

Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

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Grace screamed as she grabbed her face and scrambled to her feet. Stella stood nearby, casually swinging the empty coffee cup in one hand, completely calm and unapologetic.

She looked at the soaked, disheveled woman. For once, she held back her usual sharp edge, just because Lucas was still around.

“Lucas,” Stella called, her eyes deep and knowing as she looked at him.

Lucas, frozen in self-defense, didn’t move.

“Lucas,” Stella called again, her voice gentler this time.

Lucas’s fingertips twitched slightly.

“Go get Mr. Gray,” Stella said, placing her cool palm over Lucas’s eyes. In the next moment, his long lashes fluttered.

“Hmm...” Lucas murmured, his voice soft and small.

“I’m fine. Go ahead,” Stella reassured him, catching the worry in his eyes. She withdrew her hand, her whole demeanor still laid-back and calm.

Lucas’s eyes lit up again, and he dashed off. Every few steps, he’d glance back at Stella, then run some more, and then look back again.

Stella kept that faint smile on her lips until Lucas finally disappeared from sight. The moment he was gone, the smile vanished, and her face went cold.

She crouched in front of Grace, grabbed a fistful of her hair, and forced her head up.

“What you just said to Lucas. Say it to my face,” Stella said. Her voice was flat and indifferent, but the quiet authority in it sent a chill straight through Grace.

“I’m with Mrs. Gray! How dare you touch me?” Grace shrieked, her voice shaking. Hearing Stella was calling Sebastian over, she started to panic. She clung to Annette’s name like it was her only shield.

Stella let out a soft laugh, but her eyes stayed icy cold. She clamped Grace’s jaw in a vice-like grip.

“Even if Mrs. Gray herself was standing right here, she couldn’t save you,” Stella said, her tone casual, but the threat in her words was chillingly clear.

“You...” Grace stammered, her eyes flickering with a sudden idea. She started stripping off her jacket.

“I’ve been here way longer than you. Just wait till Mr. Gray gets here. I’ll accuse you of assault!” Grace threatened.

Stella shot Grace a look, her face unreadable.

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Grace, thinking she’d finally rattled Stella, let out a cold laugh and deliberately messed up her hair even more, trying to make herself look even more pitiful.

“This is a blind spot; no cameras here. You’re just the new girl. Who do you think Mr. Gray’s gonna believe, you or me?” Grace sneered, yanking Stella’s collar and pulling her right up close.

“Look at you, all soft and delicate. Bet you’ve never had it tough,” Grace taunted.

Just as Grace tried to touch Stella’s face, Stella kicked her straight into the pool. Water exploded everywhere, splashing wildly.

“You’d better know your place.” Stella’s eyes were ice-cold. Thinking about how Grace had grabbed her collar, she ripped off her jacket, now just in a black shirt.

She popped open two buttons, revealing a hint of her collarbone and glowing skin.

Just then, Allan wheeled Sebastian over. They arrived just in time to see everything.

Grace was thrashing around in the pool, sputtering, “H-Help...”

Stella sat coolly at the edge of the pool, one leg stretched out, the other bent. She held a teaching stick in her hand, and every time Grace surfaced for air, Stella would smack her right back down.

Allan, John, and Jake were all just stunned into silence.

‘What the heck just happened? Man, that’s savage, they all thought.

Stella propped her chin up with one hand, her gaze icy and full of disdain. Even when Sebastian rolled in, she didn’t flinch. She just raised an eyebrow, calm as ever.

“John, pull her out,” Sebastian said, his voice cold, face emotionless.

John stepped up immediately and dragged Grace out of the pool. Stella just watched, making no move to interfere this time.

Grace was coughing her lungs out, face pale from all the water she’d swallowed. The moment she spotted Sebastian, her eyes welled up, looking all pitiful. “Mr. Gray...” she called out weakly.

Lucas had somehow made his way back to Stella’s side, gripping her shirt.

Stella glanced down, her gaze calm. She ran her fingers over Lucas’s smartwatch, and Big Ben, who’d been weirdly quiet all day, suddenly had his belly glowing with a soft white light. But everyone was too busy staring at Grace to notice.

“It was him! He tried to do something horrible to me. And he even sent Lucas away.” Grace bawled her eyes out, pointing a shaky finger right at Stella.

“Look! These are the marks she left on me.” Grace made a show of pulling down her collar to reveal the fresh scratches, ones she’d just made herself. With no cameras around, she could spin any story she wanted.

‘No way he’s getting out of this one,’ Grace gloated to herself.

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Allan, John, and Jake just stared, not sure how to react to the whole scene.

Sebastian sat in his wheelchair, idly twirling his black prayer beads. His face was pale and strikingly handsome, but his expression was icy cold. He didn't even spare Grace a glance, let alone look at her shoulder.

"So you're saying... 'he' tried to do something inappropriate to you?" Allan cleared his throat, pointing at Stella, deliberately using 'he' to echo Grace's accusation, just to make sure he heard her right.

"Yes. It was him!" Grace shot back, absolutely certain, her eyes burning with dramatic fury, totally lost in her own performance.

Allan, John, and Jake were all just stunned into silence.

'Well, this is getting interesting,' the three of them thought at the same time.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Sebastian asked as he looked up at Stella.

Stella, dressed in men's clothes, radiated danger and rebellion. Her skin glowed even more against the dark fabric. That kind of striking, gender-defying allure was impossible to look away from; even in showbiz, she'd be top of the food chain.

"I do," Stella answered, her lips curling into a cocky smirk as she met his gaze.

Stella didn't even hesitate. She just kicked Grace straight back into the pool.

Grace shrieked as she hit the water.

"That's my answer," Stella said coolly, tossing a challenging look at Sebastian.

Allan, John, and Jake were frozen, speechless.

For the first time, a flicker of something crossed Sebastian's flawless face. His lips quirked up slightly, and even his icy eyes seemed to warm with a trace of amusement.

By the time John hauled Grace out of the pool again, she was half-drowned, a total mess.

"Mr. Gray... Don't let him off..." Grace wheezed, her voice barely above a whisper.

'Damn it! He actually dared to do this to me right in front of Mr. Gray?' Grace fumed inwardly.

"Let me ask you again. Are you sure it was 'him' who tried to do something inappropriate to you?" Sebastian said, his voice cold and sharp.

For the first time, Sebastian actually looked at Grace, and his icy stare was so intense it made her shiver.

"Yes," Grace managed to choke out.

'Did I mess up somewhere? Why does he keep asking me the same thing?' Grace wondered, suddenly uneasy.

Sebastian glanced at Stella, who was about to raise her hand.

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With a swift tug, Stella ripped the wig off. Her long, silky hair tumbled down, breaking free from the disguise. Caught by the wind, the strands danced around her face, and honestly, she looked stunning.

Grace stood there, completely frozen. Her brain short-circuited at the sight of Stella's icy glare. She lifted a trembling finger and pointed at the girl, stammering, "You... you..."

She just couldn't process the fact that the driver was actually a girl. Stella flashed a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. It was dead cold.

A shiver raced down Grace's spine, sending her panicked gaze toward Sebastian. But he sat there like a statue. Even in a wheelchair, the man felt like a king looking down on a peasant.

"M-Mr. Gray, p-please, let me explain..." she stammered, shaking like a leaf in a storm.

Sebastian thumbed the cold prayer beads on his wrist. "Go ahead," he said, sounding totally bored. "Explain."

Grace opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Her knees buckled, threatening to give way right there.

Stella narrowed her eyes, casually waving a stack of Lucas's worksheets in the air. "You gave a five-year-old AP Calculus problems?" Stella asked, her voice flat. "And then you used the wrong answers to grade them just to mess with his head?"

"I didn't," Grace squeaked, her voice trembling.

Sebastian took the stack without a word. The only sound was the soft click-clack of his prayer beads as he flipped through the pages, but to Grace, it sounded like a ticking time bomb.

Finally, he looked up. "Grace, correct me if I'm wrong. You graduated from one of the best colleges in the world."

His face remained a blank mask, yet the air in the room grew heavy enough to suffocate. Pure terror washed

over Grace.

The message was loud and clear. A top student didn't make mistakes that dumb by accident. It wasn't a slip-up. It was on purpose.

"Mr. Gray," Stella said, her voice slow and deliberate. "Why don't we listen to how Grace actually talks to Lucas during their lessons?"

Grace's head snapped up. All the color drained from her face, leaving her looking like a ghost. She started shaking violently, panic taking over. "No... No, don't..."

"Big Ben," Stella called out coldly.

"I'm here," Big Ben replied.

Stella reached down, covering Lucas's ears with her hands. "Play the recording for Mr. Gray," she ordered.

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"On it," Big Ben replied.

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The audio crackled to life, and Grace's voice cut through the air, dripping with venom. "Lucas, guess what? Ryan already skipped ahead to the fifth grade. But you? You're just rotting away at home.

