

The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late

#Left Behind 71 - Read The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late Left Behind 71

Chapter 71 You'll Only Go to Hell

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He didn't try to hide his smugness. "My mom even arranged the car that took him to the Angelic Etiquette Academy herself!

"The moment he drank that drugged water, I became the only person who could be the Woodwards' heir!" Chris shouted hysterically, as if it was his way of justifying his actions.

Tracy looked at him coldly, her gaze dripping with sarcasm.

After his outburst, she said slowly, "Do you honestly think Felicia brought you back and helped you hide the fact that you were illegitimate because she wanted you to be the heir?"

Chris's smile froze. "What are you talking about?"

A sense of dread suddenly rose in his heart.

Tracy looked at him as if he were a fool. "Derek knew from the start that Felicia brought you back just to fight for power with Albert. You were just pawns to her all along."

When the pawns become useless, you'll be the first to be abandoned. They might even see you as a problem and get rid of you completely.

"Derek worked so hard to get Felicia's approval to protect you, but in the end, everything he did just made you more jealous and resentful."

That's why, even when Derek was dying, he still desperately wanted an answer.

Chris staggered, and his face turned even paler.

He knew everything Tracy said.

But what difference did it make?

He was tired of being an illegitimate child, of being despised everywhere he went. He didn't want to be so poor that he couldn't afford medicine and had to wait for death with a sick body.

He was just fighting to survive. What was so wrong about that?

Chris seemed to find a reason for his actions. "So what if I'm a pawn? That woman can't have kids, so she'll have to rely on me eventually!"

Tracy wasn't surprised by his stubbornness. "Do you think someone like Felicia, once she's got all the power and money, would trust the rest of her life to a useless pawn like you?

"Especially one who was ruthless enough to harm his own twin brother?"

Chris's **face** went pale. He couldn't refute Tracy.

Felicia had never agreed to get his heart surgery all this time, so deep down he knew **the** truth.

But he couldn't let go of his dependence on her, so he just pretended he didn't understand.

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5 Sept

Chapter 71 You'll Only Go to Hell

Every choice has a give and take.

Derek had always given in to him, so he figured he should just do it again.

"So what if you're right? At least I got what I wanted." Chris still insisted on his point.

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He knew Felicia would never really hand over the power to him, but he believed that if he seized the opportunity, the future was in his hands.

He didn't regret his decision!

Chris stared at Tracy mockingly. "Did Derek tell you to come here and threaten me with this? Too bad you're barking up the wrong tree; my parents don't care about the truth."

Tracy tightened her hands unconsciously. "You got it wrong. He never wanted to use this to threaten you

Even in death, he bore no resentment.

Feeling a surge of sympathy for Derek, Tracy suddenly asked, "Was sending him to Angelic Etiquette Academy your idea, or Felicia's?"

Chris slowly relaxed. "Is that your question, or his?"

He didn't care about her answer and just laughed. "I heard that the Angelic Etiquette Academy is a place for unwanted kids from rich families. Their guardians can keep them there forever, and they can't have any contact with the outside world. It's basically a prison.

"The Woodwards can only have one heir. I couldn't kill my own brother, so the Angelic Etiquette Academy was the perfect place for him.

"He has no freedom, but he has food, a place to live, and people his own age to be friends with. It's a lot better than when we were struggling to get by. He should be grateful to me!"

Seeing him act like he'd done some great favor, Tracy felt a surge of anger.

In her mind, she could see Derek's experiences at the Angelic Etiquette Academy and his face right before he died

She couldn't control herself anymore and rushed over to slap Chris.

Smack!

The loud smack froze the smug look on Chris's face, and it took him a long time to react..

"You want *to* know what message he left for you? I'll never tell you. If you want to know, you can go and ask him yourself!

"No, you'll never see him. A kind and wonderful person like him is in heaven, but you'll only go to hell!"

Still reeling from the slap, Chris snapped his head up at her words. "What did you say? What **are** you talking about?"

He lunged at Tracy and grabbed her, gripping her shoulders so tightly that he seemed to **want to crush** them.

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Chapter 72 It Was Your Birthday

Chapter 72 It Was Your Birthday

Fros Come

“What do you mean I’ll never see him? What do you mean he’s in heaven? Tell me what happened to him

His eyes were bloodshot, and his swollen face showed a panicked, scared, and anxious expression.

racy stared at him for a moment, then broke into a smile. “If Angelic Etiquette Academy was really just a simple prison, do you think your smart and talented brother wouldn’t have been able to get a message out?”

Since he couldn’t help his mother become a legitimate wife and had to take care of his younger brother with a heart condition, Derek had forced himself to mature and learn many different skills.

His best skill was hacking.

This skill was the main reason Tracy was able to get out of the Angelic Etiquette Academy unharmed.

If the academy were just a prison, it would have been impossible for Derek not to be able to get a message to the outside world.

Chris’s face turned pale, and the hand holding Tracy’s shoulder loosened and started to tremble uncontrollably.

Tracy was satisfied with his reaction, but she still wanted more.

She continued, “Your brother, Derek, the one who protected you your whole life, but was sent to the Angelic Etiquette Academy by you, died half a year ago!”

Chris staggered, and his hand fell from Tracy’s shoulder.

But Tracy grabbed his wrist, stopping him from backing away. “He died right in front of me, eyes wide open, full of reluctance. He never closed them. He didn’t close his eyes even in death.

“And that day? It was your birthday.”

Forcing him to look at her, her voice turned cruel. “He told me that when you were a child, your birthday wish was always to spend all your future birthdays with him.

