

The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late

#Left Behind 21 - Read The Unwanted Daughter: When Love Comes Too Late Left Behind 21

Chapter 21 Pretending

Tracy looked up at Liam, puzzled.

I haven't been anywhere near the Jackmans in over two weeks-what exactly do you think I'm trying to pull?

Liam looked like he had it all figured out. "You've been avoiding us, and you even blocked my number. What, did you really think I wouldn't notice? Let me guess, you were just waiting for me to come find you first, huh? Only you would come up with something that immature."

Tracy couldn't believe what she was hearing. She didn't even have the energy to argue. "Mr. Liam, you can think whatever you want. If that's all, I'd like to go back to my room now."

"Don't move!"

He grabbed her arm and yanked her so hard that she nearly stumbled.

Tracy was already worn out, and that just pushed her over the edge. Her eyes turned cold. "Say what you came to say. You don't need to pull me around like that. Are you upset my hand healed too quickly last time?"

It had been a little over two weeks since everything happened. Her hand didn't hurt anymore, but the scars were still there.

Liam's eyes dropped to her hand without thinking. For a second, he pictured the blood running down her fingers. A jolt of discomfort shot through him.

He frowned. "That's what this is about? That little thing? It's not like I did it on purpose. If you hadn't messed with Erin, none of that would've happened. Can you stop being so dramatic?"

That "little thing" had nearly sent Tracy crashing into broken glass, leaving her hand covered in cuts. For days, she couldn't even hold a bowl without pain.

Most strangers wouldn't have treated her that heartlessly. But she and Liam had lived together for 18 years.

Even though Tracy had stopped hoping for kindness from the Jackmans, it still stung.

She looked him straight in the eyes. "So tell me-what exactly did I do wrong this time?"

If he could just say it, I'd fix it. I just want to be left alone.

Liam didn't miss a beat. "You blocked me, which forced me to come looking for you. Is this payback for when I blocked you before?"

Tracy laughed, sharp and dry. "Seriously? When you shipped me off to Angelic Etiquette Academy, you didn't even let me bring a hair tie. Where was I supposed to get a phone?"

"That number you're freaking out over? It got shut off a long time ago."

Liam froze. He hadn't thought of that.

He hesitated. "Then ... why didn't you give me your new number when you got back?"

"I don't have a phone. I never got a new number. And I sure didn't want you looking for me." Tracy's voice was steady. "Now that that's cleared up, do you need anything else, Mr. Liam?"

Maybe realizing he'd messed up, Liam's tone dropped a little. But he still didn't apologize.

"There is something else. There's a party this Thursday at noon at the Sometime Hotel. Don't forget."

The way he said it made one thing clear-he didn't care what she wanted.

Back when Tracy was still treated like someone special in the Jackmans, she had loved going to events and parties with friends.

But once Erin entered the picture, those so-called friends ditched her and ran straight to Erin. They even gossiped behind Tracy's back, calling her a wannabe who didn't belong.

After that, parties became something she dreaded, especially ones tied to the Jackmans.

"I already have plans. I'm not going," she said without even thinking twice.

But Liam wasn't about to let that slide. He stepped in her way, staring her down. "No. You're going."

Tracy blinked. "You don't even like seeing me. Aren't you afraid I'll ruin the atmosphere?"

Liam almost said the truth, that the party was for her. But Erin had told him to keep it a surprise, so he bit his tongue.

"It's a family event. You're part of this family, so you're expected to be there."

If this had been the old Tracy, her face would've lit up at those words. Being called a part of the family would've meant everything to her, and she would've waited excitedly for the big day.

But now, she just stood there, calm and steady.

They once told me I didn't know my place. They forced me to change my name, and now they're saying we're a family? What a joke.

She was about to say no again when something crossed her mind. "Is Grandpa going?"

"Of course!" Liam answered too quickly, his voice louder than it needed to be.

Franklin had never accepted Erin, and if she had anything to do with the party, he definitely wouldn't show. So, she hadn't even invited him.

But Liam's goal was to make sure Tracy showed up-he couldn't let Erin down.

So, to him, lying didn't seem like a big deal.

As soon as Tracy heard Franklin would be there, she didn't argue anymore.

She had already spoken to the doctor. Franklin's health had been getting worse over the past two years from all the stress and sadness. That was why she'd spent the last few weeks pretending she was still happy with the Jackmans and that they still cared about her.

Chapter 22 A Look of Sympathy

Tracy didn't want Franklin to worry.

Luckily, she got two days off every month, and since she had already talked to her boss about it, she could go to the party the day after tomorrow.

Tracy had agreed to go, and Liam had gotten his way, so he should've been satisfied.

But seeing her walk off without even looking back left a strange heaviness in his chest.

We took her things before for her own good. Now that she's back, she hasn't even asked for a single thing.

Clearly, she's still upset about being sent to the Angelic Etiquette Academy. She doesn't even appreciate how much we've done for her.

Feeling annoyed, Liam tracked down the housekeeper who handled most of the cleaning. "Where did you put Tracy's stuff?"

He figured he'd return it to her himself. Maybe it'd make her feel better. That way, she wouldn't act up during the party and cause problems for Erin.