"Mr. Sebastian Gray's a saint for dealing with an orphan who brings nothing but bad luck. But what happens. when he gets married? You'll be kicked out.

"Broken, cursed kids like you belong in special homes. Mrs. Annette Gray is stuck in the hospital because of you. Are you trying to destroy Mr. Sebastian Gray next?"

The air in the yard turned suffocating. Sebastian's expression went dark. He was already pale, but now he looked terrifying. The veins on the back of his hands bulged as he gripped the armrest.

He wanted to explode, but he held back his rage for Lucas's sake. "John," he said. "Take Grace to the dungeon."

"Yes, sir." John didn't hesitate. He grabbed Grace by the arm and yanked her up.

Stella raised an eyebrow. She thought, 'A dungeon? Seriously? This guy actually has a dungeon on his island?'

"No!" Grace shrieked, eyes wide with horror. "Not there. Mr. Gray, please. I'm begging you! Don't do this..."

The mere mention of the place pushed her over the edge. Panic swallowed Grace whole, and she wildly fought against John's iron grip. She knew what that place was. It was a hellhole. People didn't walk out of there alive.

"I'm family. I'm on Mrs. Annette Gray's side," she screamed, desperate for any lifeline. "Mr. Gray, please. Just

this once...”

She clawed at the stone floor, her nails tearing until they bled, leaving bloody streaks on the ground. It didn't matter. John dragged her off like a bag of trash. Her screams echoed for a moment before fading into a heavy silence.

Sebastian shifted his cold gaze to Lucas. He slowly reached a hand out, but Lucas flinched like he'd been burned. The boy shrank back, burying his face in Stella's stomach.

Sebastian's hand froze in mid-air. Allan frowned at the brutal rejection and stepped forward. “Sebastian-”

He didn't get to finish. Sebastian raised a hand to silence him. Without a word, he spun his wheelchair around and motored back toward the villa, leaving them alone.

Night had fully set in when John walked heavily down the stairs. His face was grim, and the dinner tray in his hands hadn't been touched.

“Still refusing to eat?” Allan asked.

All the fun was gone from his face. He had watched John carry the lunch tray away untouched, and when the same thing happened at dinner, the worry lines on his forehead deepened.

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“Gimme that.” Allan stood up and took the tray. “I'll give it a shot.”

He headed upstairs. Minutes later, he was back, slamming the tray onto the table in defeat. The attempt was a total failure.

Slumping into the chair opposite Stella, he propped his chin in his palm. “Stella,” he groaned. “Why don't you go up there?”

“If you couldn't get him to eat, I'm definitely not going to make a difference,” Stella replied without looking

She was focused on Lucas's old worksheets. The kid was a genius since he had nailed every single AP Calculus problem.

But being smart hadn't stopped him from being sad all afternoon. He had finally fallen asleep on the couch, and Big Ben had carried him to his room.

Allan almost said too much. He wanted to say it would be different, but he stopped himself just in time. He couldn't exactly tell her that Sebastian secretly wanted to be her father. That would just make things weird.

"Man," Allan sighed as he changed the subject. "When Mr. Annette Gray wakes up and hears about the whole mess, she's going to be crushed. She would never hurt Lucas."

He kept sighing, sneaking glances at Stella to see if she would crack. "Ever since that incident, she's been in a weird spot at Gray Manor. And she's too stubborn to move out here to Sandridge Island."

Stella just kept quiet. When she finally looked up to meet Allan's eyes, he let out a chuckle. "You know, Stella, this is the part where you ask, 'What incident, Allan?' You're really bad at following a script."

"If you wanted to spill the beans, you would've done it already," Stella said calmly. "Asking is just a waste of breath."

Allan opened his mouth, but then he closed it. 'Damn,' he thought. 'She has a point. I can't even argue with that logic.'

Just then, Jake walked in from the kitchen and set a steaming bowl on the table right in front of Stella. "Ms. Carter. Mr. Gray's orders. He wants the kitchen to prepare this for you every day."

Stella froze. She looked down at the rich, dark beef stew. The meat looked tender enough to melt in her mouth, and the beets gave the broth a deep red color. The delicious smell filled the air between them.

"Must be nice," Allan sighed, loud enough to wake the dead. He side-eyed Stella. "Meanwhile, poor Sebastian is starving. He raised Lucas from a baby, you know? He's probably heartbroken right now."

Stella didn't bite. Allan ramped it up, faking a snuffle. "Sebastian's stomach is a mess. Sometimes he even coughs up blood. Imagine him all alone in the dark... Probably crying over baby photos of Lucas."

Standing nearby, Jake rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. Allan was laying it on so thick that it was painful to

watch.

“What if Sebastian passes out from hunger and nobody finds him?” Allan added because he wanted to push

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his luck.

Stella finally looked up, giving him a stare flat enough to level a building. “Shut up,” she said slowly.

“You got it,” Allan chirped.

Without another word, Stella stood up. Her face was serious as she turned and headed for the door. Allan followed her while scratching his head in confusion.

‘Wait a second,’ he thought. ‘Did she actually buy that?’

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Outside the villa, Stella tipped her head back. She stared up at Sebastian's window, narrowing her eyes as if she were measuring the distance for a jump. Allan and Jake stood beside her, confused by her silence.

"Stella?" Allan asked.

Stella didn't answer. Her mind was somewhere else. Sebastian was as fragile as a porcelain doll, so she worried he might actually pass out alone in his room just like Allan said.

Getting the cold shoulder, Allan decided to be a pest. He leaned in and dragged her name out into a long, annoying whine. "Stel... la?"

Suddenly, Allan's eyes went wide, and his jaw dropped open. "Holy shit," he blurted out.

Stella had grabbed the carved stone pillar with one hand and smoothly pulled herself up onto the second-floor balcony. The moonlight caught her face as she climbed, her expression cold and focused.

"Hit me," Allan stammered while pointing at his cheek. "Wake me up."

Jake didn't hesitate for a second. He smacked Allan hard across the face. "Ouch! That hurts," Allan yelled, rubbing his cheek. "Okay, I am definitely not dreaming."

Jake stared at him silently. He thought, 'Of course it hurts, Man. I hit you hard enough to leave a bruise.'

"So this's actually happening," Allan said, his voice rising into a panic as he started pacing in circles. "Get Stella down. Is she insane? I just told a tiny lie to spice things up. Why is she going full Spider-Man right now?"

Panic set in as he watched her go higher. 'She's doing that without a rope,' he thought. 'If she slips and falls, Sebastian won't just kill me. He's going to feed me to something with big teeth.'

"Mr. Reed," Jake tried to speak.

"Do you think Sebastian will feed me to the lions or the tigers?" Allan asked, looking terrified. "I'm dead meat."

"Mr. Reed," Jake tried to speak.

"I need a plane ticket," Allan rambled, ignoring him completely. "Monterra? Farronia? Where is the hardest place for him to find me?"

Jake looked up at the lit balcony outside Sebastian's room. Stella was already outside the railing, clinging to it. He looked back at Allan, who was totally freaking out, and decided to just keep his mouth shut.

Up on the balcony, Sebastian sat frozen in his wheelchair. He stared blankly at the girl who had just popped her head over his railing. Stella froze. She hadn't expected an audience.

They locked eyes for three long seconds in total silence. The moment only broke when hot ash fell onto Sebastian's hand. "Stella!" he hissed.

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A flush of anger colored his pale face. He looked at her in total disbelief. 'We are on the fourth floor, he thought. 'Did she seriously just climb up with her bare hands?'

Stella weighed her options for a second before she decided to play it cool. She kept her face completely blank and offered him a stiff little wave. "Hi."

Sebastian's grip tightened so abruptly that the cigarette crumbled in his hand. "Get in here," he ordered, offering a hand.

Stella took it. Using his grip to anchor herself, she swung her legs up and vaulted over the railing in one motion. But the landing was a mess.

She tripped and fell right into his lap. A low groan rumbled in her ear. She froze. That definitely wasn't part of the plan.

"Get off me," Sebastian gritted out.

"Right," Stella said, scrambling to her feet.

He immediately scanned her from head to toe to check for injuries, but she was just a little dusty. Once he saw she was fine, his voice dropped to a dangerous growl. "Do you realize how high up we are?"

"The fourth floor?" Stella guessed, acting like it was no big deal.

Suddenly, she remembered her audience. She leaned over the railing and gave a casual wave to the two men watching from the garden. Sebastian wheeled forward to see who she was signaling. His icy glare landed on

Allan.

Allan started to sweat. "Jake, you..."

But when he turned, the spot next to him was empty. Jake had already bailed. Allan cursed under his breath.