“But he’s gone. He died on your birthday. You will never see him again, and you’ll never be able to celebrate a birthday with him again!

“Chris, you’re the one who sent him to hell, and you’re the one who killed him!”

Chris couldn’t take it anymore. His legs gave out, and he collapsed to the floor.

A surge of panic, confusion, guilt, and fear flooded his mind.

“No... Impossible. I’m still alive, so how can he be dead? I didn’t want to kill him, I didn’t...

Chris suddenly clutched his chest, his face losing all colour.

He collapsed, gasping in pain, trying *to* say something.

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Chapter 72 It Was Your Birthday

His heart condition was acting up.

Tracy stood there with a blank expression, looking down at the suffering man.

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He grabbed her ankle, his face full of fear and pleading, but her cold eyes stayed cold, like she was going to just watch him suffer and die.

Tracy couldn’t stop seeing images of Derek dying. She remembered the disappointment and the reluctance he felt when he talked about the brother he had protected, and it made her feel like Chris should go to hell for what he had done.

But then she remembered Derek's last words.

She loosened her clenched hands, took out the medicine that Chris always kept in his inside jacket pocket, and went out to call for help.

Derek cared about only one thing in this world—his younger brother.

Even though his brother had betrayed him, Derek couldn't bring himself to resent him, even in death. He wouldn't let him die.

That day's birthday party was supposed to be the Woodward's big event, but Chris's sudden illness threw it into chaos. Tracy used the opportunity to slip away.

No one noticed her leaving, and the Jackmans didn't even know she had been at the party.

Only Walter, despite his age and running back and forth between the Jackman Villa and the hospital, noticed Tracy leaving early and coming home late.

At first, he thought she was just out having fun since she'd always liked running around, but she never stayed out overnight.

He trusted her to be responsible, so he never asked her about it.

But every now and then, when Tracy came back, he'd catch a strong, greasy smell on her.

She had always been a clean person and couldn't stand strange smells on her body. So why did she keep coming home smelling like that?

Walter worried and finally decided to have someone quietly check on it.

He knew she hated people prying into her private life, but the Jackmans didn't treat her like before, and since she never complained even when things went wrong, he was genuinely worried.

Tracy had no idea Walter had picked up on her odd behavior and was still unsure if she should visit Chris again.

Derek's last wish was for Tracy to ask Chris a question and give him something.

But seeing Chris's crazy and unremorseful behavior, Tracy didn't want to tell him what Derek's last wishes

were.

He didn't deserve Derek's genuine heart.

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Chapter 72 It Was Your Birthday

Yet it was Derek's dying wish; he desperately wanted an answer even in his final moments.

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Chris, who had just woken up in the hospital, was also thinking about whether he should see her again.

Chapter 73 Regret

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He had never imagined hurting his own brother, and it had never occurred to him that a day would come when he would hear of his death, much less know that he had been the one to send him there.

The truth felt impossible to accept. Part of him wanted to walk up to Tracy and demand the whole story but another was terrified of hearing the answer.

During his recovery, Chris spent his days trapped in a haze of doubt, hardly aware of what anyone visiting had said.

"Hey, I'm talking to you. What's with the blank stare?" Winona's tone was sharp and impatient.

Chris blinked himself back to the present and met her eyes with a detached expression. "If you want to sabotage Tracy, you can do it yourself. Stop trying to drag me into it."

Winona stared at him like she could not believe what she had just heard.

"Did that heart attack rattle your brain? You were the one who swore you'd put her in her place, and you insisted on handling it yourself. I didn't drag you into anything"

Chris's voice hardened, and his patience ran thin. "Fine, I'm walking away, then. **If** you want to give her a lesson, go ahead. I'm not interested in playing any more of your stupid games."

The Woodward's and the Miller's held equal standing in Cloundville, so Chris felt no need to choose his words carefully.

Winona stood frozen for a moment.

In all the time she had known him, he had been kind, easygoing, and patient. She had never once seen him this short-tempered.

She watched him for a long moment before asking with suspicion, "Don't tell me you've actually started to fall for that fake?"

Chris's brows knitted together. "My feelings for her have nothing to do with you. I need rest. Get out."

"You-"

She never finished the sentence. Chris pulled the blanket over his head, pressed the call button, and had the nurse come in to remove her.

In the hallway, Winona's heel struck the floor hard in frustration.

Something had gotten into this man.

He had been the one to push for a spectacle in front of Erin. He had been the one who vowed he would humiliate Tracy so badly that she would never be able to show her face again.

Now, at the most important moment, he had thrown it all aside and left her in the middle of the mess. She had made her promise to *of* Mr. Norris and Erin, and she had no intention of going back on it.

Chapter 73 Regret

Her glare burned into the closed hospital door before she finally turned and walked away with sharp weeps

As soon as she left, Feliciasteped out of the elevator and entered the room alone.

After restless days of recovery, Chris sought out Tracy.

He did not go to the Jackman Villa but instead walked into the small shop where she worked.

He ordered a meal and sat in a shadowed corner, his mind weighed down enough that the shop's owner grew uneasy, thinking he might be there to cause trouble.

Tracy already suspected why he had come, so when her shift ended, she went straight to his car and climbed in.

The car stayed still by the curb, and they remained quiet for a long time.

At last, Chris spoke. "Is it true? That six months ago, he ... "His voice trailed off.

He knew the question was pointless, but some fragile hope kept him from letting **it** go.

Tracy turned to look at him. "It was a lie. Nothing is true. That's the truth. Does that sound believable to you?"

Chris stayed silent.

After a long pause, he asked in a rough voice, "Where is he now? I mean... his body. What did they do with it?"

