

Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

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Wendy squinted, searching for Stella. She had expected Stella to be standing out in the sun like a fool, but Stella was nowhere to be seen.

“Is she seriously late?” Lila snapped, forgetting that she had deliberately arrived half an hour late.

“Let me call her,” Hazel said, taking out her phone.

The phone rang, but Stella hung up immediately. The three exchanged glances, stunned. “Call her again,” Lila demanded.

Hazel’s mother had sent her to help Stella pick out a dress for Saturday’s party. She couldn’t afford to mess this up. Hazel kept calling, but Stella hung up each time.

Ten minutes passed, and the three had long lost the calm they had when they first got out of the car. Sweat drenched their clothes and ruined their carefully applied makeup.

“Keep calling!” Lila gritted out. This time, the call went through, but the ringtone seemed to come from very close by. The three of them turned, searching for the source.

Through the spotless window of the cafe next door, they saw a pair of pale hands pick up a phone from the table. Someone inside waved lazily at them through the glass, but the sunlight behind made it impossible to see her face clearly.

Lila ignored Hazel's half-hearted attempt to stop her and stormed into the café as if she owned the place.

Stella was sitting at a window seat, lounging back with the air conditioning blasting and a coffee in hand. Meanwhile, Lila and her crew looked like they had just survived a heatwave, their faces flushed and makeup ruined.

"S-Stella," Lila stammered, frozen as she stared at Stella's face in disbelief. Stella looked effortlessly stunning, calm and poised, impossible to look away from.

"Stella?" Wendy said. She was the first to lose her composure. Once the initial shock faded, jealousy flared in her eyes, hot and unmistakable.

Wendy wondered, 'Where had that awkward, old Stella gone?' Stella glanced at them and said coolly, "You're half an hour late."

Stella's gaze was cold and indifferent as it finally settled on Lila. Lila thought that this must be her insignificant cousin.

"You..." Lila stammered, but her confidence had crumbled in the face of Stella's presence. She was clearly

outmatched.

Stella stood up, and Hazel instinctively stepped back half a pace. Stella gave a faint, almost-smirk, and tossed her empty coffee cup directly into the trash can without looking. It landed dead center with a perfect thud. The three stared, stunned.

Lila finally understood what Hazel meant when she said Stella was different. Lila felt bitter, frustrated, and

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consumed by jealousy.

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“You look ugly as hell,” Lila blurted out, loud enough for the whole café to hear. The couple at the next table glanced over, snickered, and looked away, their expressions dripping with the unspoken judgment that Lila didn’t stand a chance at all.

“Go fix your makeup,” Lila snapped at Stella, trying to sound authoritative.

Stella raised an eyebrow, moving lazily while barely hiding her irritation. Then she shot back, “Who do you think you are?”

With one hand in her pocket, Stella carried an air of quiet warning. She didn’t look back as she headed straight for the door linking café to the mall.

At the entrance, all the Nova Mall higher-ups stood by the revolving doors, frozen in terrified silence. No one dared to make a sound. Ten minutes later, a jet-black Maybach arrived. Everyone tensed instantly and held their breath.

The car door opened, and a five-year-old boy stepped out, dressed all in black and looking stylish with a pair of tiny sunglasses. The kid exuded a frosty aura, a mini telescope hanging around his neck.

Before anyone could react, another figure appeared. It was Allan, also dressed in black and wearing matching sunglasses. He looked nothing like the carefree guy from Sandridge Island. Now he seemed all business.

As the onlookers thought they could relax, the real boss arrived. Sebastian was wheeled out by John, and the air turned icy, like a sudden blast of winter in the middle of summer. The Nova Mall executives didn’t dare to breathe.

It had been years since they last saw Sebastian. Lucas tilted his head, cheeks puffed out in a sulky pout as he stared at Sebastian, clearly displeased.

Their cold aura matched perfectly, leaving no doubt they were family. The whole group marched into the mall as if they owned the place.

Allan pushed Sebastian’s wheelchair and muttered, “Weren’t we supposed to keep quiet? And I thought you weren’t coming.”

The executives followed a short distance behind, trying to keep up and looking confused. ‘Why is Sebastian. showing up in person? Did something go wrong?’ they wondered anxiously.

“I checked that chip,” Allan said, lowering his voice. “It has the Lab 709 vibe. And that South District land you got? It’s tied up with Lab 709 as well. So about Stella...”

Before Allan could finish, Sebastian shot him a cold, warning look.

“Alright, I’ll shut up, okay?” Allan said, throwing his hands up in surrender.

Suddenly, Lucas, leading the group, let out an excited squeak. He had spotted Stella. Before he could dash forward, a cold hand clamped down on the back of his collar, holding him in place.

Lucas was stuck, flailing like a turtle on its back, completely unable to move.

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He puffed up his cheeks, full of fury. Bursting with impatience, Lucas snapped, “Stella was a few steps away. Let me go.”

“No,” Sebastian said, his voice ice-cold, cutting off any protest. Lucas stood his ground, hands on his hips, glaring up in defiance.

Lucas jabbed a finger at the three girls trailing behind Stella. Even a kid like him could spot trouble from a mile away. He let out a string of angry cries, vibrating with righteous determination. He declared, “Protecting Stella is our job.”

The Nova Mall executives kept their heads down, stunned. They had never seen such a wild confrontation, especially from a kid challenging adults.

Allan rubbed his chin and said, “What are those three plotting?” His gaze settled on the girl in the middle, dressed in a buttery yellow Chanel suit. She was young, but her expression was bitter and sharp.

Lucas had been glued to his mini telescope for ages, and now he sprang into action. He stomped toward Sebastian, poking at his digital watch, only to realize that Big Ben was still at home.

Lucas scrambled with hands and feet to grab Sebastian's phone, jabbed at the screen, and muttered inwardly, 'They're trying to sneak pictures of Stella while she's changing. That's so shameless.'

Lucas raged inwardly, cheeks puffed in fury. Allan blinked, momentarily forgetting that Lucas could read lips. Then his casual demeanor vanished, replaced by deadly seriousness. Sebastian's aura was intense enough to silence the entire place.

Even Allan began to crack under the pressure. The trailing executives froze, waiting for Sebastian to take action.

Meanwhile, Hazel faked panic and hesitation, but secretly, she was thrilled. Lila sneered, "Did you forget how she bullied you and your mother?"

Just thinking of Stella's beauty made Wendy's jealousy boil over. Wendy was attending the Lane family's party on Saturday as well, and if Stella showed up, she would steal all the attention. Wendy lowered her gaze, eyes filled with malice.

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Hazel gave Lila's arm a little shake, putting on her best pleading face. "Lila..."

“Hazel, you’re just too nice. That’s why people keep taking advantage of you,” Lila said.

Vera, her mother, always talked about how Stella was a troublemaker, but little did Lila know, Camilla had spread all those lies just to ruin Stella’s reputation.

Hazel stayed quiet, tears brimming in her eyes. Seeing Hazel like that made Lila want to stand up for her even

more.

“But what if people found out?” Hazel said.

Before Hazel could finish, Lila let out a laugh.

“This boutique belongs to Wendy’s family. We had the staff set up the cameras way ahead of time. What could she possibly notice? Plus, the floor manager is Sara, Wendy’s aunt.

“If anything happens, we just erase the footage and play dumb. Who’s ever going to trace it back to us?” Lila said.

Lila exchanged a glance with Wendy, a sly and malicious grin curling on her pretty lips.

Lila thought, ‘Besides, getting caught up in secret filming is humiliating. No way would Stella dare go public about it.

‘Once we get the video of Stella changing, she’ll be totally at our mercy. Let’s see how cocky she can be after

that.’

Not far away, Stella casually held her phone in one hand. On the encrypted chat screen were some messages.

Geezer: [Still alive?]

Shark: [Yeah.]

Geezer: [I knew you were too tough to die.]

Shark: [But something came up.]

Geezer: [What kind of problem?]

Stella snapped a photo and sent it. There was no hiding anything from Geezer. He was one of the few people in the world who actually knew what Shark looked like.

Geezer had picked her up off the streets when she was an orphan with nowhere to go, and now she was the sole heir to his legacy on the island.

Geezer: [What?]

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Shark: [Relax.]

Geezer: [This is absurd.]

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On a remote, mysterious island, Geezer roared, “Shark is in trouble.” His voice was booming, sending crows flying everywhere.

