

The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late

#Left Behind 191 - Read The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late Left Behind 191

Chapter 191 Illness

Chapter 191 Illness

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Daphne had been standing quietly for a while, but now her brows furrowed. Her expression wasn't happy.

She wanted to speak up, but with Matthew still there, she held it in—for Erin's reputation.

Only after Matthew left did she finally grab Erin's arm and whisper, "Erin, listen to me. Matthew may look polite and gentlemanly, but I can't shake the feeling he's hiding a cruel side. He's not half the man Norris is. Don't get too close to him."

Even though no one else was around to overhear, Daphne still softened her words to protect Erin's dignity.

Of course, Erin understood what she meant. She smiled sweetly and said, "Mom, what are you thinking? My heart belongs only to Norris. The only reason I spoke to Mr. Renault was for Tracy. Otherwise, why would I humiliate myself by asking a man for his number?"

Her face showed innocence and grief. Inside, she rolled her eyes.

Daphne wasn't wrong. Matthew did look polished on the outside, but inside, he was darker, more cunning, more ruthless than anyone guessed.

And in this story, Matthew was destined to be Tracy's most loyal simp. To prove his love, he'd done countless terrible things. He was the easiest man to use.

Hearing Erin's firm tone, Daphne finally relaxed. She didn't think Erin's excuse—"it was all for Tracy"—was strange at all.

Instead, Daphne's heart felt even more pity for her. "Erin, you need to think about yourself for once. You give in to Tracy again and again, and she doesn't appreciate it. Instead, she harasses you constantly. It breaks my heart to see it."

Erin shook her head with a weak smile. "Mom, I don't care about that."

She said she didn't care, but her pale face and watery eyes practically screamed, I'm really hurt, I just don't say it out loud.

As expected, Daphne's heart ached even more. She pulled Erin into her arms, patting her chest gently. "Erin, you look so pale. Are you feeling sick again? Is your body acting up?"

It's always Tracy. She's like a jinx to you! Your health was already weak because of her, and now, just coming to the hospital for a check-up, she stresses you into another attack. She's such a disappointment."

Erin's health had been fragile for years. After she came back to the Jackman Villa, it had taken personal nutritionists and careful care to finally get her stable. For over a year, she hadn't fallen ill.

But since Tracy returned? Erin had already "relapsed" several times.

Watching Daphne's face twist with anger, as if she wanted to march straight to Tracy and demand answers, Erin's eyes flickered.

The truth was, her pale face had nothing to do with sickness. It was because she couldn't stand how, even after she'd pushed Tracy down so far, Matthew-the so-called "simp" meant only for the heroine-still

showed interest in her.

2:08 pm ME

Chapter 191 Illness

Of course, she couldn't tell Daphne that.

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Her "illness" had a purpose. Every time she acted sick, the Jackmans' guilt would flare up. They pitied her for the 18 hard years she'd suffered, and she knew how to stretch that guilt until it gave her money, favors, whatever she wanted.

The more guilty Daphne felt, the more she resented Tracy. And that only worked in Erin's favor.

So Erin lowered her head pitifully, not arguing with Daphne's words. But a flash of darkness crossed her

eyes.

Truthfully, faking her attacks took planning and risk. That's why she hadn't used the trick in over a year.

But now, she desperately needed money.

She'd been reckless with spending and had no savings. On top of that, she'd poured every cent she had into sending Tom abroad.

But that greedy loser had lied. Instead of buying his ticket, he'd blown it all gambling. When he lost, he came crawling back for more.

He even threatened her-if she didn't give him money, he'd show up at the Jackman Villa.

And with Tracy sniffing around for clues lately, if Tom caused trouble, who knew what might happen?

So Erin had no choice but to fake being sick again, just to squeeze money out of the Jackmans.

What she didn't expect was to run into Matthew at the hospital-standing there, looking warm and gentle as he talked to Tracy.

The way he looked at her, with open curiosity and interest ... Erin couldn't stand it.

She would never allow Matthew to keep getting closer to Tracy.

Norris belonged to her. Matthew had to belong to her, too.

At that thought, she quickly cut off Daphne, who was still ranting about how Tracy was selfish, rebellious, and cruel.

"Mom," Erin said softly, "Andrew told me that working with the Renaults is important for our family. Last time, the Investor Conference had to be canceled because of that sudden incident. Andrew's been preparing nonstop ever since, so we can win their partnership in the end.

If Tracy gets close to Mr. Renault now and accidentally offends him, wouldn't that hurt the Jackmans?"

2:08 pm MAD

Chapter 192 Final Task

Chapter 192 Final Task

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Erin's face looked innocent, as if she had just asked a casual question. She didn't seem like she was trying to guide Daphne's thoughts at all.

But Daphne's expression changed instantly.

Before, she only thought Tracy was shameless and wanted nothing to do with her. But Erin's words reminded her of something.

The Renault partnership was important. When it came to company interests, Benjamin and Andrew would never tolerate mistakes.

Why couldn't Tracy be more thoughtful, like Erin? Why did she always have to stir up trouble?

Daphne's face darkened. "When we get home, I'll tell Andrew. We can't let Tracy ruin the company's business."

"Tracy won't listen to anyone," Erin said softly. "Even if Andrew talks to her, it won't matter. If it's not Matthew, it'll be some other man. The best solution is to cut off her habit of using the Jackman name to chase after men."