On the balcony, Stella glanced at the tiles. The floor was littered with enough cigarette butts to fill a bucket. It was obvious Sebastian had been chain-smoking all afternoon. When she looked up, he was still glaring at her with cold, angry eyes.

"You knew it was the fourth floor, and you still decided to free-climb the wall?" he demanded.

Stella didn't answer immediately. Then, a small chuckle escaped her, and she turned her head. Sebastian frowned. "What's funny?"

"I figured you would be mad about the break-in," she said, looking back down at him. "I didn't expect you to be mad about how I got here."

"Allan told me you have a weak stomach," she continued. "He said you might cough up blood and pass out cold. That's why I am here. Oh, right. I gotta have John bring the food up."

Stella slid the glass door open as she spoke. Without asking, she grabbed the handles of his wheelchair and rolled him inside. Sebastian didn't fight her. He just let her move him into the bedroom.

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She walked over and unlocked the bedroom door to find John already waiting. Jake must have tipped him off. He stood there holding a tray with the reheated dinner and her beef stew.

"Ms. Carter," John said as he handed the heavy tray to her. Then, his voice dropped to a barely audible whisper. "Thank you."

The door clicked shut. Stella set the tray down on the table. She nudged the larger plate toward him. "Yours," she said, then pulled the bowl of stew to her side. "Mine."

She didn't wait for a response. Reaching over, she pried his clenched fingers apart and jammed the fork handle into his palm. Then she flopped onto the sofa opposite him, ignoring his dark mood as she dug into her dinner.

It took a long moment for Sebastian to even lift his hand. When he finally did, he picked at his food slowly. Every bite seemed like a chore. Since the accident took a quarter of his stomach, eating felt like nothing more than a burden.

Watching him carefully separate the carrots from the rest of the meal, Stella broke the silence. "If you think Lucas runs away because he's scared of you," she said. "You should just ask him. Locking yourself in this room fixes nothing."

Sebastian's fork froze mid-air. His face darkened. "I don't care," he said, his voice heavy. "It doesn't matter if he's scared of me. As long as he's alive."

His appetite was dead, even though he had barely managed a few bites.

Stella leaned back, sinking into the cushions. It was hard to believe this was the same girl who had just scaled a four-story wall like a spider. "Sebastian, you should see your face," she drawled. "You look so... sulky."

Sebastian stayed silent, but his mind raced. He thought, 'Sulky? Me? I am not sulking. She's delusional.'

He went to drop his fork back onto the tray, but he never made it. Stella shot her arm out, using her spoon to block his hand mid-air. Her expression was dead serious. "You barely ate anything."

"I'm not hungry," he said. And he meant it.

"Have a couple more bites," Stella ordered.

She didn't budge, and she kept her spoon right where it was. Geezer always said nothing in the world mattered more than a full belly, and she took that rule seriously.

Sebastian stared her down, but she held his gaze. Finally, realizing she wasn't going to back off, he gave in and forced himself to swallow a little more. Stella nodded, satisfied.

Once her own bowl was empty, Stella curled up on the massive black leather sofa. She looked tiny, practically swallowed up by the dark cushions.

A question popped into her head. "So," she said as she looked up. "What is the dungeon like?"

"You want to see for yourself?" Sebastian asked, his voice low.

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Maybe the food had helped, because the violent tension in his eyes seemed to have relaxed. He watched her quietly from across the room.

Stella hugged a throw pillow to her chest and rested her chin on her hand. "Yeah. Kind of."

Her mind drifted to the other missing resident of the house. 'Also, where is Snowball?' she thought. 'I haven't seen that snake all night.'

Sebastian gave her a long look before saying, "Let's go, then."

Stella wheeled Sebastian to the entrance of the dungeon. The moment they crossed into the restricted area, the smell hit her like a punch to the gut. It was thick and heavy-old blood mixed with rot.

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A smell like rotting meat hung heavy in the air. Behind them, the moonlight cast long, twisted shadows of Stella and Sebastian across the ground.

A scream ripped through the silence of the night. It was loud and raw, echoing up from the gut of the dungeon.

The heavy iron door slammed shut behind Stella, plunging them into darkness. Almost instantly, the wall lamps flickered to life. They clicked on one by one down the hall, lighting up a dim, creepy path.

This was the scariest place on Sandridge Island. The whole area was built like a medieval dungeon. Scary carvings covered the stone walls, showing scenes that looked like they belonged in a nightmare.

Suddenly, a voice croaked out. “Help... Somebody help me... I don’t wanna die...”

A man soaked in blood clawed his way out of the shadows. His legs were dead weight, dragging behind him and leaving a long, red smear on the stone.

His eyes were caked with blood, but he saw two people standing there. “Please,” he gasped, crawling toward them. “Help me...”

When he got close enough to see, he looked up. The moment he saw who was in the wheelchair, his face twisted in pure terror. He didn’t ask for help anymore. He just started screaming.

From his wheelchair, Sebastian looked down at the guy like he was dirt. His black shirt was expensive, but it just made him look darker and colder. Right now, he didn’t look human. He looked like a monster with icy

eyes.

“Ivan Yates,” Sebastian said softly. He didn’t shout, but the name landed heavy in the air.

A young man stepped out of the dark. His face was blank. He stood respectfully before Sebastian, though his eyes flickered over to Stella. “Mr. Gray,” he said.

Sebastian glanced at him. His face didn’t change, but the silence was terrifying. “Go take your punishment.”

“Yes, sir,” Ivan replied.

Ivan had let the prisoner out on purpose to freak Stella out. He knew Sebastian had caught him red-handed, so he accepted the order without fighting it.

“You devil...” the man on the floor screamed. “Sebastian, you’re a lunatic. You sick freak!”

Ivan grabbed the guy by the back of his neck and dragged him back into the shadows. The screaming got quieter as they went deeper, but it still echoed off the walls.

Stella stared at the blood trail on the floor, seemingly deep in thought. Sebastian watched her. He looked dangerous, like a loaded gun.

“Scared yet?” Sebastian asked, his voice low and icy.

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Lifting her head slowly, Stella asked, “Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead,” Sebastian replied.

“Are Ivan, John, and Jake actually related?” she asked. “Like, real brothers?”

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It was a genuine question. ‘John and Jake look enough alike,’ she thought. ‘but where did this Ivan guy come from? If they are all related, their mom was seriously busy.’

Sebastian stared at her, completely thrown off. ‘She looked so serious,’ he thought. ‘I thought she was thinking about the blood.’

“No,” he said flatly.

“I knew it,” Stella said, nodding like she’d solved a mystery. She went right back to her usual lazy vibe. “Let me guess. There are a bunch of other guys named Yates running around, too, right?”

Sebastian paused. She wasn’t wrong. “John and Jake are blood brothers,” he said. “But the rest...”

“Say no more,” she cut in, pushing the wheelchair forward again. “You were just too lazy to think up different last names.”

Sebastian actually didn’t have a good comeback for that. As they rolled deeper into the dark hallway, dirty hands shot out from the bars on both sides.

Prisoners were wailing, begging for a way out. But the second they saw Sebastian’s face, the begging died. It was replaced by screams of absolute horror.

Through all the noise, Stella didn’t even flinch. At one point, she actually yawned. The prisoners peering through the gaps came to a swift conclusion: she might look like an angel, but she was just as twisted as the man in the wheelchair.

Sebastian's gaze never left her. Eventually, Stella sighed and stopped the chair. "Mr. Gray, is there something on my face? You keep staring."

"Is that the only question you have?" Sebastian asked.

'Is she really not curious?' he thought. 'Doesn't she care who these people are? Doesn't she want to know why they are rotting in here?'

"Yep," Stella said without missing a beat.

Sebastian fell silent. Stella looked down, but the heavy shadows masked his expression. Seeing that the black blanket had slipped off his knees, she leaned over and carefully tucked it back around his legs.

Their eyes met. "Mr. Gray," Stella said. "In my book, everything you do is right. So if these guys are locked up in here, they must deserve it."

'Sebastian is the good guy,' she thought. 'And even if he isn't, I'm on his side. That is just how this works.'

On the ride down, Sebastian had run through a million worst-case scenarios in his head. But he hadn't

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counted on Stella trusting him so blindly. For the first time in years, that cold stone he called a heart actually felt a spark of warmth.

The moment was ruined by a sudden, jagged wail from the cells behind them. "Shut up," Sebastian snapped.

His face went dark instantly. His voice was flat, but it sounded so dangerous that the wailing cut off immediately. A dead silence fell over the dungeon.

Seconds ago, the prisoners were clawing at the bars. Now, they scrambled back into the deepest shadows of their cells. They huddled in the corners, shaking in fear. To them, Sebastian was a thousand times scarier than any monster in the dark.

"They are bad people," Sebastian said, pausing to let it sink in. "Like, really bad."

“Yeah, I know,” Stella said softly.

“The worst kind of scum,” he added.