While he was at it, he thought about giving her a phone too, so Erin wouldn't always be scrambling to find

her.

The housekeeper answered, "Ms. Tracy's things were all moved to the storage-room."

"Why would her stuff be there?" Liam snapped. "You all get paid a ton, and this is how you do your job?"

His sudden outburst startled the housekeeper. She quickly explained, "Mr. Liam, you were the one who said seeing her things annoyed you. You told us to pack it all up and shove it in storage."

Liam blinked, thrown off. That ... does sound like something I said.

Irritated, he ran a hand through his hair. "Where is it now? Show me."

He wanted to personally give everything back. Maybe if he made the effort, she'd stop holding a grudge.

He imagined himself scolding her a little too-telling her to stop acting so childish and stop competing with Erin. But when he saw the box, he froze.

It was barely two feet tall. "This is all that's left? Did you steal the rest just because she's been gone for two years?"

The housekeeper bit back her anger. She thought about her five-figure monthly salary and chose to stay quiet. "Mr. Liam, we've worked for the Jackmans for a long time. None of us would do something like that."

She hesitated, then added, "It was Ms. Erin who said all that stuff reminded her of the tough years before she moved in. So Mrs. Jackman ordered us to toss everything. Only the useless stuff was kept."

All that remained were some old books and pictures-nothing of real value.

Liam realized he'd spoken too fast: The staff at the Jackmans had been around forever and wouldn't dare

steal anything.

Now that I think about it, I was there when Mom told them to throw it all out. It's just been so long that I forgot.

A wave of irritation bubbled up with nowhere to go. He gave the box a hard kick. "Get rid of this trash. It's just clutter. Don't leave it sitting around the house."

The Jackmans don't need any of this stuff. If Tracy wants something, she can just go out and buy it. Isn't spending money her specialty anyway?

The housekeeper silently picked up the box and turned to leave. As soon as she turned her back, she rolled her eyes.

They hadn't even tell Ms. Tracy they wanted to toss her stuff. Good thing she'd looked inside the box earlier and hadn't plan on keeping anything. Otherwise, it would've been heartbreaking to find out like this. They hadn't even told Ms. Tracy they wanted to toss her stuff.

Just like that, every last trace of Tracy's past at the Jackman house was gone.

Not that she cared.

To her, those things hadn't felt like hers in a long time. However they handled it was up to them.

On the day of the party, Tracy woke up early as usual but didn't hurry to leave.

She knew the Jackmans didn't really want her there, so she asked the butler what time they were heading out and planned to leave ten minutes before that.

She didn't want to ride with them, but the Sometime Hotel was far, and she hadn't gotten paid yet. A cab wasn't exactly in her budget.

Plus, if she showed up by herself, Franklin might overthink things.

But when she stepped outside, she found out they had already left 30 minutes earlier.

The butler looked a little embarrassed. "Ms. Erin said she was worried the hotel arrangements might've been off, so she went early."

He had been planning to let Tracy know, but then Erin insisted it should be a surprise and told him not to say anything.

Maybe she was just used to being brushed aside, but Tracy didn't even feel hurt. She just worried Franklin might be concerned if she got there late.

So, in the end, she asked the butler if she could borrow some money to take a cab to the hotel.

As soon as she mentioned money, the butler froze.

All the Jackman kids have their own cards. Every month, they get ten grand in spending money from the company. Why would Ms. Tracy need to borrow cash?

Then it clicked. Without saying anything, he took out the cash from his wallet and handed it to her with a look of sympathy.

Tracy avoided his eyes, took the money, and promised to pay him back by the end of the month. Then she left to catch a cab.

Sometime Hotel was a famous spot in Cloudville, and back then, Tracy always used the VIP entrance.

Chapter 23 Changed Sides

Just as Tracy reached the hotel entrance, someone stepped in her way.

"Hold up, Miss. I need to see your invitation," the security guard said with a serious look, blocking her path.

Tracy froze. This is the Jackmans's event-why would I need an invite? Nobody gave me one.

Liam was always kind of impulsive and forgetful, so she figured he'd probably just skipped that part.

She kept her cool and explained, "I came with the Jackmans. I got held up a bit, that's all. If you don't believe me, go inside and ask them."

The guard, however, just scoffed. "The whole Jackmans showed up 30 minutes ago. So how exactly are you to them?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Let me guess-you found out they booked out the entire hotel and invited half the city's elite, and now you're trying to sneak in for a free ride?"

Tracy could sense hostility the second it appeared.

She instinctively took a small step back and spoke coldly. "Don't believe me? Ask them. I'm Tracy Yarwood."

"It's just a quick question. Doesn't take much effort."

She had been as direct as possible. It would've taken him less than a minute to walk in and confirm it.

But the guard didn't even pretend to listen. He gave her a dirty look and said, "Look at you-dressed like that, acting like you belong with the Jackmans. Do you think we're idiots?"

The other guard joined in. "I've seen plenty of girls like this-just gold-diggers trying to sneak into rich parties. Disgusting."

They weren't whispering. People nearby started turning to look, some even whispering among themselves while eyeing Tracy.

Her brows furrowed as she looked at the guards. "Did I do something to you? Why are you both coming at me like this?"

She didn't remember ever seeing them before, but their attitude was nasty.

