of them, is cold-blooded,' Camilla fumed inwardly.

Camilla fixed Stella with a feverish, almost crazed stare, her voice trembling with urgency. "Help me."

After a brief pause, the door was knocked on. "Ma'am, are you done changing?" The housekeeper called out from the hallway.

“Change your clothes,” Stella said, tossing the outfit the housekeeper brought right at Camilla. She didn’t even blink, her head slightly bowed, a faint, mocking smile on her lips. “Clean yourself up a bit.”

She raised her hand and picked up the little glass vial. Holding it up to the light, Stella watched the liquid inside move, a cold, mocking smile on her face.

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As they came downstairs, Vera was chatting with Lila, Giana, and another woman. The woman gave her back to them, but her flashy red dress was impossible to miss.

Stella glanced over at Hazel with a blank expression and saw Hazel trailing behind Blake. Anyone who didn’t know better would think she was his date.

Meanwhile, a group of businessmen, who had once looked down on Blake were now shamelessly trying to get on his good side.

Blake forced a stiff smile, and when he saw Stella coming down, he kept shooting her desperate “help me” looks.

Stella didn't even bother to acknowledge him.

Vera called out, "Camilla, Stella, over here." She waved them over, and right then, the woman in the red dress turned to look at them.

It was Lauren, no doubt about it. The moment Lauren recognized Stella, her smile instantly stiffened.

But Camilla's eyes were glued to Lauren's neck. The same ruby necklace she'd just seen in that photo was sitting there as it belonged, and her features instantly contorted with anger.

Her eyes flashed with a dangerous red. 'Carter family, you've really crossed the line, Camilla fumed to herself.

"See those bodyguards? If you charge in now, you'll only make things worse for yourself. Think about your little girl," Stella's voice cut in, cool and casual, just for Camilla's ears, right as she was about to snap.

With a sharp snap, Camilla's fingernail broke off in her clenched fist.

"Put on a smile," Stella said.

Camilla forced a stiff smile onto her face and walked over to Vera and the others.

Vera flashed a fawning smile. "This is Lauren, Carlos's daughter. Lauren, meet my sister-in-law Camilla and my niece Stella." She made the introductions all around.

Camilla hid her bloodied, broken-nailed hand behind her back and forced out, "Nice to meet you, Ms. Gray.

Lauren was left speechless.

Lauren glanced at Camilla, ready to show off, but suddenly felt awkward. She instinctively fiddled with the ruby necklace at her throat, only to hear Stella's cold, mocking laugh. "Carlos's daughter, huh?"

Stella's eyes narrowed with sarcasm. "Funny, I heard Carlos and Annette only have one son. So where'd this daughter come from? Vera, you sure you haven't been played?"

Lauren and Giana were left speechless. All Vera could do was freeze, utterly speechless and humiliated.

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Giana frowned. ‘Seriously, she’s just some nobody from a small family. Who blurts out private matters like that in front of everyone? Isn’t she just asking for trouble?’ she thought.

Lauren let out a cold laugh. “Oh, come on, you know exactly who I am.” Her words made Vera and Giana freeze for a second.

‘Wait, do they actually know each other?’ both of them wondered.

“That’s the one I was talking about...” Giana said, keeping it vague and not saying more.

Lauren was left speechless. ‘Hold up, she’s the girl Giana just mentioned, the one they picked out for David?’ she thought, a flash of surprise crossing her mind.

She was about to throw some shade at that bitch Stella and Sebastian, but then she paused. This was the perfect chance to watch Stella crash and burn.

‘It’s like the universe is handing me a golden ticket,’ Lauren thought, a sly grin creeping onto her face.

Vera shot Camilla a subtle look, asking for her opinion, but Camilla just clenched her jaw and shook her head.

Vera frowned. ‘Useless. Absolutely useless,’ she thought to herself, annoyed.

Lauren suddenly let out a mocking laugh. “You really don’t know anything, do you? That guy’s been dead for ages.

“His eldest son got him, his younger son, and his daughter-in-law killed. And that nephew? He cut him out of his mother’s corpse with his own hands.”

Her words dripped with malice, and even a fool could hear it.

Stella’s eyes went frosty, her usual laid-back attitude vanishing. She just stared at Lauren, cold as ice.

Lauren's voice was loud enough for everyone nearby to hear, and the room was instantly filled with whispers.

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the entrance.

A servant burst into the room, practically tripping over themselves like they were being chased by a ghost. "Mr. Gray is here."

That one sentence sent everyone reeling. The whole place erupted in an uproar.

Lauren's smug grin froze on her face, replaced by pure panic. She never in a million years thought Sebastian would actually show up at tonight's party. This was the first time he'd set foot in a formal event since everything went down.

The Lane couple was just as shocked. Frank's hand actually trembled, and he instinctively glanced toward the entrance. He looked like he'd just seen a ghost.

'Seriously? No one told me Mr. Gray was coming to my own party?' Frank thought, totally thrown off.

"Mom, who's Mr. Gray?" Lila asked, looking totally lost. Vera just shook her head. "Don't ask, honey."

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Vera had only ever heard rumors about him, never seen him in person. The Morris family was way out of their league compared to the Gray, Pierce, and Chase families, and she'd bent over backwards just to get Lauren to even talk to her.

Everyone else looked totally caught off guard by the whole thing.

Stella just stood there, totally unfazed.

Before anyone could even react, a squad of bodyguards in black, radiating a deadly aura, stormed in first.