Three minutes later, five elders sat around a stone table, passing a phone from hand to hand.

“How do you know it’s really her?” Razorstrike asked, deadpan.

Geezer huffed and glared. ‘I raised her. Of course I know, he thought.

Even so, he still shot off a message.

Geezer: [How do I know it’s really you?]

Stella burst out laughing as soon as she saw the message.

Shark: [Geezer, you stole Queen Francesca’s dentures six months ago.]

Geezer was speechless.

The other four elders shot him sideways glances. That whole Queen Francesca denture heist had blown up in the news six months back and even got voted the year’s most ridiculous story online.

Geezer grumbled, “Queen Francesca asked for it. She bragged that even the King of Thieves would have to leave his shorts behind if he tried messing with the royal family.”

The other four shot him the classic side-eye. “You’re crazy.”

Shark: [Serpentina, the one who gave your falcon a buzz cut wasn’t Razorstrike but ViperShade.]

Serpentina, in her blazing red dress and silver hair, shot ViperShade a sly look, while he kept glancing everywhere except at her.

Serpentina said, “ViperShade, is she telling the truth?”

Her peregrine falcon, perched on her shoulder, let out a rough squawk right on cue.

ViperShade was speechless.

The other four gave him a sideways glance. Serpentina’s peregrine falcon had its feathers completely shaved off right before mating season, and the poor thing got mocked by all the other falcons.

ViperShade retorted, “It stole and ate five of my century-old centipedes.”

The other four stared at him and said, “Freak.”

Shark: [The one who puked in Geezer’s vase after getting drunk and then acted like nothing happened was Professor Cipher.]

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Geezer whipped his head around to glare at Professor Cipher.

That vase was stolen from a museum in Farronia.

It was a one-of-a-kind piece, and there wasn’t anything like it anywhere in the world.

Professor Cipher couldn’t argue back.

The other four shot him a sideways look, saying in unison, “Scum.”

Shark: [Serpentina loves digging holes in the garden to bury her gold.]

Serpentina was speechless.

The other four's eyes sparkled, itching to raid her garden.

Serpentina said, "What are you up to?"

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She twisted a strand of her hair around her finger, and a subtle smile tugged at her lips, but the deadly look in her eyes was enough to silence every bug in the area.

The other four grinned and said, "We wouldn't dare."

Shark: [Razorstrike has a secret crush on...]

A giant hammer crashed down on the stone table. In the next instant, the "indestructible" table exploded into dust, scattering at their feet.

Everyone turned their heads toward Razorstrike and all gulped.

Razorstrike commented, "Yup, that's her alright, a little monster."

The other four just stared at him, deadpan.

'Dude, why didn't you step in sooner? Did you really have to let her air out all our dirty laundry?' they all thought.

Geezer: [Cut us old folks some slack, will you?]

Inside Nova Mall, Stella couldn't help but let a rare smile slip across her face.

Shark: [Send me some stuff.]

Her fingers flew across the screen, and in no time, she'd whipped up a list and tossed in her address.

"Your phone is ancient," Lila scoffed.

She reached out to grab Stella's phone, but before she could get near, Stella fixed her with an icy stare. The menace in her gaze was enough to make Lila freeze on the spot.

“Bet you’ve never even seen a phone this fancy. It’s the latest drop,” Lila bragged.

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She took out her purple smartphone with 1TB of storage. She made a big show of unlocking it and swiping around in front of Stella, just to make sure she didn’t miss a thing.

Stella stared at her, thinking, “These people are seriously nuts.

“Bet you’ve never set foot in a place like this. This is Nova Mall, part of the Nova Group. Ever heard of it? They’re so loaded that they could buy a whole country. Someone like you could only dream of stepping into it,” Lila said.

Lila curled her lip, making no effort to hide her contempt.

“I’m a proud VIP at Nova Mall,” Lila bragged.

She waved her yellow VIP card in Stella’s face, acting like she was showing off to some clueless country bumpkin.

“Are you always this talkative?” Stella raised an eyebrow, her patience clearly running thin. Her voice was flat and icy.

Lila was caught off guard. She never expected Stella, who used to keep quiet and let people walk all over her, would suddenly be a real handful.

If Lila wasn’t stalling for time so the staff could set up the cameras, she wouldn’t bother talking to Stella.

“None of these clothes are really your style. I’ll take you to my friend’s shop in a bit,” Lila said.

Right as she finished, Lila’s phone chimed with a message. She glanced at the screen, and her face brightened. “Let’s head over,” she said.

Outside DenimKraft, Stella gave the sign a weird look, especially that messy scribble of a logo.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never even heard of DenimKraft,” Wendy said. She stood at the entrance, arms crossed, giving Stella a disdainful look.

Denim Kraft was the hottest women’s brand on the planet. Its designs were one-of-a-kind, and the owner was famous for being both a total weirdo and super mysterious. Overseas, it was the brand royals and billionaires swear by.

Only God knew how much sweat Carrie, Wendy’s mother, poured in just to land the one-and-only DenimKraft dealership in Haliville.

“See that logo? Rumor has it that the owner dropped a ridiculous amount of cash just for that design...” Wendy

said.

‘Nope, that was just me doodling when I was three,’ Stella thought.

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“What does this logo mean?” Lila looked confused. ‘Are all famous paintings this hard to get?’ she wondered.

“Uh, maybe it’s a lion?” Wendy hesitated, her voice uncertain.

“Or a tiger?” Hazel chimed in, sounding unsure too.

Stella remained silent.

‘No, it’s actually Serpentina’s first peregrine falcon, a real heartthrob among falcons. The one on her shoulder now is the third generation, just a greedy, chubby, and lazy bird, Stella thought.

‘Guess there’s a reason people say riches never survive past the third generation. Soft-hearted elders end up raising spoiled brats,’ Stella thought.

“Let’s go inside,” Hazel said, casting a sideways glance at Stella, who was still silent. Stella’s striking features were already making people turn for a second look, and Hazel was jealous.

‘Just wait. Her embarrassing moment is coming soon,’ Hazel thought.

Inside the store, a sales assistant greeted them.

“Welcome,” the sales assistant said, flashing Wendy an OK gesture behind the counter.

Wendy gave a haughty little hum.

“You, go pick something,” Wendy said, pointing at Stella without any manners, her voice dripping with

arrogance.

Lila chimed in, “Go ahead and pick whatever you want. Price doesn’t matter.”

‘You gotta bait the wolf with a lamb. Let her feel smug for now,’ Wendy thought.

“Pick whatever I want?” Stella drawled, her voice lazy, but her eyes sharp with mockery.

It was the first time in her life someone had spoken to her like she was some charity case.

Back then, even when Serpentina begged her to wear DenimKraft, Stella would turn up her nose at it. Now, it felt like Wendy was tossing her a bone.

Hazel was totally mesmerized by the gorgeous dresses in the store. Each one looked like it belonged in a fairy tale: ethereal whites, dreamy pinks, and romantic purples.

Her gaze was drawn to the black dress displayed right in the center of the store.

Under the lights, the diamonds on the black gown glittered.

She couldn't help but imagine how she would look in it.

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"That one," Stella said, pointing at a dress.

"Stella, you really think you're worthy of that?" Wendy sneered.

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That was DenimKraft's latest limited edition for this year, inspired by Black Swan. It was the only black dress here, and every diamond on it was real.

"Seriously, how thick-skinned can Stella get?" Wendy thought.

Stella shot her a cold look, saying nothing, but the rebel spirit in her eyes was almost impossible to hide.

She really had that fierce Black Swan energy.

"I want that one," Stella said lazily, each word slow and clear. Instantly, her aura made everyone in the room freeze.

Wendy instinctively shivered.

Lila gave her a subtle nudge. "Go on. Get it for her."

Wendy cleared her throat and motioned for the sales assistant to take the dress off the mannequin.

'Just wait a little longer. That little bitch,' Wendy fumed.

Stella grabbed the dress from the sales assistant with a blank face and strode toward the fitting room.

Not far away, Lucas was watching.

Seeing Stella head into the fitting room, Lucas's face scrunched up in anxious impatience. The little binoculars around his neck swung wildly. He didn't see John quietly slipping back to Sebastian's side and giving him a subtle nod.

Sebastian pulled out his phone and sent a quick message.

Meanwhile, Stella sat in the fitting room with her legs crossed, scanning the space. She'd caught how the sales assistant had guided her into this particular room, and she definitely noticed the look of triumph in Lila and Wendy's eyes.

