

The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late

#Left Behind 11 - Read The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late Left Behind 11

Chapter 11 Just to Show Off?

Back when Tracy got shipped off to the Angelic Etiquette Academy, the person she couldn't stop thinking

about was Norris.

He was her childhood crush, the guy who grew up with her, the one who once said he'd always protect her and had even been engaged to her.

If it hadn't been for him, she never would've snuck past Franklin's security two years ago to meet him. That was how she ended up walking right into that alley with no cameras, only to get grabbed by the Jackmans' people and thrown into the institution.

Now, no one seemed to notice how pale she looked. Everyone was way too busy hyping Erin up, showering her with compliments.

"Mr. Gill treats Ms. Jackman like royalty. I'm honestly jealous."

"They make such a gorgeous couple. It's like they're meant to be."

"She's almost done with school, right? A wedding's probably just around the corner!"

Erin laughed shyly. "Norris is too much. I keep telling him I've got plenty of clothes, but he keeps buying

more."

Even though she sounded like she was complaining, her face showed how happy she really was.

Daphne gave her hand a squeeze, smiling like she couldn't be prouder. "There's no such thing as too many outfits. The Gills are loaded anyway, and Norris clearly adores you."

Tracy stood off to the side, quiet, almost invisible. She watched Erin's bashfulness, Daphne's glowing pride, and everyone else's cheerful smiles. It felt like every glance was a stab straight to her numb heart.

Then, like she'd only just realized Tracy was even there, Erin turned to her with a wide-eyed look. "Tracy, why aren't you saying anything?"

Just like that, everyone looked at Tracy. Some looked curious, others confused. It was like they were all wondering, Wait, who is she?

Totally unfazed-or maybe pretending to be-Erin smiled sweetly and walked closer. "Didn't you use to love shopping here? Look around. If you see anything you like, Norris can cover it."

She gave a playful little wink. "We'll just say I picked it out. He won't notice. And even if he finds out, he wouldn't blame you!".

Tracy stared at Erin's innocent-looking face and slowly curled her fingers into tight fists.

"Erin ... is that why you asked me to come today? Just to show off?"

To throw it in my face that the guy who once promised to stay by my side is now treating her like royalty?

Erin blinked, clearly surprised. "Tracy, what are you talking about?"

Then she tilted her head and asked, like she was genuinely confused, "Wait ... do you still have feelings for

Norris?"

That one line changed the whole vibe. People suddenly looked at Tracy differently. Recognition sank in, followed by quiet judgment. "Wait, I thought she looked familiar... Isn't she Tracy Jackman?"

"Tracy Jackman? But I thought the Jackmans only had one daughter."

"You don't know? There was that baby mix-up. That's the girl who used to be Ms. Jackman-the one who wasn't the real heiress."

"Oh! That Tracy? The one who tried to steal someone else's identity and bullied the real daughter? I thought she got sent abroad."

"She changed her name to Tracy Yarwood. It was all over the news. I guess she came back early. Is she really trying to fight for her spot again?"

They didn't yell, but in that boutique, every word felt loud-sharp enough to slice through skin.

Erin stood there frozen, looking lost. "Tracy, I didn't mean to rub it in ... I didn't know you still had feelings for Norris ...

"I thought you moved on. You haven't talked to us in two years. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Her voice cracked, and tears rolled down her cheeks, making her look even more heartbroken. And just like that, everyone turned on Tracy.

"I always heard the fake heiress was bitter and jealous-now I see it's true. Ms. Jackman was just being sweet by letting her buy some outfits, and she twisted it."

"She's obviously back to take what isn't hers. Everyone knows how obsessed she was with Mr. Gill. No wonder she's freaking out, seeing how good he's treating Ms. Jackman."

"It's not about love-it's about status. But too bad. Mr. Gill and Ms. Jackman are the real deal. She's got no shot."

The voices just kept going, each one more toxic than the last. It was like they needed to make her into the villain to feel better about themselves.

It always ended up like this.

Tracy couldn't figure it out.

Why does everyone always believe Erin without hesitation? Why do they label me as the bad guy so easily?

I haven't done anything. But somehow, I'm always the one left with the blame.

Her hands still ached, but it didn't even register anymore. The pain was so old that it felt distant.

Feeling drained and confused, she looked straight at Erin and said softly, "Ms. Jackman, why do you always act like you know what I'm thinking?"

She took a breath, voice steady. "All I want is to be with Grandpa and live a normal life. I've never tried to take anything from you.

"You've got the Jackmans' name. You have Norris. I never once said I still had feelings for him. So why do you keep treating me like a threat?"

Loving Norris had already cost her too much. She wouldn't survive going through that hell again.

Maybe it was the hint of hopelessness in her voice, but the whole room suddenly went quiet.

Erin's expression faltered. She looked away, like she couldn't meet Tracy's eyes anymore. Panic started to creep across her face.

She hadn't expected Tracy to speak like that.

This wasn't the same Tracy who used to freeze up and stammer whenever she got cornered-the one who only ever said "I didn't" or "That's not true." Now, she was calm and detached, as if she'd let go.

How did she change this much in just two years?

Erin bit her lip, then let the tears fall again. "I'm sorry... I misunderstood. It's all on me.

"I just saw you looking upset when we got here and thought maybe it was about Norris ... I guessed wrongly. I didn't mean to make things worse..."

Her shaky apology snapped the room out of its silence.

Yeah. If Tracy doesn't care anymore, why does she look so cold and miserable the whole time? Why did she snap like that?

Clearly, Ms. Jackman accidentally exposed her real thoughts, and she got mad!

And just like that, the glares aimed at Tracy turned darker and more hateful.

While the tension peaked, someone suddenly rushed at her, hand raised, ready to strike.

Chapter 12 You've Slapped Me Twice Now

Smack!

The sound of the slap rang through the whole store.

Daphne hadn't held back-her hand actually stung from how hard she hit. But she didn't care. Her palm could hurt all it wanted; she was livid. "I really thought you'd matured," she said sharply, her eyes fixed on Tracy. "But no-you're still the same stubborn, selfish girl.

"Erin's always treated you well. She's always looked out for you, even put you first! And still, you pick on her at home and pull the same stunts in public? Did I raise you like this?!"

"You've let me down, Tracy. Completely."