The first guard snapped back, "Nobody's coming at you. We're just sick of women throwing themselves at wealthy men."

Then he leaned in, lowering his voice while letting his eyes roam. "But I'll admit, you're kind of cute. If you're that desperate to get in, maybe there's another way."-

The second one caught on quick, giving her a sleazy grin. "Yeah ... nothing comes free. But if you make it worth our time, maybe we'll let it slide."

As he spoke, his hand reached toward her face.

Tracy froze. A chill raced up her spine and hit her like a wave.

In that moment, his disgusting face blurred with the image of a black mask-a twisted, grinning mask that had haunted her dreams during her time at the Angelic Etiquette Academy.

That mask had appeared in her nightmares far too often. It had woken her up in cold sweats more times than she could count.

Her body shook, and the color drained from her face.

No... Don't touch me.

The second his fingers grazed her cheek, her whole body jerked away. It felt like something rotten and filthy had crawled across her skin-no, even worse.

“Don’t touch me!”

She snapped, flinging his hand away with everything she had. Her sharp nails left a deep, bleeding cut across his cheek.

She started furiously wiping at the place he touched, as if trying to scrub off something vile. Even when the skin turned red from rubbing, she didn’t stop.

The guard was stunned. The slap had knocked the breath out of him, and he didn’t even dare touch the painful sting on his face. He already knew that it was swelling fast.

“How dare you!”

He stared at her in shock and raised his hand, ready to strike back.

“Back off!”

A voice rang out from inside the hotel. Someone rushed out and stepped between them just in time, shielding Tracy with his arms stretched out.

He glared at the guard. “Are you blind? She’s the young woman the Jackmans raised for 18 years. She’s a VIP guest. And you tried to lay a hand on her? Are you out of your mind?”

Tracy looked at the person standing in front of her. She wasn’t sure if it was the shock messing with her, or if two years really had changed familiar faces that much.

But when he turned around and asked, “Tracy, are you okay?” with genuine concern in his voice, she finally remembered who he was.

It was Simon Dunn, son of the Jackman Enterprise’s deputy CEO.

Back in the day, he used to follow her around all the time, saying he wanted to be her knight, her protector.

Even knowing she and Norris were childhood sweethearts and engaged, he’d always smile and say, “As long as I get to see you happy, that’s enough.”

She had believed he meant it, and even though she couldn’t return his feelings, she did what she had helped him whenever she could.

Not long after, Simon’s dad climbed the corporate ladder and became deputy CEO.

But after the whole baby swap scandal broke out, Simon changed sides and supported Erin. He even went

as far as calling Tracy “vicious and heartless” for how she treated Erin.

Chapter 24 Real or Fake

He didn’t just put Erin on a pedestal—he spent most of his time trying to win her over by plotting pranks and revenge against her.

Tracy didn’t believe for a second that he suddenly showed up out of kindness.

She dodged Simon’s outstretched hand, forcing down the wave of bad memories.

The guard who had been slapped grumbled, “Mr. Dunn, there’s only one real daughter in the Jackmans. We all know her. She came in over half an hour ago. This girl’s clearly a shameless impostor trying to sneak in. Don’t let her fool you.”

Simon glanced at Tracy—head down, silent—and replied loudly, “Yes, there’s only one real daughter in the Jackmans. But when Mrs. Jackman gave birth, the babies were switched at the hospital. They didn’t find the real one until 18 years later.

“This one here is the fake—she stole the identity of the real daughter and lived in luxury for 18 years.”

The guard suddenly understood. “So that’s it! No wonder she gave off that fake, shameless vibe the moment I saw her. Turns out she really is a fraud—pretending to be someone else for 18 whole years without a shred of shame!”

Tracy wasn’t stupid.

The guard’s deliberate hostility and Simon’s sudden appearance—it was all too perfectly timed.

If she still didn’t get what was happening, then her two years in the etiquette school were for nothing.

Simon didn’t stop the guard’s insults. In fact, he watched her with a gleeful look, waiting for her to blow

He’d been trailing behind her for years. No one knew better than him how proud and arrogant she could be.

Now, humiliated in public like this, she’d definitely lose her temper.

Everyone knew the Jackmans no longer favored Tracy. If she dared throw a tantrum here like a spoiled heiress, he’d gladly put her in her place—for Erin.

After all, she'd been gone two years. How dare she come back and try to take Erin's place? Even force Erin to throw her this grand welcome party?

He still remembered how aggrieved and patient Erin looked when she told him about it. He could barely stop himself from stepping in and teaching Tracy a lesson right now.

But under the sneers, scorn, and curious stares, Tracy simply looked up and said, "Mr. Dunn, if you're done humiliating me, may I go in now?"

She didn't care how they looked at her. She didn't care what Simon and the guard were trying to prove. She just wanted to quietly attend this party with her grandfather.

She wasn't the old Tracy anymore. This kind of humiliation didn't even come close to the pain of a

beating.

When Simon met those calm eyes, he suddenly felt like some idiot performing for her.

"You..."

He was irritated but couldn't think of what to say. In the end, he could only lead her inside.

Tracy composed herself before entering the hotel-she didn't want her grandfather to worry when he saw her.

