

The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late #Left Behind 231 - Read The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late Left Behind 231

Besides that piece, two other works were hot on its heels.

One was called “Ripples,” based on water elements—a ring with an overall teardrop shape, the main stone at the center surrounded by cascading waves.

The other was “Nebula,” a brooch shaped like an irregular star cluster with an opal at the center like the nebula’s core, titanium framework outlining the contours, dotted with diamonds and colored gems.

Voting lasted three days. Rachel sat in the study, her tablet showing the competition’s voting page.

“Ripples” was her latest work.

Water—looks weak but can cut through stone; looks calm but can create tsunamis.

So this piece represented gentle yet unstoppable power.

Right now, “Ripples” was steadily climbing, getting dangerously close to Sophie’s “Thornbird.”

But another piece was no joke either—“Nebula” was running neck and neck with “Ripples.”

The platform used anonymous voting, so except for Sophie’s public entry, nobody knew who created what. Made the voting totally fair.

And ironically, both “Ripples” and “Thornbird” were her pieces.

She found herself curious about whoever made “Nebula.”

She lightly tapped the screen where those designs were displayed, her finger making soft clicking sounds.

Her phone buzzed—Nicolas had texted: “Sophie’s trying to dig up info on the ‘Ripples’ creator, but don’t sweat it. She won’t find jack.”

Rachel was kinda surprised Sophie had moved so fast.

She texted back “ok” and walked to the window.

This whole anonymous thing felt incredible-nobody knew she was the Leroix heiress, nobody knew she'd even entered this competition.

Just had to wait for that moment when everything got revealed.

She remembered what they'd said at the Leroix house: "Without this family, you're nothing."

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But hey, dear brother, you seeing this?

Without the Leroix name, my work can still claim the crown.

On the final voting day, "Ripples" had almost caught up to "Thornbird."

Rachel watched the numbers constantly updating when she spotted something sketchy-

"Thornbird's" vote count had suddenly jumped by 200,000 between 3 and 5 AM!

"She's buying votes!" Rachel immediately found Nicolas.

Nicolas checked the data and asked, "Bust her now?"

Rachel shook her head: "If we call her out now, she'll just claim someone's setting her up. Let's wait till the final results drop, then let the numbers do the talking."

Nicolas flashed this knowing smile: "Smart move."

Let the drama unfold.

Seemed like that hotheaded kid had finally learned some strategy.

Meanwhile, Sophie was still stuck in the hospital, frantically watching the data.

Shit! Shit! Shit!

She'd already bought nearly 800,000 votes but still couldn't pull ahead decisively!

That damn "Ripples" piece was breathing down her neck!

Plus, she'd just gotten another call from the vote-buying company saying "Ripples" was climbing too fast and suggesting another 500,000 votes.

"Do it!" Sophie screamed into the phone. "I don't give a damn what it costs-we're keeping first place!"

She glared at that water-themed ring, anxiety creeping up her spine.

Who the hell made "Ripples"?

Why couldn't they find any info on this person?

In this world, if you threw enough money around, you could uncover anyone's secrets. But this author? Complete ghost.

She stared at that design. This style, this way of handling water elements... a terrifying thought crept into her

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head.

"No way..." she whispered. "That loser should've given up ages ago... just three days, she couldn't have..."

She zoomed in, studying every detail of "Ripples."

The ring was sleek and sophisticated but packed with intricate details.

The wave patterns on the band looked like they were actually moving, the sapphire catching light like ocean swells. This design approach, this attention to detail...

Sophie's hands started trembling.

Who... was this person!

Once midnight hit, voting closed.

The nail-biting voting phase was finally over, and Maëlys's studio quickly dropped the top ten results.

This time, Maëlys herself went live on the studio's account.

Even though it was the middle of the night, hardcore fans were wide awake and ready.

“Huge thanks to all the designers who participated, and to everyone who voted...”

Maëlys had this smooth, intellectual voice. She wasn't rushing anything, keeping everyone on the edge of

their seats.

“Time for the final results. Tenth place goes to...”

Preliminaries picked ten finalists who'd compete live to choose three designers for the studio.

Maëlys was all about quality over quantity. She wanted the cream of the crop, so only three spots.

She'd even said she'd rather take one perfect commission per year than compromise on standards. Numbers

didn't matter to her.

She announced rankings from bottom to top, revealing the designers behind each piece.

When she got to the top three, she paused dramatically, grinning: “Third place is...”

Rachel was glued to her tablet, watching the livestream.

“Nebula' by Yara Adams!”

“Second place goes to...” she dragged it out, “the piece ‘Ripples’! Created by... anonymous contestant

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‘Daughter of the Sea’!”

The chat exploded:

[Anonymous entry? That's so badass!]

[Now THATS a real artist!]

[Ripples' is absolutely gorgeous, totally earned it!]

Sophie's smile died on her face.

She never would've guessed someone entered anonymously!

"This can't be happening!" Sophie shrieked.

The stream kept rolling: "Before we announce first place, we need to address something important. Our tech team found massive amounts of suspicious voting activity. After cleaning up the data, some vote counts have changed significantly."

The screen behind Maëlys lit up with comparison charts-"Thornbird's" votes nosedived while "Ripples" stayed rock solid.

Sophie went white as a sheet.

"Per competition rules, purchased votes are void, so Sophie's 'Thornbird' is now tied with 'Ripples'!"

The second she finished talking, the chat went absolutely mental:

"Wait, what? Sophie cheated?"

"Kick Sophie out! Disqualify her ass!"

"Sophie's results should be thrown out!"

Outside the livestream, Sophie collapsed on her hospital bed: "No fucking way..."

Then she spotted the wave patterns on that ring-those familiar curves hit her like a freight train.

"It's... it's her..." Sophie muttered. "That worthless bitch..."

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"It's... it's her..." Sophie muttered. "That worthless bitch..."

She frantically grabbed her backup phone and opened social inedia.

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The trending topics were already exploding with #Sophie BoughtVotes.

The comments were filled with pissed-off users:

【This is what passes for a rich heiress?】

[Disgusting, buying votes while acting all innocent!]

【So her “first place” was just bought with money!]

Sophie’s fingers trembled as she scrolled down, suddenly spotting a comment: “Am I the only one who thinks ‘Ripples’ is way more sophisticated than ‘Thornbird’? Those wave patterns are incredible!”