Tracy's ears were buzzing. For a second, she felt like she was back at the Angelic Etiquette Academy, where people hit her just because they could.

It took her a moment to snap out of it. Once she did, she caught Daphne's last words.

I've let her down?

What a joke.

Since the day Erin walked into our lives, has anyone not been disappointed in me?

Tracy turned her head slowly, her voice steady and low. "Mrs. Jackman, you've slapped me twice now."

The first time had been over that lie about her "pushing Erin down the stairs."

Her cheek was already starting to swell, hot and sore. But her eyes-they looked empty, like there was nothing left in them. That blank expression made Daphne freeze for a second.

Did I really do that?

Her fingers twitched.

Tracy used to be the girl I protected from every scrape, every little bump. I've never even scolded her harshly before.

But...

But Tracy has gone too far this time.

Erin has only ever been sweet to her. She treats Tracy like a real sister. And yet Tracy is always causing problems, always picking fights, trying to steal what isn't hers.

I wouldn't have hit her unless she gave me a reason.

Holding onto that thought, Daphne repeated with more confidence, "You pushed it too far. You hurt Erin again and again. I had no other choice."

That excuse again.

Tracy looked over at Erin, standing there like she was completely innocent, as if she had nothing to do with all this.

So Tracy asked what she'd been wanting to say for a long time. "Mrs. Jackman, can you actually tell me what I did to Ms. Jackman that counts as bullying?"

"You're still trying to play the victim!" Daphne snapped.

"Sure, you were close with Norris when you were kids-but now he's with Erin. They're the ones meant to be together!

"Erin's always treated you with kindness. And you? You throw shade in public, act like a victim, and make everything awkward. What else is that, if not bullying?"

As Daphne said all this, Erin looked even more heartbroken. Her lips trembled, like she was barely holding it together. She gently tugged on Daphne's sleeve.

"Mom... don't be mad at Tracy. She and Norris go way back. It's totally normal for her to still have feelings.

"If I hadn't shown up, maybe they'd still be together."

Daphne hugged her tightly. "Don't say that, sweetheart. This isn't your fault at all. Norris was promised to you, and you love each other. You two belong together."

Erin looked unsure for a moment, like she was trying to make up her mind. Then she seemed to decide on something.

"Tracy, I used to think I didn't have a family. And when I finally found one, when I was finally accepted and loved, that meant the world to me. I'm not going to fight you over Norris.

"I'll step back. I won't marry him."

She said it like she was giving up something huge, her voice cracking like she was barely keeping it together. Tears welled up again, falling right on cue like she was making some big, noble sacrifice.

Tracy's head started to pound.

She couldn't tell if it was from Daphne's slap or from the way Erin kept twisting everything she said and making it into something it wasn't.

While Erin sobbed, a firm and calm voice cut through the noise. "If Erin doesn't marry me, then who will she marry?"

Everyone turned to the door. A tall guy in a white shirt stood there. His features were sharp and clean. He had a calm expression, but his voice was serious.

He walked straight toward Erin, face softening. "Just yesterday, you told me I was your favorite person. And now you're saying you won't marry me?"

Erin's cheeks turned pink the second she saw him. She looked up at him shyly. "Norris ..."

Tracy's heart dropped.

For two years, she'd pictured this moment-what she'd say, how she'd act.

Maybe she'd run into his arms, crying about everything she'd gone through at the institution.

Or maybe she'd scream at him, telling him how upset she was with him.

She'd wanted to slap him and demand to know why he had lied.

Why did he say he'd always protect her and love only her, only to call her disgusting later on? Why did he suddenly claim he only ever saw her as a sister and that her love made his skin crawl?

Her mind was spinning, and somehow, Norris looked over at her, his eyebrows pulled together.

She was thinner and more closed off now. Her face looked familiar, but it took him a second.

Then he spoke. He sounded unsure but glad. "Tracy?"

He took a step toward her, almost automatically. But Erin quickly grabbed his hand.

"Norris ..."

She looked like she was barely standing, tears still fresh in her eyes. She sounded like she was trying to be strong.

"Tracy saw you buying me clothes and thought I was trying to show off. I wasn't, I swear.

"I didn't know she still had feelings for you..."

"I don't want to lose you either. But if giving you up will help her accept me as family... then I'll do it."

She finished in a shaky voice, her whole body screaming how painful that idea was.

Norris pulled back. "Don't be silly," he said gently. "Feelings aren't something you can just give up. And you're the one I was supposed to marry from the beginning."

Erin blushed, lowering her head a little. But she still looked unsure. “But what about Tracy?”

Something in Norris changed. He seemed to remember the jealous girl who’d always clung to him, who never stopped causing trouble for Erin. His expression hardened.

He looked back at Tracy. Any warmth from earlier disappeared. His eyes were sharp and cold.

That look... Tracy had seen it before, but it broke her heart all the same.

But there was a time when he’d looked at her with nothing but love.

Until Erin came along.

Now, that look of love was reserved for Erin alone.

His tone was ice. “Why did you come back?”

Not “How have you been,” or “welcome back.” It was like she didn’t belong anymore.

It hit harder than she expected. Even though she’d warned herself not to hope, even though she knew the truth, she still couldn’t help but hold out hope.

“I only came to ask one thing, Mr. Gill. Two years ago, you said you had something really important to tell me. What was it?”

Chapter 13 You Brought It on Yourself

Two years ago, Tracy was basically the family outcast. Her parents didn’t want her around, her brothers had nothing but resentment for her, and even Norris-the guy she’d grown up promised to-treated her like she was garbage. She’d felt like trash left in a ditch, like everyone just wanted her gone.

So she clung to the tiniest signs that maybe someone still cared.

Then one day, Norris called her. He told her there was something he needed to say to her alone.

He sounded kind on the phone, like how he used to be before Erin showed up and flipped her world upside down. That one phone call gave her a sliver of hope-maybe things weren’t totally broken.

So, she ditched the bodyguards Franklin had arranged and snuck off to meet him at some sketchy, half- built building with no cameras around.

But when she got there ... it wasn't Norris. It was the Jackmans. They had ropes and rags, saying weird things like, "This is for your own good."

They stripped her of everything, tied her up, and sent her straight into a nightmare.

For so long, she asked herself, Why? Why would Norris do that? Why lie to me?

Erin is already with him. The families are all in favor. And Norris looked me in the eye and promised he'd never lie.

