

The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late

#Left Behind 171 - Read The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late Left Behind 171

Chapter 171 A Secret by the Graves

Chapter 171 A Secret by the Graves

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Tracy's voice stopped short, but Ronald, sharp as ever, had picked up on the hidden meaning.

Someone had died right in front of her, yet she couldn't even bury them. She didn't know where the body was dumped-maybe not even whole.

Where had the Jackmans sent CeeCee during those two missing years?

Ronald had looked into Tracy before. He knew the kind of person she used to be when she lived with the Jackmans, and he knew the kind of person she was now."

A few short years had entirely changed her into someone else. Whatever she went through wasn't ordinary.

A surge of dark fury welled up in Ronald's chest, an undercurrent in his eyes that looked ready to destroy something.

He turned his head toward her.

Tracy's face was calm, almost expressionless. She carried herself with quiet restraint, yet to Ronald she looked unbearably lonely.

Before he realized it, the words slipped out. "Is one of these graves yours, CeeCee?"

Tracy turned to him.

She didn't answer, but the shock in her eyes was all the answer he needed.

It felt like someone had ripped at Ronald's heart.

She was alive-yet she had already arranged a grave for herself.

Even at his lowest point, he had never thought like that.

He wanted to say something, but the words caught in his throat.

He knew nothing he said could ease the weight of what she carried.

After a long silence, Ronald finally asked, his voice dark and steady, "Which grave is yours?"

The question pulled her back from her sorrow.

She wasn't sure why he asked, but she pointed toward the last of ten empty plots.

Ronald stared at it for a moment. Then a radiant smile spread across his face. "Buy me one too," he said.

He pointed to the plot right beside hers. "That one. I'll take it. Right next to you."

Tracy looked at him in a trance, unable to process his words.

He was still smiling, his dimples bright and boyish, like some carefree college kid.

The way he grinned made it feel less like he was choosing a grave and more like he was picking out

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something he liked at the store.

"You..." Her voice came out hoarse. "Why?"

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Ronald tilted his head, still smiling. "Because you're here. So this is the only place I'd want to be."

His gaze locked on hers, his big, clear eyes full of sincerity, so clear it seemed they could hold no one else.

His eyes burned with honesty and determination.

"CeeCee, you're the only person I have left in this world: So if the day ever comes when I die, the only one I'd want to lay me to rest is you."

Tracy didn't know where Ronald had come from or what kind of life he'd lived, but she could tell he meant every word.

Was she really the only one he had?

She didn't answer. Instead, she called the cemetery manager and purchased the grave plot Ronald had chosen.

Then, on the other side of her own, she had another stone carved with Derek's name.

For people like them, who didn't even leave behind a body, a tombstone was the only proof they had ever walked this earth.

Other than Derek's, Tracy left the rest untouched.

She hadn't fulfilled the promises she made to those who were gone.

No one else knew about the graves-only Tracy and Ronald.

It became their secret, one they never mentioned again after leaving the cemetery.

Because Tracy had trusted him with something so important, Ronald threw himself into making sure every detail was prepared. Their days grew busier.

Tracy, too, was occupied, planning the gift she intended to give Winona on the day of the Investor Conference.

Even though she and Ronald lived under the same roof, they barely saw or spoke to each other.

Yet the quiet moments they did share felt natural and effortless, almost enough for Tracy to forget the Jackmans existed.

She had forgotten the Jackmans, but they had not forgotten her.

Especially Liam, who kept showing up with fake concern, always bringing little gifts she refused every

time.

In the end, just to avoid him, Tracy stopped going back to the villa.

Time flew, and soon it was the day of the Investor Conference.

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Sinhaville was more prosperous than Cloudville, and the Renaults' power was far greater than the Jackmans'

When the Renaults decided to host the conference in Cloudville, even the Jackmans treated it like a major

event.

Everyone assumed the Renaults would hand the project to the Jackmans.

But to everyone's surprise, they chose the Millers instead-a family most people dismissed as nothing more than flashy newcomers.

The moment the news broke, the Millers' status skyrocketed. Winona suddenly found herself surrounded by more admirers and flatterers than ever.

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Chapter 172 Confrontation at the Conference

Chapter 172 Confrontation at the Conference

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On the day of the Investor Conference, Winona was surrounded by so many people that anyone who didn't know better might have thought the whole event belonged to her family.

But she wasn't the only star of the show. Erin, as always, drew just as much attention.

In Tracy's memory, no matter where Erin went, she was always the center of the room.

She carried herself like she was born to play the lead role, glowing with an aura that pulled everyone's eyes toward her.

Tracy and Ronald arrived late and kept to themselves, so no one noticed them slipping in.

Tracy's plan was simple: stay out of sight until the right moment, then deliver Winona a gift she wouldn't forget.

But before she could move away from the crowd, Erin spotted her. "Tracy? It really is you! I thought I was seeing things."

Erin's voice rose with cheerful surprise, loud enough to draw the attention of the people around them.

And just like that, Winona heard it too.

Her smile froze the moment her eyes landed on Tracy, shifting instantly into open suspicion and dislike.

Ever since Erin's birthday party, Winona had been on edge, terrified that Tracy would use the dirt she had on her to get revenge.

Back then, Tracy had cornered her and made threats, leaving her furious but too cautious to fight back.

That night at the party, Winona hadn't acted out of bravery. She was jealous of how Erin still spoke about Tracy with care, even offering to share her gift with her.