This comment had thousands of replies, mostly agreeing.

Sophie felt dizzy.

No... this wasn’t the outcome she wanted!

With shaking hands, she closed the app and tried to dial a familiar number, her fingers slipping on the

screen several times.

“Yvonne! You’re supposed to be good at digging up info, right? Find out who this ‘Daughter of the Sea’ really

is!” she screamed into the phone.

A hesitant voice came through: “Babe, not gonna lie-I started investigating the moment Maëlys announced the list. I tried everything, but...”

“But what?”

“This ‘Daughter of the Sea’ person is protected way too well. I can’t find any leads.”

No leads...

And coincidentally, Rachel had no traceable info either.

Could it really be her?

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Was the world really this full of coincidences?

Sophie slumped to the floor.

Why... why did Rachel have to show up again even after leaving the Leroix family!

“Babe, is there any chance... that Rachel actually is ‘Daughter of the Sea’?”

Before Yvonne could finish, Sophie hurled her phone to the ground and let out a shriek: “AHHH-”

She grabbed everything within reach and threw it all on the floor.

When she ran out of things to smash, she started clawing at her own hair.

“Why...” she clutched her head, “why do you keep haunting me...”

Yvonne heard the commotion and called out worriedly, but got no response.

When she tried calling back, it just rang and rang.

The livestream continued.

Maëlys’s voice echoed through the stream, calm but with an edge of cold steel: “After careful consideration, we’ve decided to keep Miss Sophie’s qualification. After all, artistic creation itself is pure...”

The tablet still streaming nearby made Sophie’s body go rigid. ‘She grabbed it in disbelief, staring at the

screen.

She hadn’t misheard, right? They were keeping her in the competition?

But before she could get too excited, the chat absolutely lost it.

[How much did the organizers get paid?]

[Vote buying and she still gets to compete? Is there any fairness left?]

[The ‘Ripples’ creator got screwed over by this nepotism bullshit.]

【Wait, didn’t you guys notice? Sophie broke the rules from the start and still got to compete. Vote buying is nothing compared to that. If you know, you know.】

Sophie sat dazed on the floor, the phone screen’s glow reflecting off her pale face.

She watched those brutal comments, feeling like she couldn't breathe. Suddenly, one comment caught her

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just kicking her out..."

She shot upright, staring at that comment.

Yeah, why was Maëlys doing this?

She didn't know Maëlys well, but word was she was decisive and ruthless. With her personality, shouldn't she have just disqualified Sophie outright?

She completely missed whatever Maëlys said after that.

The livestream finally ended with viewers still cursing up a storm.

The moment the stream cut off, Maëlys called Nicolas.

"Mr. Rothschild, per your instructions, I let Sophie advance and exposed all her little 'tricks.' Can you finally tell me why we're doing this?"

"Mm." Just a cold response came through, like he couldn't care less about any of it.

After waiting forever for more explanation, Maëlys knew she wouldn't get the answer she wanted.

When Nicolas didn't want to talk, nobody could pry his mouth open.

After hanging up, Nicolas tossed his phone aside.

He really didn't give a damn about Sophie. With his personality, he'd just crush her completely.

But this was all Rachel's idea.

She wanted to keep Sophie around.

Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, New York sparkled with lights, but none could match the dark intensity in his eyes.

"Knock knock-"

The bedroom door was gently pushed open as Rachel walked in carrying coffee.

These past few days living here, she'd gotten into the habit of just walking into his bedroom without waiting for permission.

Today she wore a cream knit sweater, the soft fabric hugging her slender waist.

Nicolas's gaze lingered on her for a second before casually looking away.

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Rachel set the coffee in front of him, her voice soft: "Thank you."

Nicolas picked up the cup-the handle still seemed to carry warmth from her fingertips. He unconsciously

traced it a few times.

"You sure you want to do this?" He looked up at her. "I could make her disappear forever."

Rachel shook her head: "Making her disappear would be too easy."

Her gaze drifted to the window: "I want her to watch everything she cares about crumble, piece by piece."

Nicolas's lips curved into the faintest smile.

He loved seeing her like this-like an elegant cat who could kill with one strike but preferred to toy with her prey instead.

"Aren't you worried she'll bite back?"

"With you here, what do I have to worry about?" Rachel realized how suggestive that sounded the moment

she said it, her ears turning pink.

Nicolas set down his coffee and stood, walking over to her.

His tall frame towered over her as Rachel caught his subtle cologne.

"You really know how to use me," his voice was low and dangerous.

Rachel looked up to meet his intense gaze: "So would Mr. Rothschild mind being used by me?"

Nicolas leaned down until they were close enough to feel each other's breath.

His long fingers tilted up her chin: "I'd be delighted."

Rachel opened her mouth but no sound came out. She could feel Nicolas's breath on her cheek, burning hot.

"Nicolas, it's getting late, you should rest..." she said stiffly.

"Hmm?" Nicolas's tone lifted slightly. His eyes flicked to the coffee cup with a teasing glint:

"Didn't someone just bring me coffee? I thought you didn't want me to sleep."

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Rachel's fingertips unconsciously fidgeted with the hem of her sweater, her cheeks burning red from his

question.

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Nicolas's thumb was still pressed against her jaw, applying just enough pressure to force her to tilt her head at an even more vulnerable angle.

Seeming to notice her trembling body, he chuckled softly, his Adam's apple vibrating: "Your hands were so

steady when you brought the coffee, so why are you shaking all over now?"

Just as Rachel was about to argue back, her lower back suddenly hit the desk edge.

The coffee cup rippled with dark brown waves, some even spilling over.

Nicolas reached out to steady it, but his palm ended up covering her hand that was clutching a tissue.

"Don't move." He pulled away the crumpled tissue, the slight friction sound particularly clear in their intimate atmosphere.

Rachel held her breath, watching the man's pale fingers clean the table with deliberate slowness. But as she

watched those movements, her mind started wandering in ways she couldn't control.

Those hands were really beautiful,

"You got some here too." Suddenly, Nicolas spoke, then his fingertip traced across her collarbone with the

faintest touch.

But there was no coffee stain there at all.

Rachel raised her hand to push him away, but her palm pressed against his rapidly rising chest.

Nicolas let out a muffled groan, his breathing suddenly rough: "Rachel."

"What?" Her voice trembled.