She held Daphne's hand, her voice gentle, almost hypnotic. "Mom, you remember how close Tracy used to be with Chris. We all saw it. Even when Tracy was kidnapped, Chris was the one who found her. That kind of life-or-death bond matters.

"And Chris is someone we already know well. The Woodward's just partnered with the Jackmans not long ago. If we helped Chris and Tracy get together, it wouldn't just stop her from chasing other men—it would also benefit our family.

"As for Mrs. Woodward, yes, she did oppose Tracy and Chris before. Tracy's reputation in Cloudville isn't great. But not long ago, Mrs. Woodward told me she still cares for her son. If he and Tracy have feelings for each other, she won't stand in the way anymore."

Her words were ridiculous, completely illogical, nothing like the sweet and innocent image she usually showed. Anyone with a sense would notice something was off.

But Daphne, like a fool, nodded eagerly. "You're right. Letting Tracy and Chris be together would solve everything once and for all."

She looked at Erin with pride, her face glowing. "You're so smart. Not only are you kind, but you also think of ways to help the family. Not like Tracy ...

The moment she mentioned Tracy, a flash of disgust passed through her eyes.

“Forget it. Let’s not talk about her anymore. I’ll take you to the doctor first. When we get back, I’ll buy you a few of the newest designer bags as a reward.”

Erin clung to her arm playfully. “I don’t want bags right now. If you want to spoil me, just send me a Venmo transfer. That way I can buy whatever I want.”

Daphne laughed warmly. “Alright, whatever you want.”

2:08 pm MA

Chapter 192 Final Task

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The two walked into the hospital arm in arm, chatting happily, looking more like real mother and daughter than anything else.

Tracy, meanwhile, had no idea what was happening after she left. She threw herself back into work.

She’d been keeping an eye on Matthew, but she never noticed him targeting Winona and Tony. That told her one thing-she wasn’t strong enough to deal with him yet.

At least Walter’s car accident had started to show some clues, so she sent more people to investigate that.

As for Winona and Patricia, that matter was over. Tracy went to handle the final task-placing David’s headstone.

She had purchased eleven plots at the cemetery. Except for Ronald’s, which was added separately, all of them were arranged by age.

Only David’s was different. He had been placed right next to Patricia’s.

After carving David’s name into the stone, Tracy paid her respects to both Patricia and Patricia’s grandmother.

All of this, she did for David.

She had promised him before he died. She would pass along the words he never got to say. Patricia needed to know that she hadn’t been alone in her feelings. David had loved her too-and for a very long

time.

But because he was part of the Renault family, he had always been afraid of bringing trouble to Patricia and her grandmother. So he buried all those feelings deep in his heart.

Until a few days before senior finals, when he got a call from Patricia at 2 a.m.

She didn't say much, only called his name through tears. But that single call burned in his chest like fire.

Patricia always kept a strict routine for studying. She never stayed up late. And she never called him while he was staying at the Renault Residence.

He hadn't cared about anything else that night. He rushed out alone into the dark-only to be kidnapped just minutes after leaving the Renault property.

The next time he woke up, he was already trapped inside Angelic Etiquette Academy,

He never got to tell Patricia that he loved her, too. That regret stayed with him until the end.

He never knew what had happened that night to make Patricia call him. That question haunted him.

So in his final moments, he clutched Tracy's hand and begged her to carry his words to Patricia. His eyes were still open when he died, full of unwillingness to let go.

But in the end, Tracy had failed to deliver his message.

2:08 pm MAE

Chapter 193 Family Dinner

Chapter 193 Family Dinner

+10 Free Coins

After paying her respects, Tracy's eyes fell on David's headstone. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Those words ... only you could tell Patricia yourself. I hope in your next life you'll have a good family, and you'll meet her at the best moment of your life."

She prayed he would never again suffer the pain of being the 'wrong son' or the one overlooked by his

parents.

Her gaze shifted to where Patricia rested. "Back then ... I should have grabbed your hand on the rooftop."

No matter how much time had passed, whenever Tracy thought of that day on the roof, that was her biggest regret.

Ronald happened to walk over just as she said this.

He crouched beside her. "She was already standing on the edge. Even if you had grabbed her, you couldn't have saved her.

"And I believe she never once blamed you."

Tracy tilted her head back to look at him. After a long silence, she finally nodded. "I know."

She had never spoken much to Patricia, but David often told her how much he cared about the girl.

She knew Patricia-bright and warm like the sun-would never have held that against her.

Seeing that Tracy wasn't drowning in guilt, Ronald didn't push the topic. Instead, he said, "The hospital just called. They moved him. Matthew won't find him."

Tracy immediately knew who he meant-Tony.

After surviving the crash, Tony had been in a coma.

Tracy had guessed Matthew might make a move on him in the hospital, so she stationed extra guards. But she knew she couldn't handle Matthew's people alone. She had asked Ronald for backup, and he had delivered.

This time, Matthew had failed. But who knew about the next? That was why Tracy had Tony quietly moved somewhere safe, thanks to Ronald's men.

She still didn't know how Ronald, who didn't even have legal papers in Cloudville, managed to pull all this off. She simply nodded. "Thank you."

It wasn't just words-she carved the favor deep into her heart.

Ronald only gave a helpless smirk. She was still being polite with him, but he didn't argue. Time would take care of her walls.

When Tracy left the cemetery, she felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Her whole body relaxed.

