

Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

Chapter 4

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Chapter 4 Go To The Hospital

A cold stillness fell, radiating from Sebastian until the very air felt brittle.

“Go on,” Sebastian said, the words a low command.

“Someone told your grandmother about the kidnapping. She collapsed on the spot, her heart giving out from the shock. They’ve taken her to the hospital,” John replied.

His eyes flicked toward Sebastian before he spoke again, his voice lowered, “It doesn’t look good.”

As she processed the information, Stella felt Lucas grow tense and fearful in her arms. He was whimpering softly against her.

A suffocating tension filled the room, pressing down on everyone until it was almost unbearable.

Just as the silence became too much to endure, Sebastian finally gave the order. “Have the car brought around. We’re going to the hospital.”

Stella had hoped to stay behind, but Sebastian glanced at her and shattered that hope. “You’re going with Lucas.”

She accepted it quietly, reasoning that the person who paid was the one who made the rules.

A black Maybach glided smoothly along the highway. Its custom interior was quiet and comfortable.

Stella watched the world pass by outside her window. Had she not just been there, she never would have believed they had come from a private island.

The fact that Sebastian owned an entire island made her wonder just who he really was.

But she had no time to dwell on it. The moment Sebastian settled into the car, she could tell something was wrong.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

His gaze was heavy and shadowed. The chronic pain in his head, worn thin from years of sleepless nights, was sharpening into something violent.

A dangerous stillness had entered his eyes, and even Lucas had sensed the tension.

“Your pills, Mr. Gray,” Jake said quickly from the front seat, turning to pass a small bottle back.

Before he could deliver it, the car hit a rut. The bottle slipped from his hand and rolled across the floor, stopping near Stella’s foot.

She looked down at the bottle, noticing that the label was in a foreign language.

She recognized the class of medication. It was for the mind.

“Could you get that, Ms. Carter?” Jake mouthed, his expression pleading as he pressed his hands together in a silent appeal.

Stella picked it up and held it out to Sebastian. “Here.”

In the next instant, Sebastian’s hand closed firmly around hers, trapping both her fingers and the bottle in his grip.

Stella looked down at their linked hands but said nothing.

A moment later, Sebastian released her hand and took the medicine bottle without even glancing her way.

Then he rolled down the window and tossed the bottle out.

‘He is not right in the head,’ Stella thought to herself.

“Drive faster,” Sebastian ordered. He leaned back heavily into the leather seat and closed his eyes, his brows pulled together tightly.

“Yes, sir,” John answered from the front.

Half an hour earlier, the emergency wing of the private hospital had been sealed off by a cordon of armed guards. No one was getting through.

The news had leaked, and reporters were already gathered outside, their camera flashes lighting up the scene.

“We pay your wages,” a shrill voice declared. “How dare you keep the family matriarch from entering?”

Linda Gray held the arm of an elderly woman in a tailored dress, her own posture full of disdain. With a dismissive sway of her hips, she tried to push past the guards.

The woman she was pulling along was Sophia Chapman. Her silver hair was swept into a soft bun, and her simple white dress carried a calm grace that made Linda’s tense urgency seem all the more jarring.

They were halted just steps from the door.

“Do you not see who is here?” Linda said, her voice sharp.

Before Linda could utter another word, the air behind them turned cold and dense with warning.

The fight went out of her at once. She turned to find herself locked in a stare that felt fatal.

The wheelchair did nothing to lessen the effect.

“S-Sebastian,” she managed, her voice a thin whisper. “You’re here.”

Sebastian sat still, a dark blanket covering his lap. His face was too pale, and the shadows beneath his eyes were deep and bruised.

“What did you call me?” Sebastian asked, turning his gaze toward Linda.

The look was so sharp that it made her legs go weak.

Stella watched the reporters from behind Sebastian's wheelchair. Now she understood why he had arranged for Lucas to be taken straight inside.

"Bring them all over here," Sebastian ordered in a flat, calm voice, but Stella could feel something cold and dangerous lying just beneath his quiet surface.

The reporters were quickly ushered toward him.

It had been years since the incident, and though Sebastian had kept out of sight since then, his reputation had never faded.

"Don't worry, Mr. Gray. Every photo will be destroyed," one reporter said quickly, his voice shaking.

They stood there trembling, knowing their jobs weren't worth their lives.

Sebastian stayed quiet, his long fingers slowly spinning the dark beads around his wrist.

The soft clack of the beads was steady, a measured sound. It was the rhythm of Sebastian keeping a darker impulse in check.

Stella's gaze settled on the beads, and for a moment, she seemed lost in thought.

Then the room filled with a shared, silent gasp.

Her hand, cool and delicate, came to rest over his, stilling the beads beneath her touch.

Standing behind Linda, Sophia watched it all unfold, her sharp eyes taking careful note.

The tension around Sebastian dissolved as quickly as it had gathered.

When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet. "Let go." It was not the violent reaction everyone had feared.

"Oh, okay," she said and withdrew her hand without pause.

"There is only one matriarch in this family," Sebastian said, his voice low but carrying clearly. "Let that be clear in your accounts."

Jake, a wall of muscle, crushed the reporters' cameras under his boot, making Sebastian's point for him.

The reporters scrambled away without a second thought for their ruined gear. They were simply grateful to escape with their lives.

Linda gritted her teeth as she watched them go, furious but silent. She knew better than to cause a scene.

After all, money meant nothing if she wasn't alive to spend it.

"Sebastian," said Sophia, her voice gentle. Her posture was still elegant, a quiet reminder of the beauty she once was.