Nicolas's Adam's apple rolled heavily, and just as he moved to cradle the back of her head, Rachel suddenly turned and bit his earlobe: "Nicolas, your heart's beating so fast."

Nicolas hadn't expected Rachel to turn the tables on him and suddenly laughed softly.

Rachel gripped the back of his shirt, the expensive fabric bunching up in her palm.

The feeling of taut muscle under her fingertips made them tingle, and before she knew it, Nicolas's knee had

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pressed between her legs.

"Nicolas..." her voice took on an unfamiliar softness even to herself, "the coffee's getting cold."

The man suddenly stepped back half a pace, casually straightening himself out.

Before Rachel could find her balance in the void, he swept her up in his arms.

"Then we'll make fresh." Nicolas kicked open her bedroom door, dark currents surging in his eyes. "Coffee for all-night conversations should be slowly brewed in a siphon pot."

At the same time, Sophie was doxxed for being hospitalized, with people posting the exact hospital address.

Left with no choice, the Leroix family brought her home overnight, with the family doctor handling her

recovery.

Sophie curled up on the couch, her eyes red and swollen from crying.

Joanne sat beside her, gently patting her back.

“Sophie, stop crying,” Joanne’s voice was full of heartache. “It’s just a competition. We don’t have to

participate.”

David stood by the window, his brow deeply furrowed.

“What the hell happened? How did this turn into such a huge scandal?”

“Dad!” Sophie lifted her head, her voice thick with tears. “It’s Rachel! It has to be her! That ‘Daughter of the

Sea’ is definitely her!”

“Nonsense!” David spun around sharply. “Your sister left the Leroix family ages ago. How could she possibly enter the competition?”

“It IS her!” Sophie screamed hysterically. “That design, that attention to detail-only she could do it! I’ve studied her work for years, I know her better than anyone!”

Joanne quickly hugged Sophie: “Okay, okay, stop talking. Your sister...”

Before she could finish, Sophie cut her off: “Why does sister have to compete with me for everything!”

David’s expression instantly darkened.

“Enough!” Arthur slammed his hand on the coffee table. “Look at yourself right now!”

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Sophie froze. She’d never seen her father this angry.

Joanne quickly stood up to mediate: "Alright, alright, everyone stop fighting. Sophie, go to your room and

rest."

Sophie bit her lip as tears flowed again.

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She couldn't argue with David, so she could only nod and head upstairs with Arthur's support.

Joanne sighed, looking at David: "You didn't have to get so angry."

David rubbed his temples: "This is completely unacceptable. This incident has totally embarrassed the

Leroix family."

"You're the one who spoiled her," Joanne muttered under her breath.

David didn't respond. He walked to the window, looking out at the night.

The media was going crazy, all reporting on Leroix family drama.

And people had already dug up Rachel's public break with the family at the funeral- everyone was waiting

to see the Leroix family's downfall.

He suddenly remembered the day Rachel left.

It wasn't that he hadn't looked for her, but she couldn't be found.

"Joanne," David suddenly spoke, "do you think we made a mistake?"

Joanne was stunned: "What do you mean?"

David shook his head without answering.

Forget it, no point dwelling on this. Anyone who embarrassed the Leroix family was definitely in the wrong.

The next day.

Jaxon stood at the Leroix mansion entrance, his long fingers pressing the doorbell.

The door opened, and Joanne enthusiastically brought him inside, then pointed upstairs and sighed: "Sophie's in a bad mood. Maybe... you could go see her?"

Jaxon set down the fruit basket he'd brought and nodded.

Going upstairs, he walked to Sophie's room and knocked.

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A loud crash came from inside, followed by Sophie's voice: "I said I'm not seeing anyone!"

"Sophie, it's me." Jaxon's voice was calm and patient.

The room went quiet for two seconds, then moments later, the door opened.

Sophie appeared in the doorway with red, swollen eyes.

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She wore a wrinkled nightgown, her hair disheveled, completely lacking her usual polished appearance.

"Jaxon..." her voice was tearful as she threw herself into his arms.

Jaxon gently patted her back, but his gaze moved past her shoulder to the design sketches scattered across the living room floor.

On those papers, the wave patterns of "Ripples" were clearly visible.

"Don't be sad." He gently patted Sophie's back, then supported her, guiding her downstairs to sit on the

couch.

Joanne had already left to give them privacy.

She wouldn't be any help staying anyway-better to leave it to Jaxon.

Sophie curled up on the couch, hugging a pillow.

"Jaxon, I'm finished..." she sobbed. "Everyone knows I bought votes, I..."

“But you weren’t disqualified.” Jaxon said, his voice gentle but firm. “Since the organizers gave you this chance, why not try?”

Sophie looked up at him through teary eyes: “But the online comments...”

“Do those comments matter?” Jaxon sat beside her. “What matters is the finals. If you can prove yourself in the finals, those comments will naturally disappear.”

Sophie bit her lip, hesitating, then suddenly grabbed Jaxon’s hand.

“Jaxon, I think... I think that ‘Daughter of the Sea’ is sister!”

Jaxon’s fingers trembled slightly, a hard-to-catch glint flashing in his eyes.

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Before Sophie could even catch on, Jaxon had already pulled himself together. “What makes you think that?”

Sophie’s eyes darted away. “Just a hunch, I guess... You know how it is with sisters- after all these years, you pick up on things.”

Facing Jaxon always made her feel guilty. Not just because of the whole design mess, but because she’d never told him about Rachel being locked up at the Leroix house. And she knew damn well he’d been looking for Rachel.

Thing was, she didn’t want him to find her. So she’d kept her mouth shut on purpose.

Jaxon studied her shifty behavior, fighting to keep the chaos inside him under control.

Was that anonymous contestant really Rachel?

All this time searching, and not a single trace! Never would’ve thought she’d enter some competition and make such a splash.

“Even more reason to go to the finals then.” His voice was quiet. “I’ll come with you.”

Sophie’s face lit up instantly. She practically launched herself into his arms, squeezing him tight. “Thank you, Jaxon... God, you’re amazing.”

Jaxon rubbed her back gently, but his eyes were already looking past her shoulder, up toward that corner room upstairs.

His mind drifted back to Donald’s funeral.

Rachel standing there in all black, looking pale as death. The way she'd walked away-so final, like she was done with everything.

That was the last time he'd seen her.

"Jazon?" Sophie's voice snapped him back.

"Yeah?"

"What's going through your head?"