Even after everything, she still held onto a scrap of belief.

Maybe he didn't know what happened. Maybe he tried to find her. Maybe he missed her.

She told herself that when they met again, she'd ask him straight up if he had turned on her or not.

That thought kept her sane during the hellish years at the etiquette school. She'd imagined a hundred ways that conversation could

But not once did she expect his answer to be, "I figured two years would snap you out of it. But I see you're still just as obsessed as ever.

"You're pathetic, Tracy."

Her face went pale, and her knees nearly gave out.

"So

"

.., you knew? You knew exactly what was going to happen to me, and you still sent me there?"

Her voice cracked, full of pain and fury. "Do you even have a clue what I've been through these past two years?!"

For a moment, her words hit him.

He looked away, like he felt a little guilty.

But then Erin squeezed his hand.

Right. I've done nothing wrong.

taken away, who knows what worse things she would've done?

Norris's face hardened. "Whatever you went through, you brought it on yourself."

You brought it on yourself.

Even though she had told herself not to expect anything, those words hit harder than she imagined.

What did I ever do to deserve that?

The pain and grief that had been eating away at her suddenly stopped. Everything went numb.

Wasn't it enough? Haven't I suffered enough?

What am I even hoping for anymore?

Norris looked at her again. For a second, something shifted. Maybe he saw a glimpse of the old Tracy-the girl she used to be before her 18th birthday. And he hesitated.

But Erin was watching, quietly, like she wasn't part of the mess.

The second she noticed his expression change, panic rose in her eyes.

"Norris ... "

She gently pulled his hand again, her voice soft but full of emotion. "Please don't blame Tracy. She's just having a hard time with everything. I know she'll come around."

Her voice trembled, her eyes watery. "You're always so sweet, Erin," Norris said, relaxing a little.

Erin smiled shyly and looked away, clearly loving the attention.

Then, as if she just remembered something, she turned to the store staff, took a bunch of clothes, and walked over to Tracy.

"Tracy, you've been gone so long. We all missed you. Now that you're back, our family's complete.

"These are all my favorite outfits-I want you to have them. And can you please let me be with Norris?"

"I know you like him too, but he's in love with me, I can't let him go. So... will you be happy for us?"

“When we get married, will you be my maid of honor? Only with your blessing can we be truly happy.”

She sounded so sweet and sincere. But every word stabbed into Tracy’s heart.

Everyone in Cloudville had known how head-over-heels she’d been for Norris.

Even when no one else believed in her, she chased after him like he was her last hope.

Erin had no idea how hurtful what she said was.

Two years ago, Tracy would’ve gone off. She would’ve shoved Erin and yelled at her.

still that same impulsive, wild girl.

But they were wrong.

Tracy wasn’t that person anymore. Now, those cruel little lines from Erin didn’t even make her flinch.

All her fire and stubborn love were gone. The moment Norris told her she deserved what she went through, something in her shut down for good.

She looked Erin right in the eyes and, with total calm, said, “Of course. I hope you and Mr. Gill live a long, sweet life together. May you grow old side by side, have kids and grandkids, and never be apart. May your bond last forever.

“Happy now?”

The whole room went silent. Norris and Daphne froze, their hands still midair, unsure what just happened.

Even Erin was caught off guard, her fingers tightening around the clothes.

What’s going on with Tracy?

Erin quickly smiled again, trying to play it off like everything was fine. “I’m glad you understand.”

She held out the clothes. “Come on. Try them on! If one fits, maybe you could wear it to the wedding.”

Back then, Tracy hated being touched by Erin. Now, after everything she’d endured, she hated being touched by anyone.

It reminded her of the etiquette school. All those fake smiles and gross, sneaky hands in the dark.

She started to step back, but Erin grabbed her arm.

And just like that, Erin's expression changed. "Tracy, what are you doing?! Ah!"

Still holding Tracy's wrist, Erin pulled it toward her shoulder.

With the clothes covering their arms, it looked like Tracy had pushed her.

In that instant, Tracy was dragged back to that day two years ago. It was the same exact move.

Erin had done the same thing. She had grabbed her hand and pretended to fall, making it look like Tracy pushed her down the stairs.

That memory hit hard, and her chest tightened.

No.

I can't go through that again.

I refuse to be sent back there. Never again!

Chapter 14 What the Hell Has She Gone Through?

Tracy reached out, trying to stop Erin, hoping to prevent things from spiraling like they had before.

But Erin suddenly threw her arms up, sending the clothes flying.

To Tracy, it all felt like slow motion.

She saw Norris and Daphne rushing to catch Erin. She watched Erin lean backward without a second thought. She remembered the Jackmans again, emotionlessly tying her up, shoving cloth in her mouth, and dragging her off to the nightmare that was the Angelic Etiquette Academy ...

Tracy panicked and backed away, not realizing there was a rack right behind her.

Crash!

The rack slammed to the ground with a loud crash. Tracy tripped, tangled up in the mess. The sound of fabric tearing filled the air. She looked like a complete wreck.

Erin had also taken a fall, but she landed safely in the arms of Norris and Daphne. Not a hair out of place.

Still, she winced in pain. "Mom, Norris ... my ankle ... It really hurts."

Norris knelt down fast, holding her ankle gently. Her small shoe rested on perfect, unbruised skin. But the second he touched it, Erin let out a painful cry.

Daphne gasped. "It looks bad! Norris, hurry up and get her to the hospital!"

Norris didn't waste a second. He nodded and lifted Erin into his arms.

As he turned, his eyes landed on Tracy. She was sitting on the floor, pale and shaken, surrounded by the fallen rack. Her white dress was ripped at the thigh, showing a patch of skin.

The second their eyes met, Tracy quickly tugged the skirt down and looked away.

She hadn't touched Erin.

But she had said that before. Two years ago. Over and over.

Nobody believed her then. They still sent her away.

Norris looked like he might say something, but Erin clutched his shirt and whimpered, "Norris, it hurts so much..."

Whatever thoughts he had disappeared. He comforted her gently, "Don't worry. I've got you. We're going to the hospital right now."

And just like that, he carried her out. Daphne followed, full of concern. Neither one of them looked back at Tracy.

Strangely enough, Tracy felt a bit of relief.

She was terrified they'd send her back to that place.

If it happened again, she wouldn't survive it.

