# The Wife Upstairs (Rachel Hawkins)

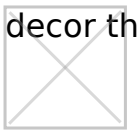
The Wife Upstairs by Rachel Hawkins is a twisty, suspenseful thriller that keeps you guessing until the very end. Set in a wealthy neighborhood, it follows Bea, a woman who returns home after being presumed dead, and the tangled secrets surrounding her husband’s new lover. With sharp twists, dark secrets, and complex characters, this book is perfect for fans of psychological thrillers and gripping mysteries.

## Chapter 1

Chapter 1 begins with a gray sky stretched low over the city, rain misting the windshield as I drive toward the gates of Thornfield Estates. It’s a routine trip now—leave behind the cracked sidewalks and water-stained ceilings of Center Point, and step into a neighborhood where even the air feels cleaner. The rain pelts harder as I pull into the Reeds’ circular drive, the kind of place designed more for show than for need. Mrs. Reed greets me at the door, hair immaculately curled, lips painted to match her umbrella, and the practiced pout she gives when she glances at the sky is supposed to seem sympathetic.

I accept Bear’s leash with a practiced smile, listening to her sigh about how dreadful the weather must be “for people like you,” while wearing boots that have never touched actual mud. This is what I’ve learned to expect here—concern wrapped in condescension, kindness that never asks questions. As Bear trots out ahead, I cinch my old raincoat tighter and step into the storm. Thornfield Estates gleams behind me, every home pristine, every hedge manicured, but it all feels as staged as a showroom.

Walking past each sprawling property, it becomes clear that the dogs aren’t walked because they need to be. Most of the backyards are larger than the entire block where my apartment sits. It’s all a display—hiring someone to walk your dog isn’t about convenience here; it’s another luxury item to flaunt, like a live-in trainer or a monogrammed bread box. I think about how many times I’ve walked past a Southern Manors throw draped over a velvet chaise, or a silver lamp shaped like a pineapple in these homes. It’s decor that says something about who lives here, even if no one actually uses it.



Rain soaks into my shoes as Bear tugs me forward, and I glance up at one of the McLarens' massive windows. Their golden retriever once barked at me so much during a walk that a neighbor called animal control. It’s all faded now into routine. Mrs. McLaren always greets me in expensive workout clothes, even though I’ve never seen her leave the house except for Botox appointments. Emily Clark, on the other hand, talks about “supporting local business” but thinks she deserves sainthood for leaving out a bottled water.

They all pretend to care, but it's scripted. If they really cared, they’d know I’m not someone who’s impressed by hollow praise or tips wrapped in condescension. These people compliment your grit, then act surprised when you don’t fall over in gratitude. They think letting you inside their gated life is charity. But I’m not grateful. I’m working. And I’m watching.

Bear and I loop past a row of nearly identical homes, the kind where every porch has a welcome mat and no one ever actually answers the door. Maintenance vans and landscaping trucks buzz along the road, making it feel more like a showroom than a neighborhood. Every detail is curated, right down to the garden gnomes that are probably imported from Italy. Meanwhile, my place has a shower that only gives hot water when you slam the knob with your fist.

My apartment smells like mildew on good days, but I’ve made it mine. Dollar-store string lights, old books stacked in corners, thrifted art hung just right—it’s not much,

but it tries. Still, nothing I do can make it look like anything in Thornfield. I once saw a brass doorknob at the Ingrahams' house that probably cost more than my mattress. Sometimes I wonder if I even want what they have, or if I just want the chance to prove I could fit into it better than they ever could.

A part of me believes that if I played it right, I could have a house like theirs. Or at least, pretend I belong in one long enough to make it real. It's not about the money, not entirely. It's about not being invisible anymore. It's about someone like Mrs. Reed actually remembering my name instead of calling me "sweetheart" like I'm the cashier at a farmer's market she visits once a year.

I duck under a pine tree with Bear, waiting out a sudden gust of wind that pelts us with wet needles. His fur is soaked, but he's content, tail wagging as he sniffs at the base of a mailbox shaped like a miniature version of the house it belongs to. Even their mailboxes have HOA-approved roofs. I glance down at my own reflection in a puddle—hair frizzed, coat sagging under the rain, sneakers already soaked through.

Still, something about this walk feels like a step toward something more. A quiet resolve hardens in my chest. I'll keep showing up in my raincoat. I'll let them underestimate me, let them think I'm just another pair of dirty shoes on their marble floors. But I see everything. And someday, they'll know it.

Bear nudges my leg, ready to move again, and I give him a quick pat. We head back toward the Reeds' house, the storm still drizzling over Thornfield Estates, but something in me has already started to shift. There's something about walking past luxury every day that stops it from feeling untouchable. You start to see the cracks under the surface. And if there are cracks, there's a way in.

# Chapter 2

Chapter 2 begins with a jolt—one that leaves me startled on the wet pavement, Bear’s leash tugging insistently in my hand as the sharp scent of rain and engine oil fills the air. The sleek car, now creased and steaming near the curb, looms in my peripheral vision. Chapter 2 forces me to meet the eyes of the man who caused it all—Alex, as he later introduces himself—removing his sunglasses to reveal a concerned expression that seems surprisingly sincere, especially given the circumstances.

He kneels down slightly to gauge if I’m injured, the drizzle clinging to both our clothes. I feel the grit of wet gravel on my palms as I get up, and there's an odd mix of shame and shock tightening in my chest. “I’m okay,” I manage to say, my voice thin, dampened by the moment. He reassures me, emphasizing that it's just a car—his words calm, but his sidelong glance at the damage betrays the sting of loss beneath his calm exterior.

The irony of the situation isn’t lost on me—he’s the one with a six-figure car now bent out of shape, yet he’s the one asking if I’m all right. As we speak, I notice his coat—clean lines, quality fabric, no label showing but clearly expensive—and how it contrasts with my wet jeans and thrifted jacket. Thornfield Estates men have a certain look: polished, deliberate, and distant. But Alex’s demeanor is something else entirely. There’s warmth in his voice, even as he apologizes again, as though he's the one who’d wronged me.

Bear remains close to my leg, his earlier barking now replaced with a low, steady breath. I wonder if dogs can detect class differences, or if he’s just unsettled by the tension. Alex offers to cover any medical costs if I need to be seen, and when I wave him off, he nods, not pressing the issue. There’s a pause before he speaks again, “Just don’t hesitate if something changes. I mean that.”

The words linger after he says them. He doesn’t give me a card or a number, which should make the gesture feel hollow, but somehow it doesn’t. It felt real—an offer meant to stand on principle more than logistics. Then he returns to his car, now humming unevenly as it pulls away, leaving a thin trail of mist behind the tires, and I’m left in the foggy quiet of a post-accident moment.

Walking Bear back through the dripping sidewalks of Mountain Brook Village, I catch my reflection in a shop window. Wet hair, dirt on my knees, and a look I barely recognize. Yet, in the strange way fate works, I had shared an unguarded moment with someone from a world that doesn’t usually see people like me unless we’re delivering groceries or trimming hedges. Chapter 2 blurs those lines, if only for a few short minutes.

Back at my apartment, the dampness clings to me like a second skin, but the encounter replays in loops. I search “Alex Thornfield Estates” just out of curiosity, and nothing obvious comes up. I don’t even know if he’s one of the long-time residents or someone just passing through, maybe staying with a friend. That’s the thing about places like Thornfield—they have so much surface gloss that it hides every seam.

Bear snoozes near my feet as I sip a mug of reheated coffee, thinking how surreal it was to be asked, genuinely asked, if I was all right by someone who could buy my entire life ten times over. It makes me wonder if there’s more to these people than privilege and performance. Maybe not all of them are so different after all. Still, the subtle power imbalance of the whole moment doesn’t escape me.

As I look out the window, past the rain-streaked glass, the cars pass by without pause. Somewhere out there, Alex is probably explaining the dented hood to a mechanic or his insurance agent, maybe even laughing it off at dinner tonight. But I’ll remember it differently. Chapter 2 reminds me that Thornfield Estates isn’t just a place of old money and manicured perfection—it’s a place where lives touch, even if only for a fleeting, accidental moment.

# Part VI: Bea

Part VI: Bea begins with a familiar sensation—the presence of Eddie beside me again, his thigh pressed close and the scent of mint on his breath. It should have made me recoil, thinking of what he's done, but instead, it made the next move easier. Knowing he came here expecting intimacy gave me the power I needed. I'd planned for this. Brushed my hair until it shined, pinched color into my cheeks, rehearsed how I'd lean in. My survival now depended on reminding him of the version of me he first loved. The version he married. If I could keep him tethered to that memory, I might just stay alive.

Sliding my hand into his, I focused on the familiar—his calloused skin, the comfort of shared history. I told myself not to think about Blanche, not to let her name surface in my mind, even as the man who murdered her sat across from me. Instead, I remembered how much I once wanted him. That electric hunger, the desperate way I used to crave his touch, his attention. It wasn't a lie back then. I just had to tap into that again. And as I moved closer, kissed him the way I had in Hawaii, it came back surprisingly fast. My lips knew their way. My body responded like it always had. For a few minutes, I believed it too.

But it wasn't long before reality pushed its way in. Eddie broke the kiss, face red, breath shallow. He stood so quickly it startled me. The shame on his face cut through my plan. He said he shouldn't have come, and my heart dropped. I reached for him, gently holding his wrist, trying to soothe his panic. The energy in the room snapped tight, like a thread ready to break. But I didn't let go. I told him it was okay. That I wanted him. That I still loved him. He kissed me again—deeply this time. And then it happened. Bodies tangled, words forgotten, boundaries blurred. Reader, I fucked him.