“I believe you,” Stella replied.

She kept wheeling him deeper into the hall. As they moved, the lights behind them flickered and died, swallowing the cells in darkness again. Safe in the shadows, the prisoners started cursing.

“To hell with him. So I smoked a couple dozen war reporters. Big deal. I hijacked some aid trucks and let a few hundred kids starve. So what?”

“Hell, all I did was sell facial recognition tech to Monterra. It’s not my fault they used it to wipe out tens of thousands of people.”

“I just sold some army secrets. That’s all...”

“Let us out... I don’t wanna die here...”

”

Inside a dark cell at the end of the hall, Snowball was curled up in the corner. His creepy red eyes were locked on Grace, who was passed out on the floor and covered in cuts and bruises.

The heavy door creaked open. Snowball hissed and showed his fangs, ready to strike. But the second it recognized the visitors, it froze.

Snowball tried to force his scary mouth into a smile. The vicious python turned into a giant, harmless pet in a split second.

Stella stared. ‘Seriously?’ she thought. ‘Since when’s Snowball such a suck-up?’

“Mr. Gray,” a voice drifted from the dark.

Ivan stepped out of the shadows. His skin was sickly pale from years of living without sunlight, and his face was totally blank. He didn’t look like a guy who just got whipped twenty times.

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Snowball was busy acting cute. It rubbed its big head against Stella's hand and tapped its tail on the floor like a dog. Ivan watched the snake fawning over her and mentally rolled his eyes.

Turning to Sebastian, Ivan got straight to the point. "Grace took money from Richard and Linda. They wanted to mess up Lucas. They needed him to fail so Ryan would look like a genius. Since Grace was hired by Mrs. Annette Gray, so..."

A dangerous shadow crossed Sebastian's face, his expression growing even colder.

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The room felt heavy, like a storm was about to break. Sebastian sat there in silence for a long time. The only sound was the clicking of the black prayer beads in his hand.

He smelled like calming sandalwood and cedar, but there was nothing calm about him. His eyes looked dark and violent. Even Snowball looked terrified, curling up in the corner like he wanted to disappear.

"Get rid of her," Sebastian said. His voice was low and cold.

Ivan knew exactly who he was talking about. He hesitated and said, "But what about Mrs. Annette Gray? If we

Sebastian didn't let him finish. He looked up, his eyes cutting Ivan off instantly. "I said, get rid of her."

The vibe in the room got scary fast. Ivan realized he was pushing his luck and shut his mouth instantly. Stella spun the wheelchair around and pushed Sebastian out, leaving the bloody room behind them.

As soon as they were out of the dungeon, Sebastian had his phone out. He called Colten right there in front of Stella. It was the middle of the night, but Colten answered on the first ring.

Stella raised an eyebrow as she listened to their conversation, but she didn't say anything.

Far away, Richard was sleeping peacefully in his warm bed. He had no clue a storm was coming to wipe out his business the moment the sun came up.

Suddenly, Stella stopped. John and Jake were sprinting out of the villa, looking panicked. "Mr. Gray! Ms. Carter," John shouted, out of breath. "It's Lucas. He's sick."

They rushed to Lucas's bedroom. Allan was sitting on the floor, holding Lucas tight. The poor kid was gagging and throwing up all over himself.

Allan looked up when they burst in. "He can't stop vomiting," he said, his voice shaking. "He threw up everything he ate."

Lucas had his eyes squeezed shut in pain, but the familiar smell of Stella made him peek through his lashes. He let out a weak noise and reached his arms out to her.

Stella didn't think twice. She grabbed Lucas from Allan, not caring about the mess on his clothes. The boy felt like a rag doll in her arms-weak, pale, and making painful noises in his throat.

Big Ben said, "This isn't food poisoning. Lucas is sick because he's stressed out and unhappy. His stomach just can't handle the emotions. You guys need to keep him away from whatever is upsetting him."

Sebastian gripped the armrest of his wheelchair so hard his knuckles turned white. The veins on his hand popped out.

He started to reach out to comfort Lucas, but his hand froze in mid-air. The memory of Lucas shrinking away from him earlier that day flashed through his mind. Painfully he let his hand drop back to his lap.

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Sebastian kept his face like stone as he spun his wheelchair around. He needed to get out of there. In his mind, leaving was the only solution. As long as he was in the room, Lucas would be terrified.

But the moment the wheelchair turned, Lucas broke down. Big, heavy tears rolled down his cheeks, and he looked so sad it hurt to watch.

“Sebastian, wait,” Stella called out.

Sebastian hit the brakes. Before he could even ask why, he felt a sudden weight in his arms. Stella had dropped Lucas right into his lap. His eyes went wide, and his whole body locked up tight.

“No,” Sebastian stammered. “Lucas is-”

He tried to explain that the kid was scared to death of him. But the words never came out. A strange thing happened. Lucas stopped throwing up, and he wasn't even pushing Sebastian away.

Instead, the boy grabbed onto Sebastian's shirt like it was a lifeline and buried his face in his uncle's chest, crying without making a sound.

The room went dead quiet. Everyone just stared. “Sebastian,” Stella said softly. “Rub his back. Nice and easy.”

She leaned down, took Sebastian's wrist, and guided his hand to the boy's back. Sebastian's hand was usually rock-steady, even when holding a gun, but right now it was trembling.

He tried to move his hand, but he was too stiff. Lucas frowned in discomfort. Sebastian panicked. He looked up at Stella, and his eyes screamed for help.

“Slow down,” she whispered. “Gentle.”

Sebastian nodded. He tried again. He forced his hand to relax and found a slow, steady rhythm. It worked. The tension left Lucas's shoulders. The boy finally looked like he was not in pain anymore.

Allan stood there looking down at his shirt, which was covered in puke. He thought, 'Why do they look like a perfect family while I'm just standing here covered in vomit?'

"Lucas," Stella said, gently wiping the cold sweat off the boy's forehead. "You want to tell Sebastian something?"

Lucas nodded. Tears were still dripping off his chin. He tapped the screen of his watch. Big Ben's voice spoke for him. "Uncle Sebastian..."

He tapped it again. He needed to be heard. Big Ben said, "Uncle Sebastian."

It was heartbreaking to watch. Stella could not believe this was the only way they knew how to talk to each other. "Sebastian," she said. "Answer him."

"I'm here," Sebastian rumbled, his voice thick with emotion.

Lucas sniffled loudly, his nose red and raw. His wet eyelashes trembled. He pressed the watch face one more time. Big Ben said, "I'll be a good boy, I promise. Uncle Sebastian, please don't send me away."

Lucas started crying all over again. Big tears rolled down his cheeks and dripped off his chin. Allan couldn't

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take it anymore. "Damn it," he whispered.

He quickly tried to fix it. "Lucas, look at me," Allan said softly. "Nobody's sending you away. You are the favorite around here. Literally everyone loves you."

"Lucas," Sebastian said, his voice firm. "Even if you burned this house down, I wouldn't send you away

He thought about how he raised Lucas from a baby. There was no way he could ever let him go.

But the promise didn't help. Lucas cried harder. Grace's nasty words were stuck in his head. She called him bad luck and said Sebastian would dump him once he got a wife. He was terrified that a wedding meant goodbye to his uncle and Stella.

Allan paced around the room like a nervous cat. The men felt useless, so naturally, they all turned and looked at Stella. Without anyone voting on it, she had somehow become the boss of Sandridge Island.

Stella noticed the stares. 'Great, she thought. 'Why's everyone staring at me? Lucas is crying, not me.'

Even Sebastian looked up at her. "Why is he still crying?"

This was a man who could close a deal worth tens of billions without a flicker of emotion. But right now, he looked totally lost. The scary CEO mask was gone. He was just a panicked guy who didn't know how to fix a crying kid.

Stella fought the urge to roll her eyes. She thought, 'Ask him, you idiots. I can't read minds. They're useless.'

She kept her face calm and poked Lucas on his soft cheek. It was soft and squishy. She liked it. "Okay, Lucas," she said. "Why the tears?"

Lucas let out a wet hiccup. He tapped his watch, and Big Ben's voice filled the room. "If Uncle Sebastian gets married, he will have his own babies. And then Stella and I will get kicked out."

Stella blinked. 'Wow,' she thought. 'You are five years old. You worry too much.'

"I'm not getting married," Sebastian said.

His eyes darkened slightly, and for a split second, his gaze flickered toward Stella before snapping back. It happened so fast that nobody caught it.

Everyone expected the tears to stop, but Lucas just wailed louder. Big Ben chimed in again. "No. That makes me a selfish, bad kid."

The adults froze, confused by the kid's logic. "So," Big Ben continued. "Uncle Sebastian, you have to marry Stella."

Stella looked like she had been slapped. Allan burst out laughing. "Okay, Lucas, nice dream," he said. "Your uncle's never gonna do that."