"Excuse us," Stella said, not letting her finish. She pushed the wheelchair forward and nearly ran over Linda's foot.

"Watch where you're going!" Linda shrieked, jumping back. The limited-edition Louis Vuitton heels she wore had just arrived that morning, and damaging them would cost far more than she could ever pay back.

Stella stopped and looked at her. The gaze was cool, the kind that seemed to leave no room for lies.

"Very touching. You wore your best shoes to visit the sick," Stella observed, her tone dry and unimpressed.

Linda's face colored with shame. She turned helplessly to Sophia.

"Sophia..." she said, her voice tight.

"Aren't you a bit old to be calling for your elder?" Stella asked, the remark perfectly aimed.

She then gave the wheelchair a gentle push and moved past them without another glance.

Sebastian watched the numbers climb in the quiet elevator. When he finally broke the silence, his voice was low. "You had no right to speak for me."

Stella leaned down, her hands coming to rest on the arms of his chair. "A 'thank you' would be more appropriate," she said, meeting his cold stare without flinching.

He was close enough now that she could see the surprising length of his lashes, dark against his skin.

Jake tried his best to disappear into the corner.

Finally, the elevator doors opened with a quiet chime.

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Chapter 5 I Can Help Her

Without a word to Sebastian, Stella stepped out of the elevator first, her hands behind her back.

“M-Mr. Gray...” Jake said quietly.

The thought that Stella might have just flirted with him flashed through Jake’s mind.

Sebastian’s cold glance was enough to silence Jake and send a chill down his back.

Outside the VIP suite, a doctor spoke to Carlos Gray, Sebastian’s grandfather, “I’m sorry. We tried everything, but Annette was brought to us too late and has suffered brain damage.

“The medical team agrees that if she doesn’t regain consciousness by tonight, we will have to announce brain death.”

The doctor was Emily Chase, a longtime family friend of the Grays and one of the country’s most accomplished young surgeons.

She removed her mask and let out a tired sigh.

Carlos's cane clattered to the floor. He staggered back, the world swimming before his eyes.

The hall was loud with the cries of the Gray family relatives. Some of the grief looked real, some did not.

"Lucas is a Jinx," Lauren Gray's voice carried over the noise. "Every disaster in this house starts with him."

She pressed a handkerchief that smelled of onion to her eyes, summoning a convincing veil of tears. Through them, she managed to catch her brother Richard Gray's gaze where he stood near Carlos.

After the scandal years ago, their mother, Sophia, had brought them to claim their place as Carlos's children. It was only his wife Annette's fierce opposition that had kept them from being formally recognized all this time.

Now, they saw their chance.

"Dad," Lauren said, her eyes glistening as she looked at Carlos. "You must remove Lucas from the family. Before he brings ruin to us all."

"Is that so?" The quiet question dropped into the room like ice, stopping all sound.

Sebastian's wheelchair rolled forward from the dim edge of the hall. Every face in the family went pale, and the air filled with the sound of stunned breath catching in throats.

"Sebastian," Carlos began, rising quickly to his feet. But the words died in his throat as he met Sebastian's cold stare.

The wheelchair stopped in front of Lauren.

"Look at me," Sebastian said, his voice cold and dangerous. "And say that again."

Lauren was so terrified that her knees buckled. She fell hard to the floor before him, her face damp with cold sweat.

"Who else would like to suggest removing Lucas from the family?" he asked the room.

Sebastian began to turn the black prayer beads around his wrist, his eyes moving slowly across the silent crowd. No one dared meet his gaze.

It was common knowledge that Sebastian only removed those beads when he intended to draw blood.

Just as Sebastian was about to remove his prayer beads, a moment that promised violence, Emily's sharp scream came from Annette's private ward. "What are you doing?"

He went still. Every head turned toward the room.

Its door was now open.

Emily called out clearly from inside, "Carlos, I saw her. She had a needle. She was going to put it in Annette's head."

Within, Stella stood with her wrist caught in Emily's grasp, a silver needle still visible in her hand.

Lucas clung to Emily's coat, his small face distressed.

Carlos's anger found a new target. "Who are you?" he demanded. "What is this?"

John, pushing Sebastian's wheelchair, saw Stella and frowned. He was certain she was causing trouble.

Stella's gaze shifted to Sebastian. Her expression smoothed into perfect calm. "Mr. Gray," she said, her voice so steady that it sounded almost detached.

Emily suddenly cried out in pain when Lucas bit her wrist. She let go of Stella immediately.

"You want her to wake up, don't you?" Stella said, pausing briefly. "I can do it."

The room erupted into whispers.

"Are you a doctor?" Emily asked coldly, still cradling her injured wrist.

"No," Stella replied flatly.

"Do you have a license to practice?" Emily pressed.

"No," Stella repeated the word.

Each answer made Emily more scornful. To her, Stella was nothing more than a delusional girl looking for attention.

“Who trained you, then?” Emily asked, her tone thick with sarcasm.

“I just learned,” Stella replied, totally unfazed.

Emily didn’t hide her contempt this time. She laughed outright. “You really have no idea what you’re saying.”

Emily found the claim absurd. ‘If she’s going to make up a story, she might as well have claimed to be a medical genius,’ she scoffed to herself.

“Enough,” John said quietly, his patience gone. “This isn’t a game, Ms. Carter.”

He knew better than anyone what Annette meant to Sebastian. To treat her life as a trivial matter was beyond understanding.

“It’s not a game,” Stella said, her voice low and steady. For the first time, a hard certainty filled her eyes.