But the moment she stepped in, she was met with a group of young, unfamiliar faces in high-end designer gowns-faces that looked vaguely familiar.

She'd been to enough parties to know this wasn't the private family gathering Liam had promised.

Still, she turned to Simon and asked, "Where's Grandpa?"

Simon was caught off guard. "Franklin?"

Today's welcome party was something Erin had painstakingly organized for Tracy. The guests were all young elites from Cloudville. Even Benjamin and Daphne didn't show up, so there's no way Franklin

would.

Everyone in Cloudville's elite circle knew that ever since Tracy left two years ago, Franklin had been hospitalized and never stepped out again—not even for the Jackmans's events.

One look at Simon's face, and Tracy understood everything.

The so-called family party, the promise that her grandfather would attend-it was all a lie.

She didn't know what Liam's true motive was, but it was clear this wasn't anything good.

With a cold face, she turned around without hesitation.

Simon didn't expect her to react like that. Stunned, he quickly rushed to block her.
"Tracy, Erin planned all this out of kindness. Don't be ungrateful!"

Kindness?

Tracy couldn't see where the kindness was in any of this.

"I appreciate her effort, but I don't need it."

She was firm and ready to leave, but Simon grabbed her by the arm.

Glancing at the nearby crowd chatting away, he suddenly raised his voice and shouted,
"Tracy, you're already here-why rush off?"

His voice drew everyone's attention. All eyes turned to Tracy.

"Let go!"

She yanked her arm free with such force that she stumbled back several steps before steadying herself.

Her slender wrist was bright red, showing just how hard Simon had grabbed her.

Tracy didn't want to argue. She pulled down her sleeve to cover it and just wanted to get out of there-but the nearby group was already closing in.

"Well, well, look who it is. Turns out it's our once-beloved princess of Cloudville, Ms. Jackman!"

"Ms. Jackman? Please, that name's been dead for years. She changed her last name to Yarwood ages ago. The news is still online-we should be calling her Ms. Yarwood now."

Chapter 25 The Most Beloved Princess

"Ms. Yarwood? Please. She's just a fraud who stole someone else's life—and even after getting exposed, she's still shamelessly clinging to the Jackmans."

A group of well-dressed sons and daughters of the elite walked over, faces full of mockery and disdain.

Two years of hell had blurred a lot of unimportant memories for Tracy, but these faces-filled with malice. -she remembered. They used to be her friends.

Now they surrounded Erin, laughing at her instead. "Look at her-dressed like she crawled out of a dumpster-and they used to call her the beloved princess of Cloudville? What a joke."

"Beloved princess." That nickname had started with the Jackmans.

Back then, they truly loved her. Everywhere they went, they'd proudly call her their most beloved princess.

And Tracy had lived up to it-fearless, radiant, and impossible to miss. Wherever she went, all eyes followed.

That was how she became Cloudville's beloved princess.

But now, all that love and attention had shifted to Erin.

Tracy stood still, letting their sneers and stares wash over her, and calmly said, "Sorry. I came to the wrong place."

She turned to leave-but Erin suddenly ran after her, trying to grab her arm. "Don't go, Tracy! I planned this whole welcome party just for you. Do you like it?"

Tracy flinched from her touch.

That kind of gesture brought back too many memories-being sent to that etiquette school two years ago... having her dress ripped in a store and not being able to afford a new one.

She stepped back, voice cold and distant. "Thank you for the effort, Ms. Erin. But I don't need it. You all enjoy yourselves."

Getting lured here by Liam, surrounded by people brought in just to humiliate her-that was definitely a carefully planned welcome.

Erin's hand froze mid-air. She looked up at Tracy with watery eyes and whispered, "I just wanted to make you happy, Tracy. I didn't know you'd hate it. I'm sorry..."

Seeing his flawless queen "bullied," Simon's temper exploded.

He shoved Tracy hard. "Do you even realize how much effort Erin put into this party? I'm warning you— don't be so damn ungrateful!"

Tracy stumbled from the shove.

Before she could say a word, Liam stepped in. "That's enough, Tracy! Erin's treated you like family from the start. She put her heart into this party, hoping you'd accept her.

"She stayed up for nights planning this surprise for you. Even if you're too coldhearted to appreciate it, the least you could do is show some basic manners.

"The Jacksons raised you for 18 years. Was this the kind of behavior they taught you? Storming out in front of everyone?"

Tracy glanced at Erin, standing behind them with a pitiful look on her face.

Fair skin. Glowing complexion.

Someone who'd truly lost sleep for days wouldn't look that refreshed and wouldn't wake at the slightest sound.

But Tracy didn't call her out. "So do you want me to stay, Mr. Liam?"

He nodded without hesitation. "Of course!"

This whole party is for her. Where else would she go?

"Alright. I'll stay," Tracy said calmly. "Shall we get on with it, then?"

She knew perfectly well she was never meant to be the star of this party. Anywhere Erin stood, she would fade into the background.

So she'd stay—just long enough to disappear unnoticed.

Her quick agreement unsettled Liam.

He'd been ready to explode, but she gave him nothing to push against.

The moment Tracy gave in, Erin's sorrowful expression melted into delight.