In that lighter mood, she didn't want to return to the suffocating Jackman Villa. Instead, she followed

2:08 pm MA

Chapter 193 Family Dinner

Ronald back to his rental apartment.

But the moment she stepped into the complex, she froze. A familiar car was parked out front.

The driver saw her too and hurried out.

"CeeCee! You're finally back-I've been waiting for two, maybe three hours!"

Liam rushed over, grinning ear to ear, showing no sign of annoyance from the wait.

+10 Free Coins

For a split second, Tracy felt like she had stepped back in time-before 18, when Liam trusted her completely, when he relied on her, when her schedule always came first in his eyes.

But things had changed.

Later, he grew impatient with her. Even something small-like if she took too long to put on her shoes- would earn his disgust, "Can't you be on time for once? Are you dragging things out just to get our attention?"

She had seen that other side of Liam. So now, watching him beam at her, she felt only bitter amusement.

When he ran toward her, Tracy took a step back, putting space between them. Her voice was cool, distant. "Mr. Liam, what do you need from me?"

His smile froze. Especially when he noticed Ronald standing half-shielding her, his face cold. Anger rose in Liam's chest but he forced it down.

Of course, Tracy had resentment. After all, the Jackmans hadn't given her allowance money for years. That made sense.

Since he had decided to make it up to her, he would just have to tolerate her attitude.

That's what he told himself. His smile returned. "CeeCee, since you came back, we haven't once sat down for a real family dinner. Tonight, Mom had the kitchen make all your favorite dishes. She sent me to bring you home."

He shot Ronald a glance. "Just us. A family dinner. No outsiders interfering."

He sounded sincere, but Tracy's eyes only grew sharper, full of suspicion.

She remembered her very first day back. Benjamin had insulted her for eating too fast, saying her manners embarrassed the Jackmans, and had banned her from the dinner table.

Now it had been almost half a year. And suddenly they remembered they hadn't eaten together. And they didn't even think it was absurd?

Her guarded stare pierced Liam's chest like needles. He staggered in pain, his breath catching.

In his entire life, he couldn't remember when it had started-when every time she looked at him, even just to speak, her eyes carried nothing but distance and caution. No warmth. No laughter.

Liam opened his mouth to speak. But no words came out. In the end, he could only look away in guilt.

2:08 pm MG

Chapter 194 Rage

Chapter 194 Rage

+10 Free Coins

"Grandpa's coming back today, too. Andrew already went to the hospital to pick him up."

Liam knew Tracy still carried resentment toward the family. If he wanted her to come home with him. tonight, he had to use Franklin's name.

Sure enough, the coldness on Tracy's face softened a little.

The Jackmans might not invite her to a family dinner, but if Franklin was there, it was different.

She hesitated for a moment. As she was about to nod, Ronald suddenly spoke. "CeeCee, call your grandpa first."

Ronald had seen how cruel and stupid the Jackmans could be. He also knew that whenever Franklin was involved, Tracy found it hard to say no. Which meant Liam could easily be lying.

Tracy needed to hear the truth from Franklin himself.

Liam's face froze. He glared at Ronald. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? You think I'd lie ... "

"Grandpa."

Before he could even finish, Tracy had already dialed Franklin.

"

Liam's hand was still raised, finger pointing at Ronald. His whole face twisted in disbelief. She didn't trust him. Not even a little.

Tracy didn't say much on the phone-just confirmed Franklin was indeed expecting her at dinner. After a few short words, she hung up.

With Franklin's confirmation, she had no choice but to ride back to the Jackman Villa with Liam.

But before she got in the car, Ronald stopped her. Right in front of Liam, he checked her phone battery, added himself as her emergency contact, turned her ringer on, and said firmly, "No matter what happens, call me first."

The message was clear. It was a warning and a slap in Liam's face.

Ronald saw Liam's sour expression but didn't stop. He even added, "Don't doubt it-I do think your family will hurt her. You've done plenty of stupid things before.

"If you had half a brain, you'd realize CeeCee has never been happy at that house. She's miserable there, and yet you keep forcing her back. If that's not brainless, what is?"

Tracy, who had been tense and gloomy at the thought of returning to the Villa, suddenly couldn't hold back a smile. Just a small one, but enough to blow away her dark mood.

Liam, on the other hand, looked upset. His expression was dark. He opened his mouth several times to snap back, but no words came.

In the end, all he could do was give a sharp snort and slam his foot on the gas.

2:08 pm MA

Chapter 194 Rage

+10 Free Coins

The car roared past Ronald, close enough to whip up a gust that would've knocked over someone lighter. Ronald stood solid as a rock, not moving an inch. He only frowned, watching the taillights vanish.

Driving that fast in the city?

If Liam wanted to kill himself, fine. But he'd better not take CeeCee down with him.

Liam's car was a sports model. He was furious, and his foot pressed harder and harder on the gas. Soon, he was flat-out racing through city streets.

This was his habit. Whenever he was upset, the only thing that calmed him was speed.

He even forgot why he had Tracy in the car. Instead of heading home, he pushed toward empty roads, faster and faster.

Only after his rage burned out did he remember his task for the day.

His face tightened, and he turned to look at the passenger seat.

Tracy's hand clutched the door handle in a death grip. Her whole body was rigid, her face pale. Her jaw was clenched so hard she hadn't made a single sound.

The sight struck him with a jolt of memory-the day he picked her up from Angelic Academy. She'd been the same then, pale as paper, clutching the handle in silence. Afraid, but refusing to speak.