After the three left, everyone in the store turned to stare at Tracy. But no one helped her up.

They had all seen how Daphne and Norris treated her. The staff just followed their lead.

The store manager walked over, annoyed. "Miss, do you realize how expensive these are? They're custom pieces, one of a kind. Can you even pay for what you just ruined?"

"I-I'm sorry."

Tracy got up quickly, trying to keep the torn fabric of her dress from showing too much skin.

The rip was bad-from her hip all the way down. One hand couldn't cover it.

After hesitating, she took off her hoodie and tied it around her waist to hide the damage.

The second her jacket came off, everyone's faces changed from judging to shocked. The whole store gasped.

Her dress showed her bare shoulders and back. What should've been smooth, soft skin was covered in scars-old and new-and burned spots.

What the hell has she gone through?

That thought crossed every mind in the room.

But Tracy acted like she didn't notice. She let her hair fall down to cover as much as she could.

Those scars weren't unusual at the Angelic Etiquette Academy-especially for the "chosen" ten who were treated like animals.

Hers weren't even the worst.

While picking up the clothes and rack pieces, she said quietly, "I'm sorry. If anything's ruined, I'll pay for it. But... I don't have much money. Could you give me a little time?"

She never finished college. The Jackmans had sent her to that awful place instead. She had no job, no money, nothing. These clothes were way out of her budget.

The store manager, halfway through helping her put the rack back up, looked at her face and the bruises on her arms. He hesitated.

He was just an employee. He did what the higher-ups told him. But none of them were here now.

After checking over the clothes, he cleared his throat. "Nothing seems torn. You can leave. Just be more careful next time."

Tracy knew he was cutting her some slack.

"Thank you."

She bowed slightly. Then, with all the store's eyes still on her—come curious

"Everything must go! T-shirts for five bucks! Pants only ten! Grab them while you can!"

Just a couple of blocks from the high-end mall, a crowd of older folks gathered around some street stalls, happily hunting for bargains.

Tracy looked down at the dress she couldn't wear anymore and stepped toward the vendors.

She picked a loose T-shirt with longer sleeves and a pair of straight pants. The total came to 30 bucks.

But she only had 31 dollars left. She had already spent 6 dollars getting from the Angelic Etiquette Academy to the Jackmans' place. That left 25.

Tracy looked at the seller. "Sir... can you make it a bit cheaper? This is all I've got."

The vendor glanced at her while chatting with others. Seeing the small pile of coins, he chuckled and held up a QR code. "Sorry, sweetheart, I don't bargain. But if you have a phone, you can scan to pay."

Tracy fidgeted. "I-I don't have one."

Some of the passersby turned to look. Their expressions weren't mean, just curious, but Tracy still felt embarrassed.

She had no college degree, no phone, no job, no money, no home, and not even proper clothes.

She never thought her life could sink this low.

Her hand clenched tightly around the coins.

Maybe I'll just buy the pants. I can cut the dress I'm wearing and use it as a top.

Right as she was about to pull her hand back, a gentle voice spoke from beside her. "Sweetheart, did someone hurt you?"

An older woman held her hand, eyes filled with concern. "Such a pretty girl ... How could anyone hurt you like that?"

She wasn't even sure where to look first-Tracy's bruised cheek or her arms.

"If someone's hurting you, speak up. Staying quiet only makes things worse."

“That’s right,” said another. “We’ve got laws now. If you need help, go to the authorities. We’ll help if we

can.”

“Everyone hits rough patches. You’ll get through this. These clothes don’t cost much- just take them. No need to pay.”

“Here, use this popsicle on your face. Don’t let anything mess up that pretty face.”

And right there-surrounded by strangers who expected nothing in return-Tracy suddenly felt tears threaten to fall.

Chapter 15 Why Is Tracy Back at the Jackmans’ Place?

When Tracy was barely hanging on at the Angelic Etiquette Academy, she didn’t cry because she knew crying didn’t help.

When the Jackmans constantly judged her and made her feel small, she still didn’t cry because nobody

cared, even if she did.

But now, surrounded by random strangers who actually seemed to care, she suddenly felt all the pain hit

her at once.

Her eyes watered, her voice shook, but all she managed to say was, “Thank you so much... I’m really okay, I promise.”

And honestly, she meant it.

She was okay. And from now on, she’d only go up from here.

She gently turned down the kind offers from the older folks. Before she left, she quietly dropped all her cash into a cloth bag behind the stall. Then she walked off, carrying the two items she’d picked out and the popsicle that one kind lady had handed her.

The cold treat numbed the sting on her face and helped keep her tears in check.

Maybe I’m not as unlucky as I thought. Not everyone I meet is heartless.

But now I’m literally broke. I have to find work. Then, once I’m ready, I’ll get away from the Jackmans for good.

At the hospital.

Erin was all smiles as she sat up in the hospital bed, her ankle wrapped neatly in a fresh white bandage.

Daphne sat on one side of the bed, slowly feeding Erin pieces of banana.

On the other side, Norris held a glass of water, watching Erin with soft, caring eyes.

In that calm, cozy hospital room, it was like Tracy had been completely erased from their minds.

“Erin... hey, Erin?”

Even before the door opened, Andrew's voice could be heard rushing down the hallway.

The second he heard Erin was in the hospital, he dropped everything. He left an important meeting and ran red lights to get there.

When he finally saw her safe and okay, he relaxed a little. “What happened? Why are you here all of a sudden?”

Erin reached for his hand and gave him a sweet smile. “It's just a sprain, Andrew. Don't stress. And please don't blame my sister. I don't think she meant it.”

Andrew frowned, clearly annoyed. “Tracy Jackman again? What did she do this time?”

Daphne's warm smile disappeared fast. Her voice was sharp. “She shoved Erin right in front of everyone. She pushed so hard! If Norris and I hadn't grabbed her in time, she could've been badly hurt.”

Just thinking about it made Daphne's blood boil.

If Tracy acts like that in public, who knows what she's done behind closed doors?

Erin didn't deny it. Instead, she gently tried to calm Daphne down. “Please, don't be mad at her. I really don't think she meant any harm. And don't let this ruin the bond you've built with her.”

Her voice dropped, like she felt bad. “She probably still holds a grudge from when you announced her removal from the family in front of the press a few years ago. But we're still sisters. Maybe one day, she'll be okay with me.”

Those words seemed to hit a nerve.

