

Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

Chapter 91

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Conrad was known as the leading expert in chip research in Clusia.

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Conrad claimed he'd been involved in a ton of major chip projects while studying in Monterra, and even held a few crucial patents himself.

After saying no to Lab 709 over and over, Conrad came back to Clusia and landed a key role at the Kinetic University Tech Research Institute.

In just a few years, he and his team scored tons of funding and awards from Clusia and local governments.

Recently, they announced that after five years of fully homegrown research, development, and production, the CoreOne Chip 1.0 was about to drop, and everyone in Clusia was hyped.

For all sorts of reasons, Clusia's chip industry kept getting messed with by foreign powers and still couldn't shake off their control. Conrad's work was supposed to be a total game-changer.

"If the Gray family really does team up with Conrad's crew... Allan thought.

After hanging up, Allan instinctively glanced at Sebastian. "Sebastian," Allan started.

But before Allan could finish, a mocking laugh from Stella cut him off.

Everyone turned to look, and there was Stella, her beautiful face wearing a lazy, sarcastic smile as she casually wiped Lucas's mouth.

“Stella, what’s so funny?” Allan asked, looking confused.

Stella lazily glanced up at him. “I’m laughing at how clueless the Gray family is.” Her words dripped with sarcasm.

“Wait, are you talking about Dr. Kramer?” Allan asked.

Sebastian’s eyes on Stella grew more thoughtful. Allan had spent years handling things outside Clusia, so it was understandable he was out of the loop on some stuff. But Stella-

Allan shot her a skeptical look. “Come on, do you even realize how much funding and recognition he’s raked in over the years?”

Lucas tugged at Stella’s sleeve, eager to go outside and open the packages.

Stella didn’t say another word. She just scooped Lucas up and walked out of the dining room.

Allan just stood there, totally lost. What’s up with Stella acting all mysterious? Allan wondered.

“Sebastian, Allan turned to Sebastian again.

“Just let them go along with it,” Sebastian replied, his tone flat.

The black prayer beads on his wrist swayed slightly, and he looked as deep and unreadable as the ocean in the dead of

winter.

For a split second, a glint of crimson flashed in his eyes. It was gone in an instant.

Out in the courtyard, Allan pushed Sebastian’s wheelchair outside.

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Lucas and Big Ben were lined up side by side, both rocking straw hats. Next to them. Snowball, the big white snake, was gently biting down on a bizarre-looking piece of grass.

Wait, is that some bizarre-looking grass?’ Allan blinked in confusion.

Stella stood off to the side, her white shirt loose and her long hair pulled back into a messy low bun off to one side. She looked cool and laid-back. Spotting them, she said, “Perfect timing.”

She grabbed a small box from nearby and flipped it open. Inside, four pristine white pills sat quietly.

A subtle herbal aroma wafted out, making everyone feel instantly refreshed.

“Take it,” Stella said, handing one right over to Sebastian.

“W-What is this?” Allan blurted out, but before he could finish, Sebastian just took one and ate it, no hesitation at all.

Allan thought, ‘Fine, whatever.

He grabbed one and downed it in one go. It melted on his tongue. It tasted sweet.

Stella turned and handed a pill to Lucas, and another to Snowball, one for the kid, one for the snake.

Only Big Ben was left standing there.

“I think I’m a little hurt,” Big Ben said, raising his hands with effort and putting on a dramatic crying face.

Stella tossed the empty box into the trash. “I’ll upgrade your chip tonight.”

Big Ben immediately started playing a song for himself. It was over the moon.

“Today’s a good day. Everything I wish for comes true, Yeah!” Big Ben sang, totally hyped.

Allan thought, ‘Looks like the world just got another lunatic.

Allan looked around. The ground was littered with cardboard boxes, all packed with all sorts of weird plants. He crouched down, picked one up, and asked, “What’s this?”

Stella shot him a cold look. “Viperroot.”

“What even is that?” Allan brought it closer, squinting at it.

It was just a bare stem, nothing else. ‘Looks dead to me,’ Allan thought.

“Viperroot has no branches, no leaves. Native to tropical jungles. Extremely poisonous, once it gets into your bloodstream, it’s instantly fatal.” Sebastian’s icy voice sounded from behind.

Allan jumped in fear and tossed the little plant back into the box without a second thought.

“And, what about that one?” Allan asked, kicking at another plant with his foot.

“Summit Orchid,” Stella replied coolly.

“What’s that one supposed to be?” Allan looked up, totally clueless. He’d never even heard of it.

“Summit Orchid grows only on the highest peaks in the world. The flowers are deadly poisonous. Once you’re exposed, there’s no antidote,” Sebastian, ever the walking encyclopedia, replied in his usual icy tone.

Allan nearly jumped out of his skin and dove behind Sebastian for cover.

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“S-Stella, you-” Allan stammered, shaking and totally freaking out.

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“It’s really not that dramatic,” Stella said, giving the box of seedlings a lazy kick to the side, like she couldn’t care less about some random junk.

Allan thumped his chest, trying to reassure himself. “See, I knew it wasn’t that bad.”

Stella casually picked up a straw hat and set it on Sebastian’s head. “Summit Orchid isn’t incurable. There’s a way to save

someone.”

Stella noticed Sebastian's face was already getting sunburned.

Allan thought, 'Come on, guys, can you treat me like a real person for once? I'm out here baking in the sun, too, you know!'

'Weak, helpless, and seriously feeling sorry for myself!' Allan thought, totally aggrieved.

"Wait, are all of these poisonous?" Allan blurted out, staring at what had to be at least a hundred boxes.

'If they're all toxic, what if Lucas gets into one of these by accident?' he thought, anxiety creeping in.

Stella patiently bent down to fix Sebastian's hat, making sure he was comfortable. "Not all of them."

Sebastian stayed perfectly still, just quietly watching her. The subtle, refreshing scent coming from Stella made the tension and ache in his forehead from all those sleepless nights finally start to melt away.

"But what about Lucas?" Allan asked.

Stella just lazily glanced at Allan, said nothing, picked up another white pill nearby broke the wax seal, and just sprinkled it on the Viperroot.

In an instant, the once lively little seedling melted into water. Once the sun hit it, it dried up instantly.

Allan was left speechless, staring in disbelief. "What exactly is this?"

"Just some random little thing," Stella replied offhandedly. Meanwhile, Lucas was already grunting and digging little holes in the patch of ground they'd set aside, his tiny shovel in hand.

Big Ben followed right after him.

Suddenly, a little red shaker appeared in front of Sebastian. He looked down and met Snowball's beady red eyes. The snake wiggled its tail, offering the shaker to him.

Sebastian was stunned for a moment.

'Come on, join the fun!' Snowball thought, a little impatient. 'Let's get hyped!'

Snowball shook the shaker with its tail, making it rustle noisily.

Snowball just kept staring at Sebastian, refusing to back down.

Sebastian narrowed his eyes, a hint of danger flickering in his gaze.

With a whoosh, Snowball flicked its tail at Allan and flung the shaker right into his arms.

Snowball didn't stick around. He zipped off and slipped, gone!

'Seriously, do I have a face that just screams "bully me" or something?' Allan thought, feeling totally helpless.

He just waved the shaker around blankly.

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Meanwhile, Stella was crouched on the ground, casually planting the little seedlings in the holes when her phone rang. She picked it up in a lazy, unbothered way.

"Hello," she said.

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“Hello, Stella!” Blake’s voice was bursting with energy on the other end of the phone.

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Stella glanced down at Lucas, who was busy digging little holes. “Hi.” She didn’t notice Snowball lazily wriggling his way into the mountain of unopened boxes.

Blake called out, “Come over for lunch!”

His voice was so loud that Lucas looked up, tilted his head, looked adorably confused, and blinked.

“Got it,” Stella replied coolly.

The stack of boxes piled up nearby crashed to the floor. Allan, waving his little red maraca, was about to get up and help, but suddenly froze, like someone had hit his pause button.

“Sebastian,” After a long moment, Allan finally found his voice. “Did I just imagine that?”

Sebastian sat in his wheelchair, face blank, clearly not interested in answering

Allan swallowed hard.