Afterward, when our breathing slowed, I thought maybe I'd won. I traced lazy circles on his chest, whispering that I loved him, that I'd never hurt him. I didn't say the other

part out loud—that if he let me go, I'd never tell. I thought I was giving him reassurance. But instead, I'd pushed too far. Eddie pulled away, cold now, distant. He got dressed silently, and this time, he left without looking back. I stayed in the bed, furious with myself for miscalculating, wondering how long it would take to earn his trust again.

The memory of Eddie and Blanche laughing together over lunch still haunted me. That day in the village, I was just supposed to browse store windows, maybe scout a new location for a Southern Manors display. Instead, I saw them—my husband and my best friend—smiling over salad like they were co-stars in a pharmaceutical ad. It wasn't just their closeness. It was the visibility. Their ease with being seen. The fury that surged in me had nothing to do with jealousy. It was about humiliation. About the way they made me small.

I crossed the street before I could stop myself, appearing at their table with a brightness I didn't feel. Their startled faces almost made the moment worth it. I pretended not to notice the blueprints spread out between them—an innocent work meeting, they'd say. But I knew better. Blanche had been inviting Eddie into her house, her plans, her wine. She'd even used my own back porch as a showroom, showing Eddie a Pinterest board and calling it a dream. He just smiled. Played along. He always did.

Later, while we made dinner, Eddie told me I'd embarrassed myself. His words came sharp, slicked with condescension. I said nothing. I knew silence would provoke him more. And it did. He walked out with my wine glass in hand, the screen door slamming behind him. We didn't talk about it again, but I saw it in Blanche's face the next time we had coffee. The smile that didn't reach her eyes. The apology that wasn't really one.

"You always overreact, Bea," she said, scraping whipped cream from her drink like I was the one who needed to be handled delicately. I let the comment hang in the air, memorizing her tone. She didn't think she'd done anything wrong. She thought I was

the problem. And maybe, to her, I was. But two days later, when I picked up Eddie’s phone and saw a selfie from Blanche—just her face, exaggerated frown, nothing sexy—I knew everything I needed to. It wasn’t about what she wore or said. It was about access. About intimacy. And she’d crossed a line.

That photo, innocent on the surface, cracked something open in me. It wasn’t about whether they’d slept together. It was about the certainty that they *could*. That they might. And that neither of them feared what I might do if I found out. I was already the joke at the table, the overreactor, the one drinking too much and talking too little. But now, I had clarity. And maybe that was more dangerous than anger.

Because clarity comes with purpose. And purpose always leads to action.

# Chapter 4

Chapter 4 begins with a question that sounds casual but carries a sharper edge underneath: “Since when does Eddie Rochester have a dog?” Emily Clark, or Mrs. Clark as she insists everyone in the neighborhood say—except when she reminds you that "Emily is fine"—asks it with a smile that doesn’t quite meet her eyes. She’s dressed in her usual athleisure that’s probably more about status than sweat, her thermos monogrammed, her tone sweet but lined with judgment. She knows Adele isn’t mine, and that means she knows I’ve been at Eddie’s house. This isn’t small talk; it’s reconnaissance.

I tell her he got the puppy last week. That part is true. And it gave me the perfect excuse to see him again—week after week, in that perfectly staged home, in that perfect little gated fantasy. Emily leans in, lowering her voice as if we’re co-conspirators, her gossip about Bea and Blanche carrying a strange reverence, like she's sharing scripture instead of speculation. There’s something oddly performative about it—how she twists her fingers together to mimic Bea and Blanche’s childhood bond. As if miming it makes her closer to the story.

The way she talks about the accident—the “real, real sad” tone that falters when she realizes I’m not reacting—reminds me that in Thornfield Estates, tragedies are social currency. Emily wants a gasp, a tear, a shocked glance. She doesn’t get one. I’ve seen real loss. This kind of rehearsed grief is just theater. Still, it’s hard not to picture the scene she paints: a drifting boat in the dark, two women missing, the weight of uncertainty heavier than any confirmed death. Whether or not she knows it, Emily hands me a glimpse of the power Bea once held, and how much her absence changed everything.

She drops a detail I hadn't known—that Eddie and Bea met at Smith Lake, that he wasn’t even there the night it happened. And just like that, Eddie becomes more than the charming contractor who adopted a dog. He becomes a man with a past wrapped in mystery, grief, and community scrutiny. Emily’s assessment that “Eddie didn’t take it as hard as Tripp” only fuels my curiosity. If Bea’s husband didn’t collapse under the weight of her loss like the rest of them expected, maybe that means something. Maybe it means he was ready to move on.

I nod and offer polite nothings. Emily, like the others, sees what she wants to see. What I see is opportunity. Each tidbit she shares is another puzzle piece in the portrait I’m building of Eddie Rochester—and of the woman he used to love. She calls him broken, but I think she means available. She calls him loyal, but I think she means vulnerable. A man who used to be happy, and now is something else.

The conversation makes me more certain of what I already felt—getting close to Eddie isn’t just a possibility. It’s a plan. His life may be shadowed by loss, but it's still full of beauty, of influence, of wealth. And if I can figure out where I fit into all that, I might finally become someone who doesn't have to explain away her life or hide the truth behind a dog leash.

As I leave Emily’s house, her words echo in my head. “He was crazy about her. We all were.” I don’t doubt it. Bea was the kind of woman who could make the rest of the world feel like wallpaper. But what Emily doesn’t understand is that admiration fades, and the people left behind don’t always want to stay buried in someone else’s story. Some of us are just waiting for the right moment to write our own.

# Chapter 19

Chapter 19 begins with the arrival of comfort food wrapped in foil, but the warmth of neighborly concern carries a subtle edge. Caroline McLaren is the first to show up, arms full with a bubbling chicken Divan and condolences that sound rehearsed. Her hug lingers too long, and she warns the casserole shouldn’t go through the dishwasher—as if that’s the most pressing concern in a house now shadowed by murder. A few hours later, Emily and Campbell arrive in tandem, bringing paper bags from the high-end gourmet shop in the village. It's the kind of place that lets you pretend you cooked when all you did was sign a receipt. I smile, nodding in appreciation, but there's a stiffness in my jaw that won't go away.

As I store the containers in the freezer, I can feel their eyes on me—sipping their iced coffees, watching me like I might crack open and spill something useful. They want details. Everyone wants details. But I also see something else in their faces today—sincerity. Campbell’s eyes are swollen, and Emily isn’t wearing a hint of makeup, something I’ve never seen before. They look... tired. Grief-ridden. And for the first time, it hits me that they’re mourning too. These weren't just neighborhood acquaintances. Bea and Blanche were their people. They hosted parties together. Raised children on the same streets. Whispered about each other, maybe, but also depended on one another to maintain the illusion that life here was perfect.

“We all are,” I agree quietly, unsure what else to say. For a long second, we just sit in silence, the kind that usually only exists between people who have known each other far longer than I’ve known them. Then, Campbell finally asks the question hanging between us like fog: “They really think someone killed them?” I nod, and Emily’s lips part slightly, like she’s about to say something else but then decides not to. I think about how Detective Laurent keeps circling us all like a hawk, and I wonder who she thinks is the prey.

Campbell’s voice is small when she says, “They want to talk to me on Thursday.” Emily adds that her appointment is Friday. Both of them glance my way, eyes searching, but I keep my face unreadable. What am I supposed to say? That I’m terrified the detectives will start digging into my past? That I’m afraid my old life is leaking through the cracks of this new one like water under a locked door?

After they leave, the house is quiet again. Too quiet. That’s when the phone rings. The number flashes up on the screen—a 205 area code. My heart stutters. It could be Detective Laurent. It could be the police saying they’ve found something—something that makes all the casserole-bearing kindness vanish like smoke. But when I answer, it’s worse. It's John Rivers.

His voice is like nails on a chalkboard, smooth but sharp. “The church is raising money for a new sound system,” he says, not bothering with pretense. I realize immediately—it’s not a request. It’s a demand, disguised in a smirk. He’s leveraging my fear, hoping to squeeze a few hundred dollars out of my panic.

“You and your boyfriend are all over the paper,” he adds, tone casual but soaked in threat. “Thought maybe you’d want to stay out of it.”

The way he says “you and your boyfriend” makes my skin crawl. He doesn’t say Eddie’s name, but the implication is clear: he’s reminding me how precarious all of this is. One word from him, and my entire new life could unravel.

I hang up the phone with trembling fingers, already moving toward my purse to find my checkbook. I tell myself this is the last time. That I’m buying silence, not feeding the monster. But deep down, I know better. Blackmail never ends on a handshake.

That evening, I pour a glass of wine and sit by the window. The storm that had threatened earlier finally breaks open, soft rain trickling down the panes. I watch the droplets race each other, my mind racing with them. If Emily and Campbell are being questioned, then I can’t be far behind. My story has to hold. My nerves have to stay calm. Because if I falter—if I hesitate even once—everything I’ve built will come

crashing down.

When Eddie walks in, he doesn’t say much, just kisses my temple and pours himself a drink. The silence between us isn’t strained, exactly, but it’s dense—full of things neither of us is willing to name. He thinks we’re finally safe, that with Tripp arrested, the danger has passed. I wish I could believe him.

But safety, like casseroles, has an expiration date. And secrets always rot from the inside first.



# Part II: Bea

Part II: Bea begins with a sense of disorientation that even writing can’t fully soothe. Putting thoughts on paper is Bea’s only way of processing the impossible—what her life has become since Blanche’s death. Her best friend is gone, and the man she once trusted with her future might be responsible. That realization hasn’t stopped echoing in her head since she woke up locked away, alone, in a hidden room of her own home.