She didn’t know how she knew, but when she saw Annette, the knowledge came to her with quiet certainty. She could picture exactly where to place the needles, how deep, and at what angle.

“I can help her,” Stella said, her gaze locked with Sebastian’s. His face gave nothing away, a storm held in check.

“Take her,” Carlos ordered, his voice thick with a rage that promised violence.

Before anyone could touch Stella, Lucas stepped in front of Stella, his small body tense and a silent warning growling in his throat.

Sebastian didn’t shift. He only raised his eyes to the men advancing on Stella, and the room went still with sudden threat.

“I mean it, Sebastian,” Stella said, her words spoken with quiet force.

Stella knew what Annette meant to Lucas and Sebastian. She wasn’t one to make promises lightly, but here, she had no proof to offer.

“That’s enough,” Emily cut in, her voice tight. “Just who do you think you are? A handful of needles? You might as well say you can wake her up right now.”

The audacity almost made Emily laugh. ‘Does she think she’s Shark?’ she thought bitterly.

Shark was a freelance surgeon, a medical genius with no ties to any hospital. She was the only doctor in the world with a certified perfect record, and stories claimed her silver needles could work miracles.

She was famously difficult and charged impossible prices, and no one even knew what she looked like. Yet the world's most powerful people still begged for her help.

“You know the cost of failure,” Sebastian said, his eyes steady and cold, the air growing heavy as he spoke.

“Mr. Gray!” Emily stared at him in disbelief.

Even Carlos looked shocked.

In the corner, Richard and Lauren exchanged a look of quiet victory.

If Annette died by Stella's hand, their mother's position would be secured, and the family fortune would shift in their direction.

“Mr. Gray, please reconsider it,” John said, his voice urgent.

He couldn't bear the thought of leaving Annette's fate in the hands of someone so inexperienced.

Stella looked back at Sebastian, a faint, sure smile on her face. She pulled her hair up into a loose knot with a shark-topped hair tie, and then carefully sterilized the needle.

Her hands moved with a quiet competence that looked strange on someone so young.

John's heart hammered in his chest. “Mr. Gray,” he said, his voice strained.

Under the watchful eyes of everyone, Stella carefully inserted a silver needle into Annette's scalp.

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Chapter 6 Annette Was Awake

“You’re insane,” Emily hissed. The sight of Stella actually inserting the needle sent a jolt of rage through her.

Without a second thought, she grabbed for Stella’s wrist, careless of Annette lying on the bed.

Before Emily could make contact, Stella’s free hand came up, a second silver needle held steady just before Emily’s eye.

“Move again, and I’ll blind you,” Stella warned coldly without looking back. Everyone could see she wasn’t joking.

Without turning her head, Stella seemed to sense every move Emily made. The silver needle in her hand tracked Emily’s slightest shift, never wavering.

Emily froze, a bead of cold sweat tracing a line down her temple.

Every eye in the room was fixed on Stella’s hands as she worked. Only Sebastian was looking elsewhere.

His eyes, sharp and unreadable, moved from the shark charm on her hair tie to the quiet certainty on her face.

His thumb brushed a bead on his wrist, but then the soft click of the beads made his hand go still.

He kept his thoughts to himself, his expression giving nothing away.

“You’ll regret this, Mr. Gray,” Emily said, her hands shoved into her coat pockets. Her face was a mask of haughty defiance, an attempt to cover the sting of public dismissal.

She was used to respect, not to being ignored.

Sebastian didn’t even give her a glance, leaving her words to hang in the air.

Stella cleared her throat softly. “Lucas, come here,” she said, her eyes finding him curled beside the wheelchair.

Lucas's small face was drawn with worry.

His eyes lit up the moment Stella called his name. He ran over and hugged her leg, looking up at her.

"I'm curious who told Mrs. Gray you were kidnapped," Stella said, her eyes cold as she looked around the room. "Let's see who really brings the bad luck."

Her gaze finally met Sebastian's across the silent room.

"I'll let Mrs. Gray speak for herself," Stella said quietly. Then a ragged gasp came from the bed.

Color slowly returned to Annette's gray face, as if life were flowing back into her. Her eyelids fluttered and opened slightly.

Jake stared, stunned that she was actually awake. He glanced at his brother, and even the usually impassive John looked shocked.

"This can't be," Emily whispered, her confidence shattered. She had given the diagnosis herself. The chance of Annette waking up had been virtually zero.

But now, against all odds, Annette was awake.

The hospital director arrived with several senior staff, and the room soon filled with onlookers.

"It's not possible," Emily insisted, her voice sharp with denial.

But the steady beep of the monitors told a different story.

"Annette!" Lauren's face drained of color at the sight of Annette awake. Panic flickered in her eyes as she took a sudden step toward the bed.

"John," Sebastian said, the single word quietly cutting through the air.

John shook off his own surprise. His expression hardened as he stepped forward to block the doorway, barring Lauren, Richard, and Carlos from coming any closer.

"Lucas," Annette whispered, her voice frail. Tears gathered in her eyes at the sight of him.

Seeing him there, safe and close, filled her with a quiet, profound relief.

Stella leaned against the window, her delicate face blank. The focus that had held her rigid was gone, leaving behind a deep, lazy exhaustion.

“Grandma,” Sebastian said softly.

Jake wheeled Sebastian to the bedside.

The dangerous air that had clung to Sebastian moments before was gone, replaced by a quiet stillness that made him seem like someone else entirely.

Stella watched him, her head tilted slightly. The shift was so unexpected that it made her smile.

Sebastian paused and looked up at her.