Diamonds spilled everywhere across the floor where the boxes had fallen.

Bathed in sunlight, they dazzled, white, pink, blue, purple, every shade imaginable. Some were even bigger than pigeon eggs, and the smallest ones looked at least two carats.

Stella looked up and met Allan’s dazed gaze.

“It’s all fake. Cubic zirconia,” she said with a straight face, totally unfazed..

‘Is she seriously treating me like an idiot? The evidence is literally everywhere, he thought.

‘If these are really cubic zirconia, I’ll rip my own head off and let Stella kick it around like a soccer ball!’ he fumed inwardly.

Before Allan could snap out of it, another loud crash rang out.

He watched, stone-faced, as a bunch of emeralds scattered all over the floor, so green and glossy, you could tell at a glance these were the real deal, super rare stuff.

“Yeah, right, these are fake, too?” Allan said, full of sarcasm.

Stella kept her cool. “Just glass. Green glass, to be exact.”

Allan froze.

“Don’t bother picking me up. Just text me the address, and I’ll head over myself. Hanging up now,” Stella said.

She glanced at the pile of boxes, spotting the tip of Snowball’s tail poking out, completely oblivious to the chaos he’d just unleashed.

Snowball wondered, ‘Eggie! I can smell the delicious scent of Eggie!’

Snowball kept nosing around, pushing boxes with its snout.

One box after another tumbled to the floor.

John and Jake were drawn over by the commotion.

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They stood there, stunned, staring at the glittering chaos all over the floor.

Stella rolled her eyes.

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“Snowball!” Stella raised an eyebrow. A big, round, white head slowly emerged from behind the boxes, beady red eyes blinking with an innocent expression.

“Uh-oh?” Lucas’s eyes went wide, his little dirt-smudged finger pointing right at Snowball’s mouth.

Everyone followed Lucas's finger and looked over.

Stella, Sebastian, Allan, John, and Jake just stared, speechless.

Big Ben exclaimed, "Uh-oh?"

Snowball had a white, oval egg in its mouth, with half of it poking out.

'An egg?' Stella squinted, thinking, 'How on earth did an egg end up inside a box? But here's the real kicker. Why does this egg look so familiar?'

Snowball wondered, 'Did they just catch me swiping the egg? If they freeze, I freeze. Maybe if I pretend to be invisible, they won't see me'

Snowball froze in place, half an egg still sticking out of his mouth.

There was dead silence.

Suddenly, a tiny crackling sound came from Snowball's mouth, and right on that pure white egg, a jagged crack split across the shell like a bolt of lightning. The egg cracked open!

Stella, Sebastian, Allan, John, Jake, and Big Ben were all stunned.

Snowball went cross-eyed in shock, its jaws locked around the egg.

Lucas scampered over on his stubby legs, eyes blinking wide, his mouth silently mouthing wow.

A fluffy little creature poked its head out, a tiny piece of white eggshell still stuck on top.

As something wriggled in its mouth, Snowball broke out in a cold sweat, beads running down its big head.

'Oh no, somebody save me!' Snowball panicked inwardly.

Allan said, "What the heck is that?"

It peeped.

Stella replied, "It's a peregrine falcon."

Allan exclaimed, “W-What?”

Stella rolled her eyes.

Big Ben, the super-smart robot, piped up, “That’s a peregrine falcon, a medium-sized raptor. In human speak, it’s crazy fierce and super loyal, the kind of bird that’ll fight for its owner no matter what!”

‘Thanks a lot!’ Allan thought, rolling his eyes.

It kept peeping!

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‘Mommy?’ the little thing chirped, looking around.

Snowball wondered, ‘Save me! Please! I swear I’ll never stuff my face again!’

Numbly, Snowball turned its head toward Stella, its beady red eyes swimming with tears.

Everyone else went quiet and turned to look at Stella, too.

Stella rolled her eyes.

She walked up to Snowball, face unreadable, and said, “Open your mouth.”

Snowball did as it was told.

Stella wondered, ‘No need to go that dramatic. Just a little is fine.’

Stella reached in and gently scooped out the tiny peregrine falcon chick, eggshell still clinging to its head.

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Lucas instantly hopped up, tiptoeing closer, eyes wide and sparkling as he gazed in wonder at the fluffy little creature nestled in Stella’s palm.

“Seriously, this thing is ugly as sin!” Allan blurted out, poking at it.

The little chick, still shaky on its feet, plopped right back down into Stella's palm with a soft thud.

Stella turned her head, expressionless.

Lucas puffed up his cheeks and shot Allan a pouty look.

Allan wondered, 'I didn't mean it.'

It peeped again. Its sparkling eyes locked onto Snowball, staring at it without blinking.

Snowball was stunned for a moment.

Stella let out a sigh and said to Snowball, "Congrats, you're a daddy now."

As soon as she finished, the fluffy chick flapped its tiny wings with all its might, then plopped right onto Snowball's big white

head.

The little thing nuzzled it, rubbing its little black head against Snowball affectionately.

Everyone just stared, speechless.

Snowball wondered, 'Wait, what?'

Big Ben snorted, "Calling the thief dad!"

The fluffy chick answered with a string of happy peeps.

After planting seedlings and scooping up all those emeralds and diamonds, everyone sat together under the eaves, enjoying popsicles.

Serpentina: [I knew there was an egg missing from the nest! Stella, you'd better take good care of my little peregrine falcon! Love you!]

Stella stared at the message, face blank, crunching on her ice pop.

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“So, what should we name it?” Allan asked idly, leaning back on the steps as he watched the fluffy chick snoozing on Snowball’s head.

Snowball heard the commotion and lifted its head, looking like it had just lost all will to live.

“Ugly thing?” Allan teased with a mischievous grin.

Lucas protested, cheeks puffed out as he chomped on his ice pop.

Stella glanced up at Sebastian. He looked like he’d never had an ice pop before, staring at it with a deadpan expression, as if he were handling a multi-million-dollar deal.

It was kind of cute.

“Hey?” Lucas reached up and poked Stella’s cheek, his little hand soft and insistent. ‘Why isn’t Stella paying attention to Lucas?’ he pouted inside.

“Hmm?” Stella raised an eyebrow.

Lucas was about to tap his watch, but then remembered that Sebastian had swiped it!

His cheeks puffed out again.

“Lucas wants to know what you’re gonna name it,” Allan said, craning his neck, his curiosity clearly more focused on the pile of unopened boxes.

‘Seriously, I bet there are even more wild secrets stashed in those boxes, Allan thought.

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“What do you think, Mr. Gray?” Stella asked calmly, and everyone’s eyes immediately turned to Sebastian.

Sebastian’s pale, almost sickly handsome face showed no emotion, cold and distant as ever.

He remained silent, but his eyes lingered on Stella’s sun-kissed cheeks. The messy bun she’d thrown up at an angle softened her usual icy vibe.

Allan chuckled, “Sebastian would never answer such a silly question.”

“Eggie,” Sebastian said flatly, biting into his popsicle, instantly proving Allan wrong.

Allan was stunned.

“Eggie?” Stella raised an eyebrow. As if sensing its name, Snowball, all fluffy and cute, let out a soft, babyish chirp.

Snowball curled itself up into a big, miserable ball, looking like it had given up on life.

It was just an innocent, good little snake, but because it couldn’t resist a snack, it lost its good reputation. It could only whimper in frustration.

“No

way, that name is just too funny.” Allan had just finished his sentence when Stella started laughing.

“It’s actually pretty good. Cute,” Stella said.”

Lucas nodded enthusiastically, giving a big thumbs-up.

Allan wondered, ‘Are you guys for real? Can your whole family pick someone else to mess with? Why is it always me? With the way you all fleece people, any fat sheep that lands on Sandridge Island wouldn’t have a single hair left!’

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Lucas blinked his big eyes, suddenly remembering something. He tugged on Stella’s sleeve. He was asking about that phone call.

“I’m heading to Pierce Manor in a bit,” Stella said calmly, gently wiping the sweat from Lucas’s rosy little cheeks.

“The Pierce Manor?” Allan perked up, glancing over at Sebastian.

Sebastian’s lips pressed into a thin line, his brows drawing together in a stormy scowl.