“She has no reason to be mad at me!” Daphne snapped. Her tone turned ice cold. “She should be thinking about what she did!”

She shot a look at Andrew. “Stop calling her ‘Tracy Jackman.’ She’s not part of this family anymore.”

Andrew stayed quiet, adjusting his glasses. He knew Daphne was just saying that out of anger.

Daphne had always favored Tracy. Even when she supposedly pushed Erin down the stairs, Daphne only agreed to send her to the etiquette school and not disown her.

So Andrew figured Daphne’s words were probably just heat-of-the-moment stuff and didn’t argue.

Erin let out a soft sigh, as if she was carrying the weight of the world. She looked at Norris, her eyes pleading.

“Norris, could you talk to Mom? Please don’t let her kick Tracy out because of me. I’ve gotten used to being treated badly ... I don’t care about that. But if she gets thrown out because of me, I’ll feel awful.”

Norris hadn’t said much until now, but when he looked at Erin, there was real kindness in his expression. “You’re too nice, Erin. That’s why people take advantage of you.”

He reached over and gave her a gentle pat on the head. “Don’t worry. Daphne’s just mad right now. She won’t actually kick Tracy out. So don’t blame yourself.”

Daphne gave a little huff but didn’t argue with him.

Erin finally looked relaxed. She leaned against Daphne, resting her head on her shoulder with a soft smile. “I’m glad to hear that.”

No one noticed the quick, dark look that flashed through her eyes.

Two years...

Why haven’t they gotten rid of Tracy by now?

Why bring her back into the family and let her live under the same roof again?

Just then, Norris asked the exact thing Erin had been thinking. “So ... why is Tracy back at the Jackmans’

place?”

He looked at Andrew with a confused frown.

They had all agreed that if Tracy didn't change after two years at the etiquette school, she'd stay there.

And judging by what just happened, she clearly hadn't changed. So why bring her home?

Andrew let out a breath. "Grandpa asked us to."

Norris went quiet. Of course. Franklin has always loved Tracy more than anyone. He'd been trying to bring her back ever since she left. He even asked me for help once.

If Erin hadn't suddenly appeared, maybe I would've told Franklin everything.

He remembered something Tracy had yelled at the mall.

"Do you even have a clue what I've been through these past two years?!"

And maybe that was true. The Angelic Etiquette Academy didn't let the girls contact anyone on the outside. He didn't know what she went through.

Still, he couldn't get that image out of his head-when she fell, and he saw her leg.

There were scars. Real ones. Or... did I just imagine them?

A strange feeling settled in his chest.

He glanced at Erin, still glowing with happiness, then turned to Andrew. "Let's not bother Erin anymore. I've got something I want to ask you. Let's talk outside."

Chapter 16 Can You Please Forgive Me?

Andrew didn't catch the shift in Norris's face. He figured Norris just had something serious to say.

But right after they stepped out into the hallway, Norris asked, "Did Tracy ever talk to you about what really happened at that etiquette school?"

Andrew stopped in his tracks, a bit thrown off. The light caught the gold rims of his glasses. "Why the sudden interest in her?"

Norris hadn't mentioned Tracy once in the past couple of years. Now, after one run-in, he suddenly wanted answers? That immediately raised red flags for Andrew.

He adjusted his glasses and said with a sharp edge, "If you're even thinking about screwing over Erin, don't expect me to remember we were ever close."

Norris was clearly caught off guard. "Wait, what? Come on, man. Tracy and I are ancient history. I was just a clueless teenager who didn't know the difference between liking someone and actually loving them."

He added quickly, "Erin's the only girl I've ever truly cared about."

Andrew hesitated.

That exact sentence-it rang a bell. He'd heard it before, back then, in the same serious tone. The only thing that changed was the name.

That thought left a bad taste in Andrew's mouth. He narrowed his eyes. "You'd better be serious this time."

As he turned to go, he tossed one last warning over his shoulder. "Erin's too nice. She's the heart of this family. If you hurt her, you'll regret it."

Norris nodded without missing a beat. "I won't hurt her."

But as soon as he said it, he paused.

The whole thing felt too familiar. Déjà vu. The same situation, different year. Except back then, Andrew had said the same thing, but about Tracy.

But that was the past. Back when Norris didn't really understand what love meant.

He thought he liked Tracy, but looking back, it felt more like brotherly care than anything real. Erin was different. She was sweet and soft, someone he could look after. That was the kind of love he needed.

Norris's eyebrows pulled together.

Tracy brought all this on herself. She's sneaky, dramatic, and always causing trouble. Whatever she went through at that place, it couldn't be worse than what Erin had suffered for 18 years on her own.

Whatever guilt had crept up inside him, he pushed it down hard. Then he turned his full attention back to Erin and took her home.

Liam had just come back after a long day when he found out what had happened. He jumped up in a rage.

on her side?"

His fists clenched. "Where is she? I don't care what anyone says. I'm putting a stop to this!"

But right then, the front door opened, and there was Tracy, standing in the doorway, hand on the knob. She had heard it all. Her fingers froze in place.

Of course.

Why would this time be any different?

Two years ago, it was the same thing. No one listened, and no one cared what I had to say. They pushed me away, then locked me up in that so-called institute.

I have no intention of going through that hell again.

Taking a steady breath, Tracy stepped into the room.

Liam's anger flared the second he saw her. He rolled up his sleeves and charged toward her. "You've got guts showing up here! I swear, I'll—"

But she was quicker. She stepped aside, and he missed.

If nothing else, the institute had taught her how to dodge and survive.

Liam lost his balance, stumbling awkwardly before spinning-back around, red-faced and fuming.

Before he could go off again, Tracy turned toward Erin and said, calm and clear, "Ms. Jackman, I lost control earlier. I almost hurt you. I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?"

Two

years ago, she would've tried to explain. That had gotten her nowhere.

She wasn't interested in earning the Jackmans' trust anymore. She didn't care what they thought. As long as they left her alone, that was enough.

And the "sweet and forgiving" Erin would definitely say yes.

Even Erin was caught off guard by the sudden apology.

Tracy said again, "Can you please forgive me?"

Erin's face twitched just slightly, but she quickly covered it up with a warm smile. "Of course, Tracy. I know you didn't mean it. I'd never—"

“I really didn’t,” Tracy interrupted flatly. “If you’re not upset, that’s all I need to hear.”