Each one was over six feet tall and looked like professional fighters, intimidating as hell, and nobody in their right mind would dare mess with them.

That was when Allan wheeled Sebastian in, seated in his wheelchair.

Sebastian was dressed in a custom black suit that made him look like he'd just crawled out of the depths of the ocean, icy, untouchable.

His face was ghostly pale, completely expressionless, and the air around him was so cold and suffocating that everyone in the room held their breath, not daring to make a sound.

Sebastian lowered his gaze, absently rolling a string of black prayer beads between his long, elegant fingers. Each knuckle was like a work of art.

The air around Sebastian was thick with danger. His killing intent was so intense that it felt like the whole room was suffocating.

Hazel's grip loosened, and her wine glass slipped right out of her hand. It dropped straight to the floor. Glass shattered everywhere.

'That's him!' Hazel's mind reeled, her heart nearly leaping out of her chest.

'That silent guy at Nova Mall, the one who ran the whole show from the shadows. So, he's Mr. Gray? The one everyone talks about as if he's a legend? Compared to him, Blake's not even in the same league. Hazel was floored.

Her heart was pounding like crazy. She instinctively shot a look at Vera and Giana. Their faces were ghostly pale, totally scared stiff, just like her. Not a single person dared to speak.

The whole party hall was dead silent.

After all these years, I'm finally seeing Sebastian again. Everyone's eyes were locked on him. Sure, Carlos had kicked him out as the boss of Gray Group, but that natural presence he had was impossible to ignore.

Not a single soul in the room could hold a candle to him.

"M-Mr. Gray, you're here?" Frank rushed over, forcing a smile, but inside he was silently cursing his luck.

Sebastian acted like he didn't even exist. His gaze swept across the hall, clearly searching for someone. Everyone followed his gaze, confused and curious.

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Stella smiled helplessly.

55 vouchers

Suddenly, a pudgy little gray fluffball peeked out from Sebastian's chest pocket, fluttering its stubby wings as it launched itself into the air above the silent party hall.

Everyone was stunned into silence.

They stared up in awe at the round, fuzzy creature. If they hadn't seen it for themselves, they'd never believed that something so adorable could possibly belong to cold-as-ice Sebastian.

Seriously, this was unreal. Eggie seemed to spot something and dove straight toward it. Finally, it landed right on someone's shoulder.

Everyone turned to look. Every eye in the room was glued to Stella. Stella and Eggie locked eyes.

'Pet me! Pet me!' Eggie demanded, practically vibrating with excitement, its fluffy little body begging for

attention.

The little peregrine falcon kept rubbing its round head against Stella, acting all cuddly. Seriously, it looked just like a plushie came to life.

Stella smiled.

"Stella, this bird is so cute," Hazel said, suddenly appearing at her side.

She gazed at the peregrine falcon with envy practically written all over her face, feeling super jealous inside. 'Why does Stella always get all the good stuff?'

Last time at Nova Mall, they ran into the higher-ups and got roasted by Nova Group's legal team.

'But now, Mr. Gray's bird just randomly lands on Stella's shoulder? Why can't something awesome like that ever happen to me?' Hazel couldn't help but sulk.

Thinking this, Hazel reached out, wanting to pet Eggie.

Stella shot Hazel a look that clearly said, “You really shouldn’t.”

But the very next second, Hazel shrieked as Eggie suddenly lunged at her finger. Eggie bit down, tearing off a chunk of her finger. Blood gushed out instantly.

“Hazel!” Camilla cried out in shock.

Everyone was speechless. If they hadn’t seen it for themselves, nobody would’ve believed that something so tiny could be that savage. It actually ripped off skin and flesh in one go?!

Allan sucked in a breath through his teeth.

Allan instinctively reached up and rubbed the little bruise by his eye. ‘So, Eggie really was going easy on me, huh?’ he thought, a bit amused.

‘Eggie’s such a good boy, Allan thought, getting a little choked up.

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“Oh my god.” Lila rushed over, snapping at Stella. “How could you just let your bird go wild and hurt someone?” She didn’t even dare look at Sebastian. She just took all her anger out on Stella.

‘Let my bird go wild and hurt someone?’ Stella thought, a little amused. “That’s a fresh accusation.

“Bullshit! She was the one shoving herself at Stella.” Blake stormed over with his crew, not even hesitating. “Are you blind or what?” He glared daggers at Lila.

‘She’s not even in the same league,’ Blake sneered at himself.

‘Does she really think she can talk to Stella like that?’ Blake thought, rolling his eyes.

Stella smiled. Hazel clutched her bleeding finger, staring at Blake in utter disbelief.

'Why is he sticking up for Stella? Didn't he hate Starfall? Last time, he even said he was going to make her pay,' Hazel thought, her mind spinning.

"M-Mr. Gray?" Frank stammered, cold sweat dripping as Sebastian stayed silent.

But then, the whirl of his wheelchair cut through the tension, and everyone scrambled out of the following him as he moved.

way, all eyes

Hazel's heart was pounding in her throat, and even Lila, who was supporting her, felt her own heart hammering in her chest.

Sebastian rolled up to them, his face cold as ever.

"M-Mr. Gray, really, it's fine, it doesn't hurt at all. It's just your bird's a little wild, so maybe people shouldn't get too close," Hazel said, her voice soft and pitiful, eyes drooping in that classic sweet, innocent act.

Sebastian lifted his hand, and Hazel's eyes sparkled. She reached out eagerly.

"Get lost," Blake snapped, shoving her aside without a second thought.

Hazel was so mortified she wished the ground would swallow her up.