Jaxon looked down at her, managing a soft smile. "Just thinking about the finals."

Sophie nestled against his shoulder, eyes closed.

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"As long as you're there, I'm good."

Jaxon didn't say anything back, just kept stroking her hair.

Rachel, looks like we're finally gonna see each other.

Finals were in three days, downtown at the Grand Theater.

Rachel was up with the sun.

No sign of Nicolas-probably already gone.

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She threw on a simple white dress, left her hair loose over her shoulders.

Quick wash-up, grabbed her bag, and headed out.

Downstairs, there was Matt by a black car, holding some fancy gift box.

"Morning, Miss Leroix," Matt said with a smile.

"Matt?" Rachel blinked. "What are you doing here?"

“Mr. Rothschild’s got this huge meeting today-can’t make it to the finals with you.” Matt held out the box. “He wanted me to bring you this.”

Rachel took it and peeked inside. A pale blue dress.

The bottom had these detailed wave patterns that caught the light just right.

“Oh, and this.” Matt handed over a smaller box.

Rachel opened it, curious, then just stared..

A ring. Her own design-“Ripples.”

The wave patterns were catching the sunlight, throwing off this soft glow that matched the dress perfectly.

Rachel’s hands were actually shaking a little as she picked up the ring. There was something engraved inside: “To my muse.”

“This is...” She looked up at Matt, voice catching,

Matt grinned. “Mr. Rothschild figured since it’s your design, you should be the first one to wear it.”

“He also said,” Matt went on, “he hopes it brings you luck.”

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Rachel slipped the ring on-perfect fit.

She stared at those wave patterns, couldn’t help but smile.

“Matt,” she said quietly, “tell him thanks for me.”

Matt chuckled. “You can tell him yourself. Oh, and he said don’t stress about it.”

Rachel went upstairs to change. The pale blue dress hugged her just right, showed off her figure without being over the top.

Not too fancy-could wear it anywhere, really.

Simple V-neck that showed off her collarbones. Sleeves tapered at the wrists, made her hands look even more delicate. The fabric felt like nothing.

When she came back down, even Matt did a double-take.

“Miss Leroix, ready to go?”

Rachel got in the car, fingers running over the dress fabric.

It smelled faintly of cedar-exactly like Nicolas.

“Matt,” she said suddenly, “got anything to... cover my face with?”

Matt caught her eye in the rearview mirror, totally getting it.

“Mr. Rothschild’s got you covered.”

At the next red light, he reached into the glove compartment and handed her another box.

Inside was a pale blue silk scarf, same material as the dress.

The edges had the same intricate wave patterns. Rachel traced them with her fingers, feeling her eyes get

hot.

He’d thought of everything.

“Mr. Rothschild said if you don’t want to show your face yet, you could use this,” Matt’s voice had this amused tone. “He picked it out himself.”

Rachel wrapped the scarf around her head a couple times, just her eyes showing.

They pulled into the parking garage. Thought they were early, but the reporters beat them to it.

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Soon as they saw the fancy car, journalists swarmed like vultures. Camera flashes going off everywhere, microphones practically scratching the windows.

“You a contestant?”

“Can we get an interview?”

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“What do you think about your chances?”

Matt’s face darkened. “Miss Leroix, stay in the car. I’ll deal with these guys.”

Rachel nodded, watching Matt get out. The reporters mobbed him immediately.

“Who’s in the car?”

“Come on, just a quick interview?”

Matt smiled, but his tone was steel. “Sorry, but the lady’s not doing interviews.”

“Why not? She hiding something?” one reporter pushed?

“Please focus on the actual competition. My lady’s privacy isn’t up for discussion. Thanks.”

Matt was getting overwhelmed, so Rachel opened her door and stepped out.

There she was in that pale blue dress, face covered except for her eyes.

The reporters froze for a second, then came at her like sharks.

“What’s your contestant number?”

“Why the face covering? You got something to hide?”

The questions were brutal. Matt’s expression went ice-cold. “My lady has sensitive skin—can’t handle direct sunlight. That’s why the scarf.”

The reporters weren’t buying it, shooting each other looks.

One of them actually pushed past Matt, shoving a microphone right in Rachel’s face. “How about sharing your design philosophy?”

Matt threw himself between them, using his arms to block the aggressive crowd. His voice turned deadly serious: “Sorry, but you’re looking at Miss Rothschild—of the New York Rothschild family.”

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The reporters went dead silent.

The New York Rothschild family. Nicolas Rothschild-that titan of the business world.

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Nobody wanted to mess with the Rothschilds, especially when this “Miss Rothschild” clearly wasn’t even a

contestant.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to bother you.”

“We’ll get out of your way.”

The reporters scattered like cockroaches, clearing a path for Rachel.

Matt escorted her into the venue, and only relaxed once he was sure no reporters had followed them.

“Miss Leroix, sorry about that whole-“.

Rachel shook her head, eyes twinkling with amusement. “You did great. The Rothschild name definitely

comes in handy.”

Just then, another black sedan pulled up.

The door opened and Sophie stepped out in four-inch heels, moving with practiced grace.

She wore a silver gown with flawless makeup, though it couldn’t quite hide the exhaustion in her eyes.

The reporters immediately swarmed like sharks smelling blood.

“Miss Leroix, care to explain the vote manipulation scandal?”

“Do you think it’s fair that the organizers kept you in the competition?”

“Any truth to rumors about financial backers supporting you?”

Sophie's face went ghost white. She stumbled backward, nearly twisting her ankle in those heels.

A lean hand caught her waist.

Jaxon stepped out of the car, his gaze cutting through the crowd like a blade,

"Gentlemen," his eyes swept over each reporter, "give the lady some space."

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The reporters hesitated, but seeing Jaxon's face made them even more excited.

"Mr. Rothschild! We've heard about your relationship with Miss Leroix-what exactly is going on between

you two?"

"Are you here to support her?"

"Is it true you're engaged, like the rumors say?"

The question made Sophie's whole body tense with excitement.

Jaxon smiled slightly, but his eyes were ice-cold. "Miss Leroix and I are old friends. I'm just here to cheer her

on."

He paused. "As for anything else, no comment."

Sophie froze, managing an awkward smile.

Their relationship summed up as "no comment"?

Jaxon ignored the reporters and strode toward the venue, keeping Sophie close.

The journalists tried to follow but security blocked them.

