

Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

Chapter 2

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Chapter 2 A Pet Python

Stella turned toward the sound.

Sebastian sat in the morning light, wearing only a black robe tied loosely at the waist. He was holding a cup of coffee, his long legs stretched out as he read a file open on his lap.

A strand of dark beads hung from his wrist. They swayed gently, giving him a quiet stillness that felt ancient and unreadable.

Stella took him in, and for a moment, she just stared. Then she snapped back to herself, the defiance returning to her eyes as she pressed her tongue to the back of her teeth.

“You...” she began.

He looked up then, and their eyes met. That was all it took. The memory of what happened right before she was knocked out rushed back to her in a single, vivid wave.

The large python shifted slowly on the bed, its size making its movements look heavy and almost harmless.

“Snowball,” Sebastian said, his voice low and cold.

Stella stared. To her, a man who kept a pet python and gave it a cute name like Snowball was clearly out of the ordinary.

At Sebastian’s call, the python slid down from the bed. It wound its way around his legs, coiled onto the sofa behind him, and settled its large head on his shoulder with a soft nudge.

“You’re Lucas’s father?” Stella asked.

Stella knew she had to explain. She wasn't the kidnapper, but a victim herself.

Sebastian stroked the python's head, his gaze locked on Stella's face as she spoke.

His expression was cool and unreadable, and the casual way he handled the massive python sent a shiver through her.

The folder on Sebastian's lap slipped to the floor, its contents spilling out. Photographs scattered across the tiles, and Stella's words died in her throat.

Every single picture was of her, from childhood through adolescence to recent months. It was a complete dossier on her life.

He had known she was innocent this whole time. Yet he'd sat there silently, letting her talk, when he'd had the truth in his lap all along.

It hit her then that he was testing her. His calculation ran deeper than she had imagined.

"Is this really fun for you, Mr. Gray?" Stella squinted, her slender frame slouched lazily against the headboard.

Sebastian didn't answer. He merely gestured toward the other side of the room.

Stella glanced toward where he pointed and met her own eyes in the mirror.

Her face was a mess of thick, smudged smoky makeup, her ears cluttered with several skull-shaped clips. It was pure punk overload.

She stared at the reflection, her fingers tracing the line of her brow. The cheap makeup was caked on thick, but beneath it all, the elegant lines of her face were still there. It gave her a look that was naturally cool and reserved.

"Mr. Gray..." She threw off the covers, stood up barefoot, and moved with a swagger. "I'm getting this off."

In the bathroom, Stella cleared the fog from the mirror. Her flawless skin was flushed and dewy from the shower, giving her a fresh, delicate beauty.

Her face was bare, without a trace of makeup. In the stillness, her captivating eyes blinked slowly, their gaze catching the light with a faint, honeyed warmth.

She seemed calm, but there was a cool distance in her expression that kept people away.

A small mole rested on her collarbone.

Her hair, freshly dried, fell in soft, shiny waves all the way down her back.

Yet Stella's mind was empty. She knew her name, but nothing else about who she was.

After she got dressed and walked out, both Sebastian and the large white python were gone.

Only a mess of photos and files remained, scattered across the floor.

"Stella Carter... eighteen," she murmured to herself, her slender fingers turning the pages as she scanned the file's sparse lines.

The records stated she was a former student of Central High School, expelled just last week for failing grades and excessive absences. She had a reputation as a rebel, and her home life was reportedly strained.

It also revealed that her younger sister, Hazel Carter, attended Edenbury Academy, the city's most elite and costly private school.

Stella turned the page, and a chill settled in her eyes as she read that she was not the Carters' real daughter.

The Carters had known the truth all along, which was why they had always treated the two sisters so differently.

What made no sense was the money. The Carters were not wealthy, yet they managed to pay for Edenbury Academy's enormous fees year after year, a sum that ran into the millions.

She was still turning this over in her mind when a rapid, anxious knock came at her bedroom door.

"Ms. Carter!" came the tense voice of Jake Yates, Sebastian's other subordinate, as he pounded hard on the wood.

He started to speak again as the door suddenly opened from the inside.

His raised fist almost struck her, but Stella moved swiftly out of the way.

He froze, his words dying on his lips as he got a clear look at her face.