She didn’t give Erin room to finish her usual speech. Tracy knew Erin too well. Give her even one more line, and she’d turn it into a story that painted Tracy as some villain. Better to shut it down quick.

Something felt off to everyone-the way Tracy owned up to it, the way she didn’t explain, the way she walked in like she had nothing to lose.

For once, Tracy wasn’t proud or defensive. She was just ... different.

Even Erin could feel the shift. It rattled her.

She turned her eyes to Liam, blinking fast, lips trembling like she was about to cry.

Right on cue, Liam’s fury reignited like a fire doused in gasoline.

Chapter 17 What’s the Correct Way to Act?

Tracy kept her head down and spoke softly, keeping it respectful. “I’ll just go back to my room. I don’t wanna bother anyone.”

“Hold it right there!”

Liam marched over and grabbed her arm roughly. “Who said you could just walk off? You pushed Erin and think a weak little ‘sorry’ is enough?”

Erin looked like she was barely holding it together. Her voice wavered. “Liam, really, I’m fine...”

The more Erin tried to calm him down, the more fired up Liam got. “Don’t worry, Erin. I’ve got this.”

His anger showed in his grip. His hand was clenched so tightly that it felt like he was trying to crush Tracy’s arm.

She tried a few times to pull away, but he held on like a vise. She frowned slightly. “I did what you asked, Mr. Liam. I admitted I shoved Ms. Jackman. I apologized. Isn’t that enough?”

They always wanted me to take the blame for things I didn’t do, and always wanted me to say sorry to Erin. I finally did, but it’s still not good enough?

“You still have to-”

Liam started to snap back but got stuck. He had no idea what else he even wanted from her.

Tracy used to argue and fight him on everything. She never admitted anything. All he ever wanted was for her to own up and say she was sorry.

But now that she actually had, it didn't feel right. Like swinging hard and hitting air-no pushback, no payoff.

Tracy calmly shifted. "Could you let go now, Mr. Liam?"

The

way

she said it-cool and polite-tightened something in Liam's chest. "What's with the attitude?"

He squeezed harder. "You've been acting weird since yesterday. Calling us 'Mr. Liam' and 'Ms. Jackman' like you're trying to act distant and dramatic. You're just trying to get attention, right?"

"I don't even believe that apology was real. You're just messing with us, trying to make us feel bad by playing the victim."

"Apologize again to Erin. And this time, actually mean it!"

He yanked her hard to the side, like he didn't care if he ripped her arm out of its socket.

But Tracy's shoulder had been injured before. That kind of pressure was too much for it.

A sharp wave of pain shot through her. Sweat instantly dotted her forehead. "Let go of me!"

Liam didn't listen. He pulled even harder.

Pain burned through her arm. She fought against it, pushing back.

Then suddenly, she broke free, but the force threw her sideways, straight into the coffee table nearby.

Crash!

Glass and ceramic shattered everywhere. Cups and decorations all went flying. Sharp pieces were scattered across the floor, some even headed for Erin's legs.

Erin screamed, too shocked to move. Right away, Andrew, Norris, and Daphne jumped in front of her, shielding her from the flying shards.

“Erin! Are you hurt?!”

No one noticed the dull sound of Tracy hitting the table. No one even looked at her as she collapsed near the broken glass.

Not that she thought they would. Tracy’s first instinct was to twist her body, catching herself with one hand to avoid landing in the middle of the glass. It sliced into her palm, but it could’ve been worse.

Meanwhile, in the center of the group, Erin stood pale and shaken. “I-I’m okay...

”

Daphne let out a sigh of relief-then finally noticed Tracy on the floor, blood dripping from her hand.

Her eyes went wide. “Tracy, you’re bleeding!”

Everyone turned at that. All eyes shifted to Tracy. She was quiet, her face tight, her injured hand red and wet with blood.

She let her arm hang low so it wouldn’t ruin her sweater.

Slowly, she got up. Her gaze locked onto Liam, her eyes flashing cold. “So, Mr. Liam, is this injury enough to prove I meant my apology to Ms. Jackman?”

Liam’s jaw clenched. He couldn’t even look straight at her bleeding hand.

Erin quickly stepped in front of him. “Please don’t be mad at Liam. He didn’t mean to hurt you. And ... I don’t think he even pulled that hard. I just don’t understand how you got hurt so bad.”

“You think I did this to myself?” Tracy’s voice turned sharp and icy.

Erin flinched. “No, that’s not what I meant. I just ... I mean, if the fall was that bad, it’s weird that only your hand got hurt...

“So if I’d fallen face-first into the glass, that would’ve made more sense to you, Ms. Jackman?”

“Th-that’s not ... ” Erin’s voice cracked, eyes filling with tears.

Liam, who had started to feel a little guilty, exploded again. He glared at Tracy like she'd crossed a line. "What's your problem?! Erin still refers to you as her sister, and you talk to her like that? You're just mad because she figured out what you're really doing."

Tracy looked at him flatly, her tone completely emotionless. "What kind of tone would you prefer, Mr. Liam?"

"Before, when I wouldn't admit to anything, you said I was heartless. Now that I confessed and apologized, you say I'm playing games."

"Just now, I asked Ms. Jackman a simple question to understand her better. And that, too, was 'wrong' to you."

"So tell me, Mr. Liam, what's the correct way to act?"

She was done guessing what they wanted from her. If there was a script they expected her to follow, they could just hand it over. She'd say the lines and get it over with.

Chapter 18 Let It Go

Maybe it was the strange calm in Tracy's eyes or the edge in her voice, but everyone just stood there, frozen.

Blood kept dripping from her fingers, landing on the floor like bright red drops of paint.

For a second, it felt like those drops stabbed right through Daphne and the others.

Erin noticed the change in the air. Something shifted behind her soft expression.

She quickly stepped in. "Tracy, Liam's just worried about me. Please, don't argue with him anymore."

She tugged gently at Liam's hand. "Liam, she's already hurt. For me, can we just believe it wasn't on purpose?"

Liam blinked and looked back at Tracy, clearly annoyed. "Erin, that's exactly what she's doing, playing off your kindness."

He glared at Tracy. "She injures herself, waits for the perfect moment to show it, then acts like the victim to make us forget what she did. She's a pro at twisting things."