Allan smiled to himself. He thought, ‘Sebastian wants to be Stella’s father, not her husband.’

“Okay,” Sebastian said.

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The smile died on Allan’s face. He froze. Wait. What he thought. Run that back. Did I hear that right?’

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Allan turned his head slowly, like his neck was rusted shut. He stared at Sebastian. Even with a crying child in his arms, Sebastian still looked cold as ice.

Allan couldn't wrap his head around it. There was no way Sebastian just agreed to that request. The room went dead silent.

Snowball slithered in, belly full and happy, but paused. It looked left, then right. The vibes in the room were weird enough to spook even a snake.

Allan decided his ears must be playing tricks on him. He cleared his throat. "Sebastian," he asked, trying to keep his voice steady. "You just said 'No way,' right?"

Sebastian didn't even blink. "I said okay."

Allan kept a stiff smile on his face. He turned to John. "What did Sebastian just say? I didn't catch it."

John stayed quiet, so Allan turned his smile toward Jake. Jake didn't waste breath on words. He just hauled off and slapped Allan across the face. The sound was loud and sharp.

"Hurt?" Jake asked flatly.

Allan clutched his cheek, wincing. "Yeah, it hurts..."

"Good," Jake said. "Then you are not dreaming. You heard him right."

Allan cursed Jake in his mind. Lucas was the only one happy about this. He looked at Stella with big, wet eyes, trying to look as pitiful as possible.

Sebastian glanced at her, too. He acted like he didn't care, but he was watching. Then Allan, John, and Jake all turned their heads at the same time. Everyone was staring right at Stella.

Stella was baffled. 'The logic of a five-year-old is a mystery,' she thought. 'How in the world did he jump from 'don't kick me out' to 'marry Sebastian?'

Lucas tapped the screen of his watch. Big Ben's voice filled the silence. "Stella..."

He tapped it again. Big Ben said, "Stella... Stella..."

Stella shrugged. Her voice was casual, like she was discussing the weather. "I'm not marrying Mr. Gray. That's not happening."

The mood in the room crashed instantly. Allan felt his stomach drop. He was terrified to even look at Lucas or Sebastian.

It happened instantly. Lucas's eyes filled up with fresh tears, ready to flood. Sebastian's face went dark. The temperature in the room felt like it dropped ten degrees in a second.

John and Jake shrank back, trying to make themselves invisible. In the corner, Snowball was a trembling ball

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of scales. Allan tried to break the awkward silence. "So..."

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He never finished the thought. Stella was already crouching down, eye-level with the boy. "Lucas, you know," she said gently. "I'm only eighteen. The law in Clusia says I'm way too young to get married."

Lucas froze. After a second, he tapped his watch screen. Big Ben asked, "Not even to anyone else?"

Stella shook her head. "Nope. Nobody."

Lucas let out a long breath. The tears stopped, and his shoulders dropped. He looked like a huge weight had been taken off him. He tapped his watch screen. Big Ben spoke up. "Then I'm safe."

Lucas closed his eyes. Seconds later, soft snores filled the room. The adults stood there, stunned by the instant power-down.

Allan felt a little emotional. 'He's an angel,' he thought, 'but only when he's asleep.'

Then the smell hit him. He looked down at the vomit on his shirt, gagged. "I'm gonna go take a shower," he muttered, heading for the door.

John and Jake followed him, leaving the room quiet. Sebastian sat there, rigid as a board. He was terrified to move and wake Lucas. His eyes just tracked Stella as she walked around the room.

“Feeling better, Mr. Gray?” Stella leaned back against the wall, a teasing smile playing on her lips. “What happened to, ‘I don’t care if he’s scared of me. As long as he’s alive?’”

She was throwing his own tough-guy speech right back in his face. Sebastian kept his face blank. “Stella...” he said quietly.

Even with a sleeping kid in his lap, he still looked dangerous. But his voice gave him away. He sounded beaten. It was a tone nobody had ever heard from him before.

Stella felt a little thump in her chest, but she ignored it. She pushed off the wall and leaned right into his personal space.

Planting a hand on his armrest to trap him, she looked down and said, “Next time you want to know what Lucas is thinking, don’t be a stone. Just ask him.”

Sebastian held her gaze, silent. Stella chuckled softly. She straightened up and gently lifted the sleeping boy from his frozen arms.

Allan could not sleep that night. He tossed and turned in bed. Something about the evening just felt wrong to him. Finally, he got up and walked down the hall. He knocked on Sebastian’s door.

Sebastian opened it. He looked like hell. He sat in his wheelchair, wrapped in something dark and heavy, looking like a dark king on a throne. He had tried to sleep without his pills and failed. He was in a nasty mood.

Allan swallowed hard and asked the question burning a hole in his brain. “So, be honest. What kind of ‘Dad’ are you trying to be to Stella?”

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Sebastian didn’t say a word. He just stared with those cold eyes. Allan pushed his luck. “Are we talking a father figure... or Daddy?”

Allan thought about how Sebastian had agreed to the marriage idea earlier. He looked at Sebastian with pure judgment. “You are a sicko,” Allan said. “You know that, right? A total pervert.”

Sebastian's hand tightened on the wheel. He had been about to take his sleeping meds, but now his patience snapped. His face turned thunderous. Allan realized he had poked the bear one too many times. His knees turned to jelly.

"Get out," Sebastian growled, slamming the door shut.

"You got it," Allan said, already backing away.

The next morning, a bomb dropped on Haliville. The city government slammed the brakes on a massive Gray Group project.

That project was a goldmine. It was going to print tens of billions in pure profit. But at dawn, everything stopped. The workers dug up an ancient graveyard right under the site.

The news hit the market like a wrecking ball. The Gray Group's stock crashed so hard that it triggered the circuit breaker instantly. This project was Richard's baby. He wanted to use it to prove himself after he kicked Sebastian out.

Penelope burst into the CEO's office at the Pierce Group. She looked pale and frantic. "Dad," she shouted, closing the door behind her. "What are we going to do?"

Kendrick frowned. He shot a look at his lawyer, signaling him to step back. "Calm down," Kendrick snapped. "Stop acting like a child."

Penelope's voice was high and shrill. "Dad, it's Gray Group. How did nobody see those tombs before? Why did they find them today? It makes no sense."

"Use your brain," Kendrick said coldly. "Someone's pulling the strings here."

Penelope's lip trembled. All she could think about was her money. She had put 15 million dollars into that project.

Her husband's family threw in hundreds of millions because she told them it was a sure thing. Now, everyone was freaking out, and the target was on her back.

"I..." Penelope stuttered.

Her eyes darted to the desk. A document sat there. She caught the words "Last Will" at the top before the lawyer quickly covered it with a folder.

A dark look appeared on Penelope's face. She wondered if her dad was changing his will again.

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Allan stared at everything that had arrived at Sandridge Island from Nova Mall, utterly stunned. Boxes were piled up everywhere. He thought, 'Did Sebastian buy all this for Stella?'

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Allan thought, 'Did Sebastian just bring back a gold mine or something?'

'Never in my life have I seen a mall delivery arrive in shipping containers.'

‘Three of them, no less?’

‘Isn’t this a little over the top?’

‘Did Sebastian just buy out everything Stella could possibly wear in her entire life, all at once?’

Stella, meanwhile, was completely clueless about all this.

Sebastian was holed up in his study, deep in a video call.

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The 27-inch computer screen was split into several windows, with people dialing in from all corners of the globe.

After another sleepless night, Sebastian’s face was pale and striking, an icy vibe radiating from him that sent chills through the screen. The dark circles under his eyes only made his presence more intense.

His black, custom-tailored suit made his whole vibe even more intimidating.

Sebastian zoned out for a moment.

Suddenly, someone knocked from outside, and the door opened just a crack.

Stella and Lucas peeked their heads in.

Everyone on the video call was immediately stunned by Sebastian’s change.

Even though they couldn’t see who had come in, they were amazed to see Sebastian, who was usually ice-cold, actually starting to melt.

Sebastian gestured for them to come in. “Carry on,” he told the people on the video call, barely moving his lips, though his attention was clearly on Stella and Lucas.

Lucas was full of energy again.

He tugged Stella down to sit with him on the snowy white carpet, clutching a chess set he’d somehow fished out from who knows where, and started setting up the pieces with a serious look, just like he’d seen adults do.

He’d just woken up, so there was still a little tuft of hair sticking up on his head.

He looked so fair and soft, absolutely adorable.

One of the white chess pieces slipped from his hand and rolled right over to Sebastian's feet.

Lucas cocked his head to the side, looking all soft and lost as he gave Stella a confused look.

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He was silently asking, "What do I do now?"

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His big, innocent eyes were practically begging for help.

Stella thought, 'Well, guess I need to pick it up for him.'