A soft breeze stirred the white curtains of the private suite, wrapping Stella in soft light. Her lips held a faint, natural color, and the quiet smile that played across them was simply lovely.

“Who told you Lucas was kidnapped?” Sebastian asked, his voice low and careful, as he took Annette’s hand.

Annette was clearly exhausted. The effort of speaking earlier had drained her, but at Sebastian’s words, she still managed to turn her gaze toward Lauren.

Then her eyes closed, and she fell back into a faint.

Lucas whimpered as he watched Annette drift off. He trembled and turned to Stella, seeking comfort.

Jake silently braced himself for Lucas’s impending outburst.

“She’s all right,” Stella said, her voice calm. She walked over and gave Lucas’s head a soft pat, reassuring him, “She’s just sleeping.”

Lucas went still. He sniffed once, and then settled down quietly beside Annette.

He curled up small, a hand sometimes straying out to touch Annette’s face, checking for breath.

The danger passed as quickly as it had come.

To Jake, Stella seemed guided by something beyond them all. Without her, the entire Gray family might have met its end today.

He pictured the chaos that could have been and shook his head in silent judgment. 'They owed her more than they could ever repay,' he thought.

"Use your own medicine if you wish," Stella said. "But the needles stay where they are for seven days."

She stifled a yawn. What had looked simple had actually taken almost everything she had.

"And if we remove the needles?" the director asked, curious.

A quick check left him stunned. Annette's vital signs were improving so fast that it seemed miraculous.

The team of specialists had already written her off. It was only out of deference to the Grays that Emily had phrased things more gently.

Everyone looked at Stella, waiting for her answer.

Stella's expression went perfectly blank. A chill ran through the room as she returned the director's stare with a coldness that felt dangerous.

"Try it," she said. Her voice was soft, but the warning in it was clear.

Sebastian glanced at Jake, who took the hint right away. Within moments, security was arranged to guard the room day and night. No one would disturb Annette's recovery.

Stella pulled out the hair tie, and her silky hair fell loose around her.

A few strands brushed against Sebastian's hand, a light, fleeting touch.

His fingers shifted slightly, but he said nothing.

"Mr. Gray," she said, her voice breaking the quiet. "Thanks for believing me. I owe you a drink."

She leaned back against the wall, eyes down, hands tucked in her pockets. A faint, careless smile touched her lips, a mix of laziness and something quietly defiant.

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Chapter 7

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Chapter 7 Her Words Shocked Everyone

In the café downstairs from the hospital, the barista stared as Stella poured six shots of syrup into her iced coffee.

Stella took a long drink, her expression one of relaxed weariness that was oddly magnetic.

The cup met the counter with a soft thud, the ice inside clinking crisply.

Her gaze drifted to the window, where a stern-looking older gentleman sat with a set of twins.

One twin, a girl, looked pale and listless. The boy was fidgeting and flushed, full of restless energy.

Stella watched the boy's legs for a silent moment.

The old man turned sharply, his silent command filling the space. Before he could utter a word, the door chimed.

Linda swept in, the distinct click of her designer heels marking her direct, unhesitating path toward Stella.

"You have some nerve for a girl your age," Linda said, her eyes sweeping over Stella with open disdain. With Sebastian out of the room, she saw no need for pretense. To her, Stella was just a fleeting distraction.

Stella watched, one eyebrow raised, as Linda pulled a thin cigarette from her designer bag and held it ready.

"So, how much do you want? Name your price," Linda said casually.

"What are you even talking about, old witch?" Stella replied, her voice cool and dismissive.

"What did you call me?" Linda's face flushed with anger. She looked ready to attack.

“Don’t think Sebastian can protect you,” Linda sneered, her earlier fear around Sebastian completely gone. “Ever since his legs were ruined, plenty of people have been waiting for him to die. And now he’s stuck with a kid who can’t even speak.”

Her gaze swept over Stella, her lips making a faint, disapproving sound that did little to hide the sharp envy beneath it.

She had to admit Stella’s face was flawless.

Unnoticed by either woman, John stood in the corner with his phone aimed their way. The live feed was streaming straight to Sebastian’s screen.

In the hospital hallway, Sebastian watched the screen from the shadows. A cold, quiet rage seemed to thicken the air around his wheelchair.

Jake swallowed, his legs unsteady. He could only hope, desperately, that Stella wouldn’t choose the wrong words.

The standoff at the café table dragged on.

“Would you say that to his face?” Stella asked, her voice calm.

She tapped the counter once for a refill. The sunlight caught her hands, warming them with a soft glow as she settled back, completely at ease.

“It would be a shame for a face like yours to be ruined by a madman like Sebastian,” Linda said, her smile cold.

“A madman?” Stella repeated quietly, turning the word over in her mind.

“You really don’t know?” Linda asked, her voice dropping as if she were telling a secret, meant to draw Stella in.

“Sebastian has always been drawn to bloodshed,” she continued. “After that one incident, he lost what little sanity he had left. Do you honestly think you’re safe with him?”

Linda’s words sparked a quiet curiosity in Stella. She wondered what incident Linda could possibly be referring to.

“Give me information on him, and I’ll pay you 300 thousand dollars. Help me when I ask, and I’ll arrange for you to study abroad.” Linda lit a cigarette and took a slow drag. “What do you think?”

Stella looked like she could still be in high school. Linda didn't know how she'd gotten involved with Sebastian, but to her mind, a girl that young should be simple enough to manage.

From his corner, John watched the exchange with cool interest, waiting to see which way Stella would lean.

"300 thousand dollars," Stella repeated, her expression going briefly distant, as if the figure had genuinely surprised her.