Winona would rather smash her presents to pieces than hand them over to Tracy.

So when Erin had laughed and said, "I really admire how bold you are, Winona. Even if I had the idea, I'd never have the courage to go through with it," Winona had foolishly taken the bait and volunteered to act for her.

Looking back, she regretted it bitterly, wishing she could slap herself for being so reckless. Ever since, she had dreaded the day Tracy might take revenge.

Now, seeing Tracy walk into the Investor Conference, she grew worried.

Today was a crucial day for the Millers.

Winona's nerves were stretched thin, terrified that Tracy would find some way to ruin everything. Then Erin's sweet voice rang out, loud enough for everyone nearby to hear. "Tracy, if you wanted to come to the Investor Conference, why didn't you come with us? Invitations like this are so rare. How did you even get

one?"

Her face showed nothing but innocent curiosity, but her words revealed two sharp points.

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Chapter 172 Confrontation at the Conference

First, Tracy hadn't come with the Jackmans.

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Second, invitations to this conference were nearly impossible to get-so how had Tracy gotten in at all?

The moment those words landed, Winona seemed to wake up. She hurried forward and asked, "Tracy, this conference is hosted by the Renaults. Ordinary people can't just walk in here. If you didn't get an invitation, how did you sneak inside?"

Tracy frowned. With all those people crowding around Erin, how had she managed to spot her so quickly?

She had no intention of wasting energy on either of them, but now everyone's eyes were on her. For the sake of her bigger plan, she had no choice but to answer.

But she didn't answer their question. Instead, she shot back, "You're not even part of the Renaults. Why are you so worked up about it? You're just the helper."

Ronald had been about to speak, ready to jump in, but the moment he heard Tracy's sharp comeback, he swallowed his words.

He knew how much Tracy hated being in the spotlight. Whenever people ganged up on her, her first instinct was always to shrink back. Especially with the Jackmans, she was used to being pushed around and bullied.

So when he saw Erin and Winona teaming up again, his first reaction was to step in and fight back for her. But to his surprise, Tracy had already handled it herself.

She wasn't the same as before.

Ronald pulled his words back, a sweet smile spreading across his face.

He looked like a guy at the movies, ready to sit back with popcorn and enjoy the show.

Winona, on the other hand, was stunned.

Every time she'd stood at Erin's side, mocking Tracy with sly jabs and cruel remarks, Tracy had only cried or fumed helplessly. That had always given Winona such a rush of satisfaction.

She had nearly forgotten that, back then, Tracy never pulled her punches when she fought back.

As Winona froze, staring at her in silence, a flicker of shadow passed through Erin's eyes.

She quickly covered it with a smile and said, "Tracy, since you're here, you must know this conference was arranged by the Renaults and handed over to the Millers to host," she said sweetly.

"At first, the Renaults were considering several other cities. Cloudville wasn't even their first choice. But out of respect for the Millers, they chose to hold it here.

"Since you're here, you should've done a little homework before you came. Everyone here is an important guest. It'd be a real shame if you accidentally offended the wrong person."

Her tone carried the weight of mockery disguised as advice.

Yet the crowd around them, blind as ever, failed to hear it. Instead, they nodded and praised her for being so kindhearted.

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Chapter 173 A Clash at the Conference

Chapter 173 A Clash at the Conference

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"Erin, you're too kind," Winona snapped as she came back to her senses. "People like her only learn after being taught a lesson! Why bother warning her?"

Her furious glare landed on Tracy, sharp enough to cut.

For a split second, she felt as if she'd gone back to those years when Tracy was always above her, always pressing her down.

She hated that feeling.

As soon as Winona spoke, her followers rushed to echo her.

"Exactly, someone like her deserves a wake-up call."

"Showing up at an event like this to stir up trouble-where does she even get the nerve? She still thinks she's some spoiled heiress!"

"She never got along with Winona, and now she's just jealous. That's the only reason she'd sneak into this conference."

“And what good would sneaking in do? Winona’s way out of her league now. I heard Mr. Renault’s had his eye on Winona for a while, and he’s the reason the Millers were trusted to host this conference.”

Compliments poured down on Winona until she nearly forgot the unease she’d felt when she first spotted Tracy.

No one noticed that Erin, who had started it all, had quietly stepped away from the center of attention.

She hadn’t left, though. She stood to the side, her eyes gleaming with excitement as Tracy became the target of every accusation.

For Erin, this was perfect. Winona was the best weapon against Tracy tonight.

The bigger the mess, the better.

The more people hated Tracy, the easier it would be for Erin.

But just as her heart swelled with thrill, she suddenly locked eyes with someone watching her-Ronald.

His dark, steady gaze was so sharp it felt like it cut straight through her.

Erin froze. Her chest tightened for no reason, and she quickly looked away.

Every time she faced Ronald, she felt like he was her natural enemy.

No matter what tricks she used, he never fell for them. In fact, it always seemed as if he could see right through her.

Even when she used her best manipulations, they had no effect.

Ronald never looked away. He didn’t miss the flicker of guilt on her face or the way her fingers twisted

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Chapter 173 A Clash at the Conference

together nervously.

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He had already noticed the way she had first called him and Tracy out, then steered the conversation so Winona and her group turned on Tracy. Erin's moves weren't random—they were calculated.

But this was an investor conference, filled with smart, powerful people. How could anyone here be led around so easily by a few words?

His gut told him Erin was hiding something.