His eyes filled with tears. In that moment, the wall he had held up broke, and his vulnerability was bare.

He looked small and lost, but Tracy felt no sympathy. "I don't know."

He could not accept that.

She told him that he died in front of her, **so** how could she not know?

Tracy's gaze did not waver. "I'm not lying. Anyone who dies at the Angelic Etiquette Academy ends up on an operating table. Their organs are sent to whoever needs them. The rest, what they call waste, is either dumped in the river to feed the fish or carried into the mountains to feed the wild animals."

She knew part of her said it to hurt him, but more of it came from helplessness and a quiet, deep sorrow.

It **was** the truth.

And it **was** still not the worst thing about the Academy.

The color drained from Chris's face, and pain gripped his chest.

He reached for his medicine and swallowed a pill.

"I didn't know... I **swear** I didn't know... God..."

09:17 **Fri**, 5 Sept ti

Chapter 73 Regret

Watching him cry, his features twisted in regret, Tracy finally asked the question that **had** been **in** Derek's mind at the very end. "So, do you regret it?"

She felt the question meant little.

Derek was clever enough to know that if the Academy had been anything short of hell, if he had lived but lost his freedom, Chris would not have regretted his actions at all.

But because it had been Derek's last wish to hear that his brother regretted his actions, Tracy would see to it that it was carried out.

Chris answered without pause. "I regret it. I really do. I regret it with everything."

"I failed him. I failed my brother... God ... I... "

He cried like a child who had lost the thing he treasured most, stripped of every defense.

Tracy's eyes, however, remained calm and empty, like still water with no life beneath.

Chapter 74 No Mercy

Chapter 74 No Mercy

Chapter 74 No Mercy

The wrong had been done, and the man was gone. No amount of confession, no matter how raw heartfelt, could ever undo it.

Derek had been far too shrewd not to grasp that truth.

Yet Chris had been his younger brother, the one constant in his life, and that made the weight of it different.

Whether it came from the strain of his sobbing or the frailty left by his illness, it left one mark: Chris's *face* was pale as unmarked paper.

His eyes searched Tracy's with desperate hope. "Did my brother... leave me any words?"

Tracy's gaze flickered, but she gave no answer.

The air between them stretched heavy until she finally spoke. "Aside from that final question, he asked me to tell you that, though he was angry and hurt, he never once blamed you."

Tears streamed down Chris's face. "Then ... does that mean he forgave me?"

Tracy pressed her lips together, hesitating before she replied. "He left you something. It's hidden in the lining of the cover of that storybook you loved most as a child."

Chris looked at her, bewildered. "What is it?"

She didn't know. But she repeated his brother's words.

"He said it's the very thing that can keep you free from Felicia's control for the rest of your life."

Even at the end, Derek had been thinking of Chris's future. That had to mean he had forgiven him.

Pain like sharp needles gripped Chris's chest again, and his sobs broke loose.

But to Tracy, they were nothing more than a performance.

His grief and regret might be real, yet so were his selfishness and cruelty.

He was unworthy of Derek's pardon or his sacrifices.

Still, Derek's last wish had been for her to deliver those words, and she had to keep it.

She had been the only one left alive. The sole survivor of her cohort.

Their final wishes had become hers to carry.

When her duty was done, Tracy opened the car's door and stepped out.

She had gone only a few steps before Chris followed, calling her name.

He hesitated for a long time before speaking. "Can you ... keep this a secret for **me**?"

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Chapter 74 No Mercy

The past could not be undone. Regret changed nothing. What mattered now was protecting what remained.

He had fought to reach this point, and he believed Derek would not have wanted to see him lose it all.

Tracy caught his intent instantly, and the mockery in her eyes surfaced without restraint. Do you know what went through my mind before I stepped out of the car, Chris?"

Chris stared at her blankly,

Her laugh was low and humorless. "I was wondering if, after finding out what the Angelic Etiquette Academy did to your brother, you might try to seek justice for him."

Even if he could never breach the Academy's gates, he could have tried.

Yet his first thought had been to shield himself, without even the shadow of an idea to avenge Derek..

Chris lowered his eyes, unable to meet the cutting scorn in hers.

She no longer wished to waste words on him. She turned away—only to see Ronald standing a short distance off, curiosity in his gaze.

She paused in surprise. "Why are you here?"

He was still healing from his wounds. He should have been at his place, recuperating.

Ronald's smile was bright as he approached. "I've been shut in too long. I wanted to get some fresh air and walk you home after work."

His eyes shifted past her to the man and the car behind. "I didn't interrupt anything, did I?"

Tracy shook her head, offering no introduction, and started walking with Ronald.

Ronald followed without a word.

If she did not speak of something, he would not ask.

But after a few steps, he turned suddenly and fixed Chris with a gaze that was dark, sharp, and edged with a clear warning.

Chris caught it without question.

The move had come so abruptly that he couldn't hide his reaction.

After a moment of stunned stillness, he forced his face back under control, got in the car, and drove **away**.

Yet his reddened eyes stayed on the rearview mirror, locked on Tracy and Ronald walking side by side.

Ronald watched the car fade into the distance. For an instant, his sunny face was clouded with a darkness that did not match his youth.

Then it **was** gone, so quickly that even Tracy, walking beside him, never noticed.

Chris never appeared in front of her again after that day, though he sent **her** a **message**.

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Chapter 74 No Mercy

It warned her to be wary of Winona and revealed the plan he had once made with *bed* the end he rem cautioned her abom Erin.