Sebastian reached out to Stella, prayer beads dangling from his wrist, radiating an intense, almost monk-like restraint. His long, elegant fingers hovered in the air, palm up.

Everyone else just stood there, dumbfounded, watching the scene unfold. Lauren was secretly smirking to herself.

Stella lifted her hand to her shoulder, her fingers curling invitingly, and Eggie hopped up, acting all cute and innocent, as if it hadn't just gone full savage on Hazel a moment ago.

Hazel bit her lip, watching, a mix of disbelief and envy in her eyes.

Seriously, if she hadn't been here herself, she'd think someone had switched out that savage fluffball for a totally different bird.

"Mr. Gray," Stella said, lifting her gaze to meet Sebastian's. Her hand lined up with his, letting Eggie hop

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smoothly from her to Sebastian, like they'd done this a hundred times before.

55 vouchers

Eggie tilted its fluffy little head, glanced left and right, then hopped right back into Sebastian's palm and let him stuff it back into his pocket.

Sebastian hummed, his lashes so long and pretty they put most women to shame, casting a shadow over his face. He occasionally shot her a sidelong glance.

Feeling Vera and Giana's curious stares on her, Stella put on a polite, distant smile, just enough to keep them from suspecting anything.

Sebastian rolled his eyes. His eyes were pure ice, and the chill radiating off him made everyone shiver.

"I haven't even bothered to hold you accountable for sullyng my pet," Sebastian said, turning to Hazel with a look so cold it was like she didn't even exist. There wasn't a trace of warmth in his eyes.

'He's just venting his anger on me,' Hazel thought, frustration bubbling up inside her.

Eggie poked its fuzzy little head out again, fluffy and adorable.

But after that bloody lesson, everyone had just one thought: 'It's all just for show.'

Hazel thought, 'Seriously? Stella just petted it, too. So, why isn't he throwing shade at her? What's his problem?'

All around, people shot Hazel mocking and sarcastic looks. These were all rich old foxes. Her lame attempts to get a guy's attention were so obvious that nobody even cared.

Vera frowned. She couldn't help but think, 'Clearly, Camilla never taught Hazel how to behave. Embarrassing herself in front of everyone like that? Lila would never be so out of line,' she thought, feeling smug.

'People from these small-time families just never know how to act,' Vera scoffed to herself.

"Mr. Gray, uh, what are you doing here?" Frank was sweating bullets. Sebastian was always a wild card. Back when he lived in Haliville, one never knew what he'd do next.

Ever since he holed up on that private island, things had been quiet, but now he just shows up out of nowhere? Frank was freaking out inside.

His heart was pounding so hard it felt like it might jump out of his chest.

"Just here to wait for someone. Don't mind me," Sebastian said, his voice dropping the temperature in the party hall by a few degrees, icy and suffocating.

With that, he wheeled himself off to the other side.

'Wait, he's here waiting for someone?' The whole room froze, everyone staring at each other in shock. 'Who could this living legend possibly be waiting for?'

People exchanged nervous glances, eyes darting around the room. No one had a clue who Sebastian, the infamous troublemaker, was here for.

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Blake and his gang of dudes kept sneaking glances at Stella, while Lauren let out a cold, expectant laugh. She was practically itching to see what would happen if Sebastian caught someone messing with his precious pet.

Lauren gripped her champagne glass, barely able to hide the wicked grin curling at the corner of her mouth.

She was determined to keep it under wraps that Sebastian was here for Stella. No way was she letting anyone find out.

On that side, the vibe was tense and unpredictable. Giana shot Vera a meaningful look; tonight had already gone way off the rails, and all they could hope for now was that nothing else would blow up.

Vera nodded. She discreetly snapped open a tiny ampoule and, making sure no one was watching, slipped it into someone else's drink. She gave the glass a gentle swirl.

Before anyone could notice, Giana stepped forward, blocking everyone's view. "Go get Ms. Carter's wound taken care of. We don't want it getting infected."

Vera pulled off the whole thing without batting an eye, then slipped the empty ampoule back into her pocket as if nothing had happened.

She said, "Stella, I didn't get a chance to introduce you earlier. This is Giana. Why don't you offer her a toast?"

Vera smiled as she handed the champagne to Stella.

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Stella just glanced at the wine, her face unreadable, and didn't take it.

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"What's the matter, Ms. Carter? Think you're too good for Giana?" Lauren said, her smile vulgar and flirtatious.

With that red dress and ruby necklace, she was practically buzzing with excitement, shamelessly bold and unapologetically flashy.

Giana's expression soured at being put on the spot. She fixed her gaze on Stella, trying to use her status to pressure her.

Not far away, Blake sidled up to Sebastian's wheelchair. Sebastian shot him a frosty look but didn't shoo him away.

However, the rest of the dude crew weren't nearly as composed. They all stood off to the side, staring at the sky or the ground, but none of them dared to meet Sebastian's eyes.

"Mr. Gray, if you don't step in soon, Stella's gonna get bullied," Blake whispered urgently.

Suddenly, a glass of champagne appeared right by his face, making him jump.

He looked up to see Allan standing there, a half-smile on his lips. "Stella can handle herself. Instead of worrying about her, why not make a bet on which of those people is gonna get burned tonight?"

Blake was frozen. The people nearby were totally floored. 'When did that spoiled Pierce kid start buddying up with Mr. Gray? Is this world glitched or what?!

Meanwhile, a bunch of the top dogs in Haliville's business world were itching to get close to Sebastian, but none of them dared to make a move.