Lucas tugged on her sleeve again, putting on his cutest face.

‘I wanna go, too!’ Lucas cheered inwardly.

“I’m going, too!” Allan shot his hand up, not bothering to be polite. “What about you, Sebastian?”

“I’ve got things to do,” Sebastian replied, his face icy, voice sharp as a blade, leaving no room for argument.

Lucas, Allan, Snowball, Eggie, and Big Ben all grinned.

An hour later, at the entrance of Pierce Manor, the moment he spotted the black Maybach rolling up, Blake, who’d been kicked out by Kendrick ages ago to wait for Stella, shoved his phone into his pocket, grinning from ear to ear.

As soon as the car stopped, Blake practically jumped to op

As soon as the car stopped, Blake practically jumped to open the back door. “Stella, ah!” he yelped. His joy instantly flipped

to horror!

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Blake stared in shock at the man in the back seat, radiating pure frost, face blank, eyes so cold that they could freeze one on the spot. Blake’s eyes went wide, then narrowed in alarm.

Blake wondered, ‘I must be having a nightmare!’ He slammed the door so hard the whole car shuddered.

Before Blake could even work up the nerve to peek again, the Maybach’s back window started rolling down slowly.

Sebastian fixed him with a cold, piercing look, eyes deep and unreadable.

‘Why the heck is Mr. Gray in the car?’ Blake freaked out, totally thrown off.

The passenger window slid down too, and Allan popped his head out, wearing a sympathetic look. “Hey!”

Blake stiffly pulled out his phone and called Kendrick. “Stella is here.”

Three minutes later, Kendrick hurried out of the villa, but the moment he saw the man sitting in the wheelchair, radiating an icy chill, his smile froze on his face. He turned his head stiffly to glare at Blake, eyes full of menace.

‘Why didn’t you say Mr. Gray was coming, too?’ Kendrick fumed inwardly.

Allan, standing behind Sebastian, gave a little cough, but Sebastian didn’t even spare him a glance. Lucas hopped out of the car, clutching something in his arms, his chubby little face all serious.

Today, Lucas had put on his most serious little black suit and a tiny bow tie. Standing next to Sebastian, it was like the demon king and his mini-me had teamed up!

Stella was the last to step out, her expression unreadable as she watched Sebastian's back.

Stella honestly thought Sebastian had something important to do, but when John drove up, and she opened the door, there was Sebastian sitting in the back seat.

"M-Mr. Gray, what an honor! Sorry for not welcoming you properly," Kendrick stammered.

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Before Kendrick could finish, Lucas, his angelic little face all serious, walked right up to him, clutching something in his

arms.

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Kendrick stared down at Lucas, while Lucas tilted his head up, meeting Kendrick's gaze without flinching.

Thirty seconds passed.

"Lucas," Sebastian said gravely, his voice deep and commanding.

Lucas put all his strength into raising his little arm, wobbling as he held up the sealed canvas.

Kendrick just stared, dumbfounded. 'What does that even mean?' he thought.

"I barged in uninvited, which was quite rude of me. This is my apology. Please accept it, Mr. Pierce," Sebastian said, his voice icy and formal.

His black shirt was buttoned to the very top, every detail immaculate, chillingly restrained, yet strangely magnetic.

Even though Sebastian was offering an apology, his whole vibe was more like some ancient regent who could wipe out a family without blinking.

Kendrick bent down, his hands shaking as he took the heavy canvas from Lucas.

Sebastian kept his gaze fixed on Kendrick.

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‘Why is Mr. Gray still staring at me?’ Kendrick thought, feeling even more confused. ‘Didn’t I already accept it? What’s he waiting for?’

Allan, seeing how everyone from Kendrick to the butler and even the servants looked absolutely terrified, finally stepped in to help. “What Sebastian means is, aren’t you going to open it and see what’s inside?”

“Oh, right!” Kendrick didn’t hesitate and immediately opened it. The moment he saw what was inside, his eyes went wide in

shock.

‘Isn’t this gift a bit too much?’ Kendrick thought, his heart pounding. ‘I don’t know if my heart can take this!’

If Kendrick wasn’t mistaken, this was the legendary painting that had been snatched up at Christen’s Auction House for 40 million dollars just half a year ago.

Back then, Kendrick had secretly wondered who could possibly drop that kind of cash. 40 million was no joke!

But now, 40 million was actually sitting in Kendrick’s hands. Kendrick’s face was falling apart.

“Kendrick,” Blake had barely blurted it out before he felt that familiar, lazy stare land on him; he didn’t even need to look to know who it was. Instantly, he switched gears and said obediently, “Grandpa.”

Blake whispered, “Uh, Stella and the rest are still waiting at the door, you know.”

“What, you don’t like it?” Sebastian barely moved his lips, his face a mask of indifference. Lucas turned his head, too. Both of them were pure ice.

“I love it! Please, come in!” Kendrick practically hugged his treasure to his chest and hurried aside to let everyone in.

Allan instinctively reached out to push Sebastian’s wheelchair, but Sebastian’s icy stare cut him off before he even got close. Allan froze, not daring to move.

“Stella, you push!” Allan called out, shoving his hands in his pockets. He just played the hands-off manager, dumping all the work on Stella.

Stella rolled her eyes.

As soon as they stepped through the front gate, a wave of delicious aroma drifted through the courtyard. Stella stopped in her tracks, taking in the scent as she glanced around Pierce Manor’s grounds.

Lucas noticed her pause and looked up at her, wide-eyed and totally innocent, his frosty little act for the Pierces was nowhere to be seen.

Lucas blinked up at her, puzzled.

“What’s wrong?” Sebastian noticed something was off and asked.

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Stella didn't answer right away. She casually looked around, then withdrew her gaze with a lazy air. "It's nothing."

"Ms. Carter, what's wrong?" Kendrick turned around when he noticed they hadn't caught up. He was still clutching the painting, as if afraid it might get damaged.

Stella spoke with a knowing tone. "The layout here is pretty unusual."

"My second daughter brought in a layout master to set it up," Kendrick replied in a neutral tone. The last time they met at Pierce Group, things ended badly; they hadn't spoken since, not even a phone call.

Stella didn't say anything else, her face calm and unreadable.

Allan, meanwhile, hung back on purpose after Kendrick went inside, swinging the manila envelope in his hand. "Stella, I know a thing or two about layout, and honestly, there's nothing special here. Are you just pulling Mr. Pierce's leg?"

Allan raised an eyebrow. From the moment he'd set foot in Pierce Manor, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

The servants looked just as drained and lifeless.

Stella gave Allan a quirky look. "Yes."

Allan was speechless. The way she said it so confidently made him start to doubt himself. 'Wait, am I the one in the wrong here? She's the one making stuff up, but somehow I'm the jerk for calling her bluff?'

"Sebastian, did you see the look Stella gave me?" Allan complained, turning to Sebastian for backup.

Sebastian shot him a bored glance. "What else did you expect?"

Her indifference was written all over her face.

Allan rolled his eyes.

Lucas lifted his chubby, cherubic face, shooting Allan a look of pure disdain.

Allan thought, ‘Why is all this hitting me so hard?’

“Mr. Gray.” Inside the villa, as soon as Sebastian was wheeled in, Xander immediately stood up, all polite and gentlemanly. “We meet again.”

He flashed a warm smile, deliberately stressing the word again, clearly making up for the greeting he missed at South District Precinct last time.

Sebastian sat in his wheelchair, giving Xander a cold, oppressive stare. He didn’t say a word, but the intensity in his eyes was enough to make Xander’s smile falter, almost slipping off his face

Sebastian asked, “Have I met you before?”

Xander took a deep breath and forced a laugh, trying to save face. “Mr. Gray, you must be joking.”

Xander spun around, putting on a show of helping Kendrick. For a split second, his face was so dark that it could rain. “Grandpa, let me get that for you.” He reached out, trying to grab the canvas from Kendrick.

But Kendrick just handed the canvas straight to Blake, his voice steady and firm. “Blake, take this to the study.”

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Blake said, “Okay.”

He grabbed the canvas a little too roughly, and it even knocked against the edge of the table.