"Since you're staying, Tracy, let's get you changed. The party's about to officially begin!"

Smiling sweetly, she glanced at Tracy's empty hands and blinked innocently. "Oh? Where's your dress?"

Only then did the crowd finally take in what Tracy was wearing.

A cheap pair of jeans. A thin, worn-out T-shirt. And an old hoodie.

No one had expected to see clothes like that on her-the shock was real. But beneath it was a twisted thrill, like seeing a former queen stripped of her crown.

"I was wondering what that garbage smell was from across the room. Turns out someone really did go dumpster diving."

"How does she even have the nerve to wear that in public? Is she not worried about catching something?"

"Tracy, did you seriously forget how to dress for these parties after being gone two years?"

Disgust was written all over their faces. One guy even waved his hand in front of his nose dramatically, 3

if she were some filthy, reeking pile of trash.

Tracy's expression didn't change-not once. She stood there as if none of it was directed at her at all.

That quiet calm made the ones throwing insults falter. As if suddenly realizing the fun wasn't as satisfying as they'd hoped. One by one, the taunts faded into silence.

Only One Outfit

Erin stepped forward just then. "Don't say that. It's my fault. I didn't explain it clearly to her. She thought it was just a regular party, so she didn't dress up.

"Even though showing up like this is disrespectful, if I'd told her this party was for her, I'm sure she would've dressed up."

Seeing her take all the blame, Simon was the first to object. "Erin, don't blame yourself. This is clearly on Tracy."

He looked at Tracy with contempt. "Everyone in our circle knows-she always dresses up for events. She showed up like this on purpose, just to make things difficult for you."

Erin looked confused and hesitant. "She ... probably wouldn't do that, right?"

"Of course she would!" Simon snapped. "She used to bully you all the time. She just got smarter after being sent away. Now she bullies you in other ways."

He suddenly remembered something and gave Tracy a mocking look. "I heard you were sent off to be 're- educated.' Guess you didn't learn much. Your bullying just got sneakier."

Tracy had been listening quietly like an outsider, but her face suddenly went pale.

She jerked her head toward Simon. "How do you know where I've been these past two years?"

The Jackmans had secretly taken her away-so secret even her grandfather couldn't find her. How did he know?

Simon didn't notice the shift in her tone. "Mr. Liam told us everything. You pushed Erin down the stairs. You deserved to be sent away."

Tracy turned to Liam, who hadn't said a word from the start. She'd told herself to give up on the Jackmans. Still, disappointment crept in.

He was the one who sent her to that hell. Now he turned around and joked about it, like he'd forgotten he used to be the one most protective of her.

Back then, if anyone dared insult her, he'd throw the first punch without hesitation. And shout, "Anyone says one more word about Tracy, I'll tear their mouth apart!"

Now, every word out of his mouth was cold and full of disdain.

Maybe the disappointment in her eyes was too obvious, because Liam avoided her gaze.

He knew she'd been pampered since childhood. He knew life at the Angelic Etiquette Academy must've been hell for her.

He also knew how proud she was-how humiliating it was to let people know where she'd been. But she brought it on herself.

If she hadn't pushed Erin, making him feel guilty about sending Tracy away, Liam wouldn't have

mentioned the "re-education" just to stop others from thinking Erin kicked her out after returning.

He had told everyone to keep quiet, to make sure her grandfather didn't find out. Only their inner circle knew.

He'd already spared Tracy's dignity. How dare she look at him like that?!

All the guilt in Liam's heart vanished. "I only spoke the truth. What are you looking at me like that for? Simon's right. You didn't learn anything in that institute. All you picked up were dirty tricks."

He looked at her with scorn. "Mom took you and Erin out to buy clothes. And you still showed up like this? You think we're all idiots?"

Tracy looked at him, eyes full of mocking amusement. "If you'd paid the slightest attention, Mr. Liam, you'd know I came back empty-handed that day. And for over half a month now, I've only worn this one outfit."

She only had one set of clothes. And she worked in a kitchen thick with greasy smoke every day.

So every time she washed her clothes, she had to hang them outside on the AC unit to dry, then wear them again the next day.

If the Jackmans had cared even a little-just once-they would've seen she didn't even have a second outfit.

Liam froze. Now that she mentioned it... Yeah, she had been wearing the same clothes every time he saw her.

But she used to be the Jackmans's most beloved princess. She never even repeated an outfit in a month.

No one expected Tracy to say something like that.

To these kids raised with money and comfort, "only one outfit" was an unimaginable concept.

And it came from Tracy, the girl they used to revolve around.

Erin slowly stepped out from behind Liam. "Tracy, I'm sorry. It's my fault. I suddenly got hospitalized that day, and Mom forgot to buy you clothes.

"Don't blame Liam. He was just too worried about me and forgot you didn't have anything to wear. It's all my fault. Why did I have to end up in the hospital right then...

..

Chapter 27 Get On Your Knees

Her words seemed to snap something in Liam-like a switch had flipped.

He suddenly turned on her, eyes blazing. "You've got the nerve to bring that up? If you hadn't pushed Erin that day, she wouldn't have ended up in the hospital, and Mom would've had time to buy your damn

clothes.

"In the end, it's all your own fault!"

"What?" Simon exploded. "She pushed Erin again?"