She hadn't been like this before.

She used to cry when she hurt. Shout when she was scared. She never hid her emotions.

When had she changed into someone so different?

Screech ...

The brakes screamed. The car jerked to a stop at the side of the road.

Everything inside lurched forward.

Luckily, Tracy braced herself in time, avoiding smashing her head. But the plastic charm hanging from the rearview mirror swung wildly and smacked her in the ear.

It left a thin red scratch.

Liam's expression shifted. "I ... I didn't mean that. Are you okay?"

Tracy didn't answer. Her eyes just lifted to the little charm still swaying.

It was cheap. Small, cute at first glance, but rough at the edges. Not the kind of thing Liam—who had always demanded the best of everything—would ever buy for himself.

So she already knew who had given it to him. Sure enough, Liam said, "That's from Erin. If it hurt you... I'm sorry."

2:09 pm ME

Chapter 195 Important Day

Chapter 195 Important Day

+10 Free Coins

The way Liam looked at her, it was like he was afraid Tracy might throw the little charm out the window.

Tracy's lips curled. "So it's not that you hate gifts. You just prefer cheap plastic junk someone could buy at a flea market for a few bucks."

Back when the Jackmans cut off her allowance, she had secretly sold her favorite set of jewelry. She even borrowed 50 grand from a friend just so she could order a custom set of cufflinks and a tie clip for Liam's birthday.

And what did Liam do? He sneered, full of disgust. "I don't like gifts. Especially not from you. Your kind of kindness feels dirty to me."

Then he tossed her carefully prepared gift straight into the trash right in front of her. And the next second, his whole face lit up when he ran to accept Erin's gift.

Later, he didn't even give Tracy the chance to pay back her friend. Instead, he had her dragged off to Westbridge Academy.

Now, years later, the memory flickered across his face. His expression went pale.

Back then, he truly hadn't realized Tracy had sold her belongings to pay for it. He thought she was using Jackman money to show off in front of everyone, to challenge Erin for the spotlight as the Jackmans' golden girl.

It had taken him years to understand just how cruel he had been.

He opened his mouth, wanting to explain, maybe even apologize. But Tracy turned her head to the window. She let her hair fall loose, hiding the scratch on her ear.

The words died in Liam's throat.

After a long silence, he finally muttered, "I'll make it up to you." Then he restarted the car.

Tracy looked out at the scenery sliding backward through the window, pressing her lips together.

Make it up to me?

That is disgusting.

At least this time, he drove steadily, no more reckless speeding.

By the time they pulled into the Jackman Villa, Tracy's pale face had regained color. She had forced

herself to be calm.

The car hadn't even stopped completely before she unbuckled and got out, eager to get away from Liam

for even a second.

But she hadn't expected to see him.

Chris.

2:09 pm

Chapter 195 Important Day

Her steps froze. This is supposed to be a Jackman family dinner. Why is he here?

+10 Free Coins

Chris smiled when he spotted her, his face warm and polished as ever. "Tracy. Long time no see."

The fake familiarity in his voice made her stomach churn.

I have Derek's video. He should be terrified of me, not acting like this.

Chris walked closer, smile unshaken. "Everyone's waiting. Let's head inside."

Tracy frowned. "Chris, what are you playing at?"

Her voice was sharp, edged with warning.

Of course, Chris noticed. But he only shrugged innocently. "Hey, don't look at me like that. I was invited

too."

His expression was harmless, but his eyes-his eyes sparkled like he was waiting for the show to start.

Since Liam was still behind, Chris leaned closer and dropped his voice. "Since we go way back, I'll give you a heads up.

"For your grandpa, today's an important day. A big deal. That's why even though he's sick, he insisted on being here."

It sounded like a reminder, but every word dripped with threat.

Tracy's gaze sharpened. "If you think siding with the Jackmans will save you, I don't mind burning that bridge."

She knew how to threaten, too.

Chris's face shifted. He glared at her, but his eyes betrayed a flicker of fear.

"Look, today has nothing to do with me. If it wasn't me, it would've been someone else. Honestly, you should be glad it's me-you'd have one more enemy at the table otherwise."

He still didn't say what was about to happen. He made it clear he wouldn't interfere. He was only here to watch.

But Tracy was sharp enough to guess.

To outsiders, the only connection between her and Chris was that he had once chased her.

So why would the Jackmans drag her back with such fanfare, and even get Franklin involved, when his health was this fragile? There was only one reason.

The thought made her nails dig into her palm. Her anger boiled, threatening to explode. She wanted to turn and walk away-but Franklin couldn't be put under any stress. They were using him against her.

Tracy took several deep breaths to push down her anger before finally stepping inside.

Inside the living room, Franklin sat in the center, leaning on a cane. His face was blank, his eyes shut, as if resting.

2:09 pm MA

Chapter 195 Important Day

On his left and right sat Benjamin, Daphne, Andrew, and Erin.

+10 Free Coins

They weren't talking, but glances flickered between them. Even the maids stood silent in the corners with their heads lowered. The whole room was heavy with tension.

Then the door opened. Every gaze swung to the entrance. Even Franklin's eyes opened.

2:09 pm & M

Chapter 196 Double Standard

Chapter 196 Double Standard

+10 Free Coins

When Franklin saw Tracy, the cold mask on his face instantly broke into a smile. He even pushed himself up with his cane. "Tracy's back."