She tossed the dress that everyone else treasured aside with total indifference.

Her phone dinged. Stella glanced at the screen. It was a message from Sebastian.

After reading the message, Stella's lips curled into a subtle smile. She leaned back against the wall, listening as the sales assistant outside kept praising Hazel, urging her to try on the dress.

"I'll take this one," Hazel finally spoke up.

Soon, Stella heard the door of the fitting room next door open.

Stella sat there, legs crossed with that rebellious swagger. She pulled out the "cheap" phone Wendy had mocked and sent a message to Serpentina.

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Then she leaned back, closed her eyes, and relaxed.

Inside the store, Wendy's eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "Got her."

Lila snorted, "Told you she's just a gold-digger. As if she could rock that Black Swan dress."

That dress was worth millions, and every diamond on it was real.

'Stella's dreaming way too big. No way I'm footing the bill for her, Wendy thought.

“I’ll send my aunt a message and have her delete the surveillance footage,” Wendy said and pulled out her phone.

Lila crossed her arms, smirking as she stared at the closed door of Stella’s fitting room. Her face showed a kind of malice that was way too grown-up for her age.

Soon, Hazel stepped out of the fitting room.

“Hazel, you look amazing.” Lila’s eyes lit up, and she made sure to shout it loud enough for Stella to hear.

The soft white feathered dress floated around Hazel, making her look like she just stepped out of a fairy tale..

Lila was eyeing that dress, so she grabbed the same style and slipped into the fitting room herself.

‘Ugh, wannabe,’ Hazel grumbled inwardly, a little miffed. But since she still needed Lila to foot the bill, she had to put up with it.

Soon, Lila came out too.

But she didn’t have Hazel’s figure, and her skin was not as smooth. The dress was tight around her waist. It looked ready to pop if she bent over. She had to suck in her stomach to keep it together.

‘She’s not as pretty as me,’ Hazel thought, feeling smug. But on the outside, she played nice, gassing Lila

“Put it on my card. I’m taking both.” Lila was practically beaming with pride.

Hazel’s mind flashed to the party on Saturday, and she said, “But what about the party?”

If they bought these two, there probably won’t be enough left for Stella’s dress.

“Just lend her your dress, Hazel,” Lila said casually.

Hazel nearly lost her cool.

‘Is she really that slick? She knows exactly what will happen on Saturday. If I lend Stella my dress, I can kiss wearing it goodbye. If she doesn’t want me to get the same style, just say it. Lila’s just as scheming as Vera,’ Hazel thought.

Meanwhile, Wendy had just hung up the phone.

She turned around and caught sight of Hazel and Lila rocking those dresses, and her heart skipped a beat.

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She was going to that party on Saturday too, so now she was itching to try one on herself.

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Before she could even try on a dress, there was a click. The fitting room door, which had been closed, suddenly popped open from inside.

Wendy, Hazel, and Lila instantly went quiet, their attention snapping to the door.

To their shock, Stella walked out in her shirt and jeans. She hadn't bothered to try on the dress. The three of them stared at each other, totally blindsided by this twist.

"Why didn't you change?" Wendy snapped.

'If she doesn't try it on, then all that effort will be for nothing,' Wendy thought.

Instead of answering, Stella strode forward, flexing her fingers as her knuckles popped loudly with every step.

She let her rebellious energy explode, no longer bothering to hide the wild, intimidating aura.

"Trash belongs where it should: in the trash can," Stella said, stopping in front of Wendy and arching her brow.

Before anyone could react, Stella yanked Wendy over with one hand, popped open the big trash can, and slammed Wendy's head into it.

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A loud bang made everyone in the store jump.

Wendy screamed and struggled. "Are you just going to stand there? Help me."

The trash can reeked, and Wendy instantly started gagging.

The staff finally snapped out of their daze and rushed over.

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But before they could get close, Stella, with a fierce look, split the decorative shelf clean in half with a kick.

Everyone froze.

Stella's moves were wild and vicious. She held Wendy by the back of the neck with one hand, the veins on her hand standing out even more. When she caught someone staring, she gave a cocky smirk.

"Are you crazy?" Lila shouted.

Stella let out a couple of careless, wicked laughs.

"So, why did you have to mess with me?" Stella said, her eyes glinting with red light as her whole vibe turned icy. She tightened her grip, yanking hard on Wendy's precious hair.

"It hurts. Help me." Wendy was crying her eyes out.

Her screams echoed through Denim Kraft. A crowd gathered outside, whispering and pointing fingers.

Not far away, Allan thought to himself, 'Stella sure doesn't mess around. Straight-up savage.'

It took Allan a second to realize this scene was definitely not kid-friendly. He covered Lucas's eyes, but Lucas slapped his hand away, stood on tiptoe, clutched his toy binoculars, and cheered Stella on.

'Whatever,' Allan thought, catching Sebastian out of the corner of his eye.

Sebastian's eyes were unreadable. No one could tell what he was thinking.

Not far away, the executives were sweating bullets and shaking like leaves. All of them were thinking. 'Someone's about to get screwed.'

"What are you doing?" Outside the store, a middle-aged woman in a black suit rushed in with the security team in tow after getting a call.

When she saw her niece being shoved into the trash can, her expression changed dramatically.

"What are you standing around for? Get her out of there," Sara barked harshly,

The security guards marched up to Stella, but Stella just gave a cold smirk, grabbed Wendy by the hair, and forced her to lift her filthy face out of the trash can.

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Wendy was covered in trash, with even some spit smeared across her face.

The security guards froze, disgusted.

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"Aunt Sara, help me," Wendy, who'd never been humiliated like this before, lunged toward Sara for help, forgetting Stella still had her by the hair. She yelped in pain.

"Let go of her, or I'm calling the cops," Sara snarled, her face contorted with fury.

Hazel felt her heart skip a beat.

If the secret filming got exposed, they'd be in deep trouble. Hazel instinctively tugged at Lila's sleeve, giving her a look.

Lila just ducked her head and whispered, "What are you so scared of? Did you forget Sara erased the security footage?"

Hearing that, Hazel finally relaxed, glancing at Stella with a smug grin.

Stella, who was supposed to be intimidated, just raised an eyebrow. "Go ahead and call the cops."

Her lashes drooped slightly, the tips tinged with faint red. Her fiery look cooled into icy indifference, her voice cold and detached.

Meanwhile, Lila took the chance to snap a shot of Stella from behind and posted it online using her alt

account.

To make sure it blew up, she tagged Nova Group, Nova Mall, Nova Group's Legal Department, DenimKraft Headquarters, and some trending bloggers.

[Hidden camera found in the fitting room at the Denim Kraft counter in Nova Mall, owned by Nova Group. This is the victim.]

Lila sneered. She purposely posted the photo from an angle that showed Stella yanking Wendy's hair, making it look way worse than it was.

Meanwhile, a senior executive was all sweaty.

"Mr. Gray, Mr. Reed, the PR department just sent this over," the senior executive said, approaching cautiously and handing over his phone.

"Should we delete it?" the executive asked.

"Trend it," Sebastian said.

"Yes, Mr. Gray... Wait, what?" The executive's jaw practically hit the floor. He looked like he'd just heard the wildest thing ever.

'Push a trending topic that's bad for the company's image? Is he serious? Is my hearing messed up or has Mr. Gray lost it?' the executive thought.

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“Just do it. No more questions,” Allan said, his tone full of that trademark devil-may-care attitude.

Then, a trending topic went viral across the internet.

A minute later, inside the mall, everyone exchanged glances, stunned. ‘A hidden camera? No way. This has to be a setup, right?’ people thought.

Nova Group was the richest and most powerful business empire in Clusia. If something this huge blew up, even the headquarters would be alarmed.

Tags like “Hidden Camera at Nova Mall” and “Nova Group” were shooting up the trending lists on social media.

This thing was blowing up big time.

Sara felt a chill run down her spine as she stared at her phone. Now she knew why Wendy had called her earlier, asking her to wipe the security footage from that time.

Sara was furious, but she forced herself to step up and snapped, “Do you even know where you are, kid? You really think you can stir up trouble here?”

While talking, Sara quickly texted Carrie, her sister-in-law upstairs, who was still getting her beauty

treatment.

All Sara wanted was to shut this reckless little troublemaker down ASAP and keep things from blowing up.