He glared at Tracy, face twisted with rage. "You almost killed her two years ago by pushing her down the stairs. And now you're try it again? You really have a death wish!

"Today, I'm going to teach you a lesson-for Erin!"

He rolled up his sleeves and stormed toward her, raising his hand without hesitation.

Smack!

Tracy instinctively shielded her head. The slap didn't land on her face, but her arm burned with pain.

It felt too familiar ...

The way Simon moved-his face, his eyes-looked exactly like the "classmates" from the Angelic Etiquette Academy.

That memory alone twisted something dark inside her, like a scream ripping through her brain.

She stayed crouched, arms guarding her head, but through the gap, her eyes locked onto Simon-with pure hatred.

"What ... what kind of look is that?"

Simon saw her stare and got even angrier. "You pushed Erin once before-and now again! Do you think I shouldn't do something about it?"

He grabbed her wrist tightly-like he meant to crush it. "You're coming over right now and apologizing to Erin!"

Tracy staggered from the force, pain shooting through her wrist. Her brows furrowed, but she didn't make

a sound.

She swallowed the discomfort, holding back the fury boiling in her chest. "I've already apologized to Ms. Erin. Mr. Dunn, could you please let go?"

Simon instinctively looked at Erin, who hesitated, then said, "She ... she did apologize. And I ... I forgave her."

But her face said otherwise-clearly unwilling.

Simon's grip tightened. "Erin, she nearly killed you. How could an apology be enough?

"I don't think she even meant it. Someone like her needs to pay a price to learn her lesson."

Suddenly, his other hand clamped down on Tracy's neck and shoved her downward. "Get on your knees. Apologize to Erin!"

Get on my knees...

Apologize...

The words hit her like a hammer, draining all color from her face..

For a second, she wondered, had Simon also gone through the Angelic Etiquette Academy?

Tracy trembled uncontrollably. She fought to free herself. "Let go of me!"

But he only pressed harder, as if he wouldn't stop until she was on her knees begging for forgiveness.

Liam's expression turned grim as he watched her-pale face, messy hair, barely holding herself up. He stepped forward, about to intervene-only for someone to grab his hand.

"Liam, please help her." Erin pleaded, face full of worry, "She pushed me down the stairs, yeah, but I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"And I don't think she meant to do it, not in front of so many people at the mall. She probably just lost control after seeing Norris being nice to me. I ... I'm not blaming her."

But her expression said something else entirely-like she was swallowing her pain and choosing to forgive for their sake.

Liam's foot halted mid-step, then pulled back. "Erin, why are you still speaking up for a jealous, vicious woman like her? You being okay just means you're lucky-not because she held back."

He glanced at Tracy with disdain. "If she really felt sorry, she wouldn't have shoved you in front of a crowd. Making her kneel is the least she deserves.

"Simon's right. A person like her won't learn unless she gets put in her place."

Simon hadn't actually used full force-despite shoving her, he was still holding back.

Tracy was still a Jackman, after all. Even if he wanted to rough her up for Erin's sake, he wouldn't go too far in front of Liam.

But Liam's words? They erased all restraint.

If even he had given up on her, what was the point of holding back anymore?

Simon kicked Tracy hard in the back of her knee, like he meant to snap her leg.

Bang!

Her kneecap slammed into the tile with a sickening crack. It sounded like it could break the floor.

Simon glared down at her like she was nothing. "You nearly killed Erin. The fact that I haven't thrown you off a building is already merciful. And you still won't apologize? You've got some nerve!

"If I let you off easy today, I'm not even a man."

He stormed up to her and kicked her in the waist.

The sharp pain made Tracy instinctively curl up, arms moving with practiced precision to shield her head and abdomen.

Chapter 28 Is She Crazy?

Simon didn't stop after kicking her. He raised his fist and slammed it down, cursing, "That's for bullying Erin! You shameless bitch! You almost got her killed and don't even feel guilty. How can someone as vile as you exist?"

The hard fists. The disgusted curses...

For a moment, Tracy felt like she was back in that hell.

They beat her with fists, kicked her, spat on her, and pissed on her. They called her useless trash, a lowly stray dog.

She tried to hide.

Under the bed. Inside the closet. Even in the slop bucket.

But they always found her.

Then came more beating and more screaming, using whatever they could to torture her.

Only when she suffered did they get rewards from the teachers.

A piece of bread. A bottle of water. A sausage.

All those times she wanted to die-at the institute, that was all she was worth.-

“Tracy ... Tracy..

Through the haze, a familiar voice called her name.

Tracy’s hand gripped the hoodie on her body-like clinging to its owner.

“Tracy, we can’t just keep taking the hits. Stand up ...

“We’re not strays. We don’t need numbers to tell us who we are. We have names. We fight back. We show them we’re not dogs to be kicked around.

“Tracy, stand up!”

In that moment, the fear in Tracy’s eyes vanished-replaced by a fire that could destroy everything.

Yeah, she wasn’t a dog to be beaten.

She had already learned to fight back-back at the Angelic Etiquette Academy, hadn’t she?

Simon kept swinging his fists, like he was unloading years of humiliation chasing after Tracy, putting on a full display of loyalty for Erin.