"I swear, your sister's a witch. She cast a spell on me. The only reason I went after you way became the pushed me into it. Be careful."

Tracy didn't reply.

She knew if Chris hadn't already wanted to harm her, no one's persuasion could have made him as

Chris stayed away, but Liam was the first to notice something **was** off.

He had known from the start what Chris intended to do and had allowed it while keeping watch.

He believed Tracy needed a lesson, but as one of the Jackmans, she could not be pushed too *far*.

It wasn't until later that he learned Chris had been hospitalized with a heart attack on Albert's birthday, and that Erin had mentioned seeing Tracy leave the house in a gown that very day.

Chapter 75 Questions

Liam feared that things were heading toward an ugly ending, so he made up his mind to find Tra hear the truth straight from her.

When he finally caught sight of her, Walter was already standing before her, speaking with a weight in her voice that Liam had never seen him use on her.

The sight made Liam pause. He slipped back into the shadows of the hallway, wanting to hear what was being said without being seen.

Walter's tone was steady, but there was no mistaking the firmness behind it. "Ms. Tracy, are you working a job somewhere?"

Liam went still, as though the words themselves had locked him in place.

Working? Tracy?

She had been cushioned by privilege from the moment she was born, raised in an environment where every need was met without effort. The idea of her taking on a job felt almost absurd.

Tracy knew that if Walter was asking, he already knew about her job. So she didn't try to deny it.

"Why?" Walter asked, clearly baffled. "They should've given you enough to live on. **If** you needed money. you could have come to me. Or Mr. Franklin. Why would you put yourself through such hardship?"

She could see the genuine care in his question, but she also knew she could not depend on her grandfather forever, and she refused to keep herself bound to the Jackmans.

"Walter, I'm not part of the Jackman family anymore. From now on, I'll earn my **own** living."

Walter's gaze softened with sympathy.

He had always had a tender spot for her, yet he also knew that once Tracy made up her mind, no one could change it.

Still, he tried. "Don't work yourself to exhaustion, and don't push yourself too far. Mr. Franklin and I will always be here for you."

Tracy felt her throat tighten, and she nodded firmly, "I know."

Around the corner, Liam stood frozen. He watched her with a mixture of disbelief and an ache in his chest that felt like a fist tightening around his heart.

He had heard her claim before that she wasn't truly a Jackman, but he had never believed she meant it.

This time,

though, a creeping panic began to take root.

It felt as though he was on the brink of losing the sister he had grown up beside, the one who **had** been closest to him all his life..

The fear that rose in him **was** sharp and almost choking.

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Chapter 75 Questions

He didn't want to hear the quiet disapproval in Walter's voice toward the Jackmans, nor did he want **to** face the truth in it. His pulse raced as he turned and hurried away.

No.

Tracy might not share their blood, but the bond they had built through the years was undeniable.

Does she *really* think *our years mean less than blood*?

It was such a narrow, selfish way to think.

She

must *have been speaking out of anger, out of bitterness over being sent* to the Angelic Etiquette Academy

That has *to be* it.

Lost in these thoughts, Liam didn't even notice Erin until he nearly walked right into her.

She flinched, frowning as though ready to scold him, but when she saw the faraway look in his eyes, her expression shifted. "Liam ... Liam! What's wrong with you?"

She called out to him several times before he blinked and returned to himself.

"It's nothing ...

He moved to leave, but Erin caught his hand. "Liam, tell me what happened."

She had been the one to tell him about Chris and Tracy, hoping it would drive him straight to Tracy for a confrontation.

She knew his temper, and she expected the argument to grow loud enough that she could share it with the rest of the Jackmans and turn them further against Tracy.

But this vacant, unsettled version of him wasn't what she had expected.

When their eyes met, Liam felt as though he had been thrown a lifeline.

He told her exactly what he had just witnessed, then asked quickly, “Erin, she said she’s not one of us. That had to be just anger talking, right?”

Erin hadn’t thought this would be what unsettled him so deeply, and for a moment, her expression flickered before she masked it.

He was too lost in thought to notice.

“Of course it’s just anger,” she said with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. Her mind was already spinning.

“She grew up surrounded by luxury and is already used to spending without thinking. She must be **short** on money now, and that’s why she’s working. Tracy’s being stubborn, that’s all. If she needed **help**, **she** could have asked the family. There’s no need for her to make things so hard on **herself**.”

Liam’s brows furrowed. “So, she’s only working because she needs money? She’s not **actually cutting ties** with us?”

Chapter 75 Questions

There was doubt in his voice. He wanted to believe it, yet his soul was not too sure if this was the real answer to his question.

“Of course not, Erin said, her voice steady and reassuring. She’s not like me. She’s had every comfort since she **was** a child. She couldn’t stand the grind of real work.

“She’s just too proud to bow her **head** and ask for help, so she’s making her own money. When the family hears about it, they’ll only feel sorry for her.”

Her gaze sharpened slightly. “Remember how she pretended to be kidnapped once just to get money from you? This time, she’s probably just taking **a** softer approach.”

The fog in Liam’s eyes began to lift, replaced by a cold, hard edge.

Chapter 76 What a Fool

Chapter 76 What a Fool

“First she staged her own kidnapping, and now she’s putting on the helpless act again. Her schemes just keep getting sharper,” Liam said, his voice tight with anger. “I’m going to expose her right now?”

He had already taken a step forward when Erin caught his arm and held him back. Liam, don't do it. That's just reckless. If you go charging in, she'll just deny every word you say.

"She's got Walter backing her now, and the truth is she really has been working. What if we've been wrong about her?" Erin lowered her head, her voice softer. "Maybe I've been thinking too much into it. Maybe she's not like that at all. I shouldn't have judged her so quickly."