And he was almost certain that secret had to do with Tracy.

He glanced toward Tracy, who stood calmly under the crowd's scorn, her expression unbothered, as if their insults couldn't touch her. Without realizing it, Ronald stepped closer to her side.

Ronald had promised he would always stand with her.

And whatever Erin's secret was, he would uncover it himself and make sure she could never hurt Tracy.

Ronald and Erin's brief exchange of looks went unnoticed, and no one had the faintest idea what the two of them were thinking.

Tracy, however, kept her eyes on Winona and the group clustered around her.

The Millers might not be as powerful as the Jackmans, but in Cloudville they still carried weight. With a wealthy father who adored her and luck always on her side, Winona was never short of people eager to flatter her.

It used to be Jasmin and her friends, but after the scandal with Patricia, they had all been taken care of. Now, fresh faces had stepped in to fill their places.

Tracy couldn't help but wonder: if history repeated itself, would these new followers end up like Jasmin's group too?

When the noise of insults against her finally died down, Tracy spoke at a calm, unhurried pace.

"Instead of wasting your time attacking me, maybe you should focus on expanding your networks. At an event like this, the guests aren't just from Cloudville. If you happen to meet someone truly important, the benefits will far outweigh whatever scraps you get from clinging to Winona. Are you sure you want to waste your chance here on me?"

Her words carried a sting, but they were sharp with truth. Winona's followers froze.

They had expected Tracy to lose her temper, to break down in shame, or to lash out. What they hadn't expected was such a cool and rational response.

They looked at each other, a flicker of doubt creeping across their faces; clearly they had wavered.

To Winona, that hesitation was a humiliation. Her anger flared hot, drowning out any second thoughts about the leverage Tracy might hold over her.

She jabbed a finger toward her rival, shouting furiously, "Tracy, stop trying to stir things up! Don't think I don't see what you're doing-distracting us so we forget you snuck in here. Well, we're not falling for it!"

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Chapter 174 Throw Them Out!

Chapter 174 Throw Them Out!

This time, Winona's little crew didn't jump in to back her up.

They knew it-no matter why Tracy said it, she was telling the truth.

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Winona's temper flared hotter. She shot them a fierce look. "What are you standing there for? Go get security and throw this uninvited guest out!"

Maybe they felt guilty, because no one dared complain. They ran to find security.

The hotel took the conference seriously, so the security guards arrived fast.

When they heard Tracy and Ronald had sneaked in, the lobby manager hurried over with security, apologized, and moved to escort them out.

Before Tracy could speak, Ronald stepped in front of her. "Are you sure we don't have invitations?"

Winona was fuming and let her mouth run. "Tracy isn't a Jackman anymore. How could you have an invite? What, did you sneak in with that man you kept?"

She turned to Tracy and ridiculed, "It's one thing to pick on Erin every chance you get, but now you're using the Jackmans' money to keep a gigolo? I've never seen anyone so shameless. No wonder Norris dumped you."

Tracy's calm face went cold. Anger flickered in her eyes.

Ronald had done nothing to her, and he'd barely said a word. How dare she call him names in front of everyone?

Tracy stepped out from behind him and fixed Winona with a cold stare. "You see a good-looking man and call him a gigolo. Is that your insecurity talking, or are you just spewing garbage?"

Maybe spending so much time with Ronald had rubbed off on her-Tracy's comebacks were sharp.

She was about to take a step forward and keep going when a hand caught her wrist.

Tracy looked back. Ronald was smiling, warm and sweet, trying to calm her. "CeeCee, don't waste your energy on people like her."

That sunny smile made it seem like he hadn't been insulted at all.

Truth was, when Winona spoke, Ronald's face had gone cold, and a cold light flickered in his eyes.

He wasn't angry about the jab at him.

People had called Ronald the same ugly name since he was born. He still hadn't shaken it.

Back home, the insults were even louder and meaner. He was used to it.

What angered him now was hearing Winona bring up Norris.

He'd looked into Tracy's past. He knew what Norris meant to her.

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Chapter 174 Throw Them Out!

Norris was the lover who grew up by her side. No one held a higher place in Tracy's heart.

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But that same person turned from warm care to cold distance. After the Jackmans threw Tracy out, she grabbed for Norris like a last lifeline, and he still joined the Jackmans to ship her overseas.

Norris hurt Tracy worse than the Jackmans ever did.

So when Winona brought him up and Tracy's face fell, Ronald's hands started to itch.

For a split second, he pictured slicing off Winona's mouth with a blade, bit by bit. He wanted to shut Winona up for good.

For a second, the maliciousness boiled up, close to breaking loose-until he heard Tracy's voice.

She was standing up for him.

So she wasn't upset because of Norris.

She was upset because of him.

That thought washed over him like warm water and cooled the malicious boiling in his chest.

Before Tracy could step forward, he caught her hand.

"CeeCee, we didn't come here to waste our time arguing with people who don't have a brain for themselves," he said.

His voice was steady and calm. His bright smile had a way of settling people.

Tracy felt a sudden rush of relief.

She was glad she'd been soft-hearted that day and saved Ronald from those kidnappers.

If he'd been sent off to a place like the Angelic Etiquette Academy, this smile might never have existed.

She said nothing and simply lowered the foot she'd been about to lift.

Once her anger cooled, Ronald turned to the lobby manager, who still looked unsure what to do.

Ronald didn't make it hard on the staff. He simply took out his invitation.