"Hey, Mr. Gray, what are you staring at?" Blake asked, taking the champagne Allan handed him, looking genuinely confused. He'd noticed Sebastian scanning the crowd with that cold stare of his.

Allan raised an eyebrow, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. He shot Blake a teasing look. "What do you think he's looking at?"

'Just checking if there's anyone in this glitzy crowd who's actually on Stella's level,' Allan thought, amused.

Sebastian just gave him a silent stare, and Allan immediately cleared his throat and sobered up.

At the same time, Stella reached out and took the champagne, her slender fingers swirling the glass, letting the pale amber liquid dance inside. “Getting a drink from me? That’s your lucky break.”

Her gaze swept over the group before finally settling on Lauren. A mysterious smile tugged at her lips as she raised her hand and signaled to a waiter.

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The waiter hurried over with a tray. “Care for a drink together?” Stella asked, her tone smooth and inviting.

With effortless grace, she picked up the champagne glasses one by one and offered them around. Her fingers lightly ran around the rim of the glass.

Vera was just about to refuse, but then she saw Lauren, looking a bit out of it, taking the glass and downing it in one go. The rest followed her lead, all eyes on Stella, worried she might back out.

Stella smiled and drained her glass in one smooth motion. Then she turned the glass upside down, letting everyone see that not a single drop was left.

She made it clear that she’d finished every last drop.

Vera let out a quiet sigh of relief and exchanged a look with Giana. ‘We did it,’ she thought.

Stella watched the two of them exchange smug glances, then lazily snapped her fingers. Lauren, who’d been looking totally out of it just a second ago, suddenly jolted and snapped back to reality.

She stared at the empty glass in her hand, totally dumbfounded. ‘Did I just drink that?’ Lauren thought, her mind a total blank.

Lauren had no memory of it at all. The last thing she remembered was locking eyes with Stella.

While Lauren was still lost in confusion, a man's furious roar exploded from the second floor, shaking the whole place and sending a shockwave through the crowd.

Everyone craned their necks, trying to figure out what the hell just happened.

Giana shot a sharp look at the old servant next to her, who scurried off upstairs without a word.

"Ms. Carter, seems like fate brought us together tonight. If you don't mind, would you come upstairs with me? Let me give you a little something," Giana said, her smile all sugar and sunshine, like the chaos never happened.

Stella lifted her gaze to meet Giana's. In the silence, there was a hint of untamed mischief in her eyes. "Yeah, why not?" she replied.

'I gave you guys a shot already, Stella mused, her tone cool and unbothered.

Sebastian watched the two head upstairs, his long fingers making a subtle gesture. Instantly, his people melted into the shadows, moving without a sound. In his palm, Eggie was curled up, a fluffy, round little puffball.

Eggie practically melted under Sebastian's icy fingers, loving every second of the attention.

"Go find her," Sebastian murmured, his face shrouded in darkness, all cold indifference. He released Eggie, watching as the little guy flapped his wings and took off into the night.

Meanwhile, Vera shot a look at Camilla. "You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

Camilla had been fidgeting, looking like she wanted to say something but couldn't. "Once you cross the line, there's no going back," Vera added.

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Before Camilla could get a word out, a guy dressed like a bodyguard came over. “Giana wants you upstairs.”

Vera frowned. ‘Did something else go wrong?’ she wondered. She didn’t bother asking and just went with him.

Upstairs, Vera knocked on the door. “Giana?” There was no response. Frowning, she pushed the door open just a crack, only to find the room completely dark.

She was about to turn and ask the bodyguard when someone shoved her hard from behind, making her stumble forward and tumble into the darkness.

The door slammed shut behind her. Vera sat there on the floor, terrified and lost, glancing around the pitch- black room.

A match flared to life right in front of her, casting a glow over a face, chillingly aloof, yet so striking it hurt to look at.

Vera’s heart skipped a beat. “That’s Stella,’ Vera thought, her mind spinning. The flame died.

Stella struck another match, and in that weak flicker of light, Vera finally saw Giana sprawled in the corner, not sure if she was dead or alive. Vera’s pupils shrank in terror.

The match went out again. “Surprised, Vera?” Stella spoke up, her tone icy in the darkness.

The electric curtains whirred open by themselves. Moonlight poured in, lighting up the whole room. Stella sat on the bed, her eyes icy enough to freeze your soul.

All Vera could do was freeze, utterly speechless and humiliated.

Stella stretched lazily, walked over to the candlestick, struck another match, and lit the candle. “By my plan, you were supposed to be the one lying there, Vera.”

She shot a cold, ruthless smile at the bed.

“S-Stella, please don’t misunderstand. Vera... The Lane family is one of the richest around. If you marry in, Giana would never treat you badly,” Vera stammered, her scalp prickling with fear as she scrambled to explain.

“How about you let your daughter enjoy this ‘fortune’ instead?” Stella replied, her voice icy and mocking.

Stella lazily flicked the match against the candlewick, her tone slow and indifferent.

“Stella!” Vera shrieked, panic twisting her voice. “Don’t you dare lay a finger on Lila. If you do, I swear you’ll regret it for the rest of your life.”

Stella let out a cold, quiet laugh.

Vera heard that faint laugh, and it somehow made everything even scarier. She watched as Stella grabbed the white candle, quickly walked over in her heels, then crouched down, using the candlelight to illuminate both their faces.

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“You won’t let me go?” Stella said coolly. “Even if I did nothing, you still wouldn’t have let me go, right, Vera?”