Her eyes grew red and glassy, and her voice trembled. "Liam, maybe I should be the one to apologize *in* her. If my accusations turned out to be wrong, it's going to keep me up at night."

Liam exhaled and looked at her with helplessness. "Erin, you're far too kind. The one who ought to be losing sleep is that calculating woman, not you."

His eyes darkened with a deep, simmering resentment. "If she enjoys pretending to struggle at work, then let's make sure she understands what real struggle feels like."

Erin kept her expression soft and uncertain, but her hand at her side clenched so tightly her nails nearly broke her skin.

She could feel it—the Jackmans were beginning to shift their opinion of Tracy.

Since Walter already knew about her job, Tracy no longer worried about Franklin finding out.

Without Chris in the picture, her days fell into a rhythm of working her shifts, visiting Franklin at the hospital, and returning to her small rented apartment.

Whether she came home or didn't, Ronald always had a meal ready for her. After dinner, he stayed to paint alongside her and helped her edit and post her videos online.

His presence gave the shabby little apartment a kind of warmth it had never known. Sometimes, she felt like she belonged.

She still kept her guard up around him, yet she couldn't deny that this was the first time she had ever felt like someone was actually waiting for her to come home every day.

It let her believe, for just a fleeting moment, that she hadn't been abandoned by the world completely.

But that peace didn't last long.

Fate had other plans for her.

Trouble reached the shop where she worked. First came a report about fire safety violations. Then one about *food* hygiene. Soon after, an accusation of unpaid taxes.

The shop was run clean and legal, yet constant inspections made it impossible to keep the doors open.

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Chapter 76 What a Fool

It was too pointed to be coincidence, but the owner couldn't think of a single person he had crossed that had this level of power

Then the message arrived.

He was told to fire Tracy and refuse her wages, or his family would be driven out of Cloudville.

The owner was a man with principles, and he couldn't bring himself to let her go without a reason.

He valued his dignity more than money. Even if he had to close the shop, he would not stand by while a young woman was singled out and pushed around.

But fear eventually found its way in.

His wife's job came under threat. His child was facing expulsion from school. His in-laws were being warned and threatened again and again.

No matter how good a man he was, he could not gamble his family's future.

At last, with guilt heavy in his voice, he called Tracy into the kitchen and told her everything.

Tracy had already suspected that she was the real target. The owner's nature was too kind for anyone **to** have such a vendetta against him, and the fact that his family was involved meant the one behind it had power in Cloudville.

Her first thought was Winona, but Winona would never spend this much time and effort just to have her fired.

If not Winona, then who?

Before the thought could settle, the owner pressed a thick roll of cash into her hand.

When she looked at him in surprise, he said quietly, "Two months' pay. He told me not to give you a cent, but I'm paying you anyway."

Tracy froze before quickly pushing the money back. "This is too much. I haven't even worked through the month yet."

"Take it," he said firmly. "Terminating you without a reason is already shameful enough. Take it, so I can feel at ease."

Gratitude swelled in her chest, though guilt followed close behind.

If not for her, his family would not be in this mess.

Her voice trembled,

"Thank you... and I'm sorry."

"It isn't your fault, so don't apologize," he said gruffly. "The one who should be apologizing is the person

behind all this.

"Anyone who hides in the dark to go after a young woman is probably worth as much as untreated sewage, and I'm not too sure if that's not an insult to sewage."

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Chapter 76 What a Fool

Tracy stared at him in silence.

Since the day she turned 18, she had been told over and over to apologize for things she didn't do even to those who had lived with her for 18 years.

This was the first time someone had told her she didn't owe an apology. And it came from a *man* she had only known for two months.

Chapter 77 Leaving

Chapter 77 Leaving

"Thank you..."

That small word carried more than gratitude for his kindness that day. It was also for the rare mercy of being told she did not need to apologize.

Wanting to keep the shop owner from further trouble, Tracy walked away that same afternoon.

She still could not see the face of the person working against her in the shadows, but she was certain they had more plans in store. Even so, she had to keep going, because survival meant finding another job

With nothing more than a high school diploma and two years of being cut off from the world, her chances were slim.

Still, Tracy refused to be choosy. Whether as a waitress, a store clerk, or a customer service agent, she was willing to take anything that came her way.

Yet without fail, every job ended before the week was over. Each time she was let go under some paper-

thin excuse.

A few bosses, sympathetic toward her struggle, hinted that someone had ordered them to dismiss her. Whoever had the reach to pressure so many different businesses in Cloudville **clearly** had influence, and the only people she could think of were from the circle she had once been part of.

But since Erin had shown up, those who once swore she was their closest friend had treated her like something to be avoided. Some even went out of their way to harm her, all for Erin's favor.

She still had no clue who it could be.

Refusing to

have Ronald dragged into the mess, she stayed away from the apartment. She did not realize that Ronald, clueless to her situation, was growing restless with worry.

She had never stayed gone so long. With no way to reach her, he went to her workplace.

That was when he learned she had been fired some time ago, and the owner told him why..

Ronald still remembered her number and borrowed the shop phone to call her.

When she answered, her voice was edged with surprise. "What's the emergency?"

"You disappeared without a word, and I was about ready to call the cops," Ronald said, letting out a weary sigh. "Your boss told me what happened. Where are you now? Do you need any help?"

The worry in his voice broke through some of the heaviness that had been weighing her down these past few days.

She knew finding a job would be a fight, but the repeated rejections had left her feeling cornered and powerless.