Winona jumped in at once. "Check it carefully. Don't get fooled by a fake."

Ronald and Tracy didn't react. Their faces didn't change.

Because of her warning, the lobby manager checked even more carefully.

At last, he looked up to confirm under everyone's interested eyes. "This invitation is real."

At a conference of this caliber, the invites go out widely across the business world. They don't always show exactly who they're for, but it isn't difficult to tell the real ones from the fakes.

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Chapter 175 Something Is Dangerously Wrong with Her

Chapter 175 Something Is Dangerously Wrong with Her

The moment Winona realized the invitation was real, she froze. "H-how is that even possible?"

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She knew all too well what Tracy's situation had been with the Jackmans. There was no way she could've gotten an invitation to this conference. As for Ronald-well, aside from being handsome, he was nothing but a useless gigolo. How could they possibly have a real invitation?

"This invitation isn't yours!" Winona blurted out, unwilling to accept it. "Tell the truth-you must have stolen someone else's!"

Ronald actually laughed. "You're really something, you know that? First, you claim we don't have an invitation. Then you say it's fake. Now you're insisting we stole it. By your logic, does that mean everyone here probably stole theirs too? Should we check them all?"

Winona's face went ashen. She could feel the stares of people around her, burning into her like she'd been stripped bare in public.

Seeing how far things had gone, Erin's expression soured too.

She couldn't believe how useless Winona was.

Part of Erin wanted to walk away right then, to cut ties with this trash. But she reminded herself-Winona still had the Renaults' favor.

By some stroke of dumb luck, Matthew had taken a liking to her. As much as Erin despised it, Winona still had value.

So, she swallowed her frustration and stepped forward. "Oh, this is just a big misunderstanding. Since it's cleared up, let's not dwell on it anymore."

Looping her arm around Winona's, she turned to Tracy with a sugary expression and acted cute. "Tracy, you know Winona-she has a childish temper. You've always been so kind and forgiving. Surely you won't hold this against her, right?"

Her words dripped with implication-if Tracy made an issue of it, she'd look petty and unreasonable.

Tracy acted as if she didn't catch the jab. She nodded lightly. "Of course I won't hold it against her. I've never done anything wrong; no skeleton in my closet, nothing is keeping me up at night."

Her gaze slid to Winona, playful yet piercing, and it sent a chill racing down Winona's spine.

"You ... I-I don't know what you're talking about," Winona stammered.

"You don't know?" Tracy's eyes narrowed, her tone sharp with mockery. "Then let me remind you. Have you ever dreamed of your classmate? Her name was P-"

Before she could finish, Winona lunged forward and gripped her wrist.

"Shut up!" she hissed, every word bitten off through clenched teeth.

Tracy had no intention of exposing the secret here anyway, so she closed her mouth. When Winona muttered about talking in private, Tracy simply nodded and followed her lead.

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Chapter 175 Something Is Dangerously Wrong with Her

Ronald frowned, ready to go after them, but stopped when Tracy glanced back at him.

She shook her head gently and comforted him with a look, telling him not to worry.

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He pressed his lips together. Worry still gnawed at him, but he trusted she had a plan. So he stayed put, though his gaze never left her until-

"Ronald," came a sharp, syrupy voice behind him, "Don't be mad at Winona. I'll apologize for her, okay?"

Even before he turned around, Ronald felt danger prick at his skin.

Instinct pushed him a step forward before he finally glanced back.

There was Erin, twirling her fingers, lips pouted, eyes wide with exaggerated innocence.

To most people, she probably looked cute-adorable even-the kind of look that hooked men with ease.

But Ronald only felt a cold shiver run down his spine, his stomach twisting with nausea.

It was the same instinctive dread as being stalked by a venomous snake-fangs already bared, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

His easy smile vanished. His expression hardened, cold and guarded, with no effort to hide it.

Ronald's reaction seemed to wound Erin. Her lips trembled, and her eyes welled with mock hurt. "I know Tracy misunderstands me, so it makes sense you don't like me. But it's not like she says. Ronald, I—"

"Can you just shut up?" Ronald snapped, his face contorted with disgust. "Do I know you? You keep repeating my name over and over. What are you, a parrot?"

Erin froze, her cheeks twitching uncontrollably.

Why? Why isn't it working? I had used the same tricks countless times before.

Why is he reacting like this?

Grinding down her anger, Erin's eyes turned red with grievance. "I don't know what Tracy told you, but I

"If you're trying to stir up trouble, you've picked the wrong target," Ronald snapped, impatience clear in his voice. "I'm not one of those fools in the Jackmans."

And with that, he walked away before she could speak up.

The Jackmans were supposed to be one of the most powerful families in Cloudville. They shouldn't have been so gullible. But the fact that they kept falling for tricks this cheap only meant one thing-there was something dangerously wrong with that woman.

Ronald kept his expression calm, but inside, his guard was higher than ever.

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Chapter 176 Fear and Reckoning

Chapter 176 Fear and Reckoning

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On the other side of the hall, just as Winona dragged Tracy away, Tracy caught sight of Erin walking right up to Ronald.

She knew that look of Erin's all too well.

Twisting her fingers, pouting slightly, and staring up with wide, innocent eyes-it was Erin's ultimate trick.

No one ever escaped it.

In more than 20 years, Tracy had never seen a single person resist it.

Would Ronald be the first?

"Tracy, what on earth are you trying to do?"

Winona's furious voice snapped her back from her thoughts.