He stared, hardly believing this was the same girl Sebastian had brought home yesterday, the one with messy, smudged makeup. Now, she looked clear and quietly beautiful.

“So you’re sending me away,” Stella said, her voice steady and without much emotion.

Lucas was safe now. Even if Sebastian had said nothing, she would have been ready to go.

“Ms. Carter, please follow me,” Jake said, shaking his head as he remembered his actual task.

The memory of Lucas’s demolished room was enough to make his blood run cold.

He would gladly trade a month in combat for a single day of babysitting duty.

“Has something happened to him?” Stella asked, a sudden fear gripping her as she followed Jake to the elevator.

Lucas’s room was on the third floor. When the elevator doors opened, a vase shot past them and exploded against the wall. The floor was a sea of wreckage, with no clear path through.

Stella stared, utterly speechless.

“He did this alone?” Stella asked, her voice a mix of disbelief and exhaustion. The devastation was absolute.

Jake could only give a stiff, helpless nod.

Stella turned and entered the room. The scene grew more chaotic with every step.

The servants stood quietly nearby, their silence a clear sign they had seen this all before.

“Bring in a fresh set for him to break,” Sebastian ordered. His tone was icy and held no mercy for the five-year-old boy, cutting with a ruthless edge.

Soon, a servant was replacing the broken items on the shelves with new ones, each piece a costly antique.

Lucas grunted angrily, swinging his small fists to warn anyone who tried to come close.

The white python, Snowball, coiled protectively around Lucas, letting the boy rest against his scales.

Seeing Lucas on the verge of total exhaustion, Stella turned a cold glare toward Sebastian. “What is wrong with you?” she demanded.

Stella’s expression tightened as Lucas started to move, her eyes flashing with immediate concern.

He was barefoot on a floor littered with glass. One wrong step could cut him.

“Stay where you are. I’m coming to you,” she said firmly.

As Stella approached, Lucas’s face lit up for a moment before his eyes glistened with tears.

His chin trembled as he reached his small hands out to her.

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Chapter 3 Paid To Stay

Silent sobs shook Lucas’s little frame, tears now flowing freely down his cheeks. His need for comfort was clear.

“Do not pick him up,” Sebastian ordered, his icy voice cutting through the room and deepening the tension.

Stella acted as if she hadn’t heard him. She leaned down, shielding Lucas’s ears with her hands, and whispered softly to him, “Ignore that weirdo.”

Jake was trying to ease his way out of the room when his brother John shot him a look that could freeze fire. He stopped moving at once, his face settling into a resigned frown.

He was trapped. When forces like these clashed, the bystanders never fared well.

“Stella,” Sebastian said, a slow and dangerous smile crossing his face. He had never met anyone brave enough to defy him so openly.

“You’re not a young man, Mr. Gray. Why bother fighting with a child?” Stella’s voice was laced with clear sarcasm.

She easily lifted Lucas into her arms and held him close, all while giving Sebastian a sharp, challenging look.

Sebastian’s expression turned cold, his eyes fixed on her with a dark, unyielding intensity.

A heavy silence fell over the room. Everyone watching held their breath, sharing the same silent thought that Stella was either fearless or foolish.

A long moment passed before Sebastian finally moved, just a slight shift of his fingers. It was enough. The tension broke, and everyone around them let out a slow, collective breath. The sudden shift in tension felt utterly surreal.

Servants rushed forward, quietly clearing the wreckage from the floor before slipping out again.

With Lucas in her arms, Stella turned to leave.

As Stella turned to leave, John blocked her path at the door. “You have not been dismissed by Mr. Gray, Ms. Carter,” he stated flatly.

Stella recognized him immediately as the man who had knocked her unconscious in the warehouse. She regarded him with a thoughtful look.

Lucas huffed and tried to bite at John’s hand, but Stella gently caught his chin and held his mouth closed.

Lucas blinked, and then tilted his head to the side, looking suddenly as soft and harmless as a baby bird.

“Alright. I’m not going,” Stella replied calmly. She carried Lucas back into the room and took a seat directly facing Sebastian.

As she sat, a quiet realization stopped her. Sebastian was in a wheelchair, a detail she had missed until now. This didn't fit, since she clearly remembered him standing in that warehouse.

She wondered if her memory was playing tricks on her.