She had no one she could talk to, **so** she buried it all deep inside.

178

Chapter 77 Leaving

Drawing in a slow breath, she said, "No. I'll take care of it."

Someone was after her, and they would have to step out of the shadows eventually.

Ronald pressed again, his voice uncertain. "You sure? Just because I'm younger doesn't mean I can't handle myself

Even through the line, she could see the faintly proud look that matched his words.

Her lips lifted in a brief smile, though her thoughts stayed clear.

For all the time they had spent together, beyond their short introductions, they knew little about each other's real lives.

"Ronald, trouble follows me everywhere, and there's bound to be more ahead," Tracy said softly, her voice weighted with something unspoken.

"You need to stay as far from me as you can."

She was no longer the girl who knew nothing of the world. And though Ronald had his own **secrets**, she could feel the sincerity and dependence behind his every gesture.

Ronald caught her meaning and gave a low chuckle. "I used to be trouble too. But you still saved me anyway."

If he were the kind to avoid problems, he never would have gone back to that house.

They left much unsaid, but in that moment, something that had been standing between them seemed to fade away.

When the call ended, Ronald still wore his bright, open smile, though there was a shadow behind it now.

He had planned to wait until his injuries healed before taking his next step, but it seemed he would have to

move sooner.

“All done?” the shop owner’s voice came from behind.

Ronald turned, his dimples showing in a smile that made him look like the same cheerful, untested college kid.

“All done. Thanks, mate.”

When Tracy hung up, a faint smile still touched her lips, and her hand closed tighter around the phone without her realizing.

Beyond her grandfather and Derek, she now knew there were others who would choose her without hesitation.

But that warmth lasted only a moment.

Liam appeared suddenly.

09:17 Fri, 5 Sept

Chapter 77 Leaving

“Who were you talking to?” he asked, his tone steady but tinged with jealousy.

It had been **far** too long since he had seen her smile like that.

What stung even more **was** how quickly it vanished the second she heard his voice. She turned, **and** her warmth was gone, replaced by cold distance.

His temper flared quickly. “I thought you didn’t **have** a phone. Where’d you get the money for one? Did Chris give it to you?”

“No... Chris doesn’t even talk to you anymore. Was it that guy who just called? **Are** you dating him?”

The questions came one after another, each carrying the weight of a judgment he had already made before he bothered to hear her out.

“So desperate for money that when you couldn’t get it from your family, you went looking for some **man** to cozy up to? I never knew you were so greedy for what you can’t earn yourself.”

Her once-in-a-blue-moon elation was marred. Tracy, naturally, had nothing but a scowl on her **face** to show for it.

Chapter 78 Tracy’s Retort

Chapter 78 Tracy’s Retort

Chapter 78 Tracy’s Retort

“I never once tried to take the Jackmans’ money. Where my money comes from has nothing to do with you.”

“The nerve of you!” Liam’s voice rose with heat. “First, you fake a kidnapping. Then, you take some pitiful job so people will feel sorry for you. When that fails, you run after men. How did we ever raise someone like you? Someone with no shame at all!

“And to think Erin believed she was wrong about you She’s been eaten up with guilt, losing sleep over it She kept telling me not to take my anger out on that shop owner’s family, the ones stupid enough to help you with your little act. Otherwise, I would have-”

“How do you even know I worked there?”

Tracy had been ready to leave without another word, but her feet stopped cold. She lifted her head and fixed him with an icy stare.

Liam mistook her stillness for embarrassment at being caught, and his mouth curled in triumph. “Your pathetic little tricks could never fool me. You wanted us to think you were struggling in some dead-end job so we’d pity you. I’ll show you what disgrace really looks like.”

Her gaze stayed sharp as glass, though fire now burned beneath it. “So it was you who went after the shop owner, and you even threatened his family? You’re the reason none of my jobs lasted longer than three days?”

She spoke each word with measured force, holding her temper by a thread.

Liam, blind to her fury, thought her questions meant she was finally afraid.

Maybe she had even come to him to beg.

He lifted his chin high. “So what if I did do that? He lifted his chin high. “So what if I did do that? You think you can get away with such cheap-

Her hand met his cheek with a crack that split the air, stopping him mid-sentence.

Her anger surged like it had been building in her chest for days.

"If you have a problem with me, then face me yourself. Abusing your family's influence to attack civilians is nothing but cowardice and humiliation!

"You didn't just ruin someone's livelihood. You threatened their family, including children and the elderly. You call you and your family civilized and noble, yet animals come from a nobler stock than you do. I was going to call you a beast, but now I see that'd just be an insult to them."

Liam stared at her with wide eyes, too shocked to speak for a long moment.

"Did you just hit me?" His voice carried disbelief.

Never had she laid a hand on him before. And now she had struck him for the sake of strangers, **even** calling him a piece **of** scum that was lower than a beast.

Her glare stayed unflinching. "I used to think you were just **someone** who worked **well** with **reckless**

1/3

09:17 Fri, 5 Sept

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Chapter 78 Tracy's Retort

abandon. I thought at least there's something good in your core, font no. I was dead wrong

It wasn't only Liam. She had been wrong about the entire Jackman family, believing their promised the they treated her no differently than their own.

Her tone turned cold and scornful. "I can't believe I was your family for a big part of my life Feels like the thought alone is tainting my whole self now. No amount of shower's going to wash that kind of stely away."

She turned and walked away as though the very air around him was poison.

Liam remained rooted in place, whether from her words or the sting still burning on his cheek He watched her retreat, baffled.

He told himself it had been for her. That he did it for her own good.