Tracy glanced at Winona, who looked like she was ready to bite her head off, and gave a short laugh. "What do you think I'm trying to do?"

Winona's chest tightened. She already had a bad feeling, but hearing Tracy say that worsened it.

She clutched Tracy's hand, her voice trembling. "Didn't you promise you wouldn't come after me again?"

In the past, Tracy might not have understood why someone as arrogant as Winona could be so terrified of a dead girl's shadow.

But now that she knew the truth, she found it laughable.

Now she was afraid? Where was this fear when she pushed Patricia to the edge of despair?

Tracy's lips curved in a cold smile; her gaze was cold. "I said I wouldn't bother you-as long as you didn't bother me. Have you managed that?"

Winona froze. She couldn't deny it.

Whether at Erin's birthday party or here at today's conference, she had been the one who started the trouble with Tracy.

She knew it was reckless. She had told herself over and over not to let her bitterness get the better of her.

But somehow, she couldn't stop.

Winona's heart sank the moment she realized why Tracy had shown up at the conference; she was probably here to expose the truth. She felt cold all over, like she had fallen straight into an icy pit.

Today was a big day for her family. For the first time, Winona was being flattered and admired in such an important setting.

If that secret came out now, she couldn't even begin to imagine the consequences. Her hand shook as she clutched Tracy's. "I'm sorry, I was wrong before. I'll apologize. Just-please don't cause a scene here. I'm

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begging you."

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In all the years they had known each other, Winona had never bowed her head to Tracy. Not even when Tony had screamed at her.

But this time, she was pleading, her voice trembling with desperation.

Tracy hadn't expected this reaction. Winona looked pitiful, but no sympathy stirred in her heart.

She hadn't even lifted a finger yet, and Winona was already terrified.

And Patricia-bright, strong Patricia-had begged too. What horrors had she endured before being driven to end her life?

Tracy slowly pried Winona's fingers off her hand, her expression cold.

"If begging really worked, don't you think Patricia would still be alive?"

Winona's face drained of color. She couldn't answer.

Patricia had begged-she remembered it all too well-but her answer had been more cruelty, and the bullying became worse.

Tracy caught the flicker of guilt in her eyes and gave a bitter laugh; she knew Winona had recalled her cruelty against Patricia. "If you still remember what you did to her, then you already know what's coming for you."

With that, she walked away, leaving Winona pale and shaken.

Tracy wanted to expose Winona's bullying today, but she knew keeping things quiet and under the radar was the smartest way to do it.

After so many years as rivals, she also knew exactly how Winona would react the moment she saw her here at the conference.

Instead of hiding, Tracy preferred to let Winona be the one living in fear.

Winona would keep her eyes glued to her all night, which meant the people actually carrying out Tracy's plan could work safely without being noticed.

That was why, in front of everyone, she had deliberately brought up Patricia's name.

Once she was done with Winona, Tracy set out to find Ronald.

But before she could, Erin appeared in front of her.

The instant Tracy saw her; her guard shot up.

Nothing good ever came from running into Erin unprepared.

But Erin either didn't notice Tracy's caution-or she noticed and simply didn't care.

With no one else around, she dropped her usual act, flashing a smug smile. "Tracy, do you know what I was just talking about with Ronald?" she asked, her tone dripping with pride.

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She knew Tracy had seen her with him earlier. That was the whole point.

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Erin's eyes glittered with triumph as she studied Tracy's face, pleased to see the faint change in her expression.

But Tracy's response froze Erin in place.

"Ronald isn't Norris," Tracy said flatly. "Calling him with that tone makes him sick."

Erin's smirk faltered. She remembered Ronald's reaction from earlier, and for the first time that night, her face turned pale.

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Chapter 177 Seeds of Doubt

Chapter 177 Seeds of Doubt

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For just a moment, Erin's face fell, but she quickly adjusted her expression. "Tracy, how long have you even known him? Do you really think you understand him that well?"

Erin tilted her chin up, her voice full of confidence. "As long as I want someone, there's never been a person I couldn't win over."

Her smile sharpened. "Did you forget how much our family once spoiled you? And yet, in the end, every single one of them turned to me."

Her words cut deep, and she wasn't finished. "They had lived with you for years. How long has Ronald even known you? Even Norris, who swore he'd love only you for life, fell head over heels for me. So tell me— what makes you think Ronald will be the exception?"

Erin's smug little smile cut deep. Every word she threw out was like a needle stabbing into Tracy's chest, draining the color from her face.

Her words were cruel-but the worst part was, they weren't entirely wrong.

People really are fickle.

Erin saw Tracy's shaken expression and pressed harder. "Oh, you probably didn't notice. When the hotel manager was checking your invitation, Ronald couldn't keep his eyes off me."

She leaned closer, her tone dripping with fake sweetness. "So when Winona dragged you away, I went over to him myself. Want to guess what we talked about?"

Her voice was teasing and suggestive, leaving Tracy's mind to fill in the blanks.

Tracy knew Erin was just trying to stir things up. She knew her words couldn't be trusted. She even remembered the promise she'd made to Ronald-to believe in him no matter what.

But deep inside, a dark whisper pushed its way in.

Don't fool yourself. Everyone changes. Ronald will too. He's no different from your family, no different from anyone else you've trusted for the past 20 years. They'll all leave you without a second thought.

The whisper echoed like a curse, hammering at the walls of her heart.