Kendrick just stared, speechless. Kendrick’s heart ached. ‘I really want to smack this brat!’ Kendrick thought.

“Hold up. Don’t be in such a rush,” Allan said with a cocky grin.

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Allan stood up and set the manila envelope he'd been carrying all along on the table. "Sebastian's apology is his, but this one's from me." He flashed a devil-may-care smile.

Kendrick was speechless.

"What's this?" Xander, still fuming and looking for somewhere to vent, hooked his finger into the bag's opening. He was a little too rough, and the bag tipped over. There was a rattling sound, then a loud crash.

A small cup just tumbled to the floor and broke into pieces.

Xander, Kendrick, and Blake all froze.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to!" Xander said, and seeing it was just a little cup, he didn't seem too bothered as he looked over at

Allan.

Allan just shrugged, clearly not giving a damn about whatever he'd brought.

Xander was about to call a servant to clean up, but Stella's calm voice cut through the air. "Wait!"

Stella sauntered over and stopped right in front of the broken pieces.

"Ms. Carter, don't tell me you're feeling bad about this?" Xander said smoothly. "If it's a big deal, I'll pay for it."

"You can't afford it," Stella replied coldly. Stella shot Xander a look, cutting him off before he could finish. She wasn't interested in his nonsense.

"What do you mean by that, Ms. Carter?" Xander couldn't hold back anymore, after being put down again and again today.

"Wait," Kendrick said. Kendrick's hands started to tremble, as if he'd just realized something.

Kendrick quickly got up, crouched by the broken pieces with a serious look, studying them closely.

After a while, Kendrick clutched his chest and looked up, struggling to get the words out. "Is this?" The question seemed to stick in his throat, and he was unable to finish.

Stella shot Allan a look. He just smirked, pure mischief in his eyes. “A cup from the Middle Ages.”

Kendrick was stunned into silence. ‘I freaking knew it!’ he cursed inwardly.

‘With this bunch, even if they handed it over in a busted-up sack, I should’ve known better than to take it lightly!’ Kendrick thought, kicking himself.

‘That’s a genuine cup from the Middle Ages!’ Kendrick’s heart nearly stopped.

Back then, the way they fired these cups was so special that no two ever came out looking the same. The glaze would change in the heat, and even the craftsmen had no clue what they’d get.

Any piece that made it to today is a total one-of-a-kind; there was literally nothing else like it.

“Do you even realize how much this thing is worth?” Kendrick croaked, barely able to get the words out as he stared at Xander.

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Xander asked, “How much?”

Xander glanced at Kendrick, his face tightening as a bad feeling crept over him.

Kendrick said, “2.6-”

Before Kendrick could finish, Blake blurted out, “2.6 thousand for a tiny cup?”

‘Damn, isn’t that way too expensive?’ Blake thought, totally floored.

Xander was just about to breathe a sigh of relief. ‘Only 2,600? That’s pocket change!’ he thought.

But Kendrick kindly smiled and quietly added, “Million.”

Both Xander and Blake were speechless.

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Both of them stared down at the shattered cup, pupils contracting in shock. Xander instinctively looked at Stella, who just raised an eyebrow with lazy indifference. “Pay up.”

Xander was speechless.

Kendrick’s heart was bleeding. This was a one-of-a-kind cup from the Middle Ages!

‘Gone, just like that?’ Kendrick thought, devastated.

“Then what about this one?” In the heavy silence, Blake suddenly froze, glancing stiffly down at the old, battered canvas he was clutching.

“40 million dollars,” Kendrick announced with that same kindly smile, dropping the truth like a bomb, completely unconcerned about his grandson’s mental breakdown.

Blake was frozen. His jaw practically hit the floor. He just stood there, mouth hanging open, staring blankly at the canvas in his hands.

40 million dollars,’ he wondered. The numbers kept echoing in his mind. ‘Wait, did I just bang it against the table? I should be groveling and begging for forgiveness right now!’

Lucas, wearing his usual poker face, stared in confusion at the stunned Pierces.

‘Uncle Sebastian’s place has a whole pile of these canvases and little black cups. Whenever I got mad, I’d smash a few, and he never made a fuss about it, Lucas wondered. ‘Man, this is weird!’

“This is my gift,” Stella said. Since everyone else had brought something, she wasn’t about to miss out. She pulled out a small box and set it on the table with a crisp click

Everyone on the other side of the table jumped in shock.

‘Come on, it’s not that dramatic, Stella thought, rolling her eyes.

Kendrick, with all his years of experience, was the first to calm down. He asked carefully, “Ms. Carter, this isn’t another crazy expensive treasure, is it?”

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Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

Chapter 95

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Chapter 95

☞ ☞ (25)

255 Vouchers

I just invited her over for a meal. How did it end up feeling like I was the one who got the better deal?’ Kendrick thought, baffled.

Stella spoke up casually, “It’s nothing special.”

Kendrick let out a sigh of relief, picked up his cup, and took a sip to calm himself. But before he could even swallow, Stella added, just as nonchalant as before, “It’s just a Vitalis Pill.”

The water Kendrick had just sipped shot out of his mouth like a fountain, right onto Blake’s face.

Blake, who instinctively raised the 40-million-dollar canvas above his head, was left speechless.

‘Did it just rain on me, or what?’ Blake thought, dazed. ‘Not sure. Better wait a sec. My legs still feel like jelly!’

“Ms. Carter, what did you just say? Vitalis, what?” Kendrick hacked away, his face turning beet red, totally stunned. He’d seen it all in his long life, but nothing had ever shocked him like this.

Stella answered coolly, “Vitalis Pill.”

Kendrick blinked, “Vitalis what?”

Stella repeated, a bit more firmly, “Vitalis Pill.”

Kendrick squinted, still not getting it. “What pill?”

Stella turned to look at Sebastian, confused.

Lucas, stone-faced, clambered up onto a nearby stool. He stretched out his little arms and popped open the box with a sharp snap. Instantly, a strong medicinal scent flooded the whole hall.

Stella, barely holding onto her patience, repeated, “Vitalis Pill.”

Kendrick was silent for a long moment, but the way his hand trembled around the cup gave away just how shaken he was.

The Vitalis pill was the Trent family’s most prized treasure.

‘Wait, the only Vitalis Pill in all of Clusia?’ Kendrick thought, his mind spinning.

Just one dose of this pill could yank someone back from the brink of death, even if they were already half in the grave.

It could keep someone hanging on by a thread, no matter how dire the situation.

‘And she calls this nothing special?’ Kendrick thought.

If the first two gifts could still be measured in money, then this was priceless.

“Is this the Vitalis Pill from the Trent family?” Kendrick asked, his face a mix of emotions. As one of Haliville’s big three families, he’d caught wind of what went down that night.

Stella didn’t bother to elaborate. “No.”

“Ms. Carter, where did you get this pill?” Xander snapped out of his shock, his gaze turning sharp and probing.

But before he could get another look, a terrifying killing intent crashed into the room. Xander’s breath caught in his throat as he whipped his head around, only to lock eyes with Sebastian.

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Chapter 95

Sebastian’s icy stare pinned him in place, making escape impossible.

Stella didn't even look his way. With a sharp snap, she closed the lid, and the scent disappeared instantly.

"Take it," she said, her face blank as she pushed the box toward Kendrick.

Kendrick was left speechless.

55 vouchers

After a long pause, Kendrick met Stella's deep amber eyes and couldn't help but flash back to the first time he'd seen her at the South District Precinct.

All these years wheeling and dealing, his gut had saved him more times than he could count. And this time, he just knew it. 'I bet it all, and once again, I hit the jackpot, Kendrick thought.

Meeting Stella was honestly a massive stroke of luck for Pierce Group.

Thinking this, Kendrick glanced at Blake, who was still holding the canvas over his head like a total dork. He couldn't help but sigh to himself, 'If there's such a thing as dumb luck, this kid is living proof!'

"Blake, put it in my study," Kendrick said, handing over the box. Blake took it with utmost care, cradling it like it was the most precious thing in the world, barely daring to breathe.

Blake headed upstairs.

"Remind him to change his clothes," Kendrick added, sending another servant after him.

Xander's eyes narrowed, his mood turning even gloomier at that.