All Vera could do was freeze, utterly speechless and humiliated.

“Your daughter is your darling angel, but other people’s daughters are just worthless, huh?” Stella tilted her hand, letting the hot, clear wax drip right onto Vera’s skin.

Vera’s face contorted in pain, and she jerked back without thinking.

Stella smiled. “Careful now. Move again, and you might be the next one lying over there.”

Vera froze, not daring to move a muscle.

“Stella, I was wrong. Please, just give me a break this once. It was your dad, Brantley. It was all his idea. Go after him, not me,” Vera sobbed, her voice cracking. But Stella just kept smiling, like she didn’t even hear her.

Stella reached out and gently stroked Vera’s cheek. “Why are you crying like that, Vera?”

Vera was forced to tilt her head up, not even daring to flinch. She was scared stiff of setting Stella off.

The window was half open, white curtains fluttering in the breeze.

A falcon swooped in and perched on Stella's shoulder, its sharp eyes fixed on Vera, daring her to move, as if it was ready to rip into her the second she tried anything.

In the next moment, Stella grabbed Vera's chin with a ruthless grip, forcing her to meet Stella's icy stare head-

Downstairs, a scream from upstairs shook the whole house, making everyone freeze.

"What happened?" someone blurted out.

"What's going on?" another voice asked, panic in their tone.

"Was that a woman screaming?" someone else gasped, eyes wide.

The guests were whispering nervously, shooting panicked glances at each other.

"My daughter. That's my daughter's voice. Something must've happened to Stella!" Camilla shouted, deliberately loud enough for everyone to hear, her tone almost theatrical.

She didn't even hesitate, just bolted for the stairs as she spoke.

The old servant next to Camilla, sticking to the plan, marched in with a whole squad to bust someone in the

act.

"What are you all standing around for? Get after them!" Frank barked at the servants.

Blake's eyes went wide. "Holy shit, is that Stella?"

In a flash, the whole crowd stampeded upstairs, with all the gossip-hungry guests scrambling after them to

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catch the drama.

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Upstairs, Giana was jolted awake by the scream, still dazed. On instinct, she stumbled into the hallway and saw a crowd gathered at the door.

Her heart leapt into her throat as she threw the door open with a loud bang.

Instantly, the unmistakable moans and gasps of a couple in the heat of the moment filled the air.

Moonlight spilled in, revealing clothes strewn all over the floor.

“David?” Giana called out, her voice rising in panic. But before she could react, Camilla barreled past, shoving Giana aside and bursting into the room. “Stella!”

The crowd at the doorway exploded with screams, everyone freaking out.

‘Seriously, this Lane family party is just non-stop chaos tonight,’ people thought, totally stunned by one wild scene after another.

Allan wheeled Sebastian up to the second floor, grinning as they joined the crowd. “Who do you think’s lying in there?” he teased.

Sebastian absently rolled his prayer beads between his fingers, a faint, icy smile curling at his lips.

“Stella!” Blake shouted, racing up the stairs. The scene hit him like a bucket of ice water. Cold sweat broke out, and his mind short-circuited.

He was about to shove the guests aside, but he froze when he saw the clothes scattered all over the floor.

Blake finally had a rare moment of clarity. “Uh...” But nobody bothered to respond.

Camilla looked like she’d just been hit by a truck, her hands trembling as she reached for the thin blanket.

Giana pretended to hold her back, but inside, she was desperate for Camilla to just rip it off already, so the scandal would be set in stone.

With a dramatic swoosh, the blanket was yanked off.

“Did someone just call for me?” Stella’s laid-back voice rang out from the back of the crowd.

Everyone spun around. Stella was standing there, totally unfazed, not even a single hair out of place. There was a smirk in her deep amber eyes as she looked into the room, and a nasty, fishy smell wafted out.

She raised her hand to her nose, looking a little grossed out.

“Stella?” Camilla acted all shocked, standing up from the bed.

She stepped aside, making sure everyone at the door could see exactly who was lying in that bed.

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“Stella!” Blake nearly burst into tears the moment he saw her.

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Giana was totally floored. She stared at Stella, completely dumbfounded. ‘If Stella’s right there, then who the heck is lying in bed with my son?’ Giana thought, her mind spinning.

Stunned and confused, Giana felt a chill run down her spine as she turned to look at the bed.

Everyone’s eyes snapped to the bed at once. Everyone was speechless.

Even with the blanket pulled off, those two were still tangled up together, making noises that had everyone dying of secondhand embarrassment.

With a sharp snap, the lights came on. Someone blurted out in shock, “It’s Lauren!”

There was Lauren, a woman in her forties or fifties, tangled up with David, who was barely in his twenties. The chemistry between them was so intense that it was almost painful to watch.

Especially since even with the lights on, they were still glued together, totally unwilling to let go.

The socialites who'd rushed in all quickly turned away, covering their eyes and blushing furiously.

Giana was so shocked and furious that she nearly fainted on the spot, but someone caught her just in time. She looked up to see Stella standing there, that half-smile on her face, mocking, infuriating. "It was you."

"I have no idea what you're rambling about, Giana," Stella replied, cool as ever. But to Giana, that calm attitude just made her hate Stella even more. "But you know, Giana..."

Stella casually rested a hand on Giana's shoulder. "You gave David way too much. After tonight, is his little troublemaker down there? He's never gonna use it again in this life."

Hearing that, Giana's eyes rolled back, and she dropped like a stone, totally knocked out.

"Giana!" the old servant cried, rushing over.