Sophie gripped Jaxon's arm tight, voice shaking. "Jaxon, thank you..."

Jaxon glanced down at her, but his gaze drifted past her shoulder, scanning the crowd.

When he'd gotten out of the car, he'd caught sight of someone in a pale blue dress who looked familiar...

"Don't mention it." His eyes kept searching, clearly distracted.

Sophie didn't notice his preoccupation, still lost in her own gratitude. "I knew you wouldn't abandon me."

Jaxon didn't respond because he'd spotted that figure again-just for a second before she disappeared

around a corner.

Pale blue gown, silk scarf wrapped around her head like armor,

Could that really be... Rachel?

Jaxon's heart started racing.

"Jaxon, what are you looking at?" Sophie followed his gaze but only saw an empty hallway.

"Nothing," Jaxon pulled his attention back. "Let's go."

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He guided Sophie into the venue, mind already working.

If "Daughter of the Sea" really was Rachel, then this competition was about to get very interesting.

And finally-finally-he'd see Rachel again.

After Matt led her to the green room, Rachel pulled off her veil.

According to Matt, Nicolas had specifically contacted the organizers to reserve this room for her.

So she'd used his connections to get special treatment.

She didn't mind pulling strings. If you had connections, why not use them?

She picked up her phone and sent Nicolas a quick message.

“Thanks for the gifts. I love them.”

Nicolas replied almost immediately: “Glad you like them.”

She walked to the window, watching the crowd below.

The room was on the third floor with a perfect view of the scene outside.

Suddenly, she spotted Sophie clinging to Jaxon’s arm as they headed upstairs.

Sophie’s movements looked weak and unsteady-without Jaxon supporting her, she’d probably collapse.

Amazing how much Sophie had worn herself down in just a few days.

Knock knock.

“Miss Leroix, the competition’s about to start,” Matt’s voice came through the door.

“Coming.” Rachel took a deep breath, rewrapped the scarf around her head, grabbed her purse, and headed

for the door.

Matt was waiting in the hallway. Once she emerged, he escorted her toward the competition area.

The corridor buzzed with activity. Rachel kept her head down, trying to avoid contact with anyone.

Center stage featured ten design stations arranged in perfect rows, each equipped with exquisite tools and

materials.

The audience filled every seat, camera flashes popping constantly in the media section.

13:57

He Stole My Ticket. I Flew Private: Revenge Served Sky High

58.1%

Rachel found a seat toward the edge.

Looking around, she noticed Sophie positioned front and center, her gown practically glowing under the

lights.

“Contestants, please prepare yourselves,” a staff member announced. “We’re about to begin.”

Rachel adjusted her scarf, making sure only her eyes were visible.

She could feel curious stares from the other contestants, but nobody recognized her as “Daughter of the Sea.”

The stage lights dimmed, then blazed back to life, illuminating Maëlys in the center.

She wore a sharp black suit, microphone in hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen, media friends, welcome to the finals!” Maëlys’s voice boomed through the theater.

“After rigorous selection, ten top designers have emerged. Now, let’s meet them one by one!”

Spotlights swept across the contestant area.

Each name called brought a contestant to their feet and onto the stage.

They started from the bottom rankings, building excitement as they worked their way up.

Nine contestants had been revealed during the preliminaries, but the author of “Ripples”-Daughter of the

Sea-remained a mystery.

Everyone was dying to know who she was.

But after calling the third-place contestant to the stage, Maëlys didn’t follow the expected order. Instead of calling the second-place “Daughter of the Sea,” she skipped ahead and announced the first-place winner:

Sophie.

Sophie blinked in surprise when she heard her name.

She’d been hoping to finally see this mysterious “Daughter of the Sea,” never expecting such secrecy.

But she quickly recovered, rising gracefully and waving to the audience with a smile. Her gaze swept the media section, then paused at a certain corner.

That figure in blue... could it be her?

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13:57

He Stole My Ticket, I Flew Private: Revenge Served Sky High

Chapter 236 Let the Lead Come to You

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Felicia turned around, shocked and scared for the first time at this son she'd taken in halfway through his life.

"You don't have to do this ... I—I can help you! I can give you everything back! Just let me go, and I'll treat you like my own son; everything I have will be yours. Just please, let me go!"

Chris just stood there, quietly watching her cry and beg, watching her throw out desperate, ugly bribes. The person he once saw as this impossible mountain didn't feel so big anymore.

He let out a cold laugh, stopped caring about her struggles and curses, and turned, walking straight into the fire without hesitation.

Derek, I'm coming to make things right. You'll forgive me, won't you?

You've always been soft-hearted with me. Of course, you'll forgive me.

But someone like me deserves to burn

in hell, and you'll live well in heaven.

By morning, the news that Chris had started a massive fire and died with Felicia was everywhere.

When Tracy saw it, she froze, unsure what she was feeling.

Then Ronald's voice broke the silence. "Tracy, the plane's about to take off. You should turn off your phone."

Tracy snapped back, as if she'd been reading about a stranger. She shut her phone, pushing all her thoughts aside.

Because of the will the lawyer brought, Tracy had been delayed a few days before finally meeting the donor.

The man was a college professor, Kenneth Hewitt, with a kind and gentle face.

When Tracy showed him Erin's photo, he recognized her immediately. "I remember this young lady—she's something else.

"Over all these years, she's the first person I've met who can make someone relax with just a few words."

14:56 Thu, Sep 18

Chapter 236 Let the Lead Come to You

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Kenneth's face showed full, honest admiration for Erin, but Tracy's chest tightened.

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Whether it was the Jackmans, friends, or even the bodyguard outside Franklin's hospital room back then—whenever they faced Erin, they'd unconsciously relax and treat her words like law.

It really was strange, almost like magic.

Tracy pushed the thought aside and asked about the driver he'd personally helped financially.

Kenneth told the truth, since it wasn't something to hide. "When Ms. Jackman mentioned it, I remembered and had someone check. That man really did need help.

"As for calling myself ... normally I wouldn't, but I thought of what Ms. Jackman said—how he'd been scammed by fame—chasing fake philanthropists. I figured if I called myself, he'd believe

it."

Back then, Erin's words had sounded casual, but Kenneth had taken them seriously, remembered them, and actually made the call.

Thinking of that, Kenneth looked full of regret. "If I'd known what would happen, I never should've called. Or at least waited until he got home."