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Stella got up lazily and deliberately moved to the other side of the desk to avoid the camera during Sebastian's video call. She silently realized that unless she actually crawled under the table, there was no way she could reach the chess piece.

Stella froze.

On the video call, someone had just finished presenting a set of data and was waiting for Sebastian's instructions.

Sebastian parted his lips, his voice icy and fluent as he effortlessly switched between languages. His tone was so chilling and aloof that it made people shiver. But then, out of nowhere, his voice stopped.

The executives from all over the world stared at his face on their screens, as if the video had frozen. But in the next moment, Sebastian slowly bent down, vanishing from the camera's view.

Everyone on the video call looked confused.

Sebastian's deep eyes locked onto Stella, who had somehow ended up under his desk. Her pale fingers were still reaching for the chess piece, and she paused, surprised by his sudden movement.

Their faces were so close that they could feel each other's breath mingling in the small space between them.

"Mr. Gray," Stella said quietly, hoping he'd just mind his own business and get back to work.

Sebastian's face stayed as cold and handsome as ever. Without even glancing her way, he picked up the white chess piece with those long, cool fingers of his, lashes lowered, looking even more like he didn't care about

the world.

"Hand," he said.

Stella opened her palm in front of him, and he gently placed the white Queen piece right back into her hand.

Sebastian spread his hand out, shielding Stella's head from bumping into the desk as she crawled out.

Stella just blinked, staying still.

She silently gripped the Queen piece in her hand.

"Come out," Sebastian said.

Stella crawled out, and sure enough, her head brushed right against Sebastian's palm where he'd been shielding her.

She headed back over to Lucas and gently set the Queen piece back onto the board, all while the hum of the video call behind her picked right back up.

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Fifteen minutes later, the meeting wrapped up.

Sebastian steered his electric wheelchair out from behind the desk, pulling up right behind Stella.

On the chessboard, Stella and Lucas were going head-to-head, neither backing down for a second.

Their hands flew across the board, moving pieces faster and faster: each one desperate to come out on top.

“I win!” Stella announced, her tone playful and triumphant.

She raised an eyebrow, her beautiful eyes glinting with a touch of swagger.

Lucas, all soft and adorable, fished a lollipop out of his pocket and handed it to her.

Stella took it, and as she leaned back, she suddenly realized Sebastian was standing right behind her.

“Mr. Gray,” she drawled, tilting her head back lazily and showing off her prize.

“Mm,” Sebastian replied.

His voice came out a bit hoarse, sounding tired. His eye settled on Stella’s face and asked, “Did you need something?”

He watched as Stella peeled the wrapper and slipped the lollipop between her lips.

A hint of pink flashed across her lips for a moment.

Sebastian silently looked away, his breath hitching just a little.

Lucas snuck a peek at Sebastian, looking just like a little ragdoll kitten: all fluffy, pale, and irresistibly soft.

He pulled out his little writing pad, the one he hadn’t touched in ages.

He wrote: [Uncle Sebastian.]

“Mm,” Sebastian replied, remembering how Stella had mentioned last night that he should give Lucas an

answer.

As soon as he heard that, Lucas instantly perked up, a huge smile spreading across his face.

With his head down, Lucas kept scribbling and erasing on his little writing pad, going back and forth again and again.

Sebastian and Stella didn't hurry him at all. They just let him fuss as long as he wanted.

Time slipped by in quiet silence.

Sebastian's eyes landed right on the top of Stella's head.

Her hair was smooth; it looked just begging to be petted.

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His long, icy fingers twitched more than once, but he had to fight the urge to reach out.

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Finally, as if he'd made up his mind, Lucas let out a little grown-up sigh and held up his writing pad.

He wrote: [I want to go to school.]

Sebastian stayed silent for a long time, just staring at the words on the writing pad. Sitting there in his wheelchair, he was like ancient, unmelted ice. His true feelings were impossible to read.

After a long silence, Sebastian finally spoke, his voice cold as ice. He said, "Say that one more time?"

Lucas let out a sigh.

He wiped the pad clean with extra care, then, getting used to this routine, held it up again like a pro.

He wrote: [Uncle Sebastian, I want to go to school.]

Silence fell again.

Stella, still sucking on her lollipop, was just about to turn around to see if Sebastian had frozen up again when she was suddenly pulled into a warm embrace from behind.

That familiar, dark woody scent: intense and possessive, completely overwhelmed her senses, leaving her breathless.

Stella and Lucas were both stunned.

With his long arm, Sebastian easily pulled the petite Stella close, and even through his suit, she could feel his muscles taut with excitement.

Even though his face remained as cold and unreadable as ever.

Sebastian lowered his chin to gently rest atop Stella's head. He murmured, "Thank you."

Sebastian had tried every trick in the book, but Lucas never gave in. The kid even went on a three-day hunger strike to make his point: no amount of coaxing or threats ever worked on him.

Everything on Sandridge Island started to change the moment Stella showed up.

Lucas's cheeks puffed up in an instant, making him look just like a cute little pufferfish, all pouty and adorable.

Just as Lucas was about to step forward and pull them apart, the study door was suddenly thrown open from

outside.

"Sebastian, you-" Allan began, but his words died in his throat,

He stepped back out of the room and let the door bang shut behind him.

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The next second, the tightly shut study door was pushed open again from the outside.

“You... you... you guys...” Allan stammered, his voice trembling with shock.

He stormed over and covered Lucas’s eyes with one hand.

Lucas was confused.

“Do you even know what these are?” Allan asked, then waved his index and middle fingers in front of his own

eyes.

Sebastian was speechless.

Stella asked, “Eyes?”

Allan said, “Wrong. These are the moral yardsticks!” He looked at Sebastian, heartbroken and shaking his head. He demanded, “How could you do something so inappropriate in front of Lucas? He’s only five.”

Both Sebastian and Stella were speechless.

“You animal!” Allan huffed, his face full of righteous accusation.

Sebastian’s face was cold and unreadable, his gaze as sharp as a blade as he reached out toward Allan.

Allan instantly shrank his neck, moving with the ease of someone who’d done this a hundred times before.

The next moment, the whiteboard with the message [Uncle Sebastian, I want to go to school] was suddenly thrust right in front of Allan’s face.

Allan shouted with excitement, more hyped than anyone, and scooped Lucas up into his arms. He exclaimed, "Lucas actually asked to go to school on his own. My precious baby! I'm going to buy you a castle as your back-to-school gift."

Wearing the same frosty expression as Sebastian, Lucas dodged Allan's dramatic, tearful kisses like a pro, totally unfazed, while sending Stella a silent SOS for help.

"So, what are you even doing here?" Stella asked offhandedly as she pulled Lucas out of Allan's dramatic embrace.

Allan's brain short-circuited for a couple of seconds.

Luckily, he recovered pretty fast.

"The stuff from Nova Mall just got delivered, but there's no way it'll all fit in Stella's closet. John wants to know how you want to handle it," Allan said.

Stella thought, 'Can't fit in? My closet's huge. I didn't pick out that much, did I?'

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"Don't believe me? See for yourself!" Allan said, pointing toward the window.

Thinking he was just being dramatic, Stella wandered over to the big glass window and casually peeked outside.

After a beat, she turned to Sebastian, speechless.

Sebastian stayed stone-faced and looked away.

Stella raised an eyebrow and asked, "What's with those three containers out there?"

Sebastian thought, 'Well, I just figured the clothes you picked are enough. So I ordered even more. But it looks like I kinda went overboard by accident.'

But he didn't dare say that out; he just let out a dry chuckle.

Lucas was totally hyped. He grabbed Stella's leg, looked up at her, his eyes sparkling with curiosity.

He was clearly dying to know what was going on.

Sebastian suddenly thought of something and wheeled himself over to the desk. His private phone was on silent, but it was getting spammed with calls. Not even bothering to look, he just reached into the drawer.

He pulled out a brand-new, limited-edition phone.

He handed it to Stella and said, "Here."

Stella said, "My phone still works. It just looks kind of beat up now that I took off the rhinestones."

Sebastian didn't say a word, but he kept holding the phone out, refusing to let "Stella, just take it, no arguments!" Allan said.

He stuffed the phone into Stella's hand without hesitation.

The phone wasn't something one could buy off the shelf. It was a custom-made, ultra-exclusive model. Only their inner circle had these, with top-tier security.

It was ridiculously pricey, but only those in the know would ever recognize it.

That logo on the back? Anyone who knew their stuff would instantly get their worth.

"Stella isn't someone any random nobody can just mock," Allan said, smirking.

He sneered inwardly, 'Seriously, what's so impressive about flexing that crappy smartphone in front of Stella?

'Our kid on the island gets only the best: food, clothes, everything!'

And that was exactly what Sebastian wanted, too.