Vera showed up without a sound, clutching Lila so tight her whole body shook. The burns from the candle wax had left angry red welts on her hand, making it look almost grotesque.

When her eyes met Stella's cold stare, Vera flashed back to that moment when Stella had grabbed her chin and laid out her choices.

"I'm giving you two clear options," Stella had said. "First, you can go next door and save Lauren right now, but that'll put you on Giana's bad side, and the Morris family will get dragged into the fallout.

"Second, for the Gray family's reputation, this whole mess will get swept under the rug, but you can use it to threaten Lauren and get the Morris family connected with Conrad."

"So, which road are you gonna take?" Stella's voice was cold as ice.

Vera shivered uncontrollably, hugging Lila even tighter, absolutely terrified.

Stella looked away, stone-faced as she yanked the flowers out of the vase. Then, without a hint of hesitation,

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she strode over to the bed and doused Lauren with the vase of water, soaking her from head to toe.

“Ah...” Lauren shrieked in shock.

Lauren snapped out of her daze, eyes flying open. The moment she realized what was happening, her mind went blank, and she started freaking out, screaming uncontrollably.

“Shut up!” Stella snapped, not holding back as she slapped Lauren hard across the face.

Lauren was left speechless. Her scream cut off instantly.

“Did you just slap me?” Lauren stared at Stella, eyes wide with shock and outrage.

Stella pointed straight at Lauren’s chest. Lauren froze, then glanced down. Her face went blank before she shrieked again, frantically crossing her arms to cover herself.

“Ms. Gray, you and David couldn’t help yourselves, no shame in that,” Stella said, her gaze icy and mocking as she looked down at Lauren. “But you couldn’t even pick the right place for it. Seriously, what’s the difference between you and a mutt?”

“Stella! You did this to me. You set me up!” Lauren shrieked, her voice trembling with fury.

Lauren, clutching the bedsheet around herself, tried to lunge at Stella, but Stella just sidestepped with a mocking smirk. “After tonight, your name’s gonna be all over Haliville. The infamous daughter of Mr. Gray. Unless...”

“Unless what?” Lauren demanded, eyes blazing with desperation.

She couldn’t even figure out how it happened. Her mind was a blur, and she just remembered feeling woozy and a bodyguard showing up.

‘Shit! How did I end up like this? That Lane guy’s got something nasty, Lauren panicked, her thoughts spiraling.

“Beg him to bury this mess,” Stella said coldly, her smile full of scorn.

Stella just smirked, and as Lauren followed where she was pointing, her eyes went wide, because standing right there was Sebastian.

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Sitting in his wheelchair, Sebastian radiated a darkness and a menacing, almost feral vibe that made people instinctively feel oppressed and afraid. It was bone-chillingly cold.

Stella met Sebastian’s gaze from across the distance, a faint smile tugging at her lips. ‘Anyone who dares to humiliate him, I’ll make them regret it,’ she promised herself.

Honestly, Sebastian was the only one in the room who could make all the news from tonight vanish like it never happened. And he could do it without even breaking a sweat.

Lauren's expression contorted with fury as she finally understood. This was Stella's payback for her earlier disrespect. She'd humiliated Sebastian, and now she was about to get a taste of her own medicine.

"I..." Lauren, wrapped in a bedsheet, stumbled off the bed. All her swagger from before had vanished. She bit down hard on her lip, inching her way toward Sebastian, step by humiliating step.

Camilla was loving every second of it. 'A homewrecker like her deserves to wallow in the filth like a pile of shit,' Camilla thought.

Sebastian idly rolled the prayer beads between his fingers, his expression frosty. Out of nowhere, the peregrine falcon swooped back in and landed on his left shoulder, burying its head in its feathers to preen.

"Please," Lauren looked up, her eyes bloodshot and desperate.

Stella strode over, the cold click of her heels echoing on the floor. "Too quiet. I can't hear you."

"Please! For the Gray family's reputation," Lauren shouted, her neck veins bulging with fury.

But as soon as she finished, Stella gave a cold laugh. "Do you even deserve to represent the Gray family?"

Lauren was left speechless.

Lauren kept her head down, but inside, her rage was boiling over.

'Just wait, Stella. I'll pay you back for this humiliation a thousand times over. You're dead meat. I'll make sure you regret ever crossing me,' she swore to herself.

"Frank," Sebastian suddenly broke the silence, and for a split second, the air seemed to freeze.

He said, "I hear you've been searching for a suitable match for David. Given what just happened, why not let the Lane and Gray families unite through marriage?"

Blake was frozen. Blake was seriously relieved to be on their team. He thought, 'Stella and Sebastian? Total power couple.'

“What?” Giana, who had just come to, almost passed out again from rage and disbelief.

Frank clenched his jaw. “Mr. Gray, isn’t that a little inappropriate?”

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Their son was just in his twenties, while Lauren was already in her forties or fifties. If this really went through everyone in Haliville would be laughing their heads off at the Lane family.

“Think it over. The Gray family’s been working with Dr. Conrad lately, Sebastian said, leaving it at that.

The chill in his voice seemed to seep from his very bones, calm, unyielding, and absolutely unshaken by his physical condition.

Frank just stared, lost in thought.

“Are you crazy? You really want our son to marry some old woman?” Giana screamed, her voice cracking with disbelief.

Lauren, already at her breaking point, swung her hand and slapped Giana across the face. “Who are you calling old, huh?”

Instantly, the whole room erupted into chaos.