Benjamin moved to steady him, but Franklin brushed him off and instead grabbed Tracy's hand as she hurried over.

His face was full of affection. "It's been too long. You've grown even prettier."

Tracy couldn't help but laugh. "Grandpa, I just visited you at the hospital two days ago. Back then, you said I was getting chubby."

"That's because you were way too thin while you were overseas. Now you've finally put on a little weight. It suits you."

Franklin and Tracy kept talking and laughing like it was just the two of them, the warmth between them. shut everyone else out.

Liam stepped through the doorway just in time to see Tracy's smile. He froze.

They had just driven back together. All that time, she hadn't looked at him in the eye even once. She hadn't smiled, not even a polite one. She treated him colder than a stranger on the street.

Now, seeing her relaxed and happy with Franklin, it was like a fist squeezing around his heart. Every breath hurt.

The others didn't look much better. Their faces darkened as they watched. A few minutes ago, they had tried everything to start a conversation with Franklin. He had ignored them completely.

But the moment Tracy walked in, he couldn't stop talking.

The double standard stung.

Tracy didn't notice their stares, or maybe she just didn't care. She focused only on Franklin, answering his questions with ease.

It was only then that she realized the point of this dinner-Chris was here to be introduced as a future son-in-law.

The idea was laughable.

Her hands curled into fists, nails biting her palms. She forced herself not to let the anger show on her face.

But Franklin noticed the stiffness anyway. His smile faded, concern creasing his brow. "Tracy, what's wrong?"

He had been overjoyed a moment ago, but now his heart grew heavy.

When he first heard Tracy had a boyfriend, he had felt that bittersweet ache of giving away a precious granddaughter. But above all, he had been happy.

He knew his body was failing. He couldn't be by her side much longer. And the Jackmans? They had long

2:09 pm

Chapter 196 Double Standard

stopped being her shield.

+10 Free Coins

If Tracy could find someone reliable, someone steady without messy ties, he could leave this world in

peace.

That was why, before agreeing to come to the villa for dinner, Franklin had Chris thoroughly investigated. Chris was an only child. Mild-mannered, polite, unremarkable, but dependable. No scandals, no chaos. If Tracy married him, and with the inheritance Franklin planned to leave her, she would never have to worry about her future.

But only if she agreed.

From what he had gathered, Tracy and Chris once had mutual feelings. They'd split only because Felicia insisted Tracy, stripped of the Jackman name, wasn't good enough for him.

That wasn't a real problem. If Franklin transferred all his assets to Tracy, she would be worth more than the Jackman title itself.

But looking at her face now, Franklin couldn't help but worry he had been wrong somewhere. His influence had faded with the years. He might have been misled.

Seeing his expression shift, Tracy quickly forced a smile. "I'm fine, Grandpa. I'm just hungry. When do we eat?"

She wanted to lean on his arm like she had as a child, wanted to cry and tell him everything.

But she couldn't. Not when she knew how much he worried about her future since Walter died. Not when the Jackmans had coaxed him from the hospital with this setup.

If he realized they were using him to push her into a marriage, if he realized they were threatening her through him, Franklin would be furious.

She couldn't let that happen.

So she had to play along. At least for now.

But the ending? That would be hers to write.

Tracy slipped her arm through Franklin's and helped him toward the dining table. As she did, she glanced back at Erin-just in time to catch the smug look on her face before she could hide it.

Of course. This whole thing had Erin's fingerprints all over it.

Why can't she ever just leave me alone?

Tracy's movement was subtle; even Franklin didn't notice. But someone else did.

Liam.

He followed her gaze and saw it too. Erin's smirk, sharp with triumph.

He had never seen that expression on Erin before. She looked arrogant and gloating, like a petty villain who couldn't resist celebrating a scheme that finally worked.

2:09 pm

Chapter 197 The Dinner Table Showdown

Chapter 197 The Dinner Table Showdown

+10 Free Coins

In his memory. Erin had always been sweet, gentle, and kind. The thought that she might wear that kind of expression?

It felt impossible. There was no way it was her. He had to be imagining it.

Erin was the kindest person he'd ever known. She smiled warmly at everyone, never once showing a sharp edge. She'd even saved his life once.

Back when everyone else thought he was as good as dead, she was the only one who refused to give up. She climbed down that cliff by herself, injured her hands carrying him back, and almost got herself killed in the process.

How could someone like that ever show such a smug and twisted look?

Liam shook his head hard, blinked a few times, and looked again. Sure enough, Erin was walking arm-in- arm with Daphne, her face glowing with that soft and angelic smile. There wasn't a trace of what he thought he'd seen.

He let out a breath of relief.

See? He was overthinking. He must've seen it wrongly.

Feeling guilty for even doubting her, Liam went all out at dinner. He piled food into her plate, peeled shrimp for her, and even picked out the bones from her fish.

Erin had no clue what was going on with him, but she wasn't complaining. She flashed a smile, then glanced over at Tracy's empty plate.

She arched a brow, voice dripping with pride. "Liam, don't just spoil me. Tracy's been eyeing my plate the whole time. Why don't you give her some, too?"

Liam glanced at Tracy. Her plate had nothing but mashed potatoes and some greens—no meat, no seafood.

He frowned. "Didn't you use to hate vegetables?"

Tracy gave a lazy shrug as she replied, "My tastes have changed."

Her cold tone rubbed him the wrong way, like she was acting all high and mighty. He was about to snap back, but Andrew cut him off first.