Everything about the room reminds her of Eddie—his planning, his taste, his control. The panic room had seemed like an odd luxury at the time, an over-the-top addition he’d justified with charm and practicality. Now, that very room has become a prison, and the man who held her close with love in his eyes might be the same man who murdered Blanche and trapped her like a criminal.

The shift in perception is so dramatic that Bea struggles to believe it herself. Even when Eddie brings food and supplies, his silence is louder than any explanation could be. Each visit reinforces the sickening truth—this isn’t a misunderstanding. He’s not here to explain. He’s keeping her locked away, deliberately, and whatever the reason, it has nothing to do with love.

Bea's thoughts return to that final dinner with Blanche, trying to trace the steps that led to tragedy. The dinner was supposed to be a celebration, a warm evening between lifelong friends. But underneath the clinking glasses and shared memories was a new tension. Blanche wasn’t herself—too thin, too sharp, and hiding bitterness behind third margaritas and passive jabs.

What stung most wasn’t the judgment about Eddie. It was Blanche’s refusal to be happy for her. Instead of joy, she offered skepticism; instead of support, she delivered warnings. Bea had wanted to give her friend a moment—like the ones she’d seen in movies—where news of a proposal sparked squeals and hugs. But that moment never

came.

As they sat across from each other at La Paz, Bea felt the shift—Blanche wasn't just skeptical. She was resentful. She questioned Eddie's intentions, mocked the quick engagement, and refused to use his name, reducing him to "that guy." Her dismissal hurt, but what cut deeper was the sudden realization that Blanche may not want what's best for Bea—she may want what Bea has.

Bea didn't want to believe it at first, but the signs were there. The cold glances. The forced compliments. The jealousy wrapped in concern. Blanche, once her fiercest protector and biggest cheerleader, was now the one undercutting her happiness.

Still, Bea tried to smooth things over. She reached for connection, even asking Blanche to be her maid of honor in an attempt to salvage what was left. But even then, Blanche couldn't let her have the win. Her final words dripped with condescension—implying Bea's love wouldn't last, mocking the ease of her life, as though success had made her soft.

That night might have been the turning point. Not just for Bea and Blanche, but for something else—something darker. Bea keeps circling it in her thoughts: was Eddie already planning something? Did he see the fracture between the friends? Did he sense that Blanche's disapproval might be a threat?

Now, in this room, Bea doesn't have the luxury of doubt. Each detail of that weekend becomes fuel for survival. She replays it not to mourn—but to analyze. To understand.

She's starting to notice patterns in Eddie's visits. The rhythm of his footsteps, the way he avoids eye contact, the small things he forgets—like that she likes her bananas green, not speckled. Those details once felt like love. Now they feel like mistakes she can exploit.

Bea isn't ready to scream. Screaming won't save her. But thinking might. And if she can stay focused, if she can write it all down, maybe she can find the thread that unravels whatever Eddie is hiding.

She’s not ready to call him a monster—not yet. But if he is, then she’ll have to become something just as ruthless to survive him.



# Chapter 22

Chapter 22 begins with mounting tension as I fall into a pattern I recognize too well—restless pacing, opening doors for no reason, searching for things that can't be seen but are deeply felt. Since Eddie brought me to the lake house, something in me hasn't settled. A hollow kind of loneliness creeps in, curling around my spine, making me feel more like a shadow in Thornfield Estates than someone who actually belongs here. I catch myself imagining how absurd it would sound to tell Emily or Campbell about what really happened there. "Hey girls, Eddie casually showed me the house where his wife might have died. Totally normal, right?"

Instead, I keep the words buried, even as I notice whispers following me. At Roasted, two older women sip coffee and murmur about Bea, speculating on whether the killer meant to take out one woman or both. Their casual tone—that awful assumption that "it always is" the husband—crawls under my skin. I wonder, do they mean Tripp? Or Eddie? One is about to be my husband, and yet both names float through conversations like storm clouds with no clear source. My soy hazelnut latte grows cold while I listen, unnoticed.

The uncertainty gnaws at me until I do something reckless—I text Tripp Ingraham. I tell myself it's just for clarity, to learn the truth, but I know better. We meet at a pub I've never been to, the kind of place I'd usually avoid, especially since it reeks of old wood and older regrets. I dress plainly—no flashy jewelry, no Southern Manors polish—just a simple beige dress that makes me look meek. Tripp arrives smug, greasy confidence wrapped in worn flannel and beer breath. "So," he says, "you here to ask if Eddie and Blanche were screwing?"

His bluntness jolts me. I wasn't expecting him to say it out loud, even if I've been thinking about it constantly. I try to steer us back on course, saying I just want to know

how he’s doing, pretending concern. But Tripp’s not fooled. He reads between the lines, maybe too easily, and suddenly I’m not the only one fishing for answers. He confesses that he doesn’t believe there was anything between Eddie and Blanche—not really. “Blanche was loyal,” he says. “Even when she shouldn’t have been.”

But his bitterness returns quickly. “Bea took her whole life,” he mutters. “And now they’re both at the bottom of a lake.” The way he says it makes me shiver, but the conversation drifts from revelation to resignation, and I can tell he’s finished talking. Whatever he knew, I’ve squeezed what I can from him.

Back at home, I dive into Facebook profiles, searching for images, anything to link Blanche and Eddie more intimately. But her page is gone, deactivated or scrubbed by family, and any pictures she's tagged in are dead ends. I’ve been so focused on Bea, convinced she held all the answers, but now I realize I’ve overlooked Blanche—the woman at the center of everything. That oversight may have cost me more than I know.

Later, I’m soaking in the tub when I hear Eddie’s footsteps down the hall. I brace myself, pretending calm. But he doesn’t greet me. Instead, he says, “Why did you have lunch with Tripp Ingraham today?” My stomach knots, heart hammering in my chest. I ask how he knows, and regret it instantly. Thornfield may be glossy on the surface, but its residents have nothing better to do than watch, whisper, and report.

Eddie steps closer, and for the first time, I feel the sheer size of him as a threat, not a comfort. He accuses me of slipping cash to someone I should have cut off. I’m too stunned to lie. He knows about John. About the blackmail. About Phoenix. He even has the number—written down, tucked away in his wallet all this time. “You know why I never called it?” he says. “Because I trust you, Janie.”

That should feel reassuring. It doesn’t. I sit on the edge of the tub, dripping and cold, holding a piece of paper that might as well be a ticking bomb. But it’s not the number that shakes me. It’s the way Eddie looked at me when he said, *That’s what you do when people threaten you.*

Because that wasn’t a suggestion.

It was a rule.



# Chapter 14

Chapter 14 begins with a simmering attempt at self-control. I tell myself not to overthink Emily and Campbell, not to crave more than I already have. This life—Eddie, the house, comfort—should feel like a win, like hitting the emotional jackpot after years of scraping by.

But the truth is, discontent lingers just beneath the surface, stirred by glances and offhand comments dressed as compliments. The same feeling flares whenever John crosses my mind, and even though he got his cash and his moment of leverage in that Home Depot lot, I can't fully trust it's over. People like him—people like *us*—don't just walk away when there's still power to squeeze.

The idea that being Mrs. Rochester could shield me from people like John is what keeps me focused. Not just living with Eddie, not just dating him. I need the title, the permanence—the security of a ring.

So I start watching him. Not obsessively, just carefully—looking for signs, anything to suggest he's thinking about proposing. I've never had anyone love me enough to plan forever, so there's no roadmap here, just instinct and hope.

A few days after the committee meeting, Eddie surprises me by coming home early and suggesting we take Adele to the Cahaba River Walk. The invitation lifts my mood; that trail, those trees, and the soft sound of water bring back the early days of us—before things got complicated. We pile into the car, and my heart beats faster than it should.

When we arrive, Adele sprints ahead, chasing squirrels, and I practically bounce with excitement, imagining a velvet box in his pocket. Eddie takes my hand, smiles, and I lean in to kiss his cheek. "You seem happy," he says, and I nod.

But just minutes later, he’s on his phone, answering emails, while I sit there, cheeks flushed from heat and embarrassment. A pair of women jog past, one casting a curious look at Eddie and then at me. That look—the silent, condescending *what’s her story* —makes my skin crawl.

Trying to break the silence, I go for subtle. “I need a manicure,” I say, waving my fingers and hoping he’ll take the bait. “All the women at Emily’s had perfect nails—and a pile of rings.”



Eddie doesn’t look up, but he does snort. “Bea always thought that was tacky,” he mutters, still typing. “Especially when they just sit at home all day.”

That answer stings more than I expect. “I’m not asking for diamonds,” I reply lightly. “Just maybe some cuticle oil and a little effort.”

He reaches for my hand absentmindedly, bringing it to his lips in a gesture that feels more habitual than heartfelt. When he mentions the village nail salon, I ask if that’s where Bea went. Finally, he lifts his eyes from the screen.

“As far as I know, yeah. That’s the place,” he says.

I push a little more. “Girls from the neighborhood, right?”

“Women,” I correct, my tone sharpening. “They’re not ‘girls’ anymore. They’re in their thirties, at least.”

Eddie gives me a look that’s hard to read, half indulgent and half dismissive—like a parent humoring a child. And I hate it. I want to be his partner, not someone he humors.

“You don’t have to patronize me,” I snap before I can stop myself, before I can remind myself to be the Jane he expects. But maybe that version of me—the filtered one—isn’t sustainable.

To his credit, he stops, really stops, and looks at me. “I’m being a dick, aren’t I?”

“A little bit.”