Norris suddenly looked like he remembered something. His gaze dropped to Tracy's leg.

But she was wearing long jeans. Nothing to see.

Tracy gave Liam a slow, sarcastic smile. "Mr. Liam, did you forget who taught you that trick?"

Back when Liam was 17, he stole some of Daphne's jewelry-three million dollars' worth-to fund upgrades for his car. Too scared to face the consequences, he asked Tracy what to do.

She told him to fake an injury, act sorry, and say a few heartfelt things, and then Daphne would forgive him. Tracy knew it, and so did Liam.

It worked. And after that, he kept doing it every time he messed up.

Tracy warned him it would only hurt Daphne more and that one day, it wouldn't work anymore. But he didn't listen.

Liam's expression twitched as the memory hit. For a second, he looked almost guilty.

But he covered it up quickly. "If you're the one who made it up, then it makes sense that you'd be even better at using it."

At that point, Tracy was done. She didn't care anymore. "Whatever you say, Mr. Liam," she said in a flat

tone.

"If that's all, I'll head back to my room. Don't wanna cause more trouble."

She didn't even glance back and just walked off toward the servants' quarters, calm and straight-backed.

Liam looked like he wanted to go after her, but Norris grabbed his arm. "Liam, let it go."

He watched her walk away-so steady, so alone-and felt something weird in his chest.

"You said she would hurt herself on purpose and show the scars later. Did she really do that often?"

Whether it was the question or his own guilt, Liam lost it. He yanked his arm free.

"What, you think I'm lying like she always does? Don't believe me, then. Whatever."

"If she pulls that poor-me routine on you, don't say I didn't warn you."

Norris stayed quiet, his face hardening.

He remembered how, back at the mall, Tracy had asked him why he had lied to her two years ago. He felt that she was clearly trying to make him feel guilty.

Then she casually talked about how rough things had been and just happened to show him the scar on her leg. It was obviously planned.

He hadn't expected it, but after two years apart, she seemed even more manipulative than before.

As Erin saw how things were going, her eyes sparkled with a plan.

She stepped closer to Norris and gently held his hand. "Norris ... Liam ... don't be mad at Tracy. I think she's just not used to being back yet."

She sounded so caring-like the perfect little sister. Then she turned to Daphne with a bright idea. "Mom, how about we throw a welcome-back party for Tracy?"

"She grew up here in Cloudville. Most of her old friends are still around. If she sees familiar faces, maybe she'll feel more at home. It might help her adjust."

Liam frowned. "Erin, after everything she's done to you, you still want to do something nice for her?"

Erin gave a soft smile, full of warmth. "If she's willing to accept me as her sister, then it's worth it, even if I have to take a few hits."

Daphne smiled and gently patted Erin's head. "If only Tracy were half as thoughtful as you."

Erin lowered her gaze, looking like the perfect daughter. But behind her lashes, her eyes were ice cold.

She looked up again, smiling sweetly. "Let's keep the party a surprise, Mom. It'll be more fun that way."

Daphne chuckled, clearly pleased. "Alright, whatever you say."

Meanwhile, Tracy sat alone in her room. Calmly, she picked shards of glass from her hand and wrapped them up like it was nothing. Her movements were steady, as if she'd done this way too many times before.

She was sure of one thing-she didn't want to stay with the Jackmans.

But Franklin had told her to stay, and he meant it. She had no money and nowhere else to go. If she left now, she'd have nothing-not even a place to sleep.

If she wanted to get out and make it on her own, she had to start from scratch. The first thing she needed was a job.

But the first 18 years of Tracy's life were spent in luxury. Then, after Erin came back, she wasted all her energy trying to win back the Jackmans. And for the last two years, she'd been locked away at the Angelic Etiquette Academy.

Chapter 19 Better Effect

The only thing Tracy was really good at was painting.

She'd loved art ever since she was a kid. She even went to art school for it, though she never finished.

But now that she thought about it, it was probably the one thing she could use to actually make a living.

The problem was, painting wasn't free. You needed materials. And there was no way she was going to use anything that came from the Jackmans. If she had any other choice, she wouldn't have stayed in that house another day.

Luckily, she still had a set of art supplies that a friend had given her a while ago. She'd never used them. She kept them stored away like they were something special.

That friend had liked her for who she was, not because she was a Jackman. That gift had nothing to do with the family, and that made it feel even more meaningful.

To avoid running into anyone, Tracy left her room early the next morning.

Her old room had been turned into Erin's fancy walk-in closet. Naturally, her stuff had been tossed into storage.

The Jackmans' storage room was massive and cluttered with all sorts of junk. Tracy had to dig for a while. before she found the last bits of her belongings.

What used to fill a whole bedroom was now crammed into one small box that was barely two feet high. It held some old clothes and a couple of random items.

The housekeeper who brought her there looked uncomfortable. "Ms. Erin said your things reminded her of tough times, so Mrs. Jackman had most of them thrown out. This is all that's left..."

Tracy's face didn't change. She felt nothing.

Without even looking at the rest, she went straight for the art supplies she'd carefully hidden at the bottom.

The box had a damaged corner, but everything inside seemed okay.

Nothing else in there really mattered to her.

She paused, frowning.

She was sure she'd had a sketchbook.

It was something she'd been working on-a gift she meant to give the same friend who gave her the painting tools.

But before she could finish it, she was sent off to the Angelic Etiquette Academy.

Thinking it might've been placed somewhere else, she kept digging through the storage room. But after checking everything, it was clear it wasn't there. The staff claimed they didn't know anything about it.

Her chest tightened a bit.

It had been two years since she last saw that friend. They might've already moved on and forgotten her.

The thought stung, but staying alive mattered more than memories right now.

She packed up her painting kit and went to visit Franklin in the hospital. After that, she immediately started looking for work.

She didn't have access to the internet and didn't have any other useful skills. So, she spent the whole day walking around before finally landing a job in the back kitchen of a tiny restaurant.

They were paying her 3,600 a month, which was way less than what the old Tracy used to spend on breakfast. But still, she felt content.

She didn't have a place to stay, but the restaurant gave her three meals a day. At least she wouldn't have to sneak around the Jackmans' kitchen like a stray dog looking for leftovers.

Kitchen work was brutal. During rush hours, it was total chaos. She burned her hands a few times from hot oil. It hurt, but for once, she felt like she was actually living her own life.