Word was, some top brass from headquarters were coming by today. If this mess got in their way, she’d be

toast.

“Stella, you filthy bitch! I’ll ruin you. Just you wait,” Wendy shrieked, spewing out a stream of the most vicious curses. Her mouth was reeking of trash.

People frowned at Wendy's trash talk, but Sara didn't care. She just felt bad for her niece.

Stella let out a cold laugh. "Why wait for the perfect moment to slap someone in the face?"

Stella eyed Wendy's sleek, glossy hair, which was obviously well taken care of.

Raised by five old monsters, Stella had grown up a little monster herself. She never let anyone get the better of her.

As she spoke, she grabbed a pair of scissors from the pen holder by the counter.

She was calm, but everyone watching felt their hearts jump into their throats.

Hazel, eyes brimming with tears, rushed forward and cried out, "Stella, don't do anything crazy. Wendy's family will come after you... No!"

Hazel was a pro at fanning the flames, but she didn't expect Stella to go off that fast.

With the scissors in hand, Stella snipped Wendy's hair, leaving her scalp a total disaster zone.

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"Wendy." Carrie, halfway through her beauty session, got the call and arrived just in time to witness the disaster. She almost passed out and then ran over and scooped Wendy up.

"Call the cops. Do it now," Carrie shouted, calling her lawyer and yelling for him to drop everything and get to Nova Mall ASAP.

But Stella didn't flinch. She calmly put the scissors back and sat down on the couch like she owned the place, fixing Carrie and Wendy with a cold stare.

With one hand, Stella picked up her phone and called the police. "I need to report a crime. Someone installed a hidden camera in the fitting room at Nova Mall."

Stella held the phone with one hand. "Yeah..."

She lifted her gaze, sweeping it over Lila and Hazel, and then locking onto Wendy. “The person who set up the camera is right here.”

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After hanging up, Stella leaned back, casually fiddling with her phone, and shrugged at Carrie like it was no big deal.

“Stella?” A voice came with a hint of superiority, but there was hesitation in it.

Lila’s eyes sparkled. She called out, “Mom,” and dashed straight into Vera’s arms.

Vera hugged her with one arm. She’d been upstairs having a spa day with Carrie when Carrie suddenly got a call about Wendy being in trouble and hurried downstairs.

Knowing Lila was with Wendy, Vera didn’t hesitate and followed right after. This was what she saw when she arrived.

'Weren't they just out shopping? How did things get so out of hand? When did Stella get so bold?' Vera thought.

Stella lazily lifted her gaze and coldly stared at Vera, who had tried to get her into someone's bed.

Vera felt a jolt. "That look on her face... she thought.

"Apologize to Wendy right now," Vera snapped in her usual commanding tone, but Stella just let out a mocking laugh.

Stella tapped her temple and shot back, "Did you hit your head or something?" Her attitude was totally defiant.

Vera's eyes went wide. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"How dare you?" Lila snapped, feeling furious that her mother had been disrespected. She stormed over and raised her hand for a slap, but she couldn't touch Stella.

With a loud thud, Stella kicked the table, and it slammed right into Lila's knee. Lila instantly dropped to a squat, clutching her knee in pain.

The dress she'd been sucking in her stomach to fit into split wide open the moment she squatted down.

Lila shrieked.

"What a scene." A captivating voice rang out from behind the crowd, dripping with that devil-may-care attitude.

The crowd gathered at the entrance of DenimKraft instinctively parted, clearing a path.

Everyone's eyes were drawn to the man sitting quietly in the wheelchair. There was no other reason. He was just ridiculously handsome.

His face looked like it had been blessed by God, every line etched with nobility. That sickly face only made him more striking. But there was a cold aura about him.

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Allan pushed the wheelchair, with a whole line of Nova Mall executives trailing behind, making a grand

entrance.

Vera's face turned pale. She knew that was Allan.

Every Nova Group employee training manual had his picture in it. Of the three owners who ran things from the shadows, he was the only one who ever showed up in person to take charge.

Lucas, who looked adorable, was about to sprint over to Stella on his chubby little legs. But before he could make a move, Sebastian caught him by the scruff of the neck like a mischievous kitten.

Sebastian shot him a frosty look. "What did you promise me?" he asked.

Lucas pouted, but in the end, he surrendered to Sebastian's iron grip. He stood there, face stiff and serious, looking like a dignified little prince.

"Mr. Gray, Mr. Reed." Seven elite lawyers with briefcases walked over and gave a deep bow.

Sebastian stayed silent, his eyes landing on Stella. After making sure she was unharmed, he finally pointed at Wendy and her group.

"Here are our cards," said the lawyers. Vera, Carrie, and Wendy each reached out and took the gold-embossed business cards.

It read, "Harmony Law Firm."

'Harmony Law Firm? That's the top law firm in Jaffina, tailor-made for the rich and powerful. It's also Nova Group's legal team. On the global stage, its reputation is only second to the legendary Broderick,' Vera thought.

"Harmony Law Firm will be pressing charges against you on behalf of Nova Group. Please stand by," one gentlemanly lawyer said. His words left everyone staring in disbelief.

"Charges? Is this some kind of mistake?" Carrie blurted out.

'We're supposed to be the victims here. Who ever heard of victims getting sued?' Carrie thought.

"You heard me right. What you did today caused reputational damage to Nova Group, and the law will make things right," the lawyer replied.

Allan raised his finger and pointed at Wendy. "You."

Then he pointed at Lila. "You."

And finally, he pointed at Hazel. "And you."

He let out a cold laugh, and in a heartbeat, that laid-back attitude was replaced by a razor-sharp edge.

'You really thought you could mess with Stella and get away with it? Did you forget she's got people who'll go to war for her?' Allan thought.

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"None of you are slipping away from this," Allan declared.

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"Why aren't you suing her? She's the one who started all this," Wendy wailed, covering her face. She was stinking of trash, and her hair looked like a bird's nest. Even so, she still went after Stella.

"Because I want to. Got a problem with that?" Allan fired back, slipping back into that maddening, devil-may-care swagger. The look he gave Wendy was undisguised contempt.

"Who called the cops?" The officers came.

"Me," Stella said and lifted her hand as she pointed at the fitting rooms. "Check the camera in there."

Hazel was losing it. At first, she'd been frustrated that Stella hadn't changed clothes, but now, that disappointment had been drowned out by the panic of facing a lawsuit from Nova Group.

“Not that one. The one next to it,” Stella said lazily, reminding the officers not to check the wrong room. Hazel happened to glance over, and she felt her blood freeze.

“How is this possible?” Hazel screamed, her whole body trembling uncontrollably.

She’d thought the camera was hidden in Stella’s fitting room, but now the officer was pulling it out of the one Hazel and Lila had used. It was small, black, and it had its own storage.

“Give it to me,” Hazel lunged at the officer, desperate to snatch the camera back.

The dress was close-fitting. Hazel had to take everything off just to squeeze into it.

“What are you doing? Step back!” The officer barked, immediately moving away, face stern.

Out of sight in a quiet corner, Stella raised her phone and gave Sebastian a quick look.

Sebastian: [The camera is in the next room.]

Now the message he’d sent her earlier finally clicked.

‘Who would’ve guessed Sebastian would actually leave the island, and he even brought Lucas along?’ Stella thought.

“No. You can’t watch. You can’t have it,” Hazel stammered, her face turning red.

Hazel thought, ‘I can’t believe Wendy messed up and put the camera in the wrong room. Now they’re going to see everything.’

‘If they take that thing to the station and pull the footage from the memory card, how am I supposed to show my face again?’

“Back off! Last warning!” the officer shouted.

He had already warned her twice. One more time and he wouldn’t hold back. But Hazel was too panicked to care, still lunging forward to snatch the camera.

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After the third warning went ignored, the officer had Hazel face-down on the floor and cuffed her without hesitation.

Stella raised an eyebrow. ‘I knew Hazel was dumb, but this is a whole new level of stupid, she thought.

“Trying to pull this kind of stunt on Nova Group’s turf? No one else in Clusia would even dare,” said Allan with pure mockery in his voice.

“You don’t have any proof,” Wendy shouted. Her face was pale, but she still refused to back down.

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Wendy glared at Stella with eyes full of spite, her stare practically dripping with malice.

Wendy didn't think she'd done anything wrong at all.