Lucas, his face still as cold as ever, suddenly tugged at Stella's sleeve. She looked down and saw his cheeks turning pink, his eyes all watery.

Lucas really needed to go potty.

"Mind if we use the bathroom?" Stella said, getting up and taking Lucas by the hand.

"Use the guest room upstairs," Kendrick said, motioning for the butler to lead the way.

Kendrick figured it was a good chance to calm himself down. But as he looked up and met Sebastian's gaze, his heart skipped a beat.

'How could I forget about the devil himself?' Kendrick thought, his heart jumping into his throat.

"Mr. Gray," Kendrick managed, his voice trembling as he tried to start a conversation. With Stella out of sight, Sebastian suddenly looked like he could eat him alive.

Sebastian slowly turned his head, stone-faced and silent.

"Nice day out, huh?" Kendrick said, his voice dry as a bone.

For Sebastian and Allan, it was a full-on awkward staring contest.

Upstairs, Stella leaned against the wall with her hands in her pockets, waiting for Lucas to finish in the bathroom.

The butler stood by respectfully, not daring to slack off.

"That's Mr. Xander Pierce's stuff. Please, don't mess with it," came a slightly biting voice from down the hall. Stella glanced up lazily, her expression unreadable.

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Chapter 95

The butler felt a sudden jolt in his chest. He realized it was coming from the study.

"Ms. Carter," the butler began.

But before he could finish, Stella lifted her delicate finger to her lips, signaling him to stay quiet.

She walked over lazily toward the source of the voice, looking completely unfazed.

The study door was half open.

55 vouchers

Blake and a servant were inside. The servant's voice was shrill and sharp, not bothering to show any respect for Blake. With no one else around, she was bossing him around, finger wagging as if she ran the place.

"How about I just put it here?" Blake said, trying to sound polite as he fidgeted with the bookshelf, looking for a spot. He was clearly uncomfortable, but managed to keep his patience.

Stella raised an eyebrow. She hadn't expected the always-tough Blake, who acted like he owned the streets, to be such a pushover at home.

That actually caught her off guard.

"Stop! That's Xander's first physics championship trophy, and this one is his math championship trophy from years ago.

"Kendrick specifically said they have to stay right here, not to be touched without permission," the servant snapped, her tone sharp and bossy.

She shot Blake a look full of undisguised mockery. "If Kendrick didn't want Xander to inherit Pierce Group, Xander would've gone straight for the Nobel Prize in Math!"

Stella was stunned for a moment.

The butler was sweating bullets. Blake and Kendrick were always at odds, and everyone just assumed Pierce Group would go to Xander. Every time Blake showed up, he always got the cold shoulder.

Kendrick had no idea about any of this. The butler had a hunch, but since it never blew up in front of him, he just turned a blind eye.

Just as the butler was getting anxious, Stella just gave a quiet laugh to herself.

The butler suddenly felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"Sorry to interrupt," Stella said lazily, raising her hand and knocking on the door a few times, each knock sending a jolt of fear through the butler.

Blake and the servant inside looked up.

The servant's face went very pale, clearly not expecting anyone to catch her. When she saw the butler, she froze, completely panicked. All she could do was pray no one had heard what she just said.

“Stella!” Blake couldn’t help but break into a goofy grin as soon as he saw her.

Stella kept her face impassive, glancing coolly at the maid. “Just so you know, there’s no such thing as a Nobel Prize for

Math.”

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Chapter 96

The maid was stunned into silence.

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55 vouchers

Once she realized what Stella meant, the maid’s face flushed a deep red. She wanted to crawl into a hole and vanish, not even knowing what to do with her hands and feet.

Stella walked over to Blake.

She glanced at the bookshelf the maid had been fussing over, her eyes frosty.

With one swift move, she knocked the trophies off the shelf, sending them clattering to the floor.

Downstairs, Kendrick and Xander both looked up at the sudden noise.

Xander started to get up, but Allan, wearing a carefree smirk, shoved him right back into his seat.

Allan drawled, “Well, what was your name again? Xander something?” barely bothering to pay attention.

Xander was speechless.

Meanwhile, Sebastian’s eyes were as deep and cold as the winter sea, his icy gaze landing on Kendrick. Even Kendrick, with all his years, felt powerless under that stare.

Kendrick knew perfectly well that Sebastian had already uncovered his true motive for inviting Stella.

The only reason Sebastian was holding back was for Stella’s sake.

Upstairs, the butler gasped, “Ms. Carter,” but the moment he met Stella’s eyes, his voice was cut short.

Stella’s gaze was bold and unapologetic, with a dangerous edge that made people uneasy.

“Put it back.” Stella drawled, half lounging against the bookshelf, her chin giving a lazy nod toward Blake. Amid the mess scattered all over the floor, she was frosty and intimidating. No one dared defy her.

Blake awkwardly set the trophies back on the shelf, hands stiff with nerves. No one dared even breathe too loudly.

Stella fiddled with a little trinket, her eyes lingering on Blake, unreadable. Blake swallowed nervously, instinctively straightening his back.

Ah, so that’s what Kendrick was scheming. Stella thought to herself and chuckled softly.

“Oh?” A little head poked out from the half-open door, and when those big eyes landed on Stella, they instantly sparkled

with excitement.

Stella beckoned him over with a gentle wave.

Lucas dashed over, his soft, pale cheeks squishing against her leg. He was the very definition of adorable!

“Can you help me take something to the old gentleman downstairs?” Stella asked, ruffling his hair.

Lucas nodded eagerly, looking up at her with pure, innocent eyes.

“This little guy is just too cute!” Blake felt his heart melting. He was about to reach out and give Lucas a head pat as Stella did, but Lucas suddenly turned and stared at him, as if he could sense what Blake was up to.

Lucas just looked at him, stone-faced, cold as ice, like a tiny statue.

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Chapter 96

Blake mentally kicked himself. ‘Why did I even try? Should’ve just cut this dumb hand off!’

55 vouchers

Stella lazily pulled a pen from the table and scrawled something on a piece of paper, her handwriting wild and flamboyant. Blake tried to sneak a peek, but she was already done.

She took her sweet time folding up the note and handed it to Lucas. “No need to come back up. Just wait for me downstairs.”

Lucas nodded with that adorable blank look, then scampered off, his little legs moving so fast that he vanished in seconds.

The moment Lucas disappeared from sight, Stella’s smile faded away. She absentmindedly used the pen to twist her long hair up, exposing her elegant neck.

Paired with that breathtaking face, she looked even more untouchable, enough to make anyone’s heart skip a beat.

Blake couldn’t help but recall the first time he’d met Stella in that VIP lounge.

Blake felt a chill run down his spine.

“You,” Stella pointed at the maid. “Get someone to bring him some clothes upstairs.”

She loosened a button at her collar with a cool, almost defiant flair. “And remember, keep your mouth shut about anything you shouldn’t say.”

The maid fled the room like her life depended on it, leaving just the butler behind.

Stella gave the butler a sly, unreadable
anile.

The butler could only stand there, lost for words.

Downstairs, Lucas stood before Kendrick, his little face frozen like a miniature iceberg.

He held up the note Stella had written with both hands, but before Kendrick could reach for it, Sebastian’s slender, icy fingers had already swooped in and snatched it away.

Lucas whipped his head around and glared at Sebastian, his cheeks puffed up in a huff.

Sebastian’s expression stayed icy and detached, yet so he had everyone in the room under his spell. He slowly

unfolded the note and scanned the words inside.

Kendrick’s heart was in his throat.

Then, Sebastian quietly slid the note across the table, placing it right in front of Kendrick. [No second chances.]

Simple words, but even through the paper, one could practically feel Stella’s defiant energy radiating out.

Upstairs, in Blake’s room, the butler trailed after Stella, silently cursing his luck. He’d figured the staff might slack off with Blake, but he never thought they’d dare to go this far.

The place was a mess; it clearly hadn't been cleaned in a while. There was still some of Xander's stuff left on the shelves. If the butler was remembering right, this used to be Xander's study.

Stella glanced coolly around the room, then looked away.

"Stella, have a seat," Blake said, awkwardly shoving the pile of clothes off the chair and onto the floor to make space for her.

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Stella looked at the clothes now scattered on the floor and, for once, was completely speechless.

55 vouchers

Not every guy could be as obsessively tidy as her sponsor. Just thinking about Sebastian's closet, so organized it could cure OCD, made Stella's casual glance at Blake fill with a touch of disdain.

She didn't sit down.

"Stella, have some water." Blake poured her some, making sure to mention, "The cup's clean."

He still had no idea why Stella brought the butler along or wanted someone to bring him clothes, but with Stella around, he figured it was safest to just keep his head down and not cause trouble.

Stella lifted her gaze to him and took the mug.

"How long does it take when you ask the staff to bring you something?" she asked. The butler felt a chill run down his spine at her words.

Blake froze for a moment, staying silent.

"How long?" Stella repeated, her face completely blank.

Blake muttered, "I-It takes a while."

Stella just held the mug, not even bothering to drink. On the wall, a photo of Xander and Kendrick still hung there; the whole room practically screamed how close those two were.

‘But is that really the truth?’ Stella wondered to herself.

She lowered her gaze, her long lashes casting shadows over her cold, indifferent face.

With every passing second, the butler’s scowl only got worse.

Suddenly, the door burst open from the hallway.

“Seriously? You need someone to bring you just one piece of clothing? Acting all important, Blake really loves making a—” The maid froze, words dying in her throat as soon as she saw the three people inside.

Stella leaned lazily against the window, her voice cool and unhurried.

“What were you about to say?” she asked, catching the maid’s impatience before she could hide it. Her tone sounded sweet, but there was a sharp edge underneath.

“Answer Ms. Carter’s question!” the butler snapped, his face stern.

The maid stammered, trying to dodge the question and looking everywhere but at Stella.

“Did you knock before coming in?” Stella asked, her smile faint but somehow chilling. For some reason, Blake instinctively hunched his shoulders, feeling a sudden chill in the air.

“I-I did knock,” the maid stammered, desperately trying to defend herself.

“Did you hear it?” Stella drawled, glancing lazily at Blake, then at the butler, her tone unhurried, like a hunter patiently stalking its prey.

The maid tried to argue.

Stella’s expression turned ice-cold in a split second. Without warning, she hurled the mug in her hand, smashing it hard against the wall right next to the maid.

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Chapter 97

The mug shattered right next to the maid, making her instantly cover her ears and crouch down in terror. “Ah.”

Blake and the butler were both startled by Stella’s sudden action.

“Stella, Blake said.

55 vouchers

He thought, ‘If I still don’t get that she’s helping me stand my ground, then I really am an idiot.’ He stared blankly at her back, his eyes growing hot with emotion, unable to say a word.

Stella didn’t even spare Blake a glance. With a cold, expressionless face, she addressed the butler, then walked past the maid who was shaking all over on the floor. “Let’s go downstairs.”

Downstairs, Xander watched as Stella strode in, radiating an air of danger. Her hair was pulled back in a sleek bun, making her look both stunning and intimidating. For a moment, a chill ran down Xander’s spine, goosebumps prickling his skin.

Expressionless, Stella sat down beside Sebastian, then looked up and locked eyes with Kendrick. They understood each other without a word.

Today, Kendrick’s so-called invitation was more like an ambush in disguise. He wasn’t as in the dark as everyone thought about what Blake had endured at Gray Manor.

O

But for reasons he couldn't openly admit, Kendrick couldn't step in himself, so Stella became the sharpest blade to help Blake make his stand.

Stella thought, 'Even if Lucas hadn't needed the bathroom, Kendrick would've found some other way to get me upstairs.'

"What happened upstairs?" Xander asked tentatively.

The butler quickly came downstairs, glanced at Stella, then bent down to whisper in Kendrick's ear.

"Just say it," But before he could say a word, Sebastian cut in. His vibe was so icy and intense that it felt almost unreal.

But the next second, Sebastian pulled out a clean, dark handkerchief, took Stella's hand, and carefully dried the water from

her skin.

The black prayer beads on his wrist swayed softly. Damn, that was nice to watch.

Allan thought, 'Sebastian, a germaphobe? Seriously? Not a chance!'

The butler shot Sebastian a wary look, then recounted everything that had happened upstairs. Blake, who had come down with them, instinctively tried to hide behind Stella.

But before he could get close, two icy stares, one from Sebastian and one from Lucas, simultaneously landed on him.

Their gazes were cold as ice.

Blake froze.

Kendrick's eyes were heavy with authority. "Call all the servants out." He paused, then looked at Xander. "Call your mother and tell her to come back."

Soon, the hall was filled with servants.

When Penelope Pierce walked in and saw the scene, her face instantly darkened. "Dad, what's going on?" she started, her tone

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annoyed. But the moment she met a pair of cold, gloomy eyes, she couldn't help but shiver.

55 vouchers

'Mr. Gray?' she thought, her heart skipping a beat. Am I dreaming? How the hell is this grim reaper sitting in my living

room?'

Penelope quickly squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them again. But he was still there, not a figment of her imagination.

'Seriously?' Penelope thought, stunned into silence. She shut her mouth, too scared to say a word.

At Kendrick's signal, the butler retold what happened.

"What's the big deal? Just dock their bonuses for this month. Why go through all this trouble?" Penelope just shrugged it off.

Those servants were acting that way because she told them to.

Blake and Kendrick had always been like oil and water. Blake barely set foot in Gray Manor more than once or twice a year, and every visit ended in a blowout.

No one knew what changed after he got out of South District Precinct, but now he'd actually moved back in, shocking

everyone.

"Ms. Carter, what do you think?" Kendrick turned to Stella.

Stella looked at Penelope, her face unreadable. "Fire them all."

"What did you just say?" Penelope shot up from her seat. Most of these servants were her loyal followers; they kept her informed about everything happening around Kendrick.

'Who does she think she is, sticking her nose into the Pierce family business?' Penelope thought, her anger simmering.

“She said, fire them all,” Sebastian repeated.

Sebastian’s eyes were shadowed, his whole presence icy and commanding. His voice was flat, but people could feel the storm brewing, and danger was thick in the air.

Allan thought, ‘Damn, Stella’s really speaking up now!

“Settle their wages,” Kendrick said, closing his eyes for a moment before opening them again and instructing the butler.

“Dad!” Penelope shot up from her seat, staring at him in disbelief.

‘Has Dad lost his mind?’ she thought.

“Grandpa, these folks have been with the Pierce family for over ten years. If you fire them just like that, word will get out, and it’ll hurt the family’s reputation.

“Why not just have them apologize properly to Ms. Carter?” Xander said smoothly, giving the servants a look.

Instantly, dozens of them lined up in front of Stella, bowing and mumbling apologies one after another.

“Shut up,” Sebastian snapped, his voice icy and sharp.

Sebastian was shrouded in a dark, menacing vibe. The noise was driving his already sleepless nerves over the edge, his temper erupted like a tornado, and in a blink, the peaceful Pierce Manor turned into a hellscape.

For a moment, his eyes looked like they were stained with blood. It made everyone’s skin crawl.

People had heard all the stories about Sebastian’s mood swings, but seeing it for real freaked everyone out.

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Xander's heart skipped a beat, but he kept his composure better than his mother. Outwardly, he remained as refined and gentle as ever, though his gaze grew more intense.

The lawyer took his place behind Kendrick.

Allan watched the lawyer with a hint of amusement, thinking this dinner with the Pierce family was getting more entertaining by the minute. Without even realizing it, he found himself glancing at Sebastian.

Sebastian's dangerously attractive face was still as captivating as ever. Now that the cold edge in his eyes had faded, he quietly watched Stella's small hand wrapped around his. It was almost too much for Allan to watch.

Not wanting to be ignored, Lucas tugged at Stella's sleeve.

'Stella, hold me,' Lucas wondered.

Without a second thought, Stella let go of Sebastian's hand and scooped the pouting Lucas into her arms.

Sebastian's face instantly turned cold, his expression so dark that it could have frozen the room. The chill radiating from him seemed to hit everyone equally. Noticing Allan's gaze, he shot him a frosty look.

Allan froze.

"Looks like you have some family business to announce, Mr. Pierce. In that case, I should—" Stella began, her tone steady and unruffled. But before she could even finish her goodbye, Kendrick interrupted her.

"Please stay, Ms. Carter," Kendrick said, letting out two muffled coughs. His face looked even more ashen than before.

At those words, Sebastian glanced up at Kendrick, his eyes unreadable. It was as if nothing in the room could escape his gaze.

‘This guy is impossible to read, Kendrick thought to himself.

“This is my will,” Kendrick announced, taking the freshly notarized document from the lawyer with a steady hand.

Beneath the table, Penelope’s fingers curled into tight fists, her gaze locked onto the sealed will like a hawk. Any irritation about being summoned back had long since disappeared, replaced by pure tension.

Kendrick glanced up and gave the lawyer a silent signal.

The lawyer cleared his throat. “Based on the records, Mr. Pierce owns a vast array of properties and assets.”

He started listing them one by one, right in front of everyone. Some items even caught Xander off guard, while Blake just sat there, totally zoned out, as if he’d checked out of reality.

“The grand total comes to 128.541 billion,” The lawyer pushed up his glasses, his voice steady. “All of this is Mr. Pierce’s personal fortune.”

Penelope sucked in a sharp breath, instinctively shooting Stella a glare.

She just couldn’t wrap her head around why Kendrick would reveal the family’s assets right in front of an outsider.

Stella’s face was so calm and uninterested. She might as well have had ‘not interested’ written across her forehead. But to Penelope, it was all just an act.

‘Who could actually not care about money?’ Penelope thought, her eyes narrowing.

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Chapter 98

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“Dad, who are you naming? Don’t tell me it’s Blake! Are you trying to destroy Pierce Group?” Penelope snapped, her anger barely contained.

She sounded more like a madwoman than the high-class lady she always tried to be. “Have you completely lost it?”

“Mom, just let Grandpa finish,” Xander said, still wearing that gentle, refined smile. But inside, he was a mess, and his gaze toward Blake was tinged with darkness.

Right now, Penelope and Xander didn’t even spare a glance at Stella and the rest anymore. All their attention was locked on the will clutched in Kendrick’s hand.

The answer was sealed inside, just waiting to come out.

“Even if he gives it to me, I don’t want it!” Blake snapped, but Xander just sneered to himself.

Yeah, like you’d really say no, Xander thought, his mind full of sarcasm. ‘Who wouldn’t be tempted by that kind of money? Spare me the act.

“I’m not playing games with Pierce Group, and I’m definitely not handing the company over to Blake,” Kendrick said, his voice steady and serious.

But Penelope wasn’t reassured in the slightest. If anything, her nerves were even more on edge.

“I don’t buy it! Dad, unless you let me see that will for myself!” Penelope shot back. She glared at the will.

Penelope’s mind was racing. ‘What exactly has Dad changed since the last time he called the lawyer to the office? And more importantly, what does the will say about Xander’s and my share?’

Kendrick locked eyes with her, his firm hand pressing down on the will. With a cold, unreadable face, he shoved the document across the table toward his daughter. “See for yourself.”

Penelope stared at the will now sitting right in front of her, totally in disbelief. Her heart nearly leapt out of her throat.

‘Did Dad actually cave?’ Penelope thought, her mind spinning.

Even Xander was taken aback. He nudged his mother under the table, hoping to bring her back to her senses.

“Mr. Pierce,” Allan said, resting his chin in his hand with a smile. “You kicked me instead.”

Xander froze.

“I believe the person I’ve chosen is far more capable than myself,” Kendrick said, his words carrying a weight of significance. His eyes lingered on the crowd before finally settling on one person.

Meanwhile, Penelope grabbed the will, flipped it open, and her eyes raced over the lines, skimming through the black-and-white text until she landed on the name she most wanted to know.

“This can’t be!” Penelope cried out, stunned. “How could it be?”

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Chapter 99

“Stella Carter?” Penelope’s voice rang out, each word weighted with disbelief and annoyance.

“Huh?” Allan’s smile froze on his face.

55 vouchers

He turned to look at Stella, the sudden twist almost giving him whiplash. Wait, Kendrick is really leaving all his inheritance to Stella? he thought, stunned

“Who’s Stella?” Penelope was losing it, her whole world crashing down. She never imagined the heir wouldn’t be her son, or Blake, but that it would end up going to some outsider instead.

“Hmm” Hearing the name, Lucas tilted his head, looking at Stella with his soft, adorable eyes.

Lucas’s eyes sparkled as he thought, ‘It’s Stella!’

“Ms. Carter, you knew all along?” Xander asked, taking a sharp breath. Even with all his usual composure, his face was dark with barely hidden frustration.

Stella turned her head and let out a quiet laugh, but the corners of her eyes burned with a cold, restless red. Out of Lucas’s sight, she could barely hold back the wild anger inside her.

If the little guy wasn’t here, she would’ve flipped the table without a second thought.

“What? Her?” Penelope glared at Stella like she was ready to tear her apart. “Dad, have you lost your mind? You’re leaving all your money to an outsider?”

She snatched a cup from the table and hurled it to the floor, ranting and swearing without pause.

Lucas flinched, startled by the sudden outburst.

“Shut up,” Stella said coldly, her tone icy and full of impatience.

Penelope gaped at her, totally stunned. “Did you just tell me to shut up?”

Stella’s beautiful eyes narrowed dangerously, but in the next instant, cool, woody-scented fingers reached out from behind and pressed over her deep amber eyes.

“Allan, Sebastian said, his voice icy cold.

His gaze toward Penelope turned even more menacing, and for a moment, the tension in the air was suffocating.

Years of tacit understanding between them showed as Allan stood up with a wild grin and gave the table a fierce kick.

The edge of the table jabbed into Penelope's stomach, making her let out a muffled groan of pain, instantly breaking out in a cold sweat.

"Who do you think you are, yelling at Stella?" Allan said, hands stuffed in his pockets, his devil-may-care grin making it clear he wasn't afraid to throw down at any moment. "I dare you to point at her again."

Allan just arched an eyebrow, his grin never fading.

Lucas scooted over, then threw his arms around Stella.

Everyone froze for a moment, the tension hanging in the air.

Stella reached up and gave Sebastian's hand a reassuring pat. "Sorry, I refuse," she said, her tone cool and steady.

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As soon as Sebastian's cold hand dropped away, Stella regained her calm composure. Her voice was casual and a little lazy as she spoke.

Allan sat back down, crossing his legs with a wicked, devil-may-care grin.

"Ms. Carter, this is the gift agreement," Kendrick said, completely unfazed. A gift agreement doesn't need one's approval; put simply, it was a take-it-or-leave-it deal.

"But if you don't want it, that's fine too. Once I'm gone, everything will be automatically donated to a charity account, not a penny will stay in the family," Kendrick added.

Kendrick leaned all the way back in his chair, his ashen face lit up with a shrewd, knowing smile.

Penelope could only stare, lost for words. She completely forgot about the pain in her stomach, her eyes widening in disbelief.

Penelope's mind went blank, unable to process what she'd just heard.

‘So, once Dad dies, even if Stella turns it down, all the money gets donated?’ Penelope’s brain short-circuited, unable to believe it as she wondered. ‘Everything?’

Stella’s eyes narrowed at Kendrick, and he stared right back, neither backing down.

It was a wordless showdown, old fox versus young fox, each sizing up the other.

Kendrick was even more cunning than Stella had expected. That whole thing about Penelope bringing in some layout expert, at first, it sounded harmless, but the more Stella mulled it over, the clearer everything became.

“Stella, why don’t you join me in the study for a little talk?” Kendrick said, his voice deep and deliberate.

Stella gave him a long, searching look. “Okay.”

Upstairs in the study, Kendrick and Stella sat face-to-face across the desk, the air thick with tension.

From the moment they stepped inside, Kendrick shed his usual mask. His hair was pure white, and even without saying a word, he radiated a commanding presence. But his pallor betrayed just how gravely ill he was.

“When did you realize?” Stella asked, sounding casual, though her gaze was fixed on a black custom-built drone sitting on the nearby bookshelf.

“Are you referring to my daughter filling the yard with plants that worsen my condition, or to her tampering with my meals?” Kendrick replied, completely unfazed, even though it was a matter of life and death.

Stella gave a soft laugh, sitting back in a relaxed posture, her head turned slightly toward the window.

“She wanted you dead, and you turned the tables, using me to teach her a lesson,” Stella said.

Penelope thought she was so clever, convinced her plan was flawless, but in reality, she was just a pawn in her father’s hands.

He played her at her own game, using his own life as the ultimate trump card and turning the tables on her.

Stella's gaze was cool, her delicate face full of scorn.

He laid all that wealth out in front of a greedy person, let Penelope taste the excitement of almost having it, only to reveal it was all smoke and mirrors; she could see it, but never touch it.

In the manor, Kendrick was more ruthless than anyone else.

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Chapter 100

Kendrick was about to bow right in front of her.

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But before he could actually do it, Stella's chilly voice rang out. "Don't even try to guilt-trip me. I'm not that noble."

Kendrick could only stare in silence. He just hung there, awkward and stiff.

But Kendrick was an old pro. He coughed awkwardly and found himself an out, "These old legs get stiff if I sit too long. Just

need to stretch a bit."

Stella kept her chin propped on one hand, watching him act with a lazy, amused look, just smiling silently.

Kendrick wondered, 'Why does someone so young make me feel so much pressure?'

But the moment their eyes met, Kendrick finally got what she was after. “I’m sorry.”

He realized, ‘No matter how good the excuse sounds, dragging innocent people into this is still wrong!

Stella’s smile faded, her eyes half-lidded and bored. “I accept your apology.”

She got up and wandered over to the floor-to-ceiling window, looking out. “That plant out there is called Winterbloom. For most people, its scent just leaves you feeling drained.

“But for those fighting cancer, it’s like death itself coming to claim you.”

Stella lowered her gaze, her voice cool. “And get this, it even has another name. They call it Last Devotion. How ironic is that?”

Kendrick paused, a dark look flickering across his old face.

Downstairs, Penelope kept glancing toward the staircase, fidgeting restlessly. She muttered under her breath, “Why isn’t he coming down yet?”

She kept flipping through the will in her hands, and the more she looked at it, the more she felt secretly lucky.

The original plan was for Kendrick to suddenly collapse from a heart attack and get hospitalized.

Once word got out about his cancer, Xander would naturally take over Pierce Group, and Penelope could cash in while the

chaos lasted.

But she had never predicted Kendrick would play his trump card and leave everything to a total outsider in his will.

‘The longer Dad sticks around, the better it is for us, Penelope thought, her mind spinning.

Lucas reached out and poked Sebastian, his eyes wide with curiosity.

‘When’s Stella coming down?’ Lucas wondered to himself.

Sebastian's eyes were icy, his voice cold and deep. "I don't know."

Lucas tilted his head, looking up at Sebastian with wide, curious eyes.

'Should I go find Stella?' Lucas wondered.

Sebastian glanced down at Lucas, his gaze icy and the dark circles under his eyes making him look even more intimidating..

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"No."

Lucas puffed up his cheeks and turned away, sulking.

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"Mr. Gray, got a minute to chat?" Xander took a deep breath, shot a quick look at Blake, who was still spaced out, and then made sure Sebastian couldn't ignore him, practically begging for attention.

Allan watched with a half-smile, his eyes full of teasing amusement.

'Sebastian's in a terrible mood, and Xander's basically asking to get roasted,' Allan thought, shaking his head.

"What exactly do you want to talk about?" Sebastian's eyes were icy and bottomless as he stared Xander down, his face unreadable but his presence overwhelming.

"You want to discuss how you cut out your grandfather's board loyalists? Or maybe how your mom secretly funneled hundreds of millions into Gray family projects behind his back?" he added.

Xander's face went stiff. He was completely lost for words.

'How the hell does Mr. Gray know about all this?' Xander thought, his mind spinning.

Xander met Sebastian's cold, predatory gaze, and a chill shot up his spine.

Suddenly, Lucas, who'd been drooping over with his chin in his hands, sprang up, his eyes lighting up as he looked toward the staircase.

Stella and Kendrick came down.

Without a second thought, Lucas threw his little arms wide and dashed straight for Stella.

Lucas tried to run, but he didn't get anywhere. He turned around, dazed, only to lock eyes with Sebastian, who was holding him by the collar with a deadpan look.

Lucas rolled his eyes.

Sebastian glanced at him.

"Dad!" Penelope put on her brightest smile and sprang to her feet, ready to help Kendrick, but he stopped her with a raised

hand.

"Antonio." Kendrick glanced at the lawyer.

Antonio immediately pulled out the agreement he'd prepared and set it on the table. "Ms. Carter, if you could sign here, please."

Penelope glared daggers at Stella. 'Wasn't she just faking it when she refused earlier? How did Dad manage to change her mind so quickly after just one trip upstairs?' she wondered.

Stella sauntered over, one hand casually tucked in her pocket, moping at her own pace.

She flashed Penelope a provocative smirk, her gorgeous face radiating that rebellious, untamable vibe, like she was the kind of wild card nobody could ever hope to control.

With a smooth motion, Stella reached behind her head and pulled out the pen, holding up her hair. Instantly, her long locks tumbled down her back in a shimmering cascade, swirling like clouds and mist, so stunning it was almost unreal.

"You should really take a look at yourself in the mirror right now," Stella quipped, the corners of her eyes tinged with a rosy flush against her porcelain skin.

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She signed her name on the agreement with a cool, effortless flair, her gaze locked on Penelope the entire time.

Watching Penelope seethe, nose flaring and eyes blazing, Stella raised a defiant brow. “Seriously, you look a mess.”

Penelope was so furious, she looked like she might just tear Stella apart on the spot.

Xander put a hand on his mom’s arm, hinting she should back off and not stir things up any further. He shot Stella a frosty look, thinking to himself, ‘No way Kendrick’s played all his cards yet.’”

Sure enough, Kendrick called, his gaze settling on his own grandson. “Blake.”

Kendrick had had a deep conversation with Stella upstairs, and once again couldn’t help but think, ‘Blake really is blessed by dumb luck.

‘No clue how he ended up on the right team, but somehow, that girl actually treats him differently.

Blake’s eyes were still red, but he kept quiet and obediently walked over to stand by his grandpa.

Kendrick looked at Blake, his face a mix of emotions. “You’ve been messing around long enough. Time to buckle down.”

Xander’s stomach dropped. ‘Is Grandpa really about to throw Blake into the company to go head-to-head with me?’ he wondered.

“Dad!” Penelope yelped, her voice shooting up in shock.

Kendrick didn’t even glance at anyone else. “I’m handing Ion Wing Drones over to you. You’ll take over next week.”

Blake was frozen. His eyes went wide. ‘Was I hearing things, or did Grandpa really say that?’ he wondered.

But as soon as Kendrick finished, Xander, who’d been sweating bullets, actually felt relieved.

‘Ton Wing Drones? Everyone knows that division’s been losing money for years. It’s a total money pit, and Pierce Group’s been burning cash on it every year just to keep the lights on,’ he wondered.

‘If I can pawn this hot potato off on Blake and split it out, I bet nobody on the board will complain, Xander thought.

Under the table, Allan nudged Stella and whispered so only she could hear, “Did you put Kendrick up to this?”

Stella glanced at Allan, just giving him a sly smile and saying nothing.

“I can’t do this. I’m really not the right guy for the job.” Blake kept backing away, panic written all over his face.

Stella lazily stuck out her foot, blocking his escape, her voice flat. “What are you trying to say?”

Blake’s knees went weak, and he instantly shut up, not daring to make a peep. “Stella, this is about running a whole company,” he mumbled, still grumbling under his breath.

Stella didn’t even bother to look at him.

“Grandpa, since you want Blake to try his hand at running things, why not just spin off Ion Wing Drones from Pierce Group completely?”

“I bet with Blake in charge, Ion Wing Drones will really take off and hit it big,” Xander said, leaning back in his chair, looking totally relaxed and almost smug.

“You sure you won’t regret this?” Kendrick gave Xander a long, complicated look.

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