It was the first time she felt like she'd truly escaped that nightmare.

From then on, Tracy got up early every morning and walked to work. If she got off early, she'd go to the hospital and sit with Franklin. She wouldn't return to the Jackmans' place until everyone there was asleep.

Over two weeks passed like this. Eventually, the whole family just kind of forgot she was even there.

Until one day, Erin suddenly mentioned the welcome dinner, and that's when it hit everyone that Tracy was still living in the house.

They'd all been too caught up in their own stuff. Most of their attention was on Erin's graduation ceremony. No one had time or energy to care about anything else.

Daphne, for once, asked with a touch of curiosity, "What's Tracy been doing lately?"

Andrew answered first. "She's been visiting Grandpa a lot."

Ever since he became CEO of Jackman Enterprise, his days had been packed. He was barely home, always in and out from morning to night. Still, he'd run into Tracy at the hospital a few times.

Every time he saw her, she would lower her head and hurry off. Even when he called her name, she'd only reply with a cold, stiff "Mr. Jackman."

Daphne didn't like that. "She can visit him, fine, but she doesn't have to go every single day. She doesn't even show up for meals anymore. Is she too busy for that now?"

Talking about meals reminded Benjamin of what he saw in the kitchen that day, and his mood soured.

He slammed his utensils on the table. "Let her stay away until she learns how to act. Skipping meals like she's above us? Throwing a spoiled brat tantrum? I took care of her for 18 years, and this is what I get?"

The friendly vibe at the table died instantly.

Liam frowned, annoyed.

Why do they always have to bring her up during dinner? Can't we just eat in peace?

Erin watched everyone closely, reading the room. Then she spoke up, sounding unsure. "Was it wrong of me to mention the welcome dinner?"

Liam was quick to reassure her. "It's not your fault. You're always trying to include Tracy. If she had even a bit of your kindness, people wouldn't find her so hard to deal with."

Erin looked relieved. She gave Liam a sweet, grateful look. "You're the best, Liam."

Then she softened her voice, adding with care, "How about you go tell her about the dinner? But don't say anything right away. Wait until she gets to the hotel and surprise her. That way, she'll really see how much I care."

Liam wasn't subtle. He was the type to speak his mind without thinking much. That made him perfect for this job. If he were ordered to deliver an altered message, it would achieve a "better effect."

Chapter 20 Stop Right There!

The one thing Liam couldn't resist was the way Erin looked at him, like he was the only thing she could

count on.

"Don't stress, Erin. I've got it handled," Liam said, patting his chest like he meant it.

That night, he hung around the living room, waiting for Tracy to get back so they could finally talk things through.

But somewhere along the way, he nodded off on the couch.

When Tracy came in, she spotted him right away. Still, she didn't stop or say anything. She just turned her head and went straight to her room.

She used to wake him if she caught him sleeping on the couch. Either that, or she'd toss a blanket over him.

But every single time, he'd snap, "Can you not? Why can't you be more like Erin and just leave me alone? You're seriously annoying."

Well, now she got the message. Loud and clear. He didn't want her fussing over him anymore, and she was going to respect that.

The next morning, Tracy left before anyone else woke up. She didn't even glance in Liam's direction.

It wasn't until the maid called out that he finally woke up.

As he sat up, a chill ran through him, making him sneeze. He reached around for a blanket, but there was nothing there.

That was when it hit him.

He rubbed his head, irritated. "Where's Tracy? Didn't she notice me here? Why didn't she wake me or cover me up?"

His voice came out sharp, irritated. The maid stood there awkwardly for a moment before saying, "Ms. Tracy's been waking up really early lately. She left a long time ago."

As for the blanket or waking him up ...

Wasn't he always the one yelling at her when she did that?

Of course, the maid didn't say any of that out loud.

Liam asked if she knew where Tracy had gone, but the maid had no clue. She shook her head honestly.

A wave of irritation washed over him.

Is she trying to get under my skin on purpose?

He yanked out his phone, ready to give her a call and let her have it. But after scrolling for a bit, he realized her number wasn't even saved anymore.

The only pinned contact at the top of his list was Erin.

He stared at the screen, a little dazed. That top spot used to belong to a number he'd blocked a while back. Tracy's number.

But he didn't blame himself. She used to nag nonstop, never giving him space. After blocking her, everything felt calmer.

Back then, when she found out she'd been blocked, she tried sucking up to him for weeks just to get unblocked.

But Liam wasn't the type to cave just because someone was nice.

She probably figured out being sweet wasn't working and must've changed tactics, acting distant to push me into making the first move.

Now that he saw through her little plan, his frown deepened, and a look of disgust crossed his face.

I actually thought that after spending two years at the Angelic Etiquette Academy, she'd come back improved. Instead, she's just more sly.

I'm not about to fall for it.

Still, Erin put in a lot of effort planning a welcome dinner, and she really wants me to bring Tracy. I don't want to let her down.

Fine. I'll call Tracy, pass along the message, then block her again.

No way I'm letting that woman win.

Feeling like justice was on his side, Liam removed her number from the block list and hit call.

He was fully prepared to call her out, say what he needed to say, and drop the info about the dinner.

But instead of hearing her voice, he got a recorded message. "The number you have dialed is no longer in service..."

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It felt like something had grabbed him by the throat and cut him off mid-thought.

He called again. Then again. A few more times. Each time, the same cold response. "The number you have dialed is no longer in service..."

He just sat there, stunned.

She's been using this number since she was a kid.. Why would it be disconnected now?

Then it clicked.

She probably figured I'd try calling, so she cut the number off on purpose to force me to show up in person.

She's really good at playing games now.

Liam didn't want to give in. But he also didn't want to disappoint Erin. So he stayed home, waiting, annoyed and restless.

He planned to call her out, break down her whole little act, and stop her right there.

He was so mad this time that he didn't even fall asleep.

When Tracy finally came home looking worn out and drained, the first thing she saw was Liam sitting there, staring her down like a storm was brewing.

She gave him a quick look, then turned away and headed for her room.

That ticked Liam off even more. He jumped up from the couch. "Stop right there!"

Tracy paused and turned back, her face unreadable. "What do you want, Mr. Liam?"

The way she said it-cold and emotionless-felt like someone just threw gas on Liam's already burning temper. "You've got some nerve asking me that. You really think I don't see what you're trying to pull?"