And there it is—his real smile, the one that reaches his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m just stressed. But I wanted today to be about us, even if I didn’t do a great job of showing it.”

That apology cracks something open. The mood softens, and I sense a chance to let him in—but also to plant a seed. “I guess I just wonder where this is going,” I say, and I mean it.



He sits up straighter, all attention now on me. I talk about how hard it is to always feel like an outsider, like a guest in someone else's home, no matter how welcome I’m told I am. “When you’ve been someone’s charity case your whole life, you start to resent the feeling,” I explain.

Eddie listens, his hands now clasped, his brow furrowed. I can see he’s wrestling with it—not annoyed, not angry, just trying to understand. He asks what I mean, and I tell him the truth.

“You saw where I came from. You know how different this life is for me.”

“You belong here,” he says, quick and certain. “I don’t want you to be like Emily or Campbell. I love you because you’re not like them.”

I watch his throat work as he swallows back the next part. *Because you’re not Bea*. He won’t say it, but it hangs between us, unspoken and undeniable.

He squeezes my hand again. “I love you, Jane. This house, this neighborhood—that’s all noise. *You* are what matters.”

I’m breathless as I nod, leaning in as he presses his forehead to mine. This should be the moment, the one where he pulls out a ring and seals everything with a promise.

But instead, he pulls back with a sigh. “I’ll try not to be gone so much. Caitlyn can take more at Southern Manors. But I still have to run both businesses. You get that, right?”

I nod again, but inside, disappointment blooms. He said all the right things—but not *that* thing. Still, I tell myself: maybe soon.



# Chapter 23

Chapter 23 begins with a familiar southern greeting—“Girl, I swear you’ve gotten even skinnier!”—spoken in a tone meant to flatter but laced with pressure. The summer evening is stifling, and though the church courtyard looks charming under the fading light, I can’t shake the sensation of being all wrong. Dressed in a sleek black dress that once felt elegant, I now feel like an outsider among a sea of pastel prints and floral skirts. Emily’s compliment floats in the air as I try not to glare at Eddie’s back. He said nothing about my dress choice, but surely he knew. I cling to the excuse that I’m a newcomer in this social order, still learning the unwritten codes.

We drift through the crowd, lemonade in hand, pretending everything is fine. Eddie makes small talk with the reverend, while I trail behind Emily, grateful she hasn’t once brought up my old job. I’d stolen from her—little things, pieces of her life—and still she greets me with warmth, as though we’re real friends. That should make me feel guilty, but instead it makes me cautious. As if her kindness is a test I’m bound to fail. Inside the Family Life Center, auction items glimmer under fluorescent lights, but most of the congregation lingers in the courtyard. It's too pretty out here, too humid, and everyone wants to be seen.

And then everything shifts. Caroline arrives in a flurry of whispers and tension, her fingers digging into my arm. “Tripp Ingraham has been arrested,” she hisses. That name lands like a stone in my chest. Emily’s already scrolling her phone, confirming the rumor, and across the courtyard I see Eddie turn toward me. The expression on his face—flat, unreadable—tells me everything. He knew. And he’s relieved.

Back home, the silence between us is heavy. Eddie confirms what I’ve already heard—Tripp was taken into custody, something to do with the autopsy. No one knows specifics. I head to the bathroom to shower, stripping off my dress and stepping under

the scalding water like I’m trying to cleanse more than just sweat. When I emerge, steam fogs the mirror and my reflection feels unfamiliar. I whisper affirmations to myself—“You’re fine, you’re safe”—but I’m not sure I believe them.

Eddie enters the bathroom and begins undressing, moving with a practiced ease I’ve always admired. He’s beautiful in a way that used to make me ache. Now, I just watch, detached, combing my hair in silence until he asks the question I’ve been dreading. “Were you scared of me?” The words are simple, but his voice is low and tight, and I freeze. Then comes the follow-up: “Did you think I killed them?”

For a moment, I try the usual tactics—soft voice, lowered lashes—but they don’t land. So I tell the truth. “Yes. I did.” The air between us stills. Then he exhales and says, “At least you’re honest.” I take his wrist, lowering his arms, trying to pull us back together. I apologize. Sincerely. For doubting him. For not trusting him with my fears.

And part of me means it. But another part knows I’m lying through my teeth. I’ve lied to everyone here, especially him. He’s the one who gave me a new life, a new name, and I’ve spent months pretending I belong. Pretending I deserve it. And yet, hearing Eddie murmur, “It’s alright,” as he pulls me into a hug almost convinces me that it could be. That maybe we really could make this work.

As I press my forehead to his chest, I ask him if he thinks it was really Tripp. I want him to say yes, with conviction. To tell me that justice is simple, clean, and done. But instead, he hesitates. “I don’t want to think he could’ve done it,” he says. He talks about golf, about drinking, about fights with Blanche. I hear the doubt in his voice. And I can’t help but feel it too.

Because the truth is, none of this feels finished. Arresting Tripp doesn’t explain the messages. The missing hours. The strange, echoing noises in the house. Something’s still wrong. Something’s still hiding in plain sight. And no matter how many church functions I attend, or how many casseroles I bake, or how often I tell myself I’m safe—deep down, I know I’m still waiting for the real storm to come.

# Chapter 27

Chapter 27 begins with an everyday question that carries more weight than it seems: which dress to wear. I hold up three options—an understated cream dress, a sleek black one, and a standout plum piece from Bea's Southern Manors collection. That last dress means something. It represents Bea's legacy, the brand, the woman I'm still trying to understand. But when Eddie glances at my choices and picks the cream one without hesitation, I nod and comply, even though a small part of me sinks. It's beautiful, yes, but safe—forgettable. Later, standing beside women whose diamonds sparkle brighter than the chandeliers, I'll realize just how right I was.

The Country Club of Birmingham is more than grand—it's intimidating. Walking through the entryway, I feel like I've stepped into a world built on money, manners, and mirrors. Everyone is dressed in a kind of wealth that doesn't need explanation. I trail behind Eddie, holding my clutch tightly, trying to match the effortless smiles I see all around me. The air buzzes with a mix of gin, gossip, and judgment. I try to remind myself that I belong here now. But I don't feel it. Not even close.

As Eddie disappears to fetch drinks, I'm left on my own, watching polished strangers flit between conversations. That's when Emily spots me. Her welcome is bright, practiced—genuine in tone but not in substance. She loops her arm through mine and introduces me to the group, women who smell of gardenias and look like they've never known a bad day. I nod, smile, answer questions about the house, the dog, our upcoming wedding. Outwardly, I pass. But inside, I feel like a borrowed accessory—fitting the theme, but not part of the story.

The conversation turns, as it always does, to gossip. Caroline mentions Tripp Ingraham, her voice low but loaded. She jokes about scandal, but there's an edge in her tone. Tripp's name doesn't feel distant—it lands in my chest like a warning. I try to

stay still, to sip slowly. The women laugh, shifting between concern and curiosity, but none of them know what I know. Or suspect what I suspect. That beneath this glittering crowd, there are secrets no one wants aired.

Emily changes the subject to lighter things—vacations, skincare, diamonds the size of marbles. Yet even with her attempt to pivot, I can't shake the feeling that danger is as much a part of this group as the champagne flutes they're holding. Someone mentions how Eddie's been drinking more lately. It's said casually, as if discussing the weather. But my stomach knots. I make a joke, brushing it off, pretending it's just stress or the excitement of the wedding. They nod, distracted by a passing waiter with more wine.

Then, the photographer circles back. Flash after flash captures these women laughing at jokes they don't mean, sipping from glasses they rarely finish. I smile for the camera, feeling my face tighten into something practiced. This is the part of the night that matters to them—the image. The evidence. Not the awkward silences or the half-heard confessions. I realize the photos won't show how Emily's grip tightened when Tripp's name came up. Or how Caroline's expression soured just slightly before her joke.

At one point, someone asks about my background, and I offer just enough to be polite. Not enough to be real. When talk of Tripp returns, and someone asks if we know him well, I find my exit through faith. "The Lord sees what's done in darkness," I say, smiling. It draws a few raised brows and a couple of forced chuckles, but it works. The conversation shifts, just as I'd hoped.

As the evening ends, I walk out feeling like I've passed a test. I stood still under scrutiny and didn't flinch. But I also know this—whatever world I've entered, it's not built to forgive. It's built to forget. And if I'm not careful, I might be next.

# Chapter 36

Chapter 36 — Chapter 36 starts with a confession neither of us expected. *He loved you.* Hearing those words from Jane shakes something loose inside me. It’s not because I believe her—it's because part of me wishes I didn’t. Jane wouldn’t want to believe it either, which makes her saying it feel like a jab more than comfort. But the tone in her voice? It doesn’t sound bitter. She looks at me with something close to understanding, and that unsettles me more than anger would have. She is not who Eddie thought she was. Maybe he never really knew either of us.

There’s a sharpness to Jane that mirrors something I recognize in myself. That calm exterior, the muted wardrobe, the ability to blend in with a neighborhood like this—it’s all camouflage. What gives her away are her eyes. They’re too bright, too alert. As she sits across from me, sipping wine like we’re just two friends catching up, I see the gears turning behind her gaze. She doesn’t believe the story I’ve told, not really. I think she’s letting me speak because she wants to hear what kind of liar I am. Maybe she’s still deciding whether to become one, too.

Her reaction reminds me of Blanche at the funeral. She never said anything directly, but I saw something in her eyes—doubt that couldn’t quite become suspicion. Blanche had always believed herself cleverer than she was, but sometimes, even people like her can get close to the truth. I wore plum that day, not black, because grief doesn’t have to dress predictably. Later, I sat in Mama’s old chair, finishing a bottle of wine, trying to wash away the last image I had of her—confused, not scared, right before she fell. Or rather, right before I helped her fall.