Linda smiled to herself. This was proving easier than she'd thought.

"Is 300 thousand really a lot of money?" Stella said flatly, giving her cup a gentle turn.

"Of course it is," Linda answered smoothly. To her, 300 thousand was just the price of a few salon visits, a small, worthwhile cost to place an informant close to Sebastian.

"But old witch, do you know how much Mr. Gray pays me?" Stella asked, leaning in with a soft smile, her captivating eyes locking onto Linda's.

"How much?" Linda leaned in, the cigarette loose between her fingers. Her eagerness made her forget the earlier insult entirely.

Instead of an answer, Stella poured the iced coffee over Linda's head. The air filled with the sharp, sweet-and-bitter scent of coffee and syrup.

Linda shrieked and covered her face.

"You bitch!" Linda made a grab for Stella, but Stella was faster. She kicked Linda squarely in the stomach.

Linda collapsed to the floor, gasping in pain.

The café fell silent. In the corner, John's hand holding his phone trembled a little.

He winced inwardly, certain the blow had been painful.

"Even if he is a madman, it's not for you to say," Stella said, clicking her tongue against her teeth. Her innocent expression vanished, replaced by clear annoyance.

Stella wasn't about to let anyone, least of all Linda, disrespect her golden goose.

To her, Sebastian represented her future security.

“As long as I’m around, no one touches him,” Stella said, her voice cold and commanding as she looked down at Linda.

On top of everything else, Linda had the nerve to smoke indoors, a habit Stella considered deeply rude.

“He’s my...” Stella said in a low, possessive voice.

Before Sebastian could hear the rest of the sentence, the live video cut out.

In the hospital hallway, he remained perfectly still, staring at the silent screen in his hand. The dangerous tension that had been clinging to him simply vanished.

Jake, who had been holding his breath in fear, finally let out a slow, quiet breath.

‘She’s got nerve,’ Jake thought, his heart pounding. ‘Calling Mr. Gray hers like that? It’s so cringe-worthy. What’s he going to do to her when she gets back?’

Back in the café, Stella’s declaration “He’s my...” was enough to make John drop his phone in shock. As it clattered to the floor, he distinctly heard her finish the sentence with the words “golden goose”.

He stared at the dark screen, uncertain whether he should tell Sebastian she’d said that.

“You’re going to pay for this, you little witch!” Linda shrieked, her voice piercing as she stood there, soaked and sticky.

Stella met her rage with a cold smile and a single, raised middle finger.

She was curious to see how exactly Linda planned to make her pay.

“He’ll pay for the mess,” Stella said, gesturing toward John. She then walked past Linda and headed for the door.

John stared after her, taken aback by the sudden realization that she’d been aware of his presence the whole time.

Just before leaving, Stella seemed to remember something. She turned back toward the dignified old man.

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Chapter 8

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Chapter 8 Your Grandson Is Dying

After dealing with the mess, John noticed Stella had stopped by the door. He followed her gaze and felt a jolt of shock.

The old man she was staring at was Victor Quinn, a man no one crossed lightly.

“Your grandson is dying,” Stella said flatly.

The words came out before John could even form his warning. They hit him like a physical blow, leaving him utterly speechless.

He was sure Stella had no idea who she was offending.

“What did you just say?” Victor asked, his voice low and dangerous. He stood with rigid authority, his eyes sharp.

“Your granddaughter will recover. It’s your grandson who’s in real trouble...” Stella’s voice was low.

“Ms. Carter!” John cut in sharply, raising his voice. Seeing her reckless insistence on continuing, he quickly took her arm and ushered her out the door.

Victor frowned, watching intently through the window as Stella walked away.

“Mr. Quinn,” his bodyguard, Henry Carroll, stepped out of the shadows, his steady gaze fixed on Stella outside the shop.

Victor had come to the hospital for his granddaughter’s checkup. He never imagined he would walk straight into the middle of the Gray family’s business.

“Do you want me to bring her back?” Henry asked quietly, awaiting Victor’s command.

Victor's eyes fell on his grandson, a healthy boy whose plump cheeks were flushed with life. Stella's words were reckless and infuriating. And yet, they left him with a nagging unease.

"Is that John?" Victor asked suddenly, shifting the topic without warning.

"Yes," Henry answered immediately. He and the Yates brothers had trained together. But they had gone to work for the Gray family while he was assigned to Victor.

"Forget it," Victor said with a wave of his hand, as if dismissing a thought.

"Just find out about that girl," he added instead.

"Right away," Henry replied.

On the other side of the building, John's usual stone-faced composure faltered. Just before the elevator doors closed, he turned to Stella, his voice tight. "Do you even know who that man was?"

"No," she said, her tone detached and uninterested.

"And yet you told him his grandson is dying?" John shot back.

He had seen what Stella could do, but that didn't mean he trusted her completely.

"His grandson is going to be in serious trouble. It could start as soon as tonight, or by tomorrow at the latest." Stella spoke in a relaxed tone, her hand casually tucked in her pocket.

"You..." John started to say, but the elevator doors opened right then.

Without even a glance back, Stella walked out.

As soon as she and John entered the hallway, Lauren's panicked scream echoed all around them. "Help! Please, someone help!"

A strong wind swept through the hospital corridor, pouring in from one of the large windows that had been flung open.

There, Jake had Lauren pinned against the window frame. Only moments earlier, she had been arrogantly calling Lucas a jinx. Now, her upper body hung dangerously over the edge, suspended in the open air.

Wind whipped her hair wildly, and her face was pale with terror as she screamed.