He knew the call led to the man getting into a car accident on the way home and killing someone, but he didn't know the two young people in front of him had come because of it.

Tracy didn't explain. Once she was done asking her questions, she left with Ronald.

Even though she was almost certain Erin had caused Walter's accident, there were still too many mysteries.

Walter's movements were supposed

to be secret—

how did Erin know when he'd be back in Cloudville or when he'd pass that road? How could she be sure Kenneth would call personally? How could she predict the driver would rush home and beat that red light by two seconds?

If this was Erin's *plan*,

there were too many factors outside her control. How could she be so sure it would

work?

From what I know of *Erin*, she *doesn't* have *the scheming mind to plan this far ahead—*so how did *she do*

it?

Thinking about all this, Tracy's brow stayed tight, and she had no leads at all.

It was like the trail had

gone

cold.

Seeing her frown every day, Ronald wanted to tell her to take a break, but he couldn't.

14:56 Thu, Sep 18

Chapter 236 Let the Lead Come to You

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Instead, he tried to help her think. “Tracy, if you can’t find the lead, let the lead come to you.”

If you’ve done nothing wrong, there’s nothing to fear.

If Erin knew they had gone to Kenneth and “found something,” she’d get nervous and make a

move.

And if she acted, they’d have a chance to catch her messing up.

Because of this plan, Tracy didn’t rush back to Cloudville. Ronald dragged her around like they were on vacation.

She knew he was trying to help her relax, and she went along without refusing. After a while, she really did feel a lot better.

14:56 Thu, **Sep** 18

apter 237 Just Wait Here

Chapter 237 Just Wait Here

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After days of waiting, there still wasn’t news about Erin, but the cemetery staff called first, saying Liam had shown up there looking for her.

Tracy hadn’t gone out of her way to hide the fact that she’d bought those plots, so whether it was Chris or Liam, they could’ve found out if they really wanted to.

But she never imagined Liam would actually go to the cemetery just to track her down.

Tracy frowned, the good mood she’d been in fading at the sound of Liam’s name.

She honestly couldn’t understand why he was so determined to find her.

Her voice came out cold, sharp enough to be heard through the phone. “Please tell him I’m done with the Jackmans. If he wants to act out some fake, close–sibling scene, don’t bother coming to me. I think it’s disgusting.”

She was about to hang up when Liam’s voice suddenly came through. “Tracy, don’t hang up yet. I ... I know I was wrong.

“Before, I was fooled by Erin, that impulsive liar. I’m really sorry about everything I’ve done to you. I can make it up to you. Can you ... Can you please not ignore me?”

There was even a tiny, desperate sort of pleading in his tone, the kind that made him sound pitiful.

Tracy didn’t feel even a flicker of sympathy—if anything, she found it hilarious.

She never thought she’d live to hear Liam insult Erin. Now that was rare.

She let out a sharp laugh. “Liam, if one day I killed you and then said ‘sorry,’ would you forgive me?”

Liam froze.

He didn’t understand why Tracy would say something like that.

“I never wanted to hurt you. Even when Erin trapped me in her lies, at most I just cursed at you a few times—I never even hit you.

“I really do know I was wrong, Tracy. Please forgive me, even if it’s just giving me one chance to make it right. Please?”

14:56 **Thu**, Sep 18

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Chapter 237 Just Wait Here

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Tracy’s lips curled into a thin, icy smile. “Liam, from the day you sent me to Angelic Etiquette Academy, we could never go back. I will never forgive you.”

If she could forgive him with just a few sorry words, she might as well kill the people who had helped her crawl out of Angelic Etiquette Academy alive.

Liam's heart felt like a giant hand had crushed it into pieces, the pain so sharp that it made his eyes sting.

"I really do know I was wrong ... I know you would never push Erin down the stairs; it had to be a misunderstanding back then. And I know the one who saved me on Suncord Mountain was you. I know the whole truth now.

"Tracy, I'm begging you. I—"

"You think I'd still care about any of that?" Tracy cut him off, voice cold. "Whether it was pushing Erin down the stairs or saving you on Suncord Mountain, I explained it countless times. You were the one who didn't believe me.

"And now you think I'd still care whether you know the truth?"

The rest of Liam's words got stuck in his throat, and he couldn't get a single one out.

It was then that he realized something he didn't want to face.

She didn't care about the truth anymore, just like she didn't care about him anymore.

Tracy didn't even bother with his silence. She spoke straight into the phone, "If anyone comes to the cemetery looking for me from now on, turn them away. I don't want to be bothered by anyone."

That last part was for the cemetery staff, and when she finished, she hung up.

Liam stared at the dark phone screen for a long time before moving.

Because the phone had been on speaker, the cemetery worker had heard everything and stood there awkwardly.

Seeing Liam just sitting there staring at the phone, not handing it back, he reached out.

"Uh... you heard what she said. I'm just an employee, Ms. Yarwood is our biggest client, so I

go against her wishes."

can't

Liam heard the refusal and the hint to leave, but his face only went pale—there was no anger.

Chapter 237 Just Wait Here

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+10 Free Coins

If it had been before, Liam, as the mighty heir of the Jackmans, probably would've thrown money at the man just to humiliate him after being asked to leave like this.

But now, he just glanced at the worker, then turned and sat down on a bench nearby.

I don't know why Tracy bought so many plots, but I know she'll have to come

back sooner or later.

If she doesn't want to see me, I'll just wait here.

It was the first time Liam had been this stubborn about anything other than racing. He didn't leave to eat or sleep, and with his status, the cemetery staff couldn't make him go.

Ever since that fight, the Jackmans hadn't bothered with him at all, so even if he'd been gone for days, no one came looking.

Instead, Norris showed up.

Norris had never seen Liam like this before.

His face was haggard and unshaven, with a pile of cigarette butts scattered at his feet.

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14:56 **Thu**, Sep 18

Chapter 238 How Did Erin Know?

Chapter 238 How Did Erin Know?

Chapter 238 How Did Erin Know?

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When Liam saw Norris, he let out a short laugh, took a final sharp drag from his cigarette, and flicked the butt away before stomping it under his shoe.

He gave Norris a look that was hard to read. "You're here for Erin, right?"

He'd already been kicked out of the Jackmans. His parents and Andrew had completely stopped caring. If an outsider like Norris came looking, it had to be for Erin.

These past few days, sitting here with nothing to do, his mind kept wandering back over everything that had happened over the years.