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Ever since she was little, anyone she didn't like ended up getting bullied by her, and whenever she got into trouble, her family always cleaned up her messes.

Besides, she thought no one knew what she had done. Sara had watched the surveillance footage get erased. She scoffed inwardly, 'What could they possibly use to nail me?'

"Wendy, don't cry. Mommy's here," Carrie said, hugging her daughter tightly, her voice shaking with emotion. "This is a smear. I'm going to the media and make sure everyone knows how you're framing us."

She glared at Stella with utter disgust, as if she wanted to devour her alive right then and there.

"Who

says there's no evidence?" Stella chuckled, her voice cold and mocking.

'Who gave them the nerve?' Stella thought.

She lazily got up, circled around Lila, and stopped in front of Wendy and Carrie, towering over them.

Her face was unreadable in the light, but something about Stella made people instinctively uneasy.

"I'll make sure you admit your crime," Stella said.

Wendy's heart skipped a beat, but she tried to act cool.

'Who's she trying to fool? I know exactly what kind of person she is,' Wendy thought.

Stella, cool as ever, pulled out her phone without a hint of panic.

The next second, phone notifications started going off all around them like a wave.

Everyone in Nova Mall got the same push notification.

But it wasn't just the people at Nova Mall.

On Twitter and every video platform, anyone who had searched for or clicked on topics like "Nova Mall Hidden Cameras" or "Nova Group" got the same notification.

It was titled "The Truth Behind the Nova Mall Hidden Camera Scandal." The video was forced to play.

The footage showed Wendy pulling out the hidden camera, motioning to the clerk to install it, and shooting Hazel a cocky smile. Every moment was captured.

Wendy's face went pale, panic written all over her. "No, that's not me."

"Scumbag," Allan muttered, grinding his teeth after watching the video. "That's just plain vicious," he thought.

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Sebastian sat in his wheelchair, his slender fingers wrapped around his phone. His eyes were icy cold, and his silence made him seem like a living iceberg.

He glanced up at Allan.

Allan said, "Because of today's hidden camera scandal, Nova Group's market value has tanked by nearly 10 billion dollars. And the ripple effects are unknown.

"Do you still think you're innocent?" Allan's voice was dripping with sarcasm.

"Now, please come with me to the police station," Allan added with a cold smirk. "Better bring your own lawyers. And don't go saying later that Nova Group is throwing its weight around."

"I don't want to go to the police station," Lila sobbed, crying her eyes out. She'd never faced anything like this before.

"Suit yourself. Go home and wait for the subpoena," Allan shrugged like he didn't care, but his words sent a chill down Vera's spine.

If it were just a simple case of hidden cameras, Vera could've tried to get Stella to sign a letter of understanding at the station and settle things quietly.

But now that Nova Group's reputation was at stake, she was completely at a loss.

Amid all the chaos, Carrie's phone started ringing frantically. It was the Denim Kraft Regional Director calling. Carrie snatched up the phone, her hands shaking.

"What? Why are you canceling my exclusive agency?" Carrie screamed, not caring one bit about her dignity.

She'd fought tooth and nail to win the exclusive DenimKraft rights in Haliville. Thanks to that, every high- society lady in town wanted to cozy up to her. 'How could they snatch it away?' she thought.

"Our boss said you pissed off someone you really shouldn't have." With that, the caller hung up without another word.

Carrie stood there, stunned, her whole body going cold. 'How could this be happening?' she thought.

"This is all your fault," Carrie snapped, shooting Stella a vicious glare. In her mind, if only Stella had just let Wendy push her around like always, none of this mess would've happened.

Stella squinted at her, a lazy, amused smile curling on her lips. She lounged against the wall and gave Carrie a casual little wave, as if to say, "Bye-bye."

'She's gonna be the death of me,' Carrie thought.

The police called for backup and rounded up everyone involved, hauling them off to the station. Allan tagged along, bringing Harmony Law Firm's top lawyer with him.

As Hazel was being led away, she shot a look in Sebastian's direction.

He hadn't said a word since he arrived, but Hazel could feel it. He was the one in control here, the one who

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held everyone's fate in his hands.

The show was finally over. DenimKraft was temporarily closed to the public, and after clearing everyone out, they rolled the security gate halfway down.

Lucas, who'd just been standing next to Sebastian, instantly turned into a cute little boy. He scampered over to Stella on his short legs, and it felt like happy pink bubbles were popping in the air all around.

Lucas reached out his tiny arms, asking for a hug.

The execs left behind just stared at each other, completely floored. The way Sebastian flipped from little troublemaker to adorable munchkin was so fast, it was like the plot did a 180 before anyone could blink.

'Wait, so Mr. Gray actually knows that girl? Was everything he just did all for her?' they couldn't help but

wonder.

Stella scooped Lucas up into her arms. "Mr. Gray, what are you doing here?"

"Just passing through," Sebastian said coolly, his chill vibe never wavering. Sitting in his wheelchair, he looked less like a patient and more like a demon king on his throne.

Stella froze mid-hug.

Lucas puffed up like an angry little pufferfish.

Out of Stella's sight, he gave Sebastian a long-nose gesture.

'Pinocchio. Such a liar,' Lucas thought.

Sebastian cast a chilly glance at Lucas, his eyes icy.

"So, are we going home now?" Stella asked.

Out of the corner of her eye, Stella caught sight of the managers standing off to the side, each lugging a massive pile of folders.

"Just set them down," Sebastian said, his pale fingers absentmindedly playing with his black prayer beads.

The higher-ups all breathed a sigh of relief as they lined up to place the half-human-high stacks of files onto the wooden coffee table.

He lifted his gaze to Stella.

Stella thought, ‘What’s with that look?’

“No need to rush home. Go ahead and pick out a file first,” Sebastian said, his eyes drifting over her shirt, a subtle, thoughtful expression crossing his face.

“Pick what?” Stella asked, still not getting it.

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Lucas tugged at her sleeve and pointed at the table with his tiny finger.

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Stella looked over and saw the table stacked with lookbooks of the latest women’s clothing collections for the

season.

Stella couldn’t help but feel that the way Sebastian was looking at her right now was weirdly familiar, and it was definitely setting off alarm bells in her head.

“Pick one,” Sebastian said. His face was as cold and handsome as ever, but his eyes were suddenly dead serious.

That was when Stella finally realized he wasn’t kidding. He actually wanted her to choose an outfit.

Stella finally realized why Sebastian’s look felt so familiar. It was because every year, she would see that gaze.

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Chapter 67

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Serpentina had that exact same look in her eyes when she brought DenimKraft's chief designer over to redo Stella's entire wardrobe for all four seasons.

"No need. I'm fine with what I'm wearing," Stella said, turning Sebastian down. She wasn't really into material things; honestly, she just found it too much trouble and couldn't be bothered.

But as soon as she finished speaking, someone tugged at the hem of her shirt. She looked down to see Lucas clutching a women's fashion magazine, staring up at her with those irresistibly cute puppy eyes.

Stella was at a loss for words.

It was like Lucas had little angel wings fluttering behind him as he slowly held out the magazine, his cherubic little face full of cautious hope.

'So he's found my weak spot, Stella thought.

She quietly took the magazine from Lucas, barely glanced at a couple of pages, and said, "These two are enough." Stella tried to hide how little she cared.

Sebastian looked where she was pointing. It was two identical white button-down shirts.

'Classic. She really couldn't care less, Sebastian thought.

“Just pack up everything except these two,” Sebastian said, giving the executive a frosty look. His lips thinned as he turned his gaze back to Stella. “Go on, keep choosing,” he told her.

Stella was speechless.

‘Why does it suddenly feel so awkward in here?’ the executive wondered.

Lucas was clearly the happiest one here. His feet kicked excitedly as he grabbed another magazine and held it out to Stella like he was showing off his latest treasure. He babbled, obviously trying to say, “Check this out. It’s so pretty!”

Stella had to pick two more at random.

Sebastian kept his icy expression, barely blinking. “Keep going,” he said.

Lucas eagerly handed her another magazine, and Stella just pointed at two more without even looking.

Sebastian pressed, “Keep going.”

By the time Stella had finished half-heartedly picking out outfits from every single women’s fashion magazine, a whole hour had gone by.

She collapsed onto the couch with a blank face, watching as Lucas, still bursting with energy, was already trying to get someone to bring over even more magazines. Honestly, she was starting to get a headache.

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Suddenly, Stella’s phone went off nonstop. It was Camilla.