In sharp contrast, Sebastian sat silently in his wheelchair, his expression cold and menacing. His intense gaze and the dark circles under his eyes made him look utterly ruthless.

“Sebastian,” Carlos said, struggling to catch his breath. His hand trembled on his cane, and his son Richard stood close by, equally tense.

Sebastian’s face was cold and unreadable.

“Trying to ask for mercy?” Sebastian asked flatly. Yet, from across the room, Stella could feel his mood turn dark in an instant.

“Today was an accident. Lauren didn’t mean to…” Carlos began carefully, eyeing his own grandson.

The simple truth was that he feared his own grandson. He knew well what Sebastian was capable of when crossed, or where those consequences might lead.

“An accident?” Sebastian said, his gaze turning to ice as it settled on Carlos.

“But Annette is fine now,” Richard mumbled quietly.

The whole hallway went silent. Richard immediately knew he’d said the wrong thing. He held his breath, afraid to even look at Sebastian.

“Say that again,” Sebastian said, his quiet voice somehow more threatening than a shout.

“Mr. Gray,” Stella cut in smoothly. She walked right up to Sebastian, ignoring the others. “I bought you a cup of coffee.”

Sebastian’s eyes moved from the small cup of dark coffee to the slender hand that held it. He remained silent, his expression giving away nothing.

John frowned when he saw the coffee and started to speak, but Sebastian shot him a warning look that made him instantly go quiet.

Sebastian reached out and took the cup.

His fingers felt cold against hers, just like the huge white python he kept as a pet.

'A cold-blooded man for a cold-blooded pet. It's a fitting match,' Stella thought. 'His hand is surprisingly large, though.'

As he took the coffee, his whole palm covered hers briefly, a chill lingering on her skin.

"Sebastian, I'm your aunt. You can't do this!" Lauren cried out. Her eyes flew to Carlos in desperation. "Dad, please help me!"

No onion was needed to make her cry this time. Tears of pure fear streamed down her face, unstoppable.

She was convinced Annette was beyond saving. It never occurred to her that Stella would appear out of nowhere and rescue Annette.

Stella rubbed her ear. She couldn't believe how similar Linda and Lauren sounded. Every shriek was the same high-pitched, grating noise.

Finally, she reached her limit. She gave Sebastian's arm a poke. "Get someone to pull her back."

His expression turned stormy at her request.

He assumed she was feeling a pang of sympathy and was trying to intervene for them.

Jake stood frozen, eyes carefully averted, doing his best to look invisible to avoid any fallout.

"Jake," Sebastian said, his voice dangerously cold, though his gaze remained fixed on Stella.

Jake yanked hard, dragging Lauren back into the hallway. But she kept screaming, too terrified to stop.

All eyes were on Stella as she closed the distance to Lauren.

Jake looked like he wanted to say something. But before he could, two distinct cracks echoed through the space, and the hallway went completely silent.

Everyone was stunned into silence.

"It was an accident," Stella said flatly. "I didn't mean to."

She brushed her palms together lightly and then turned a cool, defiant smile toward Carlos. Her expression was a clear challenge.

“You’re unbelievable...” Richard glared, pointing an accusatory finger straight at Stella.

“But she’s fine, isn’t she?” Stella said, moving behind Sebastian as if his presence alone were a shield. With Lucas gone, she saw no reason to keep up appearances.

“It’s certainly more peaceful now, Mr. Gray,” Stella said in a low, lazy drawl. Her relaxed posture and infuriatingly casual tone were perfectly crafted to provoke.

The menacing glint in Sebastian’s eyes softened a touch. He took a sip of the coffee. It was cheap and poorly made, but somehow, it lifted his spirits for a moment.

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“The order to kidnap Lucas, Sebastian stated, his voice cutting through the tension, “came from the Gray

Manor.

His very presence felt dangerous, a palpable threat that lingered in the air. Even after years away, he was still the only true head of the Gray family whom the world both acknowledged and feared.

“Sebastian Carlos gasped, shocked by his words.

I've already taken care of those responsible, Sebastian interrupted, his tone leaving no room for discussion. "In my own way."

Anyone who knew him understood that his calm tone signaled real danger.

"I'm not here to discuss this with you. I'm informing you," he added.

After that, he finished his coffee without hurry. Behind those few casual words, several lives were destroyed.

"If anything happens to Grandma or Lucas," he said, his voice low, "none of you will walk away from it."

Sebastian's handsome face was twisted with a cold, violent rage. He looked like a madman, poised perfectly between sanity and fury, and the place fell utterly silent.

A faint, chilling smile touched his lips as he lifted a hand and pointed at Lauren and Richard.

John and Jake moved forward without a word. The sound of snapping bones followed as they broke the siblings' fingers one by one.

Screams echoed through the hallway, but no one dared to intervene.

This was the price of crossing Sebastian, a lesson even his own relatives had to learn.

A yawn escaped, cutting through the heavy silence at the worst possible moment.

Sebastian looked over at Stella. He could see how tired she was, her whole body relaxed in a lazy, weary way.

"Mr. Gray, could we move this along?" she asked, her tone flat.

The hallway now felt like a living nightmare, yet Stella showed no trace of fear toward Sebastian. She was simply too tired and hungry to care about anything but getting back to the island.

"I'm hungry," Stella muttered from the bench. She rested her chin in her palm, her whole demeanor listless.

When he didn't reply, she just gave his arm a light poke. That simple touch told everyone clearly that she wasn't afraid of him in the slightest.

Sebastian's cold eyes stayed on her. "Jake," he said without looking over.