"Different country, different diet. Of course her tastes changed. You just worry about Erin. Tracy's old enough to feed herself."

This comment seemed like a reminder.

Liam glanced at Franklin's stern face and shut his mouth.

Tracy ignored their little game completely. She calmly dropped some greens on Franklin's plate. "The doctor says you need more veggies. You can't be picky."

2:09 pm ME

Chapter 197 The Dinner Table Showdown

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+10 Free Coins

She'd inherited his distaste for greens, but unlike her, he hadn't changed. He still schemed like a kid, trying to dodge anything leafy.

Sure enough, his expression twisted the moment the vegetables hit his plate. He said, "I already had a lot of greens this morning. I've hit my quota for the day."

Tracy didn't even blink. She served him more. "That was yesterday's. I asked the nurse. Nice try."

Franklin was at a loss for words.

He began to wonder which snitch sold him out.

The two of them carried on like always, warm and easy, like nobody else at the table even existed.

Tracy had been tuning out the family since she walked through the door, and Franklin did it on purpose.

After all, they'd lived under the same roof for years. And in all that time, who at this table ever went out of their way to make Tracy feel welcome?

Even at the dinner table, they said Tracy could serve herself whatever she wanted to eat. Tracy was the same age as Erin, perfectly capable of serving herself, yet somehow she was the one being fussed over as if she couldn't lift a finger.

The way Franklin and Tracy carried on made the rest of the family squirm. Especially Andrew, Liam, and Erin—they looked like they'd just put on a one-act play with nobody watching, clowns on their own stage.

The only one enjoying the show was Chris, leaning back and smirking. The family drama here? It was way juicier than anything in his family.

In the middle of that cozy banter, Erin suddenly piped up, her voice sugar-sweet. "Tracy, I remember seafood used to be your favorite. Mom even had the kitchen make some just for you. Go on, try it."

She didn't give Tracy a chance to answer before dropping a piece on her plate.

Tracy used to love seafood, but Erin had been watching all night. She hadn't touched it once.

Every time their gaze landed on the seafood, they were filled with disgust.

Erin didn't care why Tracy's tastes had changed. All she cared about was making her squirm. So she grabbed another piece, then another, piling them on Tracy's plate.

Tracy's expression darkened in an instant. Her hand clenched the cutlery so tightly that her knuckles went white, and her face drained of color.

She used to crave seafood. Now, the smell alone made her skin crawl and her stomach lurch.

The memory hit like a freight train-his mask, black as night, his breath stinking of fish as he closed in on her. The slimy, rotting stench pressed closer and closer, dragging her straight into hell.

She could never escape that smell.

Tracy's fingers trembled against the cutlery, her fingertips gradually turning white.

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+10 Free Coins

Tracy shoved her plate a little farther away and took a deep breath, forcing down the nausea as she said, "Sorry. I don't eat seafood."

Erin's face instantly crumpled, her voice trembling with fake hurt. "Tracy, are you saying you don't want what I gave you? Do you ... hate me that much?"

Her eyes reddened on cue. She sniffled dramatically, then turned toward Liam. "It's fine, you serve her instead. I promise, I won't fight her for attention."

Liam wasn't even listening. His eyes had been locked on Tracy, watching how her disgust toward seafood didn't look staged at all. Something about it left a knot in his chest. He barely registered whatever Erin was saying.

He just heard her calling him and subconsciously responded, "Huh? Okay."

Erin's smile froze. She almost bit her own tongue.

Absolute moron. Was he out of his damn mind?

She swallowed her rage, tears streaming down her cheeks like pearls dropping one by one.

Daphne rushed to pull Erin into her arms, glaring at Liam. She smacked him on the back of the head. "You idiot! Erin's your sister. How could you treat her like this?"

Liam blinked, baffled. What the hell did I even do?

Andrew gave him a sharp glare, wearing his gold-rimmed glasses.

Then he turned his cold eyes on Tracy. "Tracy, today's supposed to be a family reunion. Stop stirring things up. Apologize to Erin."

Tracy's face was still pale from holding back her gag reflex, but she wasn't surprised in the slightest.

If this meal ever went smoothly, that would be the real miracle.

She stayed calm, but Franklin finally snapped.

"Enough!"

He slammed his cutlery onto the table, shattering a porcelain plate.

Food splattered, but not far. Benjamin, Daphne, Andrew, and Liam instinctively threw themselves in front of Erin like a human shield. No one even glanced at Tracy sitting across the table.

It was ridiculous. The food barely left the plate, but their exaggerated act made Franklin's expression turn gloomy.

"You dare bully Tracy right in front of me? God knows what you'll do when I'm not around."

Franklin's glare cut across the table, cold and sharp, before it landed squarely on Erin. "This family runs a business, not a circus. If you're so desperate to put on a show, then take it out to the street-plenty of folks

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out there would love the free entertainment."

It was the first time Franklin had ever openly criticized Erin like that.

+10 Free Coins

He'd never liked her much, but she was still blood-related, and the others doted on her. He usually held back, unwilling to clash with his own granddaughter.

But tonight, she'd pushed him too far.

Erin hadn't expected Franklin to lose it like this. His words sliced straight through her pride, cruel and humiliating.

She shrank, tears spilling down her cheeks, then buried herself in Liam's chest, sobbing silently like a helpless child.