“I’m going to the restroom,” Stella said, making her escape.

In the restroom, after hanging up on Camilla for the tenth time, Stella just blocked her number.

With her hands shoved in her pockets, Stella’s eyes were sharp and frosty, and her lips curled into a sarcastic sneer.

It was then that voices drifted in from outside the stall.

“Isn’t that the guy from the Gray family who’s been gone for years? The one in the wheelchair?” someone murmured.

“Seriously?” the other one asked.

The two salesgirls, busy touching up their makeup, were making small talk as they chatted.

“Didn’t Gray Group just announce they were kicking him out as CEO?” one of them asked.

There was the sound of a lighter flipping open. The two salesgirls leaned against the wall, smoking and enjoying their rare break.

Stella lowered her eyes. Her long lashes hid the chill in her gaze as she listened quietly.

“The Gray family is just the worst,” one of the salesgirls scoffed.

“What do you mean?” the other asked, her curiosity piqued.

“You know that story, right? About how Sebastian literally pulled his nephew out of his sister-in-law’s belly right after she passed away,” the first girl said.

“Sure. Is there anyone in Haliville who doesn’t know about it?” the other girl replied.

The first salesgirl took a drag from her cigarette, grinning as she gossiped. “Back when all that drama hit the Gray family, not even a week after the death, they were already trying to erase that kid from the family tree.

“They said he brought bad luck, born under a curse or something. Just a bunch of superstitious nonsense. And Carlos? Ugh, he’s something else. That old flame he’s been pining for all these years-he never brought her back before.”

The salesgirl scoffed and continued, “But now, with Annette’s family fallen from grace, his eldest son and grandson gone, and Sebastian left in a wheelchair, he suddenly brings her back. Isn’t he just taking advantage of the mess to maybe pick himself a new heir?”

“No way, for real?” The other girl put out her cigarette, totally invested now.

The first girl said, “Of course it’s true. I have family working at the hospital. Sebastian was literally at death’s door, fighting for his life for three days and nights.

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“The second he woke up, word about the drama reached him. He insisted on going straight back to the Gray family. I don’t know what happened later, but when he finally ended up back at the hospital, he was half dead and covered in blood.”

The salesgirl stubbed out her cigarette, giving her friend a serious reminder not to gossip about any of this, and only then did the two of them amble out of the restroom.

The stall door swung open from the inside, and Stella stepped out. She stood at the sink in silence, turning on the faucet and washing her hands.

She looked up, her face blank, but her eyes were clouded with darkness.

Now, she finally understood why Sebastian said there was only one Mrs. Gray in the Gray family.

Stella left the restroom with a calm face, but an icy aura clung to her, and that badass vibe she usually kept hidden was about to break loose.

But then, Stella spotted Lucas squatting by the door, his chin propped up in his hands.

He was so cute that people passing by couldn’t resist wanting to coo at him, but the moment they saw his serious little face, they sheepishly pulled back.

“Lucas.” Stella had barely spoken when Lucas’s face lit up with delight. He dashed over, his rosy cheeks brimming with trust and affection, and rubbed his face against her hand in the most adorable way. He giggled happily.

“Not even a week after the death, they were already trying to erase that kid from the family tree. They said he brought bad luck, born under a curse or something.” One of the salesgirls’ voices echoed faintly from earlier.

Stella looked down and met Lucas's gaze. Those big, shiny, puppy-dog eyes blinked up at her.

"You're just too cute," Stella said, reaching out to give his squishy little cheeks a gentle pinch.

Lucas's eyes went huge, his whole face turning red all the way to his ears. He grabbed his cheeks with both hands, looking so happy he could barely tell up from down.

"Come on. Mr. Gray's waiting for us," Stella said, holding out her hand to Lucas.

Lucas saw her hand and nodded enthusiastically.

Inside the Denim Kraft store, the gate half-closed, Sebastian sat in his wheelchair, expressionless, staring at his phone as Carlos's name lit up the screen. The silence felt suffocating.

He let the phone ring until the call cut off on its own. His pale, striking face looked almost sickly, and for a moment, his eyes flickered with a flash of red, as if he'd just remembered something.

Sebastian knew exactly why Carlos was calling.

The executive stood off to the side, clutching a fresh stack of women's fashion magazines, cold sweat running

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down his back.

Sebastian was giving off a terrifyingly icy vibe, and all the poor guy could think was, 'When is that girl coming back? I need her to save me before I freeze to death over here!'

"What are you zoning out for?" Stella's lazy, indifferent voice came from right beside him. Sebastian's eyes flickered for a moment before he slipped his phone away.

'She was gone for way too long,' he thought.

“Again?” Stella said, holding Lucas’s hand. When she saw the fresh stack of magazines in the executive’s arms. she couldn’t help but sigh inwardly, ‘Does Sebastian seriously have an obsession with watching people change outfits, like he’s into those dress-up games or something?’

Sebastian stayed silent, as cold and distant as ever.

He shot Stella a frosty look, but then, almost absentmindedly, his gaze drifted to her other hand. She was holding something.

“Got something for you,” Stella said, holding it out to him.

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It was a black gift bag, and it looked pretty small.

Sebastian’s frosty gaze softened just a little as he looked at her.

Stella lazily lifted her hand, signaling Sebastian to take it.

Sebastian took the bag and opened it. Inside, a men's watch rested quietly in its box, the sleek black dial radiating luxury and exclusivity.

The executive leaned in, curious, and when he saw what was inside, he sucked in a breath.

'It's a Patek Philippe minute repeater perpetual calendar, worth about 15 million. Just like that, this girl bought it and gave it away?' he mused.

"Just grabbed it while passing by the store," Stella said, her face totally calm, like she hadn't just dropped about

15 million.

When she spotted the watch through the window, she instantly decided to buy it. She could sense Sebastian's aura in it-chilly and restrained.

She bent down, reaching to take off the watch Sebastian had been wearing.

"Don't-" the executive blurted out, about to warn Stella about Sebastian's boundaries, but Sebastian shot him a cold look that made him instantly shut up.

To outsiders, Sebastian was famous for keeping women at arm's length. Helping him take off his watch was unheard of. Just getting close to him was risky enough.

Stella paused, looked up toward the voice. 'Don't what? Why'd he stop mid-sentence?' she wondered.

The executive was speechless, his back drenched in cold sweat.

"Go on," Sebastian said, his brows furrowed, clearly not happy that Stella was paying attention to someone else.

"Alright." Stella just shrugged and went back to removing his watch. Before long, she had slipped the black Patek Philippe onto Sebastian's wrist, totally oblivious to the fact that his eyes were glued to her face the whole time.

Stella chuckled, one hand casually tucked in her pocket. 'Sebastian's hands are like masterpieces crafted by God. They deserve nothing but the finest,' she thought.

She looked up and met his unreadable gaze. "It really suits you," she said, as nonchalant as always, but sincere.

Sebastian paused for a moment and then just gave a quiet “mm.” For once, his icy face showed a rare hint of warmth.

Something seemed to cross his mind. His sharp gaze flicked to Lucas, and he subtly flexed his wrist, clearly

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hinting at the boy.

But Lucas didn’t even look Sebastian’s way. He was too busy holding his cheeks and grinning like a fool just because Stella had called him cute.

‘What an idiot, Sebastian scoffed inwardly.

Sebastian’s phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and picked up.

“Mr. Gray...” a woman’s voice came through. “Is it all right for me to come to the island tomorrow to continue Lucas’s lessons?”

It was Grace Burton, Lucas’s tutor.

Because of Lucas’s unique circumstances, he never went to regular school. Instead, he had Grace as his private tutor at home.

Ryan was the complete opposite. He was also five, but he was so smart that he jumped straight into fifth grade. Among the rich and powerful, he was already known as a genius.

“Sure,” Sebastian replied after a brief pause and then hung up.

“Ever thought about letting Lucas go to school again?” Stella overheard and asked. She glanced at Lucas, and when he saw her looking, his eyes lit up, twinkling like stars in the sky.

He blew her a kiss from across the room, so sweet and cute.

Sebastian was silent for a long moment.

“Sometimes, I have no idea what that kid is thinking,” Sebastian finally said, his voice cool and distant. Stella thought he wouldn’t answer, but his words caught her off guard.

Stella was momentarily stunned.