“Frank, if I were you, I wouldn’t waste any more time. Let me do a quick calculation. Tomorrow, Lane Group’s in for a major shake-up,” Stella said, half-joking as she made a show of counting on her fingers, but her eyes were icy cold.

She added, “And as for David’s health, I’m sure I don’t need to spell it out for you.”

Not far away, Vera was left speechless. ‘She even knows about that?’ she thought, her brain short-circuiting.

Thinking back to what Stella had said earlier, that everything happening to Lauren tonight was supposed to happen to her, Vera felt a cold shock run through her, chilling her to the core.

Frank just stared, lost in thought.

There was a sharp, calculating look in his eyes, mixed with a hint of ruthlessness. “Kid, what makes you think Lane Group’s gonna be in chaos tomorrow?”

Stella locked eyes with Frank, not backing down at all. She just smiled, saying nothing.

“I’ll think about it,” Frank said after a pause, not giving a straight answer. Truth was, he didn’t believe for a second that Lane Group would be in any real trouble. He figured she was just bluffing.

Sebastian didn’t say a word. He just gave a cold signal with a flick of his hand, and in an instant, black-clad bodyguards flooded into the room from all sides, sending a wave of terror through everyone present.

One of the bodyguards brushed past Lauren and yanked David, who was lying on the bed like a crumpled mess, straight up.

The guy was oozing menace, and before anyone could react, a knife flashed in his hand. In one ruthless move, he chopped off David’s pinkie finger. Blood splattered everywhere.

David’s mouth was clamped shut, and he couldn’t even make a sound.

“My son!” Giana screamed, then fainted on the spot.

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Frank was stunned. “Mr. Gray, you...” His words died in his throat as he suddenly noticed the prayer beads that had been on Sebastian’s wrist were hanging loosely from his fingers. He hadn’t even seen Sebastian take them off.

A chill ran down Frank’s spine. “Frank, when someone gives you a way out, you’d better take it,” Sebastian said, his tone eerily calm, but there was a deadly menace beneath it.

“Don’t make the mistake of disrespecting me.” His gaze was so cold it could freeze the air.

“I’ll go to the Gray family to propose marriage tomorrow! First thing in the morning,” Frank blurted out, his whole body drenched in cold sweat, his face ashen. Terror washed over him like a tidal wave.

Sebastian lowered his gaze, his hauntingly beautiful, pale face giving nothing away. Suddenly, his black electric wheelchair whirred forward, turning to face the crowd at the door, the ones who’d come just to watch the spectacle.

The place was dead silent. No one dared meet his eyes, terrified he’d single them out. Nobody wanted to draw the attention of this demon.

In the next moment, Sebastian casually pointed in a direction.

Everyone was speechless. Everyone followed his gesture, and suddenly, Vera, clinging to Lila, became the center of attention. Vera’s eyes widened in terror.

Someone grabbed David’s bloody, severed finger and started striding straight toward Vera. She tried to run, but before she could even move, a bodyguard in black stepped out of the shadows and blocked her escape.

“No, no...” Vera stammered, terror etched across her face. With a thud, the bodyguard forced her to her knees, pried her mouth open, and, without a flicker of emotion, shoved David’s severed finger right inside.

One of the socialites nearby was so horrified by the scene that she fainted on the spot.

Blake didn’t faint, but his legs felt like jelly. He could barely control them.

He couldn’t help but remember how, back before he’d ever met Stella or Sebastian, his grandpa used to warn him over and over, “In Haliville, you can mess with anyone, but never mess with Sebastian from the Gray family.”

Back then, Blake thought it was all just talk. ‘Shit, I’m gonna puke,’ Blake thought, his stomach churning.

Sebastian tuned out the screams erupting all around him, his icy, intense gaze landing on Stella. For a moment, he couldn’t help but worry Stella might hate him because of all this.

But then, Stella caught his eye and silently formed the words with her lips, “Don’t be angry.”

“I’m not marrying him. I absolutely won’t,” Lauren sobbed, tears streaming down her face. Everyone in their circle knew David swung both ways. She needed to get herself checked, pronto. But nobody spared her a glance.

Stella watched the scene with icy detachment. Even as a fellow woman, she didn’t feel a shred of pity for any of them. She’d already given them their chance.

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If they’d just chosen to step back, instead of scheming to sacrifice her for their own benefit, none of this would’ve happened.

“Too bad, it’s not up to you,” Stella said coolly.

Downstairs, Jake drove the car, and Stella got in.

She pulled her shawl back around her shoulders, resting her forehead on one hand, as if she was waiting for

someone.

Stella sat in silence for a while, lost in thought.

The car door was open, and Camilla got in.

“You...” she began, but before Camilla could get another word out, Stella, cool and aloof, passed her several documents.

Camilla took them automatically. Looking down, she realized they were all insurance policies. These were all huge personal accident insurance policies, seriously, the kind with crazy payouts.

Camilla opened each one, gulping as she did the math in her head. Her eyes went from nervous to downright hungry. Nearly 25 million dollars in total, and every single policy had her name down as the beneficiary.

“What’s this supposed to mean?” Camilla asked, her tone guarded. She watched Stella with suspicion, instantly on alert.

In Camilla’s eyes, if Sebastian was devil number one, then Stella was definitely devil number two.

Now that she’d finally calmed down, Camilla realized that everything tonight had been a chain reaction.

Everyone could be a piece in Stella’s game, and anyone who showed her malice would end up getting bitten by their own schemes.

Dealing with the devil meant you had to be on your absolute highest guard.