If not for her, he never would have used the Jackmans' influence *to* crush an ordinary family. And yet she repaid him with cruelty. The audacity of it!

Even after her outburst, Tracy's anger refused to fade.

She knew Liam. He wasn't clever enough to come up with something so underhanded.

His words made it clear. This had Erin's handprints all over it, her tearful face dripping with hints and suggestions.

Tracy didn't pause. She headed straight for Erin's room.

She reached the door and was about to push it open when a sharp, furious voice rang out from inside. "Five million? Are you out of your mind? I don't have that kind of money to give you!"

Tracy's hand froze on the doorknob. Her anger cooled into something sharper, edged with curiosity.

Someone was asking Erin for money.

She leaned in until her ear touched the door. Erin must have realized her outburst had been too loud, because the rest of her words came in a low murmur.

Tracy stayed there, listening, but aside from the faint rumble of voices, she couldn't make out anything clear.

She hesitated, weighing whether to slip the door open, when it was suddenly pulled from the other side.

Erin stood there, her face still twisted in anger. The sight of Tracy stopped her cold, and her expression shifted from shock to *clear* panic. "You... What are you doing here?"

Her voice trembled, and her eyes (larted around as if to check for anyone else.

Tracy watched her carefully.

It was the first time she had ever seen Erin look like this. Who could be after her for that kind of money?

Erin shrank back under her gaze. "Did you need something from me?"

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09:17 Fri, 8 Sept EI

Chapter 78 Tracy's Retort

Tracy studied her for a beat, then asked, "Were you the one who told Llam to threaten the shop owner's family so they'd fire me?"

The relief on Erin's face was instant.

She gave her usual soft smile and denied it without a second thought. "That wasn't me. I even told Liars not to drag innocent people into this. He-"

Chapter 79 Warning

Chapter 79 Warning

Chapter 79 Warning

Chapter 79 Warning

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"You didn't remind him out of the goodness of your dark, black heart, and you know that very well Tracy said, her voice slicing through Erin's attempt to speak.

"I gave you the position of the Jackman heiress. And I've paid back what I owed them over the last two years. More than they deserve. From here on out, I will have no connection to the Jackmans. You can stop worrying about me taking anything that belongs to you."

Her gaze sharpened, cold and unflinching. "I have no family, no friends, and no ties holding me here. My life isn't worth much. You, on the other hand, have more wealth than you could spend in a lifetime, the highest status in Cloudville, and loved ones who would shield you with their lives.

"If you're still not satisfied with that, if you insist on whittling me down until I have nowhere to go, you'll find yourself trapped in a cage with a beast that has nothing to lose and everything to gain if she just **kills** her tormentor. While you, on the other hand, have everything to lose, and nothing to gain."

Erin's expression stiffened. "Is that a threat?"

She had never imagined that, even at this point, Tracy would still dare to threaten her—and worse, she *had* no argument to fight back with.

No one knew how much she had sacrificed to hold onto her place as the Jackmans' daughter. She cherished it because she had bled for it

Tracy, however, had almost nothing left to lose, all thanks to her schemes. Yet, that was exactly what made her dangerous.

The flicker of hesitation in Erin's eyes told Tracy her words had struck home.

"Oh, I would never dare," Tracy said, her tone cooling into frost. "I'm just offering you a friendly reminder. I've never tried to compete with you, so there's no reason for you to keep treating me as your enemy.

"If you hadn't stood in my way, I would have left the Jackmans long ago, and Walter wouldn't have had the chance to stop me."

Erin's mouth parted as if she wanted to speak, but not a single word escaped.

Tracy had said what she came to say. Without another glance, she turned and walked away.

She did not mention the sharp outburst she had overheard outside the door moments earlier.

Whoever was threatening Erin was a problem for the Jackmans alone, and Tracy had no interest in dragging herself into it. The more she knew, the deeper the trouble.

He had already decided to sever ties with them and would not wade into their battles.

Erin, however, could not stop replaying the thought of what Tracy might have overheard.

Tracy was right—she had far too much to lose, and she could not let go of **a** single thing.

She had been back with the Jackmans for four years, and even though Tracy **had** been gone for **two of** them, they had never fully abandoned her.

173

Chapter 79 Warning

If Tracy went to them and spoke a word of this...

Erin's teeth clenched hard.

No, she needed to find a way to strip away whatever trust the Jackmans still had in Tracy.

Her mind churned, searching for a plan, when suddenly she remembered something Tracy had said

earlier.

“She said she repaid the debt she owed them over the past two years. What did she mean by that?”

Her voice floated into the empty room as if in conversation, yet no one was there.

The sound of her own words in the stillness carried a strange and unsettling chill.

Tracy knew Liam well enough.

After the slap she had given him and the cutting words she had thrown, he would not dare try underhanded tricks against her again.

She began sorting through the job listings she had gathered, ready to start her search anew.

When Ronald heard of her plan, he shook his head.

“Instead of pouring yourself into exhausting work for little pay, why not stay here and focus on your art?”

He picked up her phone and opened up an app. “You already have a good number of followers. Some people are offering commissions, and the rates are fair. Why not take them?”

Tracy was caught off guard.

Ronald had been the one managing her account, and she had not realized it had grown so quickly.

He had even spoken to a client and settled the details—only her agreement was needed to make it official.

The price was fair, and the requests were simple. Tracy saw no reason to refuse.

From that day on, she stopped looking for other jobs. When she wasn’t visiting the Jackmans or her grandfather in the hospital, she stayed in her apartment and painted.

The apartment had a balcony of about a hundred square feet. It bordered the greenery outside the building and had once been filthy and overgrown with weeds.