Meanwhile, Erin stood there with a harmless smile, though her eyes gleamed with something twisted.

No one ever really know what's going on in someone else's heart.

Erin knew that. And all she wanted was to crack Tracy's defenses, to make her doubt-even if it was just for a second.

Because once the doubt was there, Erin could make it grow into something so much bigger.

It was the same trick she'd used to turn the Jackmans against Tracy, the very thing that had let her steal everything away.

When Erin felt she had full control of the situation, Ronald suddenly appeared from behind Erin, rushing

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Chapter 177 Seeds of Doubt

forward with worry written all over his face.

He grabbed Tracy's arm. "CeeCee, what's wrong?"

Ronald had only lost sight of her for a few minutes; why did she look so pale now?

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His voice cut through the haze in her mind like a burst of sunlight, chasing away the shadows and silencing the whisper that had been eating at her.

Tracy lifted her head to look at him, her eyes unfocused and dazed, almost as if he were a stranger.

For a second, Erin was overwhelmed with guilt. Ronald's sudden arrival had rattled her. But when she saw Tracy's stunned expression, her confidence returned.

So what if Tracy was supposed to be the main character?

With the help Erin had, even the heroine could be reduced to nothing but a stepping stone.

Still, she didn't want Ronald calling out the lies she'd just spun. Quickly, she said, "Ronald, you two should talk. I'll leave you alone."

Before he could say anything to rebuke her, Erin spun on her heel and slipped away, too afraid he might throw her words back in her face.

But Ronald wasn't even thinking about her. His eyes never left Tracy, filled with nothing but concern.

Erin's retreating voice snapped her back to reality. Tracy shook her head lightly and said, "I'm fine."

When she turned, Erin was already gone. Tracy frowned.

What happened?

Something about that felt off.

She drew in a long breath and pushed aside the jumble of thoughts. "Come on. We have more important things to focus on."

Opportunities like tonight were rare. If they missed this one, Winona would definitely be on guard next

time.

Their plan couldn't be ruined-not by anything or anyone.

Tracy knew Winona probably had people watching her every move, maybe even scheming behind the

scenes.

What she didn't know was that Winona already had a plan-and it involved Matthew.

Matthew was the sole heir of the Renaults and carried himself with the polished charm of someone raised by an aristocratic family to be a perfect gentleman.

While Matthew was laughing and chatting with guests, Winona stormed up with a long face. She commanded rudely, "You. Come with me. We need to talk."

Not a flicker of irritation showed on his face. When the guests looked at him awkwardly, he gave a polite

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Chapter 177 Seeds of Doubt

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smile and said casually, "You know how women are-sometimes they get upset over the littlest things. I'll go calm her down. Please excuse me."

The guests chuckled and nodded, clearly impressed. "Mr. Renault really does have the best temperament. So well-mannered, his family raised him right."

Matthew acknowledged the compliment with a graceful nod before following Winona.

Only when they reached a quiet corner did the warm smile slip from his face.

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Chapter 178 A Broken Alliance

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The warmth and gentlemanly charm from earlier had vanished. What replaced it was a cold, arrogant look that most people found repulsive.

Winona didn't seem surprised. Her expression darkened, and she said, "I need you to take care of someone for me. With your skills, making her disappear without anyone knowing shouldn't be too hard, right?"

After all, wasn't that how he had handled Patricia, her grandmother, and even David years ago?

Matthew's eyes narrowed, a flash of ice cutting through his gaze. "I don't like it when people use that tone

with me."

Winona froze.

She had let her anger at Tracy cloud her judgment, nearly forgetting just how ruthless this seemingly polite man could be beneath the surface.

Forcing herself to stay calm, she softened her voice. "I wasn't giving you an order. I was offering a partnership."

Matthew smoothed his suit with deliberate slowness. "A partnership?"

The short, cold laugh was sharp and mocking. "And who exactly do you want me to deal with?"

"Tracy. The Jackmans' fake daughter." Winona rushed to answer, afraid he might change his mind.

But something in her words struck the wrong chord. Matthew's face darkened.

Everyone in high society had heard of the Jackmans' scandal with the real and fake daughter. The family had gone so far as to host a press conference to strip Tracy of the name, and it had been the talk of the city. Of course, Matthew had heard about it.

But her ending-he didn't like it. Not one bit.

He cast a cold glance at Winona. "I have no quarrel with her. Why should I lift a finger for you?"

Winona didn't understand why he had suddenly changed his stance, but she knew there was no one else who could help.

After a moment's thought, she lowered her voice and checked to make sure no one was around. "When Patricia jumped off the school roof years ago, Tracy just happened to be there."

That made Matthew raise a brow in surprise. He hadn't known that.

But beyond mild curiosity, he showed no interest. "That's your problem. What does it have to do with me?"

"You..." Winona faltered, stunned.

Matthew smirked, the curve of his mouth sharp with ridicule. "All these years, how many favors and benefits have you squeezed out of me and my family using that incident as leverage? Do you even remember?"

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He didn't wait for her to answer. "Even if we call it cooperation, the advantages your family has taken far outweigh what you ever contributed. Yet you're still greedy. Forcing me to hand over the right to host the conference was bad enough, but now you dream of becoming my wife? Do you really think you're worthy?"

The Renaults stood higher than even the Jackmans. And Matthew was their only heir. For Winona to set her sights on him was nothing short of laughable.

She was lusting after someone above her league.