It hadn’t taken much. A gentle push as she stumbled near the stairs. I didn’t plan it, but I didn’t stop it either. The sound of her head hitting the bottom step still visits me in dreams. Not nightmares—just echoes. I told myself it was mercy, that she was

always chasing another prescription or drink, that she'd already been fading. But deep down, I knew I didn't do it for her. I did it for me. Because freedom sometimes looks like blood on hardwood floors.

That wasn't something I ever told Eddie. I let him think Mama's death was just another tragic accident, and he accepted it. Maybe because he had secrets of his own. Things didn't fall apart until Blanche started digging. She didn't confront me directly until that dinner, the one after she caught me and Tripp in that bathroom. She accused me of stealing everything—my brand, my charm, my place in Eddie's life. But Blanche always underestimated how much I could take before I snapped.

I gave her a peace offering the next morning, a gluten-free pastry and a smile. She took it. The lake trip was my second gift. Tripp was bait. He annoyed her so much, she drank more than I expected, which only made the rest easier. She passed out before the boat even drifted far from shore. And when the hammer came down, it was almost clinical. Quick. Quiet. No screams—just water lapping at the side of the boat as she slid into the lake.

It should have worked. Girls' trip gone wrong, a drunk husband as the scapegoat. Tripp wouldn't remember anything—I'd made sure of that with Xanax and vodka. And everyone knew he and Blanche had problems. Maybe they'd think she drowned. Maybe they'd find the damage and think it was him. Either way, I'd be clear.

But then Eddie showed up. Standing there on the dock, looking like someone who didn't belong in the script. Panic on his face, confusion in his stance. He ruined everything. He didn't even have to say anything—I knew the second I saw him that the story had changed. Men like Eddie think they control the narrative. But what they don't realize is how easily stories unravel when they enter the scene without understanding the role they're walking into.

Jane leans in now, her voice tight with urgency. *We have to tell the police.* She says Eddie could've killed me. That he murdered Blanche. I almost laugh. Because none of this is about justice. It's about control—who holds it, who lets go, and who never

needed permission to begin with. I pull my hand away from hers. *Later,* I say. Let me enjoy the air, the wine, the illusion of choice.

Jane won’t wait forever. I can see that now. She’s sharper than Blanche ever was, more dangerous too, because she still thinks she has a conscience. She might go to the police, she might not. But either way, the game has changed again.

And I’m still playing.



# Chapter 8: Bea

Chapter 8: Bea begins in a setting she’s carefully curated—the launch party for Southern Manors at the historic Tutweiler Hotel in Birmingham. The venue’s old-world charm aligns perfectly with the brand she’s so painstakingly crafted: a blend of Southern grace and timeless elegance. The guests sip bourbon cocktails, and the air hums with praise, yet Bea remains distanced in her thoughts. This is her success, the culmination of years of grit disguised as effortless charm. But even amid admiration, there's an ache—an absence of someone to share it with. Her brand celebrates family values and warm tradition, yet her life often feels like an echo chamber of pretense. This party is not just an event—it’s a statement, a performance of the life she’s built to bury the one she escaped.

As she scans the crowd, her eyes find her mother seated awkwardly near the buffet table. Frail and visibly uncomfortable, her mother looks like a relic in a room of polished veneer. Bea feels a sudden pull of guilt, mixed with the familiar tension of their history. Her mother is not part of the story Bea tells investors or magazine profiles. She’s a woman who spent much of her life battling addiction, slipping in and out of stability, often with Bea left to pick up the pieces. The brand’s family-first narrative rings hollow to Bea in this moment, knowing how much of it has been manufactured to suit glossy campaigns and catalog captions. Still, she presses forward, as always—composed, driven, strategic.

Taking the stage for her speech, Bea offers stories about heirloom recipes, porch swings, and Sunday suppers that never happened. The words come smoothly, part truth, part illusion. But before the applause can follow, her mother rises from her seat—wobbling, red-eyed, slurring. The disruption is swift and sharp, like a hairline crack spreading across crystal. Her mother mumbles about “lies” and “the real Bea,” loud enough to hush the room. Panic floods Bea’s chest, but Blanche, calm and poised

as ever, moves quickly, guiding her mother out while shielding her friend from further embarrassment. It’s a moment of grace amidst the wreckage, one Bea silently clings to.

In the hours after the party, Bea sits alone with a glass of wine and the memory of that interruption. What does it mean to build something so beautiful on such unstable ground? Her mother’s outburst wasn’t just humiliating—it was a threat to the delicate balance Bea has fought to maintain. She thinks of everything she’s left behind: her given name, Bertha; the single-wide trailer; the welfare checks. Reinvention had been a necessity, not a luxury. And Southern Manors is more than a brand—it’s proof that she climbed out of that legacy and forged a new one. But the cracks are harder to conceal now. Her mother’s presence is a reminder that the past doesn’t fade—it waits.

The chapter then shifts focus to Eddie, who exists in Bea’s world like a shadow cast across bright fabric. His visits have become irregular, less predictable, more distant. When they first met, his charm was disarming, and she mistook his intensity for devotion. But now, his unpredictability feels less romantic and more dangerous. Bea senses the shift. There’s someone else—Jane. She’s heard whispers, read texts on his phone when he left it unattended. It’s not just infidelity that stings—it’s betrayal of control, of loyalty. And despite all her resolve, a sharp jealousy coils in her chest.

With Eddie, it has never been simple. He sees her carefully maintained life but doesn’t fully understand it. Their relationship is less partnership and more obsession, with secrets on both sides. She wonders whether Eddie ever truly loved her, or just the idea of someone who could keep up with his performances. The line between dependence and manipulation blurs. And with Jane now in the picture, Bea feels something slipping—something important. She won’t let it go without a fight.

Flashbacks interspersed throughout reveal Bea’s childhood—her mother passed out on a stained couch, the electricity shut off, the humiliation of standing in line for food stamps. These memories aren’t just background—they are the fire that forged her. Each success has been an act of rebellion against that origin. From Bertha to Bea, she

became someone else, someone who never had to look back. But deep down, she knows the transformation isn’t complete. The girl she was still lingers, whispering doubts when the lights go out and no one is watching.

As the chapter draws to a close, Bea understands that everything she’s built is at risk. Her mother, Eddie, Jane—they’re not just people in her orbit, they’re catalysts. Each could shatter the identity she’s built if she lets her guard down. And so she plans, as she always does—calculating, adjusting, never revealing the cracks. Because for Bea, survival is an art. And perfection, even if it’s just an illusion, is her shield.

# Part IV: Bea

Part IV: Bea didn’t feel like going out for dinner with Blanche and Tripp, but she didn’t want to break their long-standing routine either. Every other Thursday, the four of them got together, and even when she wasn’t in the mood, she showed up. This time, they were trying out a trendy barbecue joint in Homewood, its string lights and metal furniture giving off the kind of ambiance people post on Instagram but rarely enjoy in real life.

She felt removed from the group, especially Blanche, whose conversation seemed increasingly superficial. The once-natural connection they shared had faded, leaving behind strained small talk and polite nods. Football filled the silence between Eddie and Tripp, but it fizzled out quickly, replaced by Tripp’s complaints about a neighbor’s basketball hoop.

Bea’s fingers itched to pick up her phone, but she forced herself to stay present. The setting was idyllic, but her thoughts wandered far from the twinkle of fairy lights. Tripp’s gripes about the neighborhood felt dated, and when Eddie gently suggested letting kids play, a flicker of tension cut through the pleasantries.

Blanche, in contrast, appeared composed and elegant tonight—subtly applied makeup, a glowing pink dress, and a nearly untouched wineglass. Bea saw the version of Blanche she missed, the one who used to laugh easily and speak honestly. But she also sensed this image was curated, a mask hiding whatever Blanche wasn’t ready to say out loud.

Their friendship had thinned over time, stretched by lives that no longer matched. While Blanche sat on boards and hosted charity luncheons, Bea worked long hours and built a brand—two parallel lives pretending to intersect. Every time Bea tried to ask if Blanche was okay, the answer came in sarcasm or silence.

Still, Blanche’s energy tonight seemed lighter, almost hopeful. Bea allowed herself to believe that maybe, just maybe, her friend was still reachable. That hope flickered even brighter when Blanche brought up home renovations, inspired by the work Eddie had done.

It caught Bea off guard, especially knowing the Ingrahams hadn’t been flush with cash recently. Tripp’s surprised reaction confirmed her suspicion—it wasn’t a mutual decision. He looked more interested in his bourbon than the conversation, his third glass leaving him ruddy-cheeked and disinterested.

Blanche shrugged off his confusion with a jab, her tone familiar and sharp. Bea had grown used to hearing those barbed remarks, but tonight, they seemed especially pointed. When Blanche turned to Eddie, her tone softened, and she asked if he’d take on the project.

Eddie’s playful reply earned laughs from the table, and Bea reached for his leg without thinking, grounding herself in his presence. Blanche’s eyes lingered on that gesture, subtle but loaded, as if she were evaluating more than just a business opportunity. Something unspoken passed between them, and Bea felt it land heavily.

She didn’t want Eddie working on Blanche’s house—not because of schedules or budgets, though those were easy excuses. Deep down, she felt the weight of something darker, an instinct clawing at her chest. It wasn’t about kitchens or curb appeal; it was about proximity.

The dinner wrapped up as expected, Tripp tipsy and barely able to walk. Eddie helped him to the car, and Bea headed to their own, her heels clicking over pavement, head buzzing with wine and questions. But halfway there, something in her shifted.