He suddenly realized that every time they had bullied Tracy, it had always been to protect Erin.

They'd always thought Erin was soft-hearted and kind, that even if she got pushed around, she'd never run crying to them.

But if Erin never complained, how would they have known she'd been "bullied" at all?

Liam locked eyes with Norris, his smile curling into something mocking. "Let me guess. She told you, 'It's not Liam's fault. It's all mine. I'm the one to blame,' then cried all sad and pitiful right in front of you? And you decided I must've been the one hurting her, so you came here ready to defend your precious girl?"

Caught off guard, Norris choked on his words, no comeback coming to mind.

Because Erin had indeed said exactly that. And he'd come to Liam just to stand up for her.

The look on Norris's face told Liam he'd nailed it. His smirk deepened. "Norris, you and Andrew have always been the clever ones in our group. But now? Both of you got played by Erin. Doesn't that make you feel stupid?"

Norris's brow furrowed, and he snapped, annoyed, "Liam, Erin is your sister—how can you talk about her like that?"

Liam didn't flinch at the scolding. Looking at Norris felt like looking at his own past self—so clueless it was almost funny,

That expression pissed Norris off for some reason.

He'd always been calm and detached. If it weren't for Erin, he would never have come all the way to a remote, depressing place like this.

Chapter 238 How Did Erin Know?

+10 Free Coins

But in the end, this was the Jackmans' business. Sure, as Liam's future brother-in-law, he could scold the guy a little. But it wasn't his place to really get involved.

He figured it was better to leave it for the Jackmans themselves to handle.

With that thought, Norris pushed down his irritation, frowned, and said, "I heard you've been here for days. Who are you waiting for?"

Liam lowered his gaze, his voice barely above a whisper. "I want to apologize to Tracy. I know she'll forgive me, just like before."

Back then, no matter how badly I messed up, Tracy always forgave me

. She'd even turn around and comfort me.

*Growing up together like that
isn't something you can just cut off. She's bound to forgive me.*

That was what Liam kept telling himself, but the panic and fear in his chest wouldn't go away. Without thinking, he pulled out another cigarette and lit it.

Norris hadn't expected him to be here for Tracy. Instinctively, he glanced around. "Why are you waiting for her in a place like this?"

Liam blew out a cloud of smoke but didn't answer. Instead, he asked, "Tracy bought 11 burial plots here. The staff said they overheard her mention one of them was for herself."

Norris froze, his face full of shock. "What did you say?"

Liam tilted his head back. "Weird, right? Tracy's the type to shine brightly and take up space. Why would she buy herself a grave while she's still alive—and why so many?"

It was the one question that had kept him up every night he'd been here, and he still had no

answer.

Norris still hadn't fully processed the whole "Tracy bought herself a grave" thing. He stared blankly at the cheap, bare-bones cemetery around them.

And out of nowhere, he remembered the first time he'd seen her after she came back from Angelic Etiquette Academy.

She'd asked him whether he had any idea what she had been through these past two years.

Norris's chest tightened, unease spreading cold and fast.

He turned to Liam. “That Angelic Etiquette Academy—what kind of place is it, really?”

Chapter 238 How Did Erin Know?

Liam didn’t even look up. “What else could it be? Basically a private juvie.”

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Big-name families hated having their kids publicly dragged away by the authorities for crossing legal lines. Angelic Etiquette Academy existed for that exact reason.

If the family couldn’t control a child, the Academy would do it for them. They’d go in for two years minimum, and when they came out, they’d be the kind of kid who put the family’s interests first and obeyed without question.

It was Erin who’d found the place, saying two years wasn’t that long, that it’d be perfect for cooling Tracy down.

A sharp shiver ran through Liam, his hand trembling hard around the cigarette.

I

was born and raised in Cloudville, and I’ve been part of the highest elite circles his whole life. Even I have never heard of a place like that. So how... how did Erin know?

14:56 Thu, Sep 18

Chapter 239 Safest, Smartest Choice

Chapter 239 Safest, Smartest Choice

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Tracy’s change happened after she came back from Angelic Etiquette Academy.

Liam suddenly remembered the day he went to pick Tracy up at the gates—she was standing there, eyes empty and numb, staring at the sky like a walking corpse who’d been living in darkness for far too long...

Something clicked inside Liam. He jumped to his feet, grabbed Norris’s hand, not even caring that the burning cigarette butt had cut his skin.

“Norris, you’re the Gills’ heir. You’ve got way more resources than I do. Help me find out what exactly Tracy went through during those two years at Angelic Etiquette Academy.”

Norris’s heart jumped. He’d already felt that something wasn’t right, but Liam’s sudden reaction made that uneasy feeling even sharper.

Maybe just to quiet that feeling, he paused for a moment, then finally nodded.

I don’t have any hidden plan. I just...

I just

want Liam to face his mistakes and willingly go to Erin to apologize.

That’s right—everything I’m doing is for Erin!

Liam had no idea what Norris was thinking. Even though Norris agreed, the restlessness inside Liam didn’t fade.

He suddenly had a feeling that all his questions might be answered by those two years of Tracy’s life.

Only the answer might hurt and make him regret everything.

Tracy had already heard from the staff that Liam had been staking out the cemetery for days, but she didn’t let it bother her.

She’d been hanging out with Ronald for a few days, relaxing while also waiting for Erin to finally show her true colors.

And sure enough, patience paid off—less than a week later, Erin made her move.

Ever since the Walter incident, Tracy had people watching Erin constantly.

And just to be safe, she had several groups tracking her at once, so no matter how small a

14:56 Thu, **Sep 18**

Chapter 239 Safest, Smartest Choice

move, Erin couldn’t slip past them.

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+10 Free Coins

Erin was careful. Even when sending money to Tom, she made sure there was no trace.

But this time, she was rattled—she secretly set up a private meeting with Tom.

Worried about scaring her off, Tracy's people didn't get too close, so they couldn't hear what was said.

Judging by Erin's reaction, though, she seemed angry and impatient, yet also helpless against Tom—as if he had some dirt on her.

In the end, whatever they talked about, Erin pulled out a big stack of cash and handed it to Tom. Right after, Tom bought a ticket for a ship overseas.

Clearly, he was planning to run.

So Tracy immediately contacted the group she'd assigned to Tom before and told them to grab him.