Even Benjamin, usually quick to defend, kept his hands folded neatly under the table, keeping his head low and not daring to speak.

Liam, though—Liam was hotheaded, and protecting Erin had always been second nature to him. His brain lagged behind his mouth, and the words tumbled out before he thought twice. "Grandpa, you've got it wrong. Erin's not like that.

'She's gentle and kind. She even risked her life for me once. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't even be here today.'

Back at that race at Suncord Mountain, when he'd slipped and fallen off the cliff, everyone thought he was gone for good. His parents even picked out a burial plot. But Erin refused to give up. She'd searched for him on her own, dragged him back half-dead, and saved his life.

For that reason alone, he'd always stand by her side.

Franklin knew the story well-but he'd always seen it differently.

'The rescue teams searched for you for days and couldn't find a trace. But somehow she waltzed in and stumbled on you right away? She hauls you out of there without a scratch-hair neat, clothes spotless- except for a little scrape on her hand. Use that pig brain of yours, Liam. Does that sound right to you?'

Liam's hand, which had been rubbing circles on Erin's back froze mid-motion.

He remembered falling into the river, fighting to crawl out, wandering lost in the forest for days until he collapsed from exhaustion.

When he woke up, he was in a hospital bed. Everyone told him Erin had found him. He'd seen her hand wrapped in gauze, and he believed it. He never questioned it.

And while he'd been missing, Tracy had gone on a trip, which only fueled his bitterness toward her. He had been too wrapped up in that resentment to look deeper into Erin's so-called miracle rescue.

Erin felt his hesitation immediately. The muscles in her face twisted with rage, but she buried it against his

chest so no one else could see,

Damn old man. Why wouldn't he just go to hell already?

She should've finished him off two years ago, made sure he didn't live to ruin her plans today.

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Franklin's eyes burned with disappointment as he glared at Liam. His breathing turned ragged and his once ruddy complexion draining pale under the strain.

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Chapter 199 The Only One Who Never Left

+10 Free Coins

Tracy quickly got up and steadied Franklin, patting his chest to calm him down. "Grandpa, don't get upset. I don't care about what they said, and you shouldn't either."

Worried that someone at the table might say something even dumber to push him further, she wasted no time. She helped him upstairs, ending the ridiculous dinner before it got any worse.

The truth was, Franklin wasn't supposed to be discharged from the hospital yet. His health was too fragile. But when it came to Tracy's future, he had dug his heels in, insisting on it.

The doctors had no choice but to prepare extra equipment and discharge him.

Back in his room, Tracy moved with practiced ease, sorting through the pile of medicine, handing him the right pills, then hooking him up to the monitors.

Watching her hustle around with that worried look on her face, Franklin's eyes misted. "Tracy, I've failed you," he whispered.

Her hand stilled as she plugged in one of the machines.

She knew exactly what he meant-that he blamed himself for not protecting her.

She turned around and put a soft smile on her face, crouching down beside him. She reassured him, 'Grandpa, anyone else in the world might let me down, but not you.'

She meant it. She remembered, over and over, what it felt like when family and friends abandoned her for Erin, how the betrayal had gutted her. If not for Franklin's love and care, she would've shattered completely.

Through those brutal two years at the Angelic Etiquette Academy, what kept her alive wasn't just the burning need to demand answers from her family. It was the thought of him-how much she couldn't bear to never see him again.

She knew he must've searched for her, worried himself sick by carrying that pain every day. That was why she had to come back for him.

Franklin's eyes were glassy as he patted her hand gently and asked, "Tracy, tell me the truth. What's going on with you and Chris?"

Franklin wasn't clueless.

Daphne had sworn that Tracy was dating Chris, and sure enough, when he'd looked into it, there were signs that could've pointed that way.

But tonight, Tracy hadn't said a single word to Chris. Not one. There was no spark, no hint of romance between them. He might be old, but he wasn't senile.

Tracy knew he'd seen right through it. She had never intended to fake anything with Chris for Franklin's sake, but there were things she couldn't explain.

So she offered a little white lie."We broke up. Grandpa, I wasn't happy with him."

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She knew what mattered most to him was her happiness. If she said that, he wouldn't push.

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And she was right. He patted her hand and said firmly. "Then good riddance. If he's making you unhappy, keep your distance. All I want is for you to be happy for the rest of your life."

He mentally crossed Chris's name off the list and immediately began running through other names, other young men in Cloudville who might suit her.

He wanted to make sure she had someone by her side before he left this world.

"Tracy, be honest-is there someone out there who makes you happy? Anyone?"

Unbidden, a face flashed in her mind-Ronald, with that easy smile and dimples that lit up his whole expression.

Happy? Was that the word? She honestly didn't know.

Ever since she'd stepped into the Angelic Etiquette Academy, she'd forgotten what happiness even felt like.

But with Ronald, she could breathe. For once, she felt at peace. Sometimes, when the nightmares of that place came back, being around him almost made her believe it had all been nothing more than a bad dream.

Franklin saw her expression shift, and he knew. She was thinking of someone.

And who else could it be?

His thoughts landed on the same person who had been showing up with Tracy at the hospital these past few weeks. Ronald.

He couldn't deny it-he liked the kid. Out of all the young men he'd met, Ronald impressed him most.

Smart, capable, sharper than Andrew even. The type who knew how to keep his cards close. He wasn't a good match for someone innocent like Tracy.