"Understood, Mr. Gray. Jake, who was still following orders, was stunned inside. While keeping his expression

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completely neutral, he deliberately sped up the brutal work of snapping fingers.

He had to admit, Stella's nerve was seriously impressive.

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During the ride back, Lucas curled into a tiny ball on Stella's lap. He looked like a frightened kitten, clinging to her as if afraid he'd be left behind.

After struggling to tap out a message on the little phone hanging around his neck, he turned it to show Stella the screen. It said, [Story?]

He stared up at her, his big eyes full of silent pleading.

Stella looked at him for a moment. "Alright," she said. "What story would you like?"

She wasn't a natural storyteller, but Lucas was already pulling a well-worn copy of *The Little Prince* from the car. He handed it to her, his whole face glowing with excitement.

'Fine,' Stella thought, giving in. 'For the money, I can do this.'

"To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes," she began, her voice cool and unhurried, "But if you tame me, then we shall need each other.

"To me, you will be unique in the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world...."

A soft breeze drifted in through the window, lifting a few strands of her long hair and sending them drifting across Sebastian's neck.

He found himself watching her, his intense gaze settled on her face.

The setting sun cast everything in a golden light, catching her neutral, faintly defiant expression.

Her quiet, steady voice was deeply soothing.

After a moment, Stella closed the book. In the quiet that followed, with Lucas asleep in her lap, the gnawing feeling in her stomach became impossible to ignore.

She turned her head to watch the city blur past the window, a restless, undefined annoyance tugging at her.

Suddenly, a heavy warmth leaned against her shoulder, and the deep, smoky scent of his cologne enveloped her completely,

Sebastian had drifted off, his head resting on her.

"Mr. Gray..." she started, her hunger making her impatient. She was about to nudge him away.

But then she noticed Jake in the front passenger seat. He had glanced back casually, and then jerked so violently that he would have hit the roof if not for his seatbelt.

He didn't make a sound, but his eyes were wide as he frantically shook his head and motioned for her to stay

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perfectly still.

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Up front, John stopped at a red light. He caught the scene in the rearview mirror and stared, just as shocked.

Jake typed on his phone and held it up for Stella to see. The message was simple: [Mr. Gray has severe insomnia. Hasn't slept in five days.]

He gave her a pleading look, his face full of silent urgency, before he typed more. [Please, Ms. Carter. Don't move. Just stay like that. Let him rest.]

The car was plunged into a deep, heavy quiet. Stella didn't know what to say.

But when her eyes found Sebastian sleeping beside her, that feeling shifted.

His long lashes shadowed the dark circles under his eyes. Even when he was asleep, his features remained sharp, his lips pressed into a thin, tight line. And the unnatural paleness of his skin gave him a delicate, almost vulnerable beauty.

The dangerous edge he always carried was gone. He just looked like a man who was finally, exhaustedly, asleep.

A small frown touched his brow, as if his dreams were troubled.

Then, as her light, clean scent drifted over him, the line between his brows smoothed away.

Watching the peace settle over his face, Stella felt her own exhaustion pull at her. Her eyelids grew heavy, and soon, she too was asleep.

Stella awoke in the dead of night to something cold and damp against her skin. Her eyes fluttered open to meet a pair of small, gleaming red ones staring back.

Sebastian's enormous white python, Snowball, had somehow gotten into her room. Its massive body, coiled on the floor, occasionally nudged her through the blanket with its tail.

Now that she was awake, Snowball tapped her more insistently.

It slowly dawned on her that she was back on the island. Through the dark window, she could see nothing, but the glowing numbers on the nightstand clock read barely three in the morning.

Snowball grew visibly anxious at her stillness and reared up, its whole body tense.

Then, to her astonishment, Snowball began slowly and deliberately coiling its long body, forming one distinct letter after another: an S, then an O, then a final S.

‘It’s a python that knows Morse code?’ she thought, stunned.

She slid out of bed and followed Snowball through the dark, silent halls. At every turn, Snowball paused, brushing the tip of its tail lightly against her leg to guide her forward.

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Before long, Snowball led Stella to a bedroom with its door left partway open.

It was a place she didn’t recognize.

She pushed the door open. The heavy, coppery smell of blood greeted her immediately.

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From the black sofa, Sebastian lifted his head at the sound. Propped on one elbow, he met her gaze with cold, empty eyes, a smear of blood still at the corner of his mouth.

“You’re spitting blood?” Stella said, frowning as she strode toward him. A small, dark stain marred the carpet beside the sofa, confirming her fear.

“Out,” Sebastian said, his voice rough.

His eyes were blank, his face pallid and colorless in the moonlight. A thin layer of cold sweat coated his forehead, and his voice sounded deeper and rougher than usual.

“Stella-” he began, but she cut him off, pushing him back onto the sofa without ceremony.

“Be quiet,” she ordered.

Being woken by a huge white python in the middle of the night would sour anyone's mood, especially when it just made her hungrier.

Stella rested her warm fingers on Sebastian's wrist, checking his pulse. Her expression grew graver passing second.

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Stella had never felt a constitution so thoroughly wrecked as Sebastian's.

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Every internal organ bore scars. The pain from such old, deep injuries was a constant, relentless companion, haunting Sebastian in every waking moment.

“You have quite the tolerance for pain,” Stella remarked, her gaze lowered. Her tone was deceptively light, laced with a clear thread of sarcasm.

Sebastian paid her no mind. He simply reached for the phone and dialed an internal number.

Within moments, John hurried in with a medical case: He stopped short at the sight of Stella.