No one around tried to stop him. They watched like spectators at a public execution, thrilled by the show.

Just as Simon raised his leg to kick again, the girl who’d been curled up on the ground suddenly struck back-her foot slamming into his shin.

The sudden move startled everyone. Instinctively, they backed away. Liam even threw his arms around Erin to shield her, like she might get hurt.

“Ahhh-!”

One kick, and Simon was screaming, clutching his leg and collapsing to the ground in pain.

But earlier, no matter how many times he hit Tracy, she hadn't make a sound.

She stared at him, eyes locked. Ignoring the pain all over her body, she lunged forward.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

She didn't curse. She didn't yell. She just clenched her fists tight and punched-each hit thrown with everything she had.

"Ahh-stop! Get off me! You bitch, get away from me!"

Simon shrieked in pain and kept spewing insults.

He tried to push her off, but Tracy was like a boulder on top of him—immovable no matter how hard he shoved.

She gritted her teeth and stayed silent. Her fists just kept coming, like she meant to beat him to death.

Everyone froze, shocked by her rage.

It took a few seconds before Liam finally shouted, "What are you all standing there for? Get her off him!"

That snapped them out of it. A few people rushed forward to pull her back.

But Tracy was like a rabid animal. Anyone who got too close got scratched or hit. One man ended up a bleeding gash on his face.

with

She stayed on top of Simon, attacking anyone who approached, and when no one came close, she just kept pounding him.

Someone once told her that if you're ever cornered by a group, pick one and go all in.

Scratch, bite, kick, punch-whatever it takes. Hit like you mean to kill.

Because if you're not ruthless enough, you'll be the one left half-dead on the ground.

Everyone looked at her in fear now. No one dared step closer.

"Is... is she crazy?"

Someone whispered, their voice shaking.

At this rate, she really might kill him.

Gritting his teeth, Liam let go of Erin and charged forward.

He grabbed Tracy from behind, taking several hits and scratches, but he didn't let go.

He turned and yelled at the frozen men, "Help me, damn it!"

They finally snapped out of it and rushed over, fumbling to restrain her. No one knew how many punches. or scratches they had taken before they finally dragged her off Simon.

Tracy kept struggling, her eyes still locked on him like a predator. If they loosened their grip even a little, she'd pounce again. It took four or five men just to hold her down.

Chapter 29 Open Up!

Liam, finally able to catch his breath, let go and slapped Tracy hard across the face.

Smack!

The sharp sound froze Tracy mid-struggle. Her bloodshot eyes shifted from Simon to Liam.

She looked like a wild beast just dragged out of the arena-bloodied, feral, and ready to kill.

Liam's rage suddenly lodged in his throat. He stared at her, stunned, unable to move.

He'd never seen eyes like that. Like a trapped animal ready to go down fighting.

How could Tracy... look like this?

"Liam!"

Erin's panicked voice snapped him out of it.

She bent down beside Simon, who clutched his face and moaned in pain. Her face was full of worry. "Liam, come quick! I think Simon's seriously hurt. Should we call an ambulance?"

Liam rushed over. Simon's face was swollen, bruised, and covered in scratch marks.

Seeing him, Simon whimpered, "Mr. Liam ... ah—"

He let out a cry so sharp that tears welled up in his eyes.

“Don’t move. I’ll call for help,” Liam said, pulling out his phone.

On the other side, the men holding Tracy saw her finally stop resisting and began to loosen their grip.

Without their support, she collapsed to the ground, limp and drained.

Everyone hovered around Simon now, giving Tracy a wide berth, like they feared she might snap again— and this time come for them.

But Tracy sat there quietly, head lowered, unmoving. No one could see her face.

Simon’s fists were nothing compared to what she’d taken in the institute-beatings handed out for scraps of food and water. Injuries like this? Routine.

She’d just lost control for a moment. Triggered by old memories and by old monsters.

After a long silence, Tracy finally managed to calm herself.

The ambulance arrived. Simon howled louder the second the medics showed up.

Everyone immediately rushed to him.

There were medical checks, bandaging, and a stretcher.

of the “carefully staged” banquet.

Only Liam seemed to suddenly remember something. He turned back toward her.

She was still sitting there, her thin back looking like it could be blown away by the wind.

Not a trace remained of the proud, radiant girl she once was.

He had the urge to walk over-but just then, someone leaned heavily against him.

Erin looked pale. “Liam, I’m not feeling well.”

His thoughts vanished instantly. “Did everything earlier scare you? I’ll take you to the hospital right now!”

Tracy never expected anyone to remember her. She slowly pushed herself up, her body aching all over.

Her injuries weren’t any less severe than Simon’s.

But she'd instinctively protected her head, so aside from the swollen, bright red slap mark on her face, she. didn't look too bad.

She was used to injuries like this.

But being used to it ... didn't mean it didn't hurt.

Everyone wants someone to care when they're hurt-even just a simple "Are you okay?"

Under the curious stares, Tracy pulled up her hood and wrapped her cardigan tightly around herself. Without saying a word, she walked out of the Sometime Hotel.

That dead, hollow look-like she was sealed off from the world-was nothing like the furious, crazed girl from earlier. It was like looking at two different people.