“Before you came along, Lucas shut everyone out,” Sebastian said, his eyes thoughtful. “He’d just sit in the corner all day, like a little robot, barely moving or saying a word.”

He went on, remembering, “He didn’t talk to me, or anyone else. If he was in a good mood, he’d have Snowball take him up a tree to catch some sun. If he was upset, he’d just start breaking stuff.”

Stella found it hard to believe the Lucas Sebastian was talking about was the same cheerful kid right in front of her.

She tilted her head at Sebastian. “You know, that’s the longest thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

Sebastian didn’t know how to respond.

At the police station, Vera anxiously turned to Camilla. “Still can’t get through to her?”

Camilla looked awkward. She couldn’t exactly admit that Stella had blocked her.

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“Just our luck, huh? How did we run into trouble with Nova Group out of nowhere?” Camilla griped, seriously frustrated.

Vera didn’t respond, just ignored her and lit up a cigarette.

“Don’t you think Stella’s been acting off lately?” Vera said, unable to shake off a sense of unease just thinking about the look in Stella’s eyes back at the store.

She added, “Stella got expelled, but she hasn’t come home. She won’t even pick up your calls. Where the hell is she?”

“Let her rot for all I care!” Camilla snapped, wishing Stella would just drop dead already.

‘Thanks to her, Hazel and Lila got caught on camera!’ she fumed to herself.

“Isn’t it just paying a fine and she’s out? Why is this taking so long?” Camilla kept ranting, driving Vera up the wall.

Wendy had never been hauled into the police station before, and she was so freaked out she blurted out everything, ratting everyone out. That got Lila and Hazel in trouble too, turning them from victims into accomplices.

When Wendy’s mom heard about it, she lost all control. She grabbed Vera and bawled her eyes out, making a huge scene. Vera felt her head pounding.

Vera had already reached out to the Morris family to pull some strings at the station, hoping to just pay a fine and get everyone out clean, no record. But after all that back-and-forth with the lawyer, they were still locked

Vera was getting anxious. Just then, she spotted Allan and the Harmony Law Firm crew heading out.

When Allan saw her, that cocky, handsome face of his slowly broke into a knowing smile.

Vera’s heart skipped a beat. Soon enough, her lawyer came out, and that was all the confirmation she needed. Her worst fears were coming true.

“Mrs. Morris,” the lawyer said, looking uneasy.

“Go ahead,” Vera said.

“Nova Group won’t accept any settlement, and the police won’t let us pull any strings. Lila and her two friends...” The lawyer glanced at Vera and Camilla and then continued, “They will be detained for five days.”

Camilla’s eyes were blazing with fury. “Stella!”

Back on the island, Stella stepped out of the shower and sneezed.

The door to the nursery was left half-open. Lucas was sitting quietly on the carpet, absorbed in solving a metal puzzle.

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Snowball was curled up into a big ball, acting as Lucas's pillow. Its tail tip tapped the carpet every now and then.

Big Ben was charging nearby.

Lucas was focused on the metal puzzle, his fingers moving so fast that one could barely follow. He didn't even blink, and in under a minute, he had the whole thing solved.

Leaning against the wall, Stella raised an eyebrow. 'Did he really just finish that in less than a minute? The Guinness World Record for this puzzle is two and a half minutes,' she thought.

Stella kept quiet, because the very next second, Lucas was already reassembling the puzzle just as quickly, as if the whole thing was just routine for him.

Stella then knocked lazily on the door. Lucas jumped, looking up in surprise.

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With a swoosh, Lucas hid the metal puzzle under Snowball's belly.

Stella strolled over nonchalantly and plopped down on the floor, just like Lucas had done. She reached under Snowball's belly and pulled out the puzzle, saying nothing as she started fiddling with it.

Her movements were relaxed, but her fingers danced nimbly. She did not even look down. Her eyes stayed fixed on Lucas the whole time.

Just half a minute later, she finished unlocking it. Lucas's jaw dropped, and he started clapping excitedly.

"Grace is coming tomorrow," Stella said, handing the puzzle back to Lucas. She leaned against the giant Snowball, whose chilly scales felt just like a built-in ice machine.

Lucas hung his head, looking all mopey.

"You don't like it?" Stella caught onto his mood instantly. It was the first time since she'd arrived on the island that Lucas was so obviously not happy about something.

Lucas shook his head, but his fingers clung to the hem of Stella's shirt. He edged closer to her, then even closer.

Slowly, he looked up, his chubby face peeking out. Those big puppy eyes stared up at her, all innocent. If he had a tail, it would have been wagging nonstop. It was enough to melt anyone's heart.

He poked at his smartwatch. Big Ben said, "I want to sleep next to you tonight."

'Stella smells so good after her bath. I wish she'd hug me,' Lucas thought.

"Then go take a bath," Stella said lazily.

Without a word, Lucas dashed off to the bathroom. Big Ben, ever the smart guardian, switched to waterproof mode and powered down non-essential systems, trailing after him to keep an eye on his safety.

Stella and Snowball sprawled out lazily on the carpet as the sound of the shower drifted over.

Suddenly, Snowball tapped Stella with the tip of its tail and then shot up straight like a pole. It used its head to knock stuff off the bookshelf, sending it scattering all over the table and floor.

Snowball turned around, fixing her with those tiny red eyes. The tip of its white tail tapped the floor, as if urging her on.

Stella was at a loss for words. She'd almost forgotten that Snowball was a well-read snake.

She started picking up the stuff, but when her eyes happened to catch what was written on one of the papers, she paused for a second.

If she was right, all of this was homework Grace had left for Lucas. The stuff on it was way out of his league, with some parts just plain wrong, even kind of ridiculous.

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Seeing Stella had noticed, Snowball yawned wide and flopped back down, looping the tip of its tail around and around like it was bored out of its mind.

“Snowball,” Stella called, glancing down at the python.

At her voice, Snowball instantly stopped twisting itself into a pretzel and looked up at her.

“What happens if Lucas can't finish all this?” Stella wondered, her eyes sharp and cold.

Snowball tilted its head, looking adorably confused. Then it slithered over to the wall, stood up tall like a kid in time-out, and slid back down to Stella, gesturing for her to hold out her hand.

Stella did, and Snowball gave her palm a quick tap with the tip of its tail.

Stella's gaze turned frosty. She quietly put the stuff back, shot a look at the bathroom door, and then walked

out.

In the study, Allan was sprawled out on the couch, wearing a face mask.

“Too bad they can only be detained for five days,” he muttered.

His black robe hung open as he patted his face through the mask. Allan, looking every bit the pampered prince, couldn't help but laugh when he remembered Wendy's messy hair.

Sebastian stayed silent. To him, those people were nothing but ants.

On the table in front of them, there was an admission notice from Edenbury Academy.

“Guardian,” Sebastian said.

“Huh? What did you say?” Allan blinked, not catching it.

“This admission notice was meant for the guardian,” Sebastian replied coolly, making Allan freeze for a second.

‘Wait, it was supposed to go to the guardian?’ Allan thought, a little thrown off. And he asked, “So what now?”

“Now I've got it,” Sebastian said, lifting his head. Those pretty, cold eyes locked onto Allan's face.

Allan blinked. “So?”

With a totally blank face, Sebastian said, “I'm her guardian.” It was like he was just stating a fact.

Allan was floored. ‘Did my ears just glitch, or was Sebastian out of his mind? How did he sum that up as guardian?’ he thought.

“Dude, Stella's 18. Once you hit 18, the whole guardian thing is over,” Allan said, feeling like he really needed to stop his friend from always trying to play dad.

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“There is a guardian,” Sebastian replied, his hauntingly handsome face turning cold.

Allan was totally stumped.

“It’s me,” Sebastian said flatly.

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Allan sank back onto the couch, arms folded over his chest. With the face mask still on, he looked perfectly calm. ‘Whatever, I’m not getting into this with him, he thought, choosing peace over pointless debate.

Someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Allan called out.

The door swung open, and Stella spotted Allan lying there with his face mask on. ‘Huh, he actually has a skincare routine,’ she thought.

“Hey, Stella!” Allan, who’d just flopped down, instantly sat up, gripping the back of the leather couch.

“I’m here to ask Mr. Gray something,” Stella said, looking right at Sebastian. Without missing a beat, Sebastian just picked up a file and dropped it over the admission notice on the table.

Allan just stared, speechless.

“Ask away,” Sebastian said coolly.