“Mr. Gray, your medicine,” John said, his face set in a hard, displeased line as he walked past her.

“Ms. Carter, what are you doing here?” he asked pointedly.

“What’s your problem with me?” Stella retorted, a sharp and mocking smile on her lips. She wasn’t the type to let anyone’s attitude slide.

“Remember this, Ms. Carter. Mr. Gray can’t have coffee,” John stated bluntly, his tone cool.

It suddenly came back to Stella. The coffee she’d given Sebastian at the hospital was strong black coffee. And she’d served it with ice.

“John, Sebastian cut in sharply, his gaze silencing him.

John

mediately bowed his head and held out the medication.

“That medicine only numbs the pain,” Stella said, blocking John’s hand. “It makes ulcers worse. That’s what’s causing the bleeding.”

“Mr. Gray’s real problem is...” Stella began, her eyes drifting to Sebastian.

He sat there in a black robe, distant and closed off. Looking at him, she couldn’t bring herself to say that he seemed weary of life.

With his body so damaged, living meant constant pain. Some days, it felt like survival was a heavier burden than letting go.

“What’s really wrong with him?” John pressed, his loyalty making him push for details.

“John, have the kitchen make something to eat,” Sebastian cut in, his voice cool. He settled back into the sofa, seemingly unruffled that Stella had seen right through him.

“Mr. Gray...” John started, hesitating.

“Now,” Sebastian said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

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With a clipped nod, John turned and left the room.

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A chill touched Stella's ankles. She glanced down to see Snowball. It was coiled on the floor, lifting its head at the slightest sound to watch over Sebastian.

'A python with a conscience, she thought wryly.

"Stay back," Sebastian warned, his breath carrying the sharp, metallic scent of blood.

His gaze drifted to the loose neckline of her top, lingering for a split second on a small, dark mole just above her collarbone. He forced himself to look away, a tightness forming in his chest.

Stella stood facing him. The soft lamplight gave her skin a smooth, delicate glow. Her long, slender legs and her face, which was distractingly lovely, were all softened by an air of profound weariness.

"I didn't know coffee was off limits for you," Stella said, and then cleared her throat awkwardly. "But you say no, so we share the blame."

didn't

She leaned back against the cabinet, her collarbones sharp as she deftly split the responsibility between them.

The simple truth was she didn't want him gone. He was her golden goose, and though he was moody, complicated, and far from stable, he was still her responsibility.

Maybe it was just another kind of instinct, an impulse to cling to the first person she was tied to.

Sebastian coughed, a rough sound laced with the faint smell of blood.

"Clever," he said quietly, his tone flat and distant, making him seem even more unapproachable.

But Stella wasn't focused on his words.

Her eyes had dropped to where his robe hung loose, revealing a glimpse of his waist.

The muscles there tightened with each cough, looking firm and smooth under the fabric.

“If you keep going like this, it will kill you,” Stella said, her voice direct and clear.

Her long, silky hair flowed behind her as she moved, making her look both beautiful and ethereal.

“Without you, that child will lose his support. How long do you think he can survive on his own?” she continued.

“Stella,” Sebastian said, his intense eyes fixed on her face. A dangerous tension began to spread through the air.

“You know I’m right,” Stella said with a quiet laugh, her body still relaxed and showing no sign of intimidation. “I can make it hurt less.”

His condition was severe. There was no simple or fast cure. For now, all she could do was ease the symptoms.

“What do you want?” Sebastian asked, his voice low.

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He snatched her wrist abruptly. His gaze was inscrutable, his manner detached, yet as he looked down at her calm, unflinching face, something in his own expression wavered for just an instant.

“What is it,” he continued, the words precise, “that you want from me?”

He tugged her closer, the movement abrupt enough to stir the massive white python coiled in a heap beneath the sofa.

John stood in the doorway, tray in hand. Stepping inside now seemed like the wrong move.

Stella steadied herself against the dark sofa. His scent filled the air around her, cool and clean and so completely his. Lingered just beneath the surface was the faint, metallic trace of blood.

“There is indeed something I want,” she said.

A faint, sharp smile played on her lips.

Sebastian watched her, his expression cool, waiting for her to state her terms.

Even John listened from outside, expression guarded, anticipating a high price.

“Equality,” Stella said softly.

“I’m not an employee you can command,” she said, her voice light but her gaze steady. “I want to stand beside you, not beneath you.”

Her slender fingers lifted, brushing gently at the dried blood on the corner of his mouth.

“That’s all,” Stella said quietly, watching a small bead of blood bloom against her finger.

Sebastian’s lips tightened.

“Stella...” Sebastian’s voice was low, his eyes holding something she couldn’t name as he looked at her.

“There’s only one person in this whole family who stands beside me as an equal. Do you know who it is?” His question came easily, like a slow-spreading trap.

Her wrist remained held tight in his grasp. She waited, her captivating eyes quiet but watchful.

After a long pause, his grip fell away. He retreated into the shadows behind him, his voice cool and final. “Leave.”

The shift in the room was immediate. His mood had turned, sharp and dark.

The question stayed with her, silent but persistent, as she left the room and stepped into the hallway beyond.

Outside, John was waiting with a tray of food. His expression was troubled as he handed it to her. He watched her walk away, looking as though he wanted to speak, but no words came.

In the Gray family, only Sebastian's wife could stand beside him as his true equal,

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Stella opened her eyes to morning light.

Lucas was sitting in the soft glow, quietly playing with the python's tail.

Snowball wore a little crocheted shark hat today. It looked funny and sweet on its big body.