Ronald had cleaned the entire place until it gleamed. He had transformed the balcony into her studio and even bought a small cabinet to hold her supplies.

He had also brought in other furniture, replacing even the old, battered dining table with a new one.

Tracy's eyes widened. "Where did you get the money for all this?"

When she first found Ronald, the most valuable thing he owned was the set of clothes on his **back**

, **which** had been thrown away because it **was** covered in bloodstains and tears.

Even the money she had given him a few times would not have been enough **to buy** furniture **of this**

2/3

09:18 Fr,6 Sept

Chapter 79 Warning

quality.

Ronald leaned against the new table, resting his chin on his hand A smile lit his face, deepening *the* dimples in his cheeks. "I told you I'm not just good at cooking and cleaning I can make money *on y* you believe me now?"

Tracy frowned slightly. "How did you make it?"

Ronald answered without hesitation. "Took out a loan and did some trading. Even after I cleared my *debt*. I still had over a hundred thousand left in the bank."

Chapter 80 A Gift

Chapter 80 A Gift

Chapter 80 A Gift

Ronald set a pristine card on the table, his tone casual yet deliberate as he said, "I opened this term with your information. I want you to hold on to it. The password's your birthday."

Tracy didn't reach for it. Her eyes lingered on him, searching for something beyond the surface

Trading stocks wasn't something an average person could simply wander into.

It demanded expertise, sharp instincts, and often a hand on the pulse of whispers few could access

Even then, profit was never promised.

Yet Ronald had not only done it—he had made an impressive sum in a fraction of the time most could dream of. Not even Andrew, Cloudville’s lauded business prodigy, could have pulled that off so quickly.

The kidnappers had mentioned he came from Jezelton.

In a place teeming with cunning minds and hidden power, a man with his skill would still stand out. Though questions pressed at her, Tracy didn’t ask them. She left his **secrets** untouched.

And she left the card untouched too. It was the money he had earned, and she saw no reason to take it.

When her refusal held firm, Ronald paused. Then, without another word, he linked the card to her number. “Thanks for having faith in me. I’ll make more money with this. **If** you ever need money, just use what’s there.”.

Tracy stilled, unsettled by how easily he could place that kind of faith in her. They had not known each other long. There were still truths neither had shared. Yet he spoke as if trust were already absolute.

She hesitated before asking, “If you’ve got this much money, why stay here?”

With his ability, he could have bought a place far better than this worn apartment. There was no need for him to share *it* with her.

Ronald’s eyes lit with a teasing glint. “You worked yourself to the bone to save me, and now you want to leave me behind before I can repay you?”

The words caught her off guard.

His tone was sincere. His expression was open, so much so that it was hard to imagine him lying.

But Tracy had lived long enough to know how quickly sincerity could shift.

Even as she felt it, she could not fully trust it.

While she lingered in thought, Ronald suddenly took her wrist. “I bought some furniture, but I haven’t had the time to go get them just yet/Come check them out. We can change up some stuff if the furniture’s **not** to your liking.”

He gave her no chance to refuse, pulling her toward the home furnishings market.

173

Chapter 80 A Gift

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The furniture he had chosen wasn't extravagant. The priciest pieces were two beds, yet he had bought everything a home might need, right down to a dishwasher and an oven.

When the shopkeepers learned the items were headed to an old district, they assumed they were for aging parents and praised them for their devotion.

Tracy and Ronald shared a glance but said nothing.

She wasn't about to dip into his earnings, and her own savings couldn't stretch to a better place.

Besides, this was her first home of her own, and she wasn't ready to leave it behind.

As for Ronald, the old neighborhood gave him cover.

And since the money was meant to keep him close, he would naturally be wherever Tracy was.

They left the store and stepped toward the curb to hail a cab.

That was when a luxury car hurtled toward them.~.

Tires screeched across the pavement, their piercing cry slicing through the air.

Ronald, a step ahead of Tracy, nearly caught the full force of it.

"Careful!"

Tracy yanked him back just in time. The car skidded to a stop just a few steps away.

Her heart still pounded as she gripped his arm.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," Ronald replied, smiling as if nothing had happened.

But when he turned to the car, his gaze sharpened to ice.

That driver hadn't swerved by accident. For a moment there, they had meant to kill him.

Have the Jezelton guys found me?

That's fast.

The car's doors opened, and two men stepped out.

Ronald didn't know them, but Tracy did.

"Liam?" Her voice rose with fury. "What the hell is it this time?"

She shifted to block Ronald from view, her glare fixed on the man in front of her.

Liam was a seasoned rally driver. The way he had just steered straight for Ronald was no mistake.

Seeing her stand protectively in front of another man made Liam's temper flare. "What is it this time? You should be asking yourself that!"

He jabbed a finger toward Ronald. "Who is he? Is he the guy you were talking to on the phone **the** other2/3

09:18 **Fri**, 5 Sept 10

Chapter 80 A Gift

day? Is he the one keeping you?"

Tracy knew Liam's temper well. When his emotions boiled over, his words cut deep, and she had long since grown used to it.

But she wouldn't let him drag Ronald through the mud.

The earnest Ronald should never have been in contact with scum like the Jackmans.

She tried to lead him away, but he stayed rooted in place.

The smile on his face didn't waver. He radiated the warmth of a sun. The guy was more like a young **man** than Liam ever was.

Ronald said, "I have no idea who you are, but you've got it all wrong. I'm not the one keeping CeeCee. She's the one keeping me."

His grin broadened, bold and shameless. “These days, everything I eat, wear, and use was paid for by her.”