Winona wasn't stupid; she could hear the insult clearly,

But the worst part was that he wasn't wrong.

Her family had once risen because of sheer luck, when her father's cheap batch of stones revealed several rare gemstones. They'd enjoyed wealth for a few years.

But after that, the family had only declined. If Matthew hadn't stepped in, the Millers would have been erased from Cloudville's elite circle long ago.

She knew the truth, but it still stung. Winona rebuked, "I never cared about being your wife." She muttered defensively, "That wasn't my idea."

It had been her father who kept pushing her to chase Matthew, insisting she play the part of the eager girl, saying things like it was easy for a woman to chase after a man.

The memory of those humiliating attempts-her forced smiles and constant efforts to please, only to receive nothing but scorn in return-made her chest burn with anger.

Matthew let out a short, cold laugh at her reaction. "So you don't care about being my wife ... What, you'd rather be Norris's wife?"

Winona stiffened, panic flickering across her face. "Too bad," Matthew continued casually. "Norris never cared about you. If you hadn't shamelessly tagged along behind Ms. Jackman, he probably wouldn't have given you a second glance."

Winona froze. Her eyes darted nervously around, terrified someone might overhear.

When she saw that no one was paying attention, she breathed again, though her face betrayed her

uneasiness.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about."

She had hidden this secret well. It had been years, and Tracy never found out.

How had Matthew figured it out?

His mocking smile widened. "You don't know? Do you want me to spell it out for you?"

"You're in love with Norris."

"Shut up!" Winona blurted, her voice sharp, reaching to grab him in desperation.

But Matthew smoothly stepped aside, his expression dripping with contempt.

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"Calm down. I couldn't care less about your love life," Matthew said with a crooked smile. "Just know your own place. Whoever you want to deal with-that's your business; don't drag my family along with it."

His point couldn't have been clearer.

He wasn't going to help Winona to deal with Tracy. If she wanted to make a move, that was on her-so long as it didn't involve his family.

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Chapter 179 Felicia's Hidden Motives

Chapter 179 Felicia's Hidden Motives.

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When Matthew finished speaking, he didn't wait for Winona's reaction. He turned and walked away.

In that instant, the arrogance on his face melted into the polished manners of a gentleman, as if he wore two entirely different masks.

Winona was so furious she wanted to rip into him right then and there, but she forced herself to hold back.

The Renaults were not people she could afford to offend.

After several deep breaths, she finally smoothed her expression, put on a fake smile, and returned to entertaining the guests.

Not long after the two of them left, a figure slipped out from behind a fire exit door at the corner.

It was Tracy. She watched Winona's back disappear and couldn't help feeling both absurd and speechless.

She had overheard the entire exchange between Winona and Matthew. For the first time, she realized Winona had feelings for Norris.

All these years, she hadn't noticed a single clue.

Then she remembered what Jasmin once told her-that Winona targeted her mainly because she was known as Cloudville's most beloved princess.

Maybe Norris was part of that reason too.

But now, Norris was in love with Erin. The one who carried that title was Erin.

With Winona's overbearing and extreme personality, why would she ever lower herself to play second fiddle beside Erin?

Something about Erin seemed stranger by the day.

Tracy shifted her gaze to the hallway where Matthew had walked away.

In some ways, she and Matthew weren't so different-

A fake heiress.

A fake heir.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, a voice came from behind. "Ms. Yarwood, what are you doing here all alone?"

Tracy snapped back to reality and instinctively tensed up. She turned to see Felicia approaching with a smile.

Ever since the Woodward's partnered with the Jackmans on a business project, their standing in Cloudville had skyrocketed. As the project lead, Felicia naturally had access to today's Investor Conference.

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Chapter 179 Felicia's Hidden Motives

Tracy's only encounter with her was back when she had to play the part of Chris's girlfriend.

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That meeting was far from pleasant. There was no reason Felicia should be going out of her way to greet her now.

Tracy instinctively stepped back, her guard up.

Felicia pretended not to notice, walking closer as if to take her hand. Tracy dodged at once.

Felicia's smile stiffened, a flicker of darkness passing through her eyes before she quickly recovered.

She didn't try to step closer again. Instead, Felicia smiled lightly and asked, "It hasn't been that long since we last met. Why are you acting so distant?"

Tracy frowned, unsure why Felicia was pretending to be so friendly, but the wariness in her heart didn't fade.

Felicia's smile softened. "The last time I saw you, I thought you were a wonderful girl. It's a shame Chris didn't realize what he had."

She leaned in a little, her tone dripping with tenderness. "Did you and Chris have a fight? If he treated you badly, just tell me. I'll make sure you're taken care of."

Felicia sounded so genuine, so serious, that anyone else might have believed her.

But Tracy knew better. Her little act with Chris had ended a long time ago. For Felicia to bring it up now, here of all places-means she had an angle.

She had carried out Derek's last wish. Tracy had no interest in the Woodward's family battles.

So she shut it down flat. "If there's nothing else, I'll excuse myself, Mrs. Woodward."

Without waiting for a reply, Tracy turned on her heel and walked away quickly.

Felicia's smile dropped. She frowned, annoyed, but didn't follow. Instead, she watched Tracy's back disappear into the crowd, her thoughts racing.

The Woodward's couldn't compete with the Jackmans, not really. But a marriage between the Woodward's only son and the Jackmans' adopted daughter? That wasn't impossible. They were close in age, after all.