"I'll have John open up both sides of your room and put your seasonal clothes in there first," Sebastian said in

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his usual calm tone, already having everything sorted out.

“You...” Stella hesitated, wanting to say something.

But before she could, Lucas was already tugging at her sleeve, eager to check out her new clothes.

“Thanks,” Stella drawled, taking Lucas by the hand as they left the study.

Once Stella was gone, Allan’s expression instantly turned serious again.

He said, “Sebastian, Gray Group’s stock price has already hit the daily limit down right at the opening bell.”

Sebastian didn’t say a word. He picked up his private phone, which had been lighting up nonstop. Carlos had already called him twenty times.

He looked seriously anxious.

Sebastian’s eyes grew cold and distant. Ever since Stella and Lucas left, the air around him turned icy and forbidding, a chilling aura that warned everyone to stay away.

The black prayer beads, etched with scripture, dangled loosely from his wrist. So flawless it looked sculpted by an artist.

Sebastian gave off a cold, dangerous vibe.

Downstairs, Stella was messing with her new phone, looking absent-minded, clearly lost in her own world.

Lucas was running wild through the pile of new clothes.

“Lucas,” Stella called out, her voice lazy and casual.

She waved him over, and Lucas giggled as he dashed back to her. He threw his arms around her leg, his puppy eyes all bright and watery.

He tilted his head to the side, gazing up at her.

“Does Sebastian like anything in particular?” Stella asked.

Lucas kept tilting his head, trying super hard to remember.

Suddenly, his eyes lit up.

He started miming something with his hands.

Stella raised an eyebrow and asked, “You mean cars?”

Lucas nodded eagerly.

“Are you sure?” Stella asked, raising an eyebrow. She thought, ‘With Sebastian’s legs, can he even get behind

the wheel?’

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Seeing Stella doubt him, Lucas started getting anxious and grabbed her hand, pulling her straight toward the elevator inside the villa.

The moment the elevator doors opened, the whole place lit up.

Luxury cars lined up in perfect order: each one a limited-edition sports car, quietly parked. Their sleek bodies caught the light, throwing off a cold, dark gleam.

Just like their owner: cool and distant.

And right up front, in the best spot, was the black Maybach Sebastian usually took.

Stella stood there with her hands in her pockets, her eyes lowered.

Allan’s voice suddenly came from behind her, asking, “Isn’t this sick?”

Stella looked up to see Allan strolling out of the shadows, back to his usual cocky self. He glanced at the cars, a hint of nostalgia in his eyes.

“Too bad you didn’t know Sebastian back in the day, Stella. He was way crazier behind the wheel than I ever was,” Allan said.

He pointed to the Lamborghini Veneno parked at the very end of the corridor and said, “Sebastian was the first of us to get into street racing. That car was his very first trophy.”

Stella followed his finger, her eyes narrowing with a laid-back, curious vibe.

She asked, “Is there a car Mr. Gray actually wants? Like, something he doesn’t already have?”

“Of course,” Allan said, grinning like he was half-joking.

He said, “Pagani Zonda. Only 140 in the whole world. See that empty spot over there? That’s where the Zonda’s supposed to go.”

Thinking of something, Allan’s eyes flashed cold for a moment, but it disappeared just as quickly.

Stella kept quiet, just staring at the empty parking spot.

Suddenly, Allan’s phone chimed with a message. He glanced at it, not really paying attention until he saw the group message and couldn’t help but yell, “Damn!”

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Chapter 79

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Stella turned her head toward him, raising an eyebrow.

Allan said, “There’s a street race in Haliville tonight!”

Allan was a total motorhead, obsessed with both official races and wild underground ones. Just talking about it had his adrenaline racing.

Stella repeated, “Street race?” Her eyes flashed with a bit of streetwise attitude, but she didn’t look the least bit interested.

“It’s totally illegal: no rules, no safety, you crash, it’s all on you,” Allan said, glancing at Lucas, who was still a ways off, and dropped his voice.

To Stella, Allan looked just like a guilty puppy sneaking around!

Allan said, “There’s this legendary mountain road in Haliville, the Death Road. Every racer in Clusia knows about it. It’s insanely challenging.”

Whenever Allan talked about something he loved, one could see the excitement practically shining in his

eyes.

Because the death and accident rates were so high, races on the Death Road only happened once every six months or even a year. This was Allan’s first time actually catching one.

“What’s the prize?” Stella asked.

These street races always came with some jaw-dropping prizes.

It just cranked up the excitement even more.

“Let me check,” Allan said, scrolling down to the very bottom of his phone.

He didn’t say a word for what felt like forever.

Stella snapped her fingers, giving him a raised eyebrow, totally deadpan.

Allan turned his phone toward her.

The prize was a Pagani Zonda.

It was the one Sebastian wanted.

Allan said, “Whoever wins tonight’s street race gets to drive off in this Pagani Zonda!” He tried to play it cool, but inside, he was practically buzzing. He was dead set on bringing this car home for Sebastian.

“Stella, wanna come with me tonight and see some real action?” Allan asked.

“Count me in,” Stella said, her eyes sharp and her whole vibe turning fierce. She was clearly interested now.

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Allan was absolutely floored.

“Did you just say what I think you said? I must’ve misheard,” Allan asked again, just to be sure.

“I said, I’m in,” Stella repeated herself, slow and clear, dead serious.

Allan was stunned for a moment.

When he realized Stella was actually serious, a chill ran down his spine. He instantly regretted ever mentioning it.

“Hey, Stella, chill! This kind of race is seriously dangerous,” Allan blurted out, worry all over his face.

“I know. I’m still in,” Stella replied.

Her voice was lazy, like she didn’t care, but her presence was just as fierce as Sebastian’s.

“People can seriously die in these races,” Allan pleaded, worry written all over his face.

He was trying everything to talk sense into her, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead.

“I! Am! In!” Stella replied, her voice icy and unshakable.

She just stared him down, cold as ice.

“No way! Absolutely not. If Sebastian finds out, he’s seriously gonna murder me,” Allan blurted out, just picturing it made him shiver all over.

But then, Stella fixed him with a look full of meaning, her eyes saying way more than words ever could.

Stella said, “Oh, and if Mr. Gray finds out...” She trailed off, giving Allan a meaningful look.

Allan just froze.

Lucas, who’d been scampering around the garage, finally came running back. He sensed the weird vibe in the air, so his little head turned from Stella to Allan, back and forth.

He reached out his tiny little hand and poked at Allan, who was totally zoned out like a statue.

Allan cursed inwardly, ‘Shit! I’m so dead.’

Night fell.

In the dining room, for once, Allan was actually on time, no jet lag in sight. He showed up in a smoky grey suit, his hair slicked back in a classic style, and those gold-rimmed glasses perched on his nose again.

He pulled out a chair and sat down across from Sebastian.

“Sebastian, I need to head out for something tonight,” Allan said.

As he spoke, he tried to act normal, picking up his fork, but his hands were shaking like crazy.

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Stella just stared at him, thinking, ‘Is he for real?’

Sebastian looked up at Allan, his face totally blank. His icy eyes were as deep and unreadable as an ancient

ocean.

“It’s really important!” Allan said with a dry laugh, trying to emphasize just how urgent it was.

Suddenly, Sebastian raised his hand, making Allan jump.

Snowball, which had been lazily coiled around the decorative tree, perked up at its master's call. It slithered down, hissing softly, and draped its huge head over Sebastian's shoulder like it owned the place.

"Just how important is it?" Sebastian asked, his voice low and steady as he absentmindedly stroked Snowball, looking as unreadable as ever.

Allan swallowed nervously, let out a couple of awkward chuckles, and said, "Super important, really, really important."

Sebastian was speechless.

Stella kept eating, completely unfazed. She chimed in, "I'm heading out tonight, too. Allan, you're driving

me."

Lucas, who hadn't cared one bit about Allan leaving, was instantly stunned by Stella's words. His fork dropped with a loud clatter; his little mouth quivered. He looked absolutely devastated.

Lucas typed on his watch.

Big Ben, standing nearby, asked, "Hey, can Lucas tag along?"

Stella turned her head and placed a piece of meat into Lucas's bowl. She said, "Not happening."

Lucas typed again.

Big Ben asked, "Stella, you heard me, right?"

Stella's hand froze for a second. She asked, "What?"

Lucas repeated the movement.

Big Ben said, "Lucas's heart just broke!"

Stella was speechless.

Snowball, who'd been curled up comfortably by Sebastian, suddenly shuddered, almost making all its scales stand on end. It hesitantly lifted its big head and sneaked a nervous glance at Sebastian.

Right then, Sebastian was absentmindedly petting Snowball, but his icy gaze was locked on Allan and Stella.

The air in the huge room felt thinner by the second, as if the whole place were freezing over.