Instead of leaving, she rounded the corner to the back lot where Blanche and Tripp’s SUV waited. Under the harsh glow of the streetlight, she saw them—Eddie and Blanche—too close, too familiar. His smile, the one Bea thought was hers alone, now belonged to another.

That realization burned through her, colder than jealousy, heavier than betrayal. Blanche didn’t want Bea’s backsplash or open floor plan—she wanted Eddie. And Bea could no longer ignore what was unfolding before her eyes.

Months passed, and everything changed. Bea’s new reality became four walls, stocked supplies, and silence, broken only by Eddie’s visits. He didn’t come every day, but when he did, he brought food, water, and a suffocating sense of order.



At first, she hoarded everything, unsure if he’d return. But he always did, never speaking more than necessary. Slowly, she began to trust that he wouldn’t leave her to rot.

The silence hurt more than the confinement. She longed to know what lies he was telling the outside world and whether anyone missed her. Did anyone even ask about Blanche?

When he arrived wearing the shirt she’d given him—a specific blue to match his eyes—she couldn’t help but speak. The compliment was casual, but the pause in his step said it hit deeper. It was the first human exchange they’d had in weeks.

Eddie softened then, acknowledging the shirt and its history. That moment stayed with Bea long after he left. A crack in the wall—figurative, but real enough to let in light.

Soon, he came more often, even daily, and stayed longer. Books followed, small gestures with big meanings. Their shared past slowly became the present again.

She remembered an old leadership workshop she’d hated, and told him the story. He laughed, really laughed, and for a second, it felt like the old days—before Blanche, before the lies. They were together in memory, not conflict.

There were still unspoken things between them. But when Eddie sat on the bed, when their shoulders brushed, the silence felt less like punishment and more like possibility. The man who had locked her away was also the man who still smiled like he meant it.

She held onto that thought, even as she fought off a thousand others. If he still saw her as Bea—the woman he'd once loved—maybe there was a way out. Not through force or fury, but through understanding.

She remembered Hawaii. The ocean, the drinks, the ease of that trip. A time when everything felt like it was falling into place.

Blanche hadn't approved of that trip. Called it tacky. But Bea had gone anyway and met Eddie—not the captor, not the liar, but the man who made her laugh by the sea.

That version of him had drawn her in. And now, she was going to bring him back. She wasn't done fighting—but this time, she would fight smart.

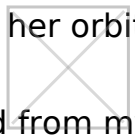
# Chapter 32

Chapter 32 begins with a jolt of pain and regret. My skull throbbed like it had been split open from the inside, and the nausea rising in my stomach felt thick and threatening. I turned to the side, waiting to throw up, but nothing came. Instead, I choked and spat onto the floor, staring at the blood, wondering how I had failed to see this unraveling. Bea had always been the sharpest person in any room. Of course, she wouldn't stay trapped forever. And I should've realized it—should've planned for more than just a locked door and a clean story. Panic had driven my decision, not strategy.

Lying there, busted and broken on the floor, I tried to move, but my ribs screamed and my arms gave out. Downstairs, I could only imagine what Bea and Jane were doing—calling the police, maybe? Toasting to my downfall? I almost hoped it was something simple like that, because anything else was worse. The idea of the two of them forming some alliance? That terrified me more than prison ever could. Jane had always seemed innocent, but she wasn't stupid. Bea, on the other hand, was never innocent. And now they were both loose, and I was helpless, exactly where I'd never allowed myself to be before.

It hadn't started this way. I hadn't gone to Hawaii looking for a target. Bea showing up had been a fluke. But when Charlie spotted her, sipping a drink near the pool, everything changed. Charlie had recognized her instantly—"That's Bea Mason," she said, like it meant something. To her, it did. To most women, Bea was a name, a brand, a symbol of reinvention. I hadn't understood the hype until I did a little research. Self-made. Two hundred million. An empire built from home decor and Southern nostalgia. She wasn't just wealthy. She was powerful. And power had always pulled me in like gravity.

Charlie was rich, yes, but it was old money—structured, supervised, limited. Her family gave her just enough to sparkle but never enough to actually burn anything down. Bea, though, had real capital. Her own name on the bank accounts. I started to see the potential, the gap she might have in her life, the opening I could fill. And when I finally approached her—casual, friendly, curious—I did it with the kind of confidence that comes from study, not luck. I knew what to say, how to lean in, how to make it seem like I belonged in her orbit.



Charlie had faded from my mind quickly after that. I left the resort without much fuss, packed my things, and rebooked a stay somewhere closer to where I suspected Bea had gone next. It wasn't stalking. It was strategic timing. Bea had mentioned her love for beach markets and hotel bars. I found the places she'd likely go and waited. Eventually, our paths crossed again, and I made sure it felt organic. I didn't force it—I gave her just enough curiosity to approach me. That was always the trick. Not chasing. Letting people think they were choosing.

The thing is, Bea was sharper than I gave her credit for. She didn't fall for flattery or gimmicks. What got her was sincerity—crafted, of course, but sincere enough to feel real. I told her about my modest upbringing, my struggles with purpose, how I admired what she'd built. I said I wanted to create something of my own. That I wasn't intimidated by strong women. She responded well to that. She wanted someone who saw her as a partner, not a competitor. And I played that role flawlessly.

But the further in I got, the harder it became to separate the performance from reality. Bea fascinated me. She was poised, calculating, decisive. But there were cracks—moments when she drank too much, when she looked too long at nothing, when she flinched at certain questions. I chalked it up to stress. Maybe trauma. I didn't realize then that beneath all that Southern polish was someone who'd done whatever it took to survive. Including getting rid of people who got in her way.

Later, when she told me about her mother's death, the version I got was sanitized—tragic, accidental, sad. I didn't ask for more. I didn't want to know. I had

seen the public records—no charges, no suspicions. But there was a small voice inside me that kept asking questions. And when Blanche hinted at the truth, the timeline made more sense than I was willing to admit. That’s when I started thinking: if Bea was capable of that, then what else had she done?

Even knowing all this, I hadn’t intended for it to spiral like this. Locking her away wasn’t part of some master plan. It was desperation. I wanted to protect the company. I wanted to protect myself. But deep down, I also wanted to protect Bea—from the outside world, from her worst impulses, and from the consequences I knew she wouldn’t be able to outrun.

Now, bleeding on the floor, every fantasy I’d built is collapsing. Bea is free. Jane might know the truth. And all I can do is wait and wonder which of them will come through the door first—and whether it’ll be with help or with vengeance.

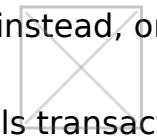
# Chapter 21

Chapter 21 begins with a veneer of normalcy, the keyword introducing a chapter that swings rapidly from cozy calm to pointed discomfort. After a pleasant dinner, conversation flows easily, wine loosens their smiles, and the glow of shared laughter briefly restores the illusion of harmony. But that peace begins to erode the moment they step back into the house. Eddie’s posture shifts—his jaw tightens, his voice flattens—and the connection they shared at dinner slips away. Rather than join the narrator in the living room, he pours himself another drink and heads out back, leaving her to wonder what soured his mood so quickly.

Later that night, the narrator wakes to find the other side of the bed still empty. Curious, she goes searching and discovers Eddie outside, fumbling near the boathouse with a flashlight. He claims he’s looking for a key he misplaced, muttering about needing to check something in the shed. His tone is strained, his words too casual. There’s no real urgency behind his explanation, and yet the task seems to carry weight. The narrator offers to help, but he brushes her off, insisting it’s nothing. Watching him from the porch, she notices the way his shoulders slump slightly—an unguarded moment of defeat or regret, perhaps—but when he turns to face her again, that moment is gone.

Back in the bedroom, she lies awake, turning over every strange detail in her mind. There’s a lingering chill in the room, not from the air but from the suspicion that something just beneath the surface is being hidden. Eddie’s behavior that night scratches at her peace. Why now? Why that key? She wonders if it’s connected to the other moments that haven’t added up—the quick shifts in his mood, the unfinished stories about Bea, the silence that fills the gaps in their conversations.

The next day brings no answers, only new complications. As she scrolls through her inbox, sipping her coffee, Eddie appears in the doorway, his laptop in hand and his expression unreadable. He asks, carefully but not casually, about several unexpected withdrawals from their shared account. Her heart skips, but she keeps her expression neutral, claiming they're for wedding preparations—dress fittings, vendor deposits, deposits she can't really prove. He doesn't press for receipts but suggests she use a new credit card instead, one he hands her right there at the kitchen island.



The moment feels transactional, not generous. Like a way to keep tabs under the guise of convenience. She nods, smiles, and accepts it, but inside, there's a tightening. Eddie never directly accuses her, but the question was clear. He doesn't trust her fully, just like she doesn't trust him. And yet they're planning a life together, inviting guests, choosing cake flavors. The contradiction of it all settles heavily on her shoulders.

Later that afternoon, the narrator sits alone, looking out at the lake from the back deck, the same view that once felt like a promise of peace. Now, every gentle ripple carries a whisper of secrets. She replays the conversation, the way he looked at her, and the odd timing of the bank issue. Eddie's past—especially his connection to Blanche and Bea—casts a long shadow, one that lengthens with every evasive smile and vague explanation.

She tries to dismiss the thoughts. Tells herself everyone has doubts. But it's getting harder to pretend she hasn't seen the cracks forming in the picture-perfect surface of their life. Trust is being tested in quiet ways, in late-night disappearances, in whispered accusations, in financial oversight masked as support.

And as the day slips into dusk, she wonders what else Eddie is hiding—what else lies locked behind doors, or perhaps, floating beneath still waters just out of reach.