But he also saw how Tracy was genuinely happy with him, how Ronald truly cared for her. For a man like him, it was hard to admit, but maybe that wasn't such a bad thing.

If the Jackmans hurt her again, maybe Ronald could be the one to protect her.

Franklin realized he'd already talked himself into it.

Tracy, of course, had no idea about the thoughts spiralling in his mind.

She only held his hand tighter, "Grandpa, don't worry about me getting married. I'm not in a rush. When it's the right time, when it's real, you'll be the first to know."

He knew she was only trying to ease his mind. He knew he shouldn't pressure her, so he let out a heavy sigh instead.

His old, wrinkled hand rested carefully on her head, gentle as if she were made of glass. "My dear Tracy ... what will you do if I'm not around anymore?"

The man who had dominated the business world for decades sat there now like a frail old soul, terrified of 2/3

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leaving her without anyone to lean on-wanting desperately to protect Tracy, yet powerless to do more.

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+10 Free Coins

Tracy gently caressed Franklin's palm, her voice soft with affection and dependence. "Then just live for a long time. Grandpa. Stay with me. Otherwise, if someone bullies me, who's going to stand up for me?"

Of course, he wished he could.

He wanted to see her get married, to see her have kids, to see her live a happy life. But reality was harsh.

His body wouldn't hold up that long.

He couldn't let the granddaughter he'd cherished like a jewel all these years end up trampled and mistreated once he was gone. He had to carve out a safety net for her before it was too late.

A sharp light flickered in his tired cloudy eyes.

Tracy didn't notice. After reassuring him, she tucked him into bed and watched him drift into a deep sleep

?

Neither of them realized that just beyond the half-closed door, someone stood with a phone raised, snapping pictures and recording video.

The moment Erin saw Tracy helping Franklin upstairs alone, she knew there'd be something worth catching. She hadn't expected the footage to turn out this good.

"Erin, what are you doing?"

Liam's voice came from behind her, startling her so badly she almost dropped the phone.

She fumbled to shut it off and shoved it behind her back, forcing a flustered smile as she turned toward him.

"I-I just wanted to help out, but Grandpa's already asleep, so ... I didn't want to disturb him."

Liam didn't think twice.

To him, Erin had always been kind. She'd even said earlier she wanted to apologize to Tracy, and he'd followed because he worried Tracy might snap at her.

But hadn't he just seen her holding her phone up to the crack in the door? What the hell was that about? Before he could ask, the door opened from inside.

Tracy stood there, expression flat as stone. She looked at them both, then closed the door gently before turning on Erin, her voice cold.

"Grandpa will be staying here for a while. Don't bother him unless you have a real reason."

Franklin had insisted on staying at the Jackman Villa. His health made moving dangerous, and he wanted to stand visibly at Tracy's side in front of the family. No matter how much she tried to refuse, he wouldn't budge.

It was the second time Tracy had spoken to Erin with that sharp edge in her voice.

The first had been on Franklin's birthday. The news about Walter had left him so furious he'd collapsed

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and landed in the hospital.

+10 Free Coins

Erin clearly remembered that moment too-how Tracy had grabbed her, the look in her eyes. Her jaw tightened, teeth grinding hard enough she almost cracked one.

If Tracy cared that much about Franklin, then wouldn't it be sweet if he died because of her? Wouldn't Tracy completely lose her mind?

The thought alone sent a dark thrill rushing through her, blood humming with anticipation. She ducked her head quickly to hide her emotions.

But Liam had taken it all in. He interpreted it as another evidence of Tracy bullying Erin.

He immediately stepped in front of Erin, his face twisted with anger. "Tracy, you—"

But then her eyes met his. And suddenly, his throat locked like an invisible hand had wrapped around it.

Ever since he'd learned Tracy hadn't used a dime of family money all these years, he couldn't stop replaying the past. Slowly, painfully, it started to make sense-why she always seemed to be "competing" with Erin.

The new clothes. The food she liked. The chance to travel with the family. Even school competitions.

Maybe Tracy wasn't taking things from Erin. Maybe she was just claiming for what should've been hers all along.

It was the Jackman family who had decided Erin deserved everything, who told themselves Tracy should have nothing. And the moment Tracy had anything like Erin's, they'd branded her a thief.

The guilt hit him so hard he couldn't even meet her eyes. His chest felt tight with regret.

Erin had been waiting for him to back her up, to yell at Tracy, to prove she was the victim. But when she looked up, all she saw was Liam's guilty expression. She almost choked on her rage.

What is this idiot thinking now?

Her nails dug into her palms as she barely resisted the urge to slap him across the face.

Instead, she shot Tracy a look full of venom, then glanced at the closed door behind her.

She was ready. Everything was falling into place. And she would make sure Tracy and Franklin paid the price.

Meanwhile, Franklin stayed in the Franklin Villa, which meant Tracy stayed there, too.

Ever since that disastrous dinner, Daphne had been dropping Chris's name every chance she got, making it clear she wanted to set Tracy up with him.

Tracy didn't react. It was like she didn't understand the underlying message.

Even when Daphne finally spelled it out that she should start dating Chris, Tracy's voice was calm, almost flat when she said, "If you think he's so great, maybe Erin should date him, Mrs. Jackman."

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"You-! You really don't know what's good for you!"

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Daphne's face turned red with fury. In the end, it took Erin's soft cooing and gentle comfort to calm her down. But instead of letting it go, Daphne stormed off straight to Franklin's room, ready to stir up trouble there.