“If he can plot against you, you can plot right back,” Stella said. Her skin was so perfect that it was almost dazzling. She looked completely harmless, no trace of aggression, but there was something undeniably dark about her.

Camilla was so unnerved by the implication in Stella’s words that she let go of the insurance policies. The papers were scattered all over the floor.

“All I want is for Brantley to come back to me,” Camilla said, but she couldn’t help glancing at the papers scattered on the floor. Stella just gave a casual smile, bent down, and scooped up the insurance papers.

She handed them back to Camilla. “You’re overthinking it. It’s just a tool to keep us in check.”

Camilla was left speechless. She’d thought Stella was planning to use her to take Brantley out, but maybe she’d been overthinking it all along.

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“He’s still your father, you know,” Camilla said as she reached out and took the stack of insurance papers, nearly 25 million dollars’ worth, accepting the situation with a resigned sigh.

Stella just scoffed at that. “Do you know why I didn’t press you about the necklace that night?” Stella asked, her voice cool and detached.

Camilla was still thrown off by Stella's cold, mocking laugh when the next question hit her.

Camilla froze. 'Why is she bringing up the necklace again?' she thought. Her heart skipped a beat.

"W-Why?" Camilla stammered, both shocked and scared.

"Because I knew that, except for Hazel saying the necklace was bought, every single thing you told me was a lie," Stella replied, her tone icy and unwavering.

Camilla was left speechless.

"I know way more than any of you think I do," Stella drawled, her tone cool and detached. "So, don't even try to guilt-trip me with family stuff."

Camilla's grip tightened on the car door. 'What is she getting at? What does she actually know?' she thought, anxiety creeping in.

Jake opened the car door from the outside. "Time to get out," Stella said with a half-smile, making it clear she wanted Camilla gone. Camilla stumbled out, rattled.

"Stella, no matter what you think you know, don't forget, you're still officially part of the Carter family," Camilla blurted out, almost without thinking, just before Jake shut the door.

Stella let out a soft, dismissive laugh and shook her head. To Camilla, that smile looked like Stella was laughing at how outmatched she really was.

The car pulled away. Camilla watched the Mercedes vanish down the street, then turned to find Hazel, only to freeze as she locked eyes with Sebastian, whose gaze was cold as death.

Sebastian was suddenly right there, blocking her way, and the chill in his eyes made her skin crawl.

"M-Mr. Gray..." Camilla choked out, her blood running cold. She had no idea how much he'd overheard.

Sebastian sat in his wheelchair, completely expressionless. He didn't move, and Camilla didn't dare move a muscle until Allan spoke up.

"Move, you're blocking the way," Allan said, shooting her an impatient look.

Camilla hurriedly stepped aside as Allan wheeled Sebastian past her. A black Maybach pulled up right where Jake had parked earlier.

Sebastian got into the car.

Camilla hurried away, completely unaware that behind her, the previously closed car window was slowly rolling down, revealing Sebastian's face.

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The black Mercedes and the Maybach stopped side by side at a red light at the intersection, both back windows rolling down together.

"Why don't you head back to the island? Allan's got something to handle," Sebastian said, his voice warmer, nothing like the chill he'd shown at the Lane house.

Behind him, Allan looked momentarily surprised, then gave Stella a resigned shrug.

Stella raised an eyebrow. "This late?"

After everything tonight, it was nearly dawn.

"He's really in a rush," Sebastian said calmly.

Allan rolled his eyes. 'Seriously, I'm about to lose it here. This is urgent, he thought, feeling the

pressure

mount.

The light turned green, and Stella waved at Sebastian before coolly rolling her window back up.

Sebastian rolled his eyes.

Allan leaned over, saying, "She's already gone. What are you still staring at?"

Sebastian coldly turned to Allan, meeting his gaze. “She didn’t even ask where I’m going?”

Allan rolled his eyes. He let out a sigh. “Would you even tell her if she asked?”

The two of them locked eyes.

“Just drive,” Sebastian said, deciding to drop it.

Allan rolled his eyes. He grumbled under his breath.

On the Ocean Bridge in Haliville, a Maybach was parked quietly, its engine off.

Roadwork signs blocked both ends of the bridge, and the whole stretch was eerily silent, yet the place was filled with men in black suits, standing guard.

The bridge was lit up like day. Two screams so loud they could wake the dead echoed across the bridge, shaking the night.

Suddenly, two people were shoved right off the edge. Just as they were about to hit the water, the bungee cords strapped to their ankles snapped them back up at the very last second.

Again and again, the same thing happened, over and over, like some twisted amusement park ride.

Inside the car, Allan joked with a playful smirk, “Man, those screams are really something.” But Sebastian just sat there in silence, cradling Eggie in his arms.

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“Let the ropes out a little more,” Sebastian said after a pause, poking Eggie’s round belly with his finger.

Eggie just lay there, completely unfazed. Then it rolled over and went right back to sleep.

This time, when they were dropped again, they crashed straight into the sea. The icy water rushed into their mouths, salty, bitter, and freezing.

They had no idea who'd put them through this hell. They were panicking, minds blown, completely losing it.

And those two were one other than Brantley and Camilla.

The lawyers from Harmony Law Firm arrived right on time. Even in the middle of the night, they remained impeccably professional.

“Mr. Gray, Mr. Reed,” the lawyer greeted, ignoring the screams outside. He took out the prepared agreement from his briefcase and handed it over.

He said, “As long as these two sign here, Ms. Carter’s household registration can be transferred out tonight. However...”

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