# Chapter 20

Chapter 20 begins with a suggestion that feels more like a test—an invitation wrapped in nonchalance. Eddie, pouring coffee in the morning light, proposes a weekend at the lake, speaking casually as though the place didn’t carry the weight of two deaths. The narrator, mid-page in a bridal magazine, is momentarily thrown. It's not just the idea of going there—it’s what it might reveal. Her instincts tighten, warning her there’s something he’s not saying, but she agrees anyway, partly from curiosity, partly from fear of what her refusal might provoke.

Their drive to Smith Lake starts lighthearted enough. Rural Alabama rolls past the car windows, and lunch in Jasper offers a glimpse of a relaxed, charming Eddie. He fits in so seamlessly it’s unnerving—equally at home in designer suits and barbecue joints. The narrator plays along, trying to enjoy the ease between them, but unease simmers just beneath her smile. When they arrive at the lake house, the scenery turns serene and unnervingly still. The lake glistens in the sun, but its beauty feels deceptive, a veneer over something heavy and unresolved.

Inside, the house is designed to feel rustic, masculine, intentionally different from the refined elegance of their home in Thornfield Estates. Dark wood, nautical accents, and heavy furniture dominate the space. Bea may have designed it, but it feels like she was creating an image of Eddie—not herself. That realization unsettles the narrator. There’s a familiarity here that aligns too perfectly with Eddie’s preferences, which suggests Bea had been trying to mold something—or someone—into place. And while the decor seems benign, it hints at deeper attempts to control or preserve parts of their marriage.

Later, Eddie opens up unexpectedly, his voice low and reflective as he watches the water. The quiet around the lake, once peaceful, now feels oppressive. He talks about

the lake’s depth, the underwater forest left behind when the area was flooded. The idea of trees still standing beneath the surface, untouched and hidden, becomes a metaphor for everything left unsaid between them. The narrator imagines Bea’s body caught in those submerged branches, a haunting picture that lingers long after the conversation ends.

As the evening sets in, the mood remains subdued. The stillness of the lake wraps around the house like a blanket, making every creak and breeze feel amplified. While Eddie prepares dinner, the narrator walks out to the dock alone. She watches the gentle ripple of the water and tries to picture how things might have unfolded that night—how two women ended up dead in a place this calm. It doesn’t feel like a crime scene. And maybe that’s what makes it so terrifying.

Back inside, they eat by the window, the silence between them thicker than before. Eddie talks about how he didn’t sleep for weeks after it happened. About how every night, he imagined the noise Bea might’ve made as she fell, the splash, the last breath. The narrator listens but says little. She doesn’t know whether to feel sorry for him or scared of him. Maybe both.

Later, as she lies in the guestroom bed staring at the wooden beams above, she replays every word of their dinner. Every pause. Every look. It’s not what Eddie says that unnerves her most—it’s what he doesn’t. There’s no mention of Blanche, no direct description of what happened that night, no concrete answers. Just murmurs about darkness, trees, and silence.

Before she drifts off, she wonders if Eddie brought her here to test her loyalty or to see if she’d ask too many questions. Either way, she senses that something about this trip isn’t about relaxation. It’s about control. And that realization chills her far more than the deep waters outside ever could.

# Chapter 6

Chapter 6 begins with Eddie absent. His car isn’t in the garage, and I take Adele out for her walk alone, pretending the hollow in my chest isn’t disappointment. The puppy’s leash is light in my hand, and we head not into Thornfield’s manicured lanes, but downhill toward Mountain Brook Village. This isn’t just about changing scenery—it’s strategy. I want to be seen. By walking Adele where people don’t recognize me as the dog-walker, I’m not just someone with a leash—I’m someone connected to Eddie Rochester. That distinction matters more than I’d like to admit.

The streets are quiet, store windows gleaming in the early morning light. Adele trots happily beside me, her tail wagging like we’re both just out for a pleasant stroll. But beneath the surface, I’m rehearsing an illusion. I pass boutiques with items I’ve seen inside the houses I work in—overpriced throw pillows, pastel handbags, things that scream disposable income. And just as I’m starting to relax into the rhythm of it, a voice cuts in: “Jane?” Mrs. McLaren. She’s holding her coffee like a prop, dressed in head-to-toe athleisure and oozing the kind of Southern sweetness that always feels like a trap.

She steps closer, her gaze shifting to Adele. Her tone stays light, but her words scold. “Probably not safe to have the dogs out of the neighborhood.” It’s the kind of correction disguised as concern that digs deep. I smile and nod like I’ve been trained to, hiding the flare of humiliation that burns up my spine. To her, I’m a service worker who stepped too far from the invisible boundary meant to keep me in place. A dog-walker pretending to be something she’s not.

I head back toward Thornfield, my jaw tight, and let myself into Eddie’s house. Adele’s leash clicks against the door as I unclip her and let her out into the backyard. I should leave now—do the polite thing, pretend this was just a drop-off. But I don’t. I stay.

Something in me wants to linger, to feel out the edges of this space when no one is looking. And this time, I’m not looking for something to take. I’m looking for her.

There are no photographs on the living room walls, no clutter on the mantel. I notice the gaps where picture frames must have once been. The absence is louder than presence would be. I follow the pull of curiosity, heading upstairs. The second floor is dim, shadows lingering in corners. There’s art on the walls, elegant and curated, but nothing personal. It’s a house where someone removed their life in a hurry—or had it removed for them.

At the end of the hallway, beneath a round stained-glass window, there’s a table. And on that table sits a single framed photo. Just one. It’s Eddie and Bea. They’re standing on a beach, and the way he looks at her in the photo hits me like a punch. It’s not just that they’re attractive. It’s the way their bodies align, the way his eyes are fixed on her like she’s the sun. They fit. And seeing that makes me feel foolish. Of course he doesn’t want me. Not like that.

I’m still staring when a voice says, “That was in Hawaii.” I turn, startled, and the keys slip from my hand. Eddie is there, at the top of the stairs, leaning casually, watching me. He doesn’t seem surprised to find me in the hallway, and his presence suddenly makes the space feel smaller. “That’s where we met,” he says. “Hawaii, last year.”

I try to recover. I lie, say I was looking for the bathroom. He doesn’t call me on it, not exactly. Just gives me that smile that never quite reaches his eyes. He moves closer, talking about the other pictures—how he burned them. Wedding photos, house-building memories. All gone. But not this one. This one, he kept.

I ask why. Why keep just this one image? His answer is simple. He couldn’t bring himself to throw it away. And in that moment, something shifts. I see grief, yes, but I also see the door it left open. A void where something used to be. A void I’m stepping into. Not because I want to replace her. But because I want to matter to him.

His hand finds my elbow, fingers warm. “What happened was awful,” I say. He nods. But then, his voice drops low. “But you’re not sorry. Because her not being here means you can be.” His thumb moves against my arm, and every nerve in my body responds. I should step back. I should tell him he’s wrong. But I don’t.

Because he’s not.



# Chapter 25

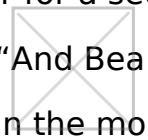
Chapter 25 opens with the kind of small, suburban ritual I never imagined myself participating in: a morning committee meeting. As I walk into Roasted, the local coffee shop where Thornfield's women hold court, I feel oddly composed. The pencil skirt and pink blouse are a far cry from the dog-walking uniform I used to wear in this very neighborhood. I settle in next to Campbell and Emily, both dressed in matching shades of athleisure that scream effortless wealth. Yet, for the first time, I don't feel completely out of place. My binder is color-coded and filled with clippings from garden magazines. Emily praises my organization, and I smile, basking in the glow of performative belonging. I don't mention how late I was up putting it together, or the odd noises from upstairs that I've chalked up to an overactive imagination—or pests, if I'm lucky.

As I open the binder to explain ideas for sprucing up the front beds, my ring catches the light and draws attention just as I'd hoped. Campbell immediately asks about the wedding. I say we haven't set a date, blaming the delays on everything happening with Tripp. It's partially true. Tripp's name hangs in the air like static. Emily leans in, voice lowered, and mentions that the police discovered Tripp had been at the lake. That part is new. Campbell's shock is genuine—she even knocks the table with her knee, rattling the silverware. There's a moment of silence, and I can feel their attention sharpen.

Trying to keep my tone casual, I speculate that the police must've found receipts or maybe a witness. I even laugh a little when Emily quips about Kardashian-style "receipts," but my stomach's in knots. When Campbell whispers, "So… he really did it?" I react too quickly, too strongly. My "of course he did" lands with a thud, and they both look at me. I fumble to recover, insisting the police wouldn't arrest him unless they were sure. It's a weak deflection, but it does the job—for now. Still, I feel the

energy shift. Campbell taps her nail against the table, eyes distant, then murmurs that Tripp wasn't violent—just sloppy, sometimes drunk, but not dangerous.

Emily cuts in, reminding us they'd been having problems. Their looks, aimed at me and then at each other, say more than their words. I push gently, pretending to be curious, playing dumb: "Tripp said there were rumors about Blanche and Eddie…" Their expressions falter for a second. Then Emily shrugs, almost bored. "They were together a lot," she says. "And Bea was never around." Campbell nods, confirming that Bea had all but vanished in the months before it all fell apart.



They remember Bea as someone who used to show up. She planned events, hosted parties, offered advice. Then, slowly, she stopped. Emily hints that something was going on long before Blanche died—something tied to Bea's mother, maybe, and not at all juicy. But I don't buy that. Tripp had mentioned tension between the two women. Now I hear the same echo from them. I can't help thinking the key to all of this lies buried in whatever passed between Bea and Blanche before Eddie ever entered the picture.