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John frowned, elbowed Jake, who was still spacing out, and shot him a look. The two of them made a quick exit from the restaurant.

“When will you be back?” Sebastian asked.

He glanced away, but the tension in the room was still thick as ice.

Allan grinned, feeling oddly touched. He said, “Wow, Sebastian, didn’t know you cared. I’ll be back before you know it, promise.”

Deep down, Allan actually felt a little guilty.

Sebastian looked up, his eyes cold as ice as he stared Allan down. He demanded, “Get lost.”

Allan was stunned for a moment.

“When will you be back?” Sebastian asked Stella again, his voice cold and unyielding.

He was unusually persistent about getting an answer.

“No idea, depends on how things go,” Stella replied, grabbing a napkin to wipe her mouth like she didn’t even notice the bone-chilling air coming off Sebastian.

One thing was crystal clear to Allan now: Stella wasn’t afraid of Sebastian. Not even a hint of fear.

When Stella answered, Sebastian’s grim face grew even darker. The shadows under his eyes from last night’s lack of sleep made his stare downright scary.

Allan ducked his head as low as he could, his hands trembling so hard it was a miracle he didn’t drop anything.

He thought, ‘Seriously, did someone set the AC in this place to arctic blast or what?’

“Whatever,” Sebastian said coldly.

After a moment, Sebastian, face like ice, steered his electric wheelchair away.

Snowball shot past everyone’s feet at top speed, slithering out of the restaurant so fast it didn’t even glance at its food bowl.

It made a desperate dash for safety.

Maybe on purpose, maybe not, but Sebastian’s wheelchair slowed down a little as he passed by Stella.

Stella didn’t even look his way, totally ignoring him and busy cleaning up Lucas’s face.

The next second, Sebastian grabbed Stella’s wrist.

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Stella turned to look at Sebastian, confused,

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Sebastian looked dangerously cold and dark, his eyes like ancient ice, sending chills through the air.

The pressure in the room was so intense that it felt like a tornado was about to tear everything apart.

Allan swallowed nervously, barely daring to breathe, sneaking glances at the two of them from the corner of his eye.

Sebastian didn't say anything, but there was something in his eyes when he looked at Stella, something he wasn't saying out loud.

"Whatever," Sebastian repeated himself, his expression cold and unyielding, but his grip on her wrist only grew tighter.

Stella lazily raised her trapped wrist, her eyes signaling him. She said, "Let go."

Allan was shaking in his boots at Sebastian's icy glare. Just when he thought Sebastian was about to go nuclear, Sebastian simply let go of Stella's wrist, his face unreadable, and stormed out of the restaurant without another word.

The instant Sebastian left, Allan felt like his bones had turned to jelly, and he just slumped over the table, completely spent.

"Stella, don't you think Sebastian is really scary when he gets moody?" Allan croaked, barely able to get the words out.

He was so freaked out, he felt like his soul was about to jump out of his skin.

Stella didn't respond. Her long lashes lowered, masking the casual indifference in her eyes.

She thought, 'Scary?'

'Honestly, he's kind of cute.'

The bedroom was dark, not a single light on.

By the floor-to-ceiling windows, Sebastian sat in his black wheelchair, watching the sports car speed away. His expression blended into the darkness, showing no trace of human emotion. A shadow flickered in his

eyes.

He just sat there, not moving an inch.

After ages, the door to the kids' room swung open.

Snowball had been lazily slithering around on the floor with his back to the door, just relaxing. But the second the door opened, his whole body stiffened, his round head snapping around to stare at the cold, intimidating man standing there.

Snowball was stunned for a moment.

It thought, 'This must be a nightmare.

'Wake

up,

Snowball! Snap out of it!'

Lucas, fresh from his bath, sat sulking on the big bed, his cheeks resting in his hands.

Hearing the door open, Lucas's eyes sparkled, thinking Stella had come back. But when he realized it was Sebastian, his excitement vanished in a flash. He tilted his head, thought for a moment, then patted the spot beside him.

Sebastian steered his electric wheelchair around the petrified Snowball and sat down next to Lucas.

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The two of them sat side by side like ice sculptures: one big, one small.

Lucas let out a soft, wistful sigh.

Lucas typed on his watch.

Big Ben asked, "Where did Stella go?"

Lucas rested his chin in his hand, looking all forlorn and miserable.

Sebastian didn't reply.

Lucas typed again.

Big Ben asked, "When is Stella coming back?"

Sebastian kept silent.

Lucas did it again.

Big Ben said, "Stella..."

Sebastian cut him off, his voice cold and unyielding. He said, "It's 10:30. Time for bed."

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As he said this, Sebastian's face grew even darker. Years of insomnia had made him naturally averse to sleep, and just the thought of going to bed put him in an even worse mood. His eyes grew even colder.

Lucas puffed up his cheeks in a huff, looking just like a little squirrel with its cheeks stuffed full of nuts.

Lucas typed on his watch.

Big Ben said, "Stella always tells me bedtime stories!"

Lucas let out a tiny, mock-angry "hmpf" at Sebastian, trying to act tough but still sounding adorable.

Sebastian gave Lucas an even frostier glare.

But Lucas, who had grown up right next to Sebastian, wasn't buying any of it; he just flipped the attached shark hood of his onesie over his head and ignored him completely.

"So, what kind of story do you want to hear?" Sebastian asked at last, his voice still cold, but one could tell he was reluctantly giving in.

Lucas turned to look at him.

They just stared at each other in silence.

Stella always picked whatever she felt like, and he'd just listen until he drifted off to sleep. But now, with Sebastian here instead, Lucas had no idea what kind of story he wanted.

Sebastian began, "Once upon a time, there was a little tadpole who couldn't find his mom."

His face was totally blank, and his voice was as flat as a pancake.

Lucas's ears perked up.

"Then, it swam and swam, and bumped into a fish," Sebastian kept going, his voice still cold and monotone.

Lucas looked like he was lost in thought.

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Sebastian continued, "So it asked, 'Aunt Fish, have you seen my mom?'"

Lucas's eyes lit up as he looked up at Sebastian, silently asking, "And then? What happened next?"

Sebastian said, "The Fish replied with a gentle smile."

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Sebastian's cold eyes locked onto Lucas, his black pajamas making him look even more like a demon king. His handsome, icy face slowly curled into a thin, icy smile. He said, "Then it ate the tadpole.

"And from then on, the little tadpole's mom never saw her little tadpole again."

Lucas just sat there, his expression stuck in a daze, completely speechless.

Sebastian kept that icy smirk on his lips, saying nothing at all.

At some point, Snowball had wrapped himself around the ornamental tree and was just hanging there, utterly dumbfounded.

Lucas just sat there in stunned silence for what felt like forever.

His big eyes were wide and innocent, pure as ever.

And then, in the blink of an eye, his eyes welled up with tears.

Lucas thought, 'That story is super creepy!

Snowball thought, 'Even I'm freaked out by that story!

Sebastian watched Lucas cry uncontrollably, his face still blank, but, for one of the rare times in his life, he felt a pang of guilt. He reached out his long arm to comfort Lucas, but the kid immediately pushed his hand away.

Lucas kept sobbing for almost half an hour, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Lucas typed on his watch.

Big Ben said, "I want to find Stella."

With a frosty expression, Sebastian summoned John.

John frowned at Lucas, who was

so hard he had snot bubbles coming out. He asked, "Mr. Gray, your orders?"

"You have five minutes to find her," Sebastian said, his voice so chilling it made John's blood freeze.

Then he turned to Lucas and said, "Come on, I'll take you to her. Quit crying."

Later, a black Maybach drove off from Sandridge Island.

Inside the Aston Martin, Allan was on the verge of tears as he looked at Stella behind the wheel.

Her perfectly sculpted face was totally blank, head propped up with one hand, her long hair pulled back in a neat bun.

Right outside the windshield was today's street racing scene.

At the dangerous Death Road, crowds were going wild. The whole place was electric.

“Stella, can we please just go home?” Allan begged, sounding totally desperate.

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Allan glanced at Stella’s side profile: gone was the gentle patience she’d shown Lucas back on the island. Now, her wild, rebellious streak was in full force, her eyes and brows chillingly fierce.

Her only response was to drop the top, letting the cool night breeze toss a few loose strands of hair across her cheek.

She ignored him completely.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Allan, the useless rich kid from Jaffina?” a snarky voice called out from the side.

A guy decked out in hip-hop clothes with dreadlocks pulled up next to them in a Porsche convertible.

There was a hot girl riding shotgun.

Allan’s face instantly went cold. It took him a second to realize who it was: Chad.

Chad was some spoiled brat from one of Jaffina’s big families. He’d been out of the country for a few years, and it looked like he’d only just gotten back.

Chad sneered, “An Aston Martin? Since when could you afford a ride like that? What, did this chick buy it for you? Are you her boy toy now?”

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