"You've never asked my name," Sebastian said, his voice low. His eyes, steady and inscrutable, stayed fixed on Stella.

His face revealed nothing, his sharp, handsome features a mask of cool control. He held himself with the calm authority of someone accustomed to being in charge.

Jake's eyes lit up at the comment. He instinctively glanced toward John with an openly curious look.

John answered with another sharp look, a clear command for his brother to stop.

"Does it matter?" Stella said without thinking, her face showing her genuine confusion.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room.

A moment later, sensing her own bluntness, she added with a casual shrug, "I'm leaving soon anyway. Does it even matter what your name is, Mr. Gray?"

The air in the room seemed to grow even heavier.

Jake hunched his shoulders slightly, watching Stella. In his eyes, her manner was straightforward to the point of being almost tactless.

Sebastian's voice was quiet. "I didn't give you permission to go."

He watched her with a look that felt too deep, too knowing. His hand moved slowly over the python's head as it lay across his lap, the gesture steady and unnervingly patient.

Stella's face showed nothing, but she was listening, weighing each word.

Then a contract was set down in front of her.

"Stay and look after him," he said. "The offer is thirty million dollars." He said it plainly, as if naming a price for an ordinary service.

Stella remained silent, though her lashes lowered for a beat.

Sebastian didn't press her. He simply twisted the python's tail in his fingers, his attention drifting back to her delicate face now and then. Something shifted behind his calm expression, a quiet intensity she couldn't read.

Lucas tilted his head back, blinking his wide, bright eyes up at Stella. He nuzzled his soft, curly hair against her hand in a little plea for affection.

A wave of regret washed over him for his earlier outburst, and he worried that he might have scared her.

He wondered if she thought he was a bad kid now.

"All of your needs will be taken care of," Sebastian stated. "Your only job is to stay here with him."

Noticing Lucas's genuine unhappiness, Sebastian narrowed his eyes slightly.

Sensing the shift in atmosphere, Snowball slipped swiftly from Sebastian's lap and retreated to a corner, coiling itself into a tight, defensive loop.

"John..." Jake leaned in close to John, his voice barely above a whisper. "Trust me, after watching a ton of dramas, I can already see it.

"Ms. Carter is gonna shove that contract right in Mr. Gray's face, yell 'You think money can buy me?', and run out crying."

John ignored him completely.

As Sebastian's most trusted man, John knew his duty. If Sebastian wanted her to stay, John would make it happen by any means necessary.

"You..." Stella looked up, her voice quiet but steady. Her expression was impossible to read.

Jake nudged John, his eyes bright with expectation.

Sebastian's presence was cold and absolute. Even seated in the wheelchair, he was no less intimidating.

"You have to give me a pen," she said simply. A signature required a pen, and there was none.

Everyone looked at the empty space on the table beside the contract. There was no pen.

Sebastian turned his head toward Jake, who had brought the papers. His handsome face showed no feeling, his gaze as flat and dismissive as if Jake were furniture.

A silent cry for help flashed in Jake's mind as he braced himself for the consequences.

A pen was quickly brought forward. Stella took it, letting it roll once through her fingers in a smooth, practiced motion before holding it still.

She looked directly at Sebastian and said, "Mr. Gray, let me ask you one last question..."

"Are you really willing to pay thirty million to keep me here with Lucas, even if I might cause trouble for you later?"

It was a choice she was leaving in his hands.

Even without her memories, something deep inside assured her that she always kept her promises.

Payment meant responsibility.

Sebastian's reply was immediate and straightforward. In one smooth motion, he slid a black bank card across the table toward her. It was an unlimited account, loaded with thirty million dollars.

"The pin is six zeroes," he said, his voice calm and steady.

A small smile touched Stella's lips, and her eyes seemed to brighten. "I have one more condition, though."

"Name it," Sebastian replied. His handsome face remained completely impassive, even as she raised the stakes.

"My condition is admission to Edenbury Academy," Stella said. That elite academy was her price, and she would not be refused.

"Deal," Sebastian replied, sounding like he'd been waiting for her to ask.

His swift agreement settled it. Stella took the pen and signed. "A deal, then."

From that moment on, she saw him as her sponsor.

“Mr. Gray,” John’s voice cut in, sharp with urgency. “Your grandmother is in the hospital.”

The atmosphere in the room turned.