Curiosity prickles at me. I ask if Bea had a temper. They hesitate, and I watch the gears turn behind their perfectly glossed lips. These women don't lie outright, but they edit the truth like seasoned politicians. Their silence says more than anything else. Finally, Emily chuckles softly and says Bea was "intense." Campbell adds that she was "driven." No one says "angry." But it's there—in the pause, in the shrug, in the way Campbell quickly changes the subject.

I nod and go back to my binder, but inside, everything's buzzing. The threads are starting to connect. Bea's withdrawal, the whispers about Eddie and Blanche, the vague mention of her mother. Something happened back then—something that flipped a switch in Bea. And whatever it was, it still casts a shadow over everything. I smile at the right times, sip my coffee, and let them think I've moved on from the topic. But I haven't. Not even close.

# Chapter 18

Chapter 18 begins with Eddie leading Detective Laurent to the backyard, a gesture that seems casual but carries an undercurrent of tension. Inside, I busy myself with mundane tasks, trying to mirror Eddie's composed demeanor. However, the presence of law enforcement in our home shatters the illusion of safety that wealth and status are supposed to provide. Detective Laurent's friendly inquiry about our relationship timeline feels more like an interrogation, and my rehearsed responses feel inadequate. She mentions my past as Eddie's dog-walker, a detail that seems trivial but now feels loaded with significance. Her departure leaves behind a business card, a tangible reminder that this is far from over.

Eddie's return from the backyard marks a shift in the atmosphere; his usual composure is replaced by a palpable unease. He reveals that Blanche's body has been found, and the circumstances suggest foul play. The revelation that both Blanche's death and Bea's disappearance are now considered homicides sends a chill through me. The idea that someone we knew could be capable of such violence is unsettling. Eddie's assurance that the police view him as a grieving widower rather than a suspect offers little comfort. The possibility that I might be questioned looms large, threatening to expose parts of my past I've tried to keep hidden.

Eddie's attempt to console me feels hollow; his suggestion to focus on our upcoming wedding seems disconnected from the gravity of the situation. I share a fragment of my past, mentioning a foster family in Arizona that left me wary of authorities. This partial truth serves as a shield, a way to explain my apprehension without revealing too much. Eddie listens, his concern evident, but I can't shake the feeling that he's more focused on maintaining appearances than addressing the underlying issues. The weight of recent events presses down, making the future feel uncertain and precarious.

In the days that follow, the community's response is a mix of sympathy and curiosity. Neighbors drop off casseroles and offer condolences, but their eyes search for signs of scandal. I navigate these interactions with practiced politeness, all the while feeling like an imposter in my own life. The line between genuine concern and gossip is blurred, leaving me questioning everyone's motives. Eddie, meanwhile, retreats further into himself, his silence speaking volumes. Our conversations become strained, each of us tiptoeing around the elephant in the room.



As the investigation progresses, the media begins to take interest, adding another layer of scrutiny. Reporters linger near our home, and headlines speculate about Eddie's involvement. The pressure mounts, and I find myself constantly on edge, anticipating the next revelation. Eddie's reassurances become less convincing, his own confidence seemingly eroding. The facade we've maintained starts to crack, revealing the fragility beneath. In quiet moments, I question everything: our relationship, our future, and the truths we've both concealed.

The discovery of Blanche's body and the reclassification of Bea's disappearance as a homicide have far-reaching implications. Not only do they cast a shadow over Eddie's past, but they also threaten to unearth secrets I've buried deep. The life I've built here, the identity I've assumed, all feel precarious in the face of potential exposure. Each interaction with law enforcement, each probing question, brings me closer to the edge. I grapple with the fear that my past will collide with my present, unraveling everything. In this atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty, trust becomes a scarce commodity.

Amidst the turmoil, I find myself reflecting on the nature of truth and deception. The narratives we've constructed, the lies we've told, all seem to be converging. Eddie's past, once a distant concern, now feels intimately connected to my own. The boundaries between victim and perpetrator blur, leaving me questioning where I stand. In this web of secrets, the only certainty is that the truth has a way of surfacing, no matter how deeply it's buried. As the investigation continues, I brace myself for the inevitable reckoning.

# Chapter 37

Chapter 37 — Chapter 37 begins in a hospital room that smells like antiseptic and regret. I haven’t been admitted since I broke my elbow at fifteen trying to impress a skater boy. I hated hospitals then, and being here now hasn’t improved my opinion. I’m told I’ll be discharged tomorrow, but I don’t even know where “home” is anymore. The estate in Thornfield is gone—burned down to the bones—along with any future I thought I was building. Maybe it’s strange that what I fixate on isn’t the fact that my fiancé trapped his wife in a panic room. The real shock lies in how much sense that truth makes, as if all the disjointed feelings I had before had been waiting for confirmation.

Now, everything lines up—my doubts, my discomfort, the flickers of instinct I’d ignored. When Bea ran up those stairs to get to Eddie, I saw something I didn’t recognize in myself. That love—wild, desperate, reckless—wasn’t mine. It never had been. Eddie might have said the right things, but whatever he felt for me didn’t burn like that. When the panic room door opened, the fire rushed out like it had been waiting. I backed away as instinct took over, stumbling into the night. I ran, the grass scraping my knees as I hit the lawn, my lungs tight from the smoke. In the end, I did what I’ve always done. I saved myself.

That realization cuts deeper than I expected. Because if I saved myself, I also left them behind. I survived the fire, walked away without burns—just smoke in my throat and ash in my memories. Nurses say I’m lucky, and I suppose I am. But luck doesn’t change the fact that my world has burned to the ground. I'm floating now, untethered from everything I thought I had. Just as I’m sinking into that thought, a quiet knock pulls me back. It’s Detective Laurent. I sit up too quickly, heart spiking as if it still expects bad news.

She enters like it’s a social visit, smiling gently, her posture relaxed. But her eyes are too observant. I can’t read her expression, and that makes me uneasy. I nod when she asks to talk and try to seem normal, like I’m just another victim. She starts gently, asking how I’m doing. My throat still hurts, so I rasp that I’m okay. “It all feels unreal,” I say, because it does—too much like a movie, too little like a life. Then she drops the real news, the kind that makes your stomach twist.

She tells me Eddie didn’t make it out. I nod slowly, because I’ve practiced this moment. I pretend I didn’t know, and it isn’t hard. What catches me off guard is her next statement—that their working theory is Eddie set the fire on purpose. That he tried to kill me and himself. The shock I show isn’t an act. I genuinely hadn’t considered that angle. “He did it on purpose?” I ask, and she nods, confirming it with a sigh that carries too many stories.

Then she tells me what the investigation has uncovered—Eddie’s car was seen near the lake the night Blanche disappeared. A neighbor reported seeing him leave the house late. The pieces are forming a picture, and it's worse than I imagined. The detective says they suspect Eddie murdered Blanche and possibly Bea too. My hand flies to my mouth in disbelief. It’s a lot to absorb. She mentions Tripp, how he was used to flush Eddie out, how he’s been cleared. It’s strange feeling sorry for someone like Tripp, but I can’t help it. He was a pawn, just like the rest of us.

Detective Laurent leans in and takes my hand. She says she’s sorry. But my thoughts are spinning. If they think Bea is dead, then that means they never found her body. And if that’s true, she’s still out there. My heart thuds at the thought. Bea—alive and hiding—possibly watching everything unfold from some quiet corner. The detective mentions they may reach out again with more questions. I thank her, keeping my voice even, but inside, I’m already somewhere else.

As she walks to the door, I can't stop myself. I ask, “Did you… is Eddie’s body…” The question trails off, but it’s heavy with meaning. What I really want to know is, was he really in there? Is this over? Or am I still a character in someone else’s unfinished story?

# Chapter 15

Chapter 15 opens with a gathering at Eddie’s place—the official site of the Neighborhood Beautification Committee’s latest meeting. Or rather, *my* house, as I’ve been trying to remind myself, though the words don’t always feel true. As I carry the empty wineglasses to the sink, I can’t ignore the dull ache of being in a beautiful home that doesn’t entirely feel like mine yet.

Most of the committee meeting had been fluff—half-hearted discussions about seasonal wreaths and Pinterest boards masked a more obvious motive. Everyone just wanted a peek inside the house, to mentally rearrange the space that used to belong to Bea. The way their eyes darted from the mantle to the corners, quietly assessing what had changed or stayed, was impossible to miss.

Campbell and Emily lingered after the others had left, insisting they wanted to help clean up. But I knew better—they weren’t here for housework. They were here to poke around, to prod at the shell Bea left behind and maybe get me to crack.

Campbell complimented the house, noting it felt “brighter,” which Emily agreed with through a lazy sip of wine. I knew nothing major had changed since they were last here, so their comments had to be about more than curtains or lighting. It felt like code for something else—maybe a passive-aggressive way of saying *it’s still hers*.

I lobbed a compliment back about Bea’s taste, lightly laughing, hoping to seem self-aware but not insecure. It was a tactic—to see if they’d bite, reveal something unguarded. And when Campbell mentioned how jealous Blanche had been over Bea’s Birmingham Magazine spread, I felt like I was finally hearing something honest.

Their small talk about past feuds between Bea and Blanche made the ghost of this house even louder. I didn’t mind. I *wanted* these glimpses into Bea’s life, hoping that if

I could piece her together fully, she'd stop feeling so present in every creak and hallway.

But reminders of Bea weren't limited to conversations. Last week, a floral delivery showed up unannounced—part of a recurring order Bea had set up. Eddie had never canceled it, and now lilies and magnolias sat in the entryway like her