With Erin's personality, there was no way she'd tolerate a leech like Tom for this long, but she had. That meant he had something she feared.

Whatever it was, she definitely wasn't letting him

1. go.

But after grabbing him, she had to figure out where to hide him.

All of Tracy's current workers had been left behind by Franklin, and the Jackmans all knew exactly who they were.

And since the Jackmans seem to lose all logic whenever Erin is involved, it wasn't impossible that Erin would get them to help track Tom down.

Plus, Erin had too many strange tricks. That bodyguard who had stayed by Franklin's side for almost seven years had still been manipulated by her. Tracy felt like nowhere was truly safe to

hide him.

When Ronald found out what she was struggling with, he didn't hesitate. "If you trust me, let me take him. I promise, even if the Jackmans turn Cloudville upside down, they won't find

him."

Tracy did trust Ronald. She knew if he said it, he had the ability to make it happen.

But she also knew Ronald had been keeping his identity hidden in Cloudville, as if he were avoiding someone.

14:56 Thu, Sep 18

Chapter 239 Safest, Smartest Choice

He'd already helped her several times. If this kept up, it might cause him trouble.

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+10 Free Coins

When Ronald realized what she was worried about, he laughed, warm and amused. "I'm glad you care about me. That proves I'm not just anybody to you.

"If I said helping wouldn't cause me trouble, you wouldn't believe me. But my cover's blown, so whether it causes trouble or not doesn't matter anymore.

"If I'm supposed to just do nothing because I'm afraid of trouble, then you shouldn't have saved me from those kidnappers in the first place. I'm the real big trouble here."

He didn't bother lying or sugarcoating. He just told her the truth, plain and simple.

In front of Tracy, he was always honest.

And that honesty was what mattered most to her.

She'd seen too much lying and betrayal. His honesty was priceless.

She didn't refuse Ronald's help. After all, he had hidden Tony before, and even Matthew couldn't find him then. Giving Tom to Ronald now was the safest, smartest choice.

Chapter 240 Toast

Chapter 240 Toast

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But after asking Ronald for help, Tracy added, "I'm sorry."

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Tracy was smart. She knew Ronald had always kept his whereabouts and identity hidden so well, and the only time he could've been exposed was that time when Franklin had his accident.

Back when she rescued Ronald, she'd heard the kidnappers mention he came from Jezelton, so the people he was hiding from had to be from Jezelton.

Franklin had survived that critical moment only because of the doctor Ronald had brought from Jezelton.

When he saw her apologizing to him for this, Ronald let out a helpless sigh. "Tracy, you don't need to apologize to me. I'm doing all these willingly.

"If anyone should be apologizing, it should be me apologizing to you."

He looked straight into Tracy's eyes, those intense eyes of his carrying an aggressive stubbornness. "I'm a huge, huge trouble. Being around me means you're bound to get tangled up in all of it.

"Now that my whereabouts are already exposed, there's a chance your information has landed in that person's hands, and he could come after you at any time.

"So, Tracy, are you scared?"

His hand tightened without him even noticing, his voice soft when he asked, his whole heart in

suspense.

He was afraid of hearing the answer he didn't want from her lips, yet deep down, he silently promised himself that even if she said she was scared, he would never let go.

His life had been so dark that he would fight to hold onto the tiniest bit of light with everything he had.

This was also the first time, in all the time they'd known each other, that Tracy had seen such deep stubbornness in his face—it was completely different from the sunny, cheerful side he usually showed.

But to her, Ronald didn't look strange at all right now.

If he really were that bright, sunshiney type, he must have grown up surrounded by love and

14:56 Thu, Sep 18

Chapter 240 Toast

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protection. Then how could he have almost been sent to Angelic Etiquette Academy? How could he have said that she was the only one he had in this world?

Tracy's eyes stayed locked on Ronald's, not missing the nervousness in his gaze.

She didn't look away. Her lips parted slightly, and she simply said, "I'm not scared."

She didn't explain why she wasn't scared, nor did she say anything else to make Ronald believe

her.

But just those few words were enough to finally make his heart settle.

He took her hand in his, his smile blooming again.

The sweet dimples on his face were clear and pure, making him look like a college kid who'd been sheltered at home, untouched by a single wound from the outside world.

Tracy glanced at their intertwined hands but didn't pull away, letting him lead her forward slowly.

Feeling her lack of resistance, Ronald's smile deepened, and his grip grew stronger.

He knew that as long as he didn't let go first, Tracy would never let go of his hand.

And he was the same. As long as Tracy didn't let go, he never would either.

Night fell.

Jezelton.

Even though Ronald had been away from Jezelton for a long time, some things still unfolded exactly as he'd expected.

For example, the information about Tracy had been delivered to a certain person's study as fast as possible.

This information included Tracy's life story—except for those two years she'd spent at Angelic Etiquette Academy.

After all, the Academy's power had stood unshaken in the country for so many years; not just anyone could dig into it, not even a big name in Jezelton.

But there were exceptions to every rule—for instance, certain “guests” who had once been to

14:56 Thu, Sep 18

Chapter 240 Toast

Angelic Etiquette Academy.

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In the stillness of the night, the warm yellow light glowed over the desk, making the already solemnly decorated study feel even heavier.

A man with an aura of cool elegance and nobility lounged lazily in his chair.

He wore deep-blue pajamas, with a towel draped around his neck, his toned chest half-revealed, and damp hair falling over his forehead. Combined with his sharp features, he radiated a noble, intimidating presence.

In his hand was a folder. His long, well-defined fingers pinched the photo of Tracy from inside, and his lips curved slightly.

“So it's you.”

He seemed a little surprised but even more pleased.

Then he picked up his phone and dialed his assistant, his gaze never leaving the photo in his hand. “Book me a ticket. I'm going to Cloudville in person.”

Because of Tom's disappearance, Erin had been extra anxious lately.

Tom never got on that boat!

She'd first thought that greedy, shameless jerk had gone back on his word and wanted to keep blackmailing her, so she'd contacted him herself, ready to settle accounts. But she couldn't find him anywhere.

Even when she offered to pay him, she got no reply.

That was definitely not Tom's style, which meant something must have happened to him.

Erin didn't actually care what happened to Tom—in fact, she'd been wishing for his death for a long time.

But first, she had to get whatever he was holding over her.

*If that bastard is dead, then whatever he has on me will show up in public a month later, and when that happens, I'll be **toast!***