“Where did you get Lucas’s tutor?” Stella asked.

“What’s going on?” Allan asked, his expression turning serious the moment he heard it was about Lucas.

Stella glanced at Allan’s face, smeared with that black-and-yellow seaweed mask, and couldn’t help but avert her gaze, feeling a bit awkward.

“Grandma arranged it,” Sebastian replied, his eyes

“Mrs. Gray?” Stella was taken aback by that answer.

cold.

‘Mrs. Gray would never hurt Lucas,’ Stella thought, keeping her doubts to herself.

“Mm.” Sebastian’s voice was low. “Anything wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m heading out,” Stella said, leaving the study.

“Why did Stella ask about the tutor out of the blue?” Allan mumbled, sprawled on the couch, sounding confused.

Sebastian stayed silent, fingers turning his black prayer beads, his expression serious and distant. The atmosphere around him grew colder by the second.

Early the next morning, Grace drove herself to the dock.

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Like always, she had to wait for someone from the island to come pick her up. But today, the car was running five minutes late.

Grace glanced at her watch, getting a little impatient. Luckily, a black luxury car finally rolled up next to her. She hopped in without missing a beat and whipped out her compact, fixing her makeup right away.

“Why are there two people picking me up today?” Grace asked.

Since Annette was the one who brought her in, the island drivers usually treated her like royalty. But today, these two hadn’t said a single word since she got in, which was really weird.

Jake, sitting shotgun, looked utterly defeated. He was convinced his whole career was about to go up in smoke, as someone unexpected was behind the wheel.

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Chapter 70

Chapter 70

It was Stella who was driving.

☪

She was rocking a sharp men's suit she'd clearly picked up from who-knows-where. Her left elbow propped against her cheek, right hand casually steering the wheel with effortless swagger.

Her short hair was a wild mess, and her face was so gorgeous it almost didn't seem real. She wore a blank look, but in her eyes flickered a hint of reckless nonchalance.

She shot Jake a sidelong glance, her eyes full of warning.

Jake stayed silent.

“I’m new here,” Stella said, her tone unhurried, but it made Grace, who was fixing her makeup, pause mid-motion.

‘Her voice is actually pretty nice,’ Grace thought to herself.

Soon, the car pulled up in front of the villa.

The moment Grace stepped out of the car, she spotted Lucas squatting by the potato plants, filthy from head to toe. Next to him was the white robot she found ridiculous. She couldn’t help but curl her lip in disgust.

‘So dirty! At least that big white snake isn’t here,’ Grace thought.

That snake almost had a mind of its own. More than once, she’d felt like it was about to swallow her whole. That was why she’d asked Sebastian to keep it locked up whenever she was around.

Stella got out of the car just in time to see it all go down.

Jake floored it, driving the car straight into the garage.

Lucas, who’d been facing the other way, suddenly stopped in his tracks. His nose twitched as he sniffed the air, and his eyes lit up instantly. ‘Smells like Stella!’ he thought.

He tossed his shovel aside and spun around, looking for where that familiar scent was coming from.

For a while, Lucas just stared, completely confused. He recognized Stella right away, but she was somehow with short hair and dressed like a boy. And now she was giving him a silent “shh” with her finger to her lips.

Lucas was so lost in thought that he didn’t even notice his feet. His left foot tripped over his right, and he stumbled forward, about to fall flat on his face.

Grace’s eyes widened in shock as she quickly dodged out of the way. There was no one else around except Stella, a newcomer in her eyes, so she wasn’t worried about anyone blabbing.

But her Denim Kraft suit cost over 25 thousand dollars. There was no way she was letting it get dirty.

Lucas shut his eyes in fright. But the next second, he was swept up into a pair of arms that felt so familiar and

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warm.

“Lucas.” Stella knelt on one knee, a mesmerizing smile on her pretty face. She cradled Lucas in her arms, looking effortlessly cool and impossibly handsome. “I’ll protect you.”

Lucas opened his eyes, his heart pounding like crazy. ‘Stella is so cool. I’m totally crushing on her, he thought.

Jake was heading over after parking the car. Grace saw him out of the corner of her eye and instantly snatched Lucas from Stella, shooting Stella a warning look.

Frightened, Lucas turned and bit down hard on Grace’s wrist.

“Whoa...” Jake was startled.

“It’s not Lucas’s fault. He almost fell, and I was just trying to catch him...” Grace winced, eyes brimming with tears. She was putting on her most pitiful look.

If it were that stone-faced guy today, she wouldn’t have dared, but this guy was a pushover. She wasn’t worried at all.

“I’ll go get the first aid kit,” Jake said, hurrying off.

Once it was just the three of them, Grace’s face turned cold in a flash. She yanked Lucas away.

“It figures. What a little jinx. He doesn’t even know what’s good for him!” Grace muttered, scowling at the bloody bite mark on her wrist. She’d been to this island enough times to know exactly where every camera

was.

And right here? Not a single camera in sight.

“Listen up, newbie. Whatever you saw, you’d better keep it to yourself. Mrs. Gray brought me here, and when push comes to shove, who do you think they’ll trust? Me, or you?” Grace glared at Stella’s pretty face, her voice low and menacing.

Jealousy twisted in her gut. ‘Seriously, why does a guy have to look this damn gorgeous?’ she thought.

To Grace’s shock, Lucas, who used to just take her scolding and hitting like a lifeless doll, suddenly bared his teeth at her like a provoked little animal.

Grace’s heart skipped a beat. ‘Wait, Lucas is acting different today,’ she thought.

Before Lucas could really lash out, Stella reached over with lazy ease and covered his mouth from behind.

“I get it,” Stella replied, her voice clipped. The words were by the book, but the vibe she gave off was pure badass.

Jake came back in a flash with the first aid kit and had someone patch up Grace’s wound.

“So, Mr. Gray’s not around today?” Grace asked, acting all casual.

Jake was about to answer, but Stella beat him to it. “He’s here. Mr. Gray’s in his study.”

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Jake shot Stella a stunned look, but she didn’t even blink, her face completely blank.

Jake was freaking out inside. ‘We can’t just spill Mr. Gray’s whereabouts like that!’

“Oh, really?” Grace said thoughtfully. “Then how about we do some outdoor lessons today? Let Lucas get some fresh air. It’s good for his body and his mind.”

She gave Jake a bright smile as she made the suggestion.

Jake was just about to refuse, but Stella cut in again, “Sounds good.”

Jake said nothing. If he couldn’t tell something was up by now, he’d really be an idiot.

“Where do you want to have the lesson?” Stella asked, cool and casual, looking right at Grace.

“Over there,” Grace said, pointing to the spot by the pool. ‘No cameras there, she thought, a sly glint in her

eyes.

Soon, a huge umbrella was set up by the pool. Grace and Lucas sat face-to-face, the table between them covered with homework and tutoring materials.

Big Ben was standing off to the side, unusually silent and stiff, like his system was lagging.

Stella glanced at the pile of so-called homework. It was all AP Calculus problems.

“Get me a coffee,” Grace said sharply to Stella.

Stella shot her a hard look and walked off.

“Do this one,” Grace said, tapping a problem with her finger.

Lucas’s face hardened. He was about to fling the pen away, but then he remembered Stella would be back soon. ‘Better behave, he told himself. So he took the pen and started writing.

But before Lucas could finish, Grace snatched the pen right out of his hand, leaving a long, messy streak across the paper.

“Wrong! Are you really this dumb? You can’t even solve something this easy?” Grace kept a fake smile plastered on her face, but her words were pure poison. From a distance, it looked like a normal tutoring

session.

She continued, “Ryan’s already skipped ahead to fifth grade, and all you do is sit around at home. Mr. Gray is way too soft, taking care of a cursed orphan like you. What do you think he’ll do with you once he gets married, huh?”

Lucas’s eyes went wide. ‘But I got it right. I know how to do this,’ he thought.

“Kids like you-broken and troublemaking-should go to some special school. Mrs. Annette Gray’s in the hospital because of you, and now you’re trying to ruin Mr. Gray too?” Grace spat, her voice cold and vicious.

Lucas's hand gripped the pen tighter and tighter, his gaze turning blank. He just sat there, frozen like a lifeless

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doll. No response at all.

“Are you done?” Stella's icy voice rang out from nearby.

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Before Grace could even look up, a cup of steaming hot coffee was poured straight down on her head. Totally blindsided, she shrieked from the burning pain.

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