She still had some of the money she'd borrowed from the butler, so she stopped by a pharmacy for some medicine. Then, dragging her sore body, she walked step by step back to the Jackman Villa.

The old Tracy had known nothing about this kind of thing. But after two years at the Angelic Etiquette Academy, she'd learned how to treat all kinds of injuries.

In the small, bare servant's room, Tracy took off her top, revealing a body covered in terrifying bruises and

scars.

Every ugly, twisted mark carried the weight of those painful years.

But Tracy stared straight ahead, like she saw nothing. Expressionless, she applied the medicine.

Even when she pressed too hard and her body instinctively tensed in pain, her face remained calm-like she couldn't feel a thing.

She hadn't even finished when a loud knock pounded at the door.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Open up! Tracy, open the damn door! I know you're in there. Get out here right now!"

Panicked, she threw on her clothes.

Luckily, she always locked the door out of habit. The person outside tried a few times, then started banging harder.

Tracy fixed herself up, got to her feet, and opened the door. Liam and Andrew stood there with cold, serious expressions.

Liam looked pissed. "What the hell were you doing? We've been yelling for ages!"

The words "nothing much" reached her lips-but she swallowed them back. Instead, she stepped aside slightly. "Mr. Liam, if you're that curious, why not come in and take a look yourself?"

Chapter 30 He Changed

The half-used medicine swas still scattered on her bed. She wondered if, after seeing it, he might ask, "Are you hurt?"

But Liam's expression only grew darker at her words. "Can you stop with the attitude? Who taught you to talk like that?"

She wasn't surprised.

If he hadn't silently agreed with Simon-if he hadn't allowed it-how would Simon have dared to hit her like that right in front of him?

Even if he asked about her injuries now, it would be nothing but crocodile tears.

Tracy looked at the two men with a calm, indifferent gaze. "Do you need something?"

Liam hated that look in her eyes. His tone grew harsher. "You seriously have the nerve to ask? You know what you did."

Tracy didn't. Not exactly.

In the Jackmans' eyes, she would never know what unforgivable thing she'd supposedly done.

Then Andrew spoke up. "Tracy, how could you attack Simon in a setting like that? You hurt several innocent people, too."

His tone wasn't hostile, but it was firm. "Now the Dunns want an explanation. Mom and Dad are waiting in the living room."

Tracy finally understood what they meant.

She hadn't expected the Dunns to act so fast. She also knew nothing good was waiting for her outside-no one would stand by her. Still, she didn't regret it.

If she could go back, she'd still fight. No hesitation.

Without a hint of fear, she stepped past the two of them and walked toward the door.

The Jackman brothers, expecting a scene, were caught off guard for a moment-then quickly followed.

Andrew adjusted his glasses. "Tracy, this was your fault. When you see the Dunns, just apologize. Try to calm things down. Otherwise, I won't be able to help you."

Hearing "your fault" from his mouth didn't surprise her.

But she still stopped walking and turned her head toward him. "If you're so sure I'm the one at fault, then tell me-do you actually know what happened?"

Andrew hadn't expected her to stop so suddenly-he nearly ran into her.

Hearing her snap back with that sharp, unapologetic tone, he frowned. "Everyone saw you hit him. They said you looked like you wanted to kill Simon. Even Erin said you ...

38

"They said? Erin said? But have you ever asked me?" Tracy cut him off. "Did you even care what happened to me before I hit him?"

Andrew froze, stunned by her retort.

Her eyes stared straight at him, like they could see right through.

His heart skipped a beat.

Tracy used to lash out, deny everything, and accuse Erin of setting her up. She'd never come at him with this kind of biting sarcasm.

She'd changed-sharper now. She almost had him second-guessing himself.

But his gaze turned cold again. "Simon might be reckless, but he knows his limits. Even if he crossed a line, he was just trying to stand up for Erin. That's no excuse for what you did in public.

"We raised you in this house for 20 years. We taught you manners. And two years away is all it took for you to forget?"

Hearing that, Tracy felt a bitterness that didn't surprise her anymore. Of course she knew it would be like

this.

She was used to Andrew dismissing her side of the story and judging her with no interest in the truth-so his words didn't hurt.

Her tone grew even colder. "If you've already decided I'm at fault, then stop pretending you want to help."

Otherwise, she might actually throw up.

Liam finally lost patience. "Andrew is trying to help you! What's with the attitude? When you got into fights as a kid, who always stood up for you?"

"Are

you saying you don't need him now? Stop acting like you're above it!"

Back then, Tracy's bold and outspoken nature made her a target among other kids. She never backed down and always ended up in fights.

And every time, it was Andrew-barely a teen himself-who shielded her when other parents came knocking.

But now, with the Dunns at their door, Andrew was the one dragging her out to apologize-telling her to bow her head, to beg for their forgiveness.

Same person. How had he changed so much?

Tracy's eyes glinted with mockery. "You said it yourself. That was when I was a kid. Now that you've decided I'm guilty, don't call it helping me.

"I don't need it."

Done wasting words, she turned and strode toward the living room.

Liam was furious. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Is it wrong that we care about her?!"

Andrew's expression darkened, but all he did was sigh softly. "She'll understand one day. When she grows up, she'll see we meant well."