She wanted to know exactly how Tracy had managed to make Chris change a kidnapper's testimony and personally clear her name.

If Tracy had that kind of power, maybe she could help Felicia break free from Chris's control.

"Since when are you and Tracy so close, Mrs. Woodward?"

Erin suddenly appeared, following Felicia's gaze.

Even though Tracy was already gone, it was clear Erin knew exactly who Felicia had been talking to.

Felicia pulled her thoughts back and glanced at her. "Ms. Jackman, are you worried about me or your sister?"

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She had worked with Erin before and knew perfectly well what kind of person this sweet, kind-hearted heiress really was.

This girl wouldn't show up out of nowhere just to make small talk.

Erin didn't bother to deny it. "Of course, I'm worried about you, Mrs. Woodward."

With a bright smile, she stepped closer and linked her arm through Felicia's. "You seem very concerned about Tracy and Chris. Funny enough, so am I. If the chance comes, I'd be more than happy to give you a

hand."

Her tone was gentle, but her words carried an edge. "After all, nothing would please me more than helping Tracy find her happiness."

Meanwhile, Tracy had no idea what was happening behind her.

She had only stepped aside to make a quick phone call-right before overhearing Winona and Matthew's conversation.

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Chapter 180 Whispers and Suspicions

Chapter 180 Whispers and Suspicions.

The moment Tracy stepped out, she spotted Ronald waiting for her not far away.

He had already seen her, and instead of waiting, he ran straight over.

When they met, neither spoke at first-Ronald simply nodded.

Tracy instantly understood what he meant.

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While she had gone to make a call, Ronald hadn't been idle either. They had a big plan to pull off tonight.

With practiced ease, the two of them exchanged information, then moved to stand by a table near the dining area.

From there, they could see the entire hotel lobby. Just as importantly, Winona's people, the ones spying on them, could see them too.

Time seemed to crawl as they waited.

Ronald brought over some desserts, setting them in front of Tracy one by one. He didn't touch any himself.

Tracy noticed, but she was used to it by now.

After living with him for so long, she had realized just how picky he was with food-not in the sense of being fussy, but careful.

If he hadn't made it himself or others had tried it, he wouldn't eat it.

Almost as if he was always guarding against something.

She never pressed him on it.

She simply ate what was in front of her and let the silence pass.

Finally, maybe because the quiet felt too heavy, Ronald spoke up.

His topic caught her off guard; Ronald actually brought up Erin.

“CeeCee, when Winona pulled you away earlier, Erin came looking for me.”

Tracy froze mid-bite, instantly recalling the things Erin had said to her.

Swallowing her food, she turned to Ronald. “What did she want?”

Instead of letting Erin’s nonsense fester in her head, she would rather hear Ronald’s side directly.

She had promised to trust him-and she meant it.

Ronald had no idea that Erin had tried to stir things up with Tracy.

Thinking Tracy was simply worried about him, he happily repeated the whole story.

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Chapter 180 Whispers and Suspicions

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“She kept calling my name over and over. I couldn’t get her to quit. Honestly, I thought there was something wrong with her name, and I didn’t want it to pass on to me, so I bolted.”

He patted his chest like he’d just escaped a disaster, then gave her a boyish grin, eager for Tracy to praise him. “See, CeeCee? I’m smart, right?”

Ronald told it in such a lighthearted way that it baffled Tracy.

She knew he wasn’t lying. Even when Erin had stood right in front of her, trying to sow doubt, she had still believed Ronald.

But she had to admit, Erin’s words had gotten under her skin, which drove her to ask him what the two had been talking about.

Still, something else nagged at her. “Why would she go after you?”

Tracy knew Erin’s tricks too well. That was how she’d pulled the whole family to her side, little by little.

But why, Ronald?

Ronald had thought about that himself. Though he didn't know the exact reason, he had a strong guess that it had something to do with Tracy.

After digging into Erin's background, he'd noticed a pattern: whether it was clothes, friends, or even family, if it belonged to Tracy, Erin would try to take it.

Showing up out of nowhere to target him probably fits that same pattern.

Ronald explained his guess, then leaned in and lowered his voice. "CeeCee, I don't know what it is, but there's something off about Erin. You need to be careful."

"You think so too?" Tracy asked in surprise. "What feels off to you?"

Hearing her say "too" told Ronald she already had her suspicions.

Still, he couldn't quite pin it down.

Ronald stayed quiet for a long time before finally saying, "When Winona tried to make things difficult for us earlier, I noticed Erin standing off to the side. It was obvious she was the one who set the whole thing up."

He frowned, his tone serious. "But what really bothered me was how just a few words from her had provoked Winona; almost everyone there seemed swept up by it. That's not normal."

His eyes darkened. "There's something strange about that woman. It's like she can control people's minds."

Tracy's body jolted, the words striking her like a sudden flash of clarity.

Control people's minds?

That explained it-everyone orbiting Erin acted like they were under her spell.

But how could any ordinary person have that kind of power?

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Not even the most advanced technology or the world's best hypnotists could pull something like that off.

And yet her grandfather, Walter, and Ronald hadn't been affected by her spell.

Seeing her lost in thought, Ronald leaned closer and asked softly, "CeeCee, what's wrong?"

She shook her head, unable to untangle the mess of thoughts rushing through her.

After a moment, she told him about Erin confronting her earlier, trying to drive a wedge between them. She warned Ronald to stay alert.

Only then did Ronald realize just how much Erin had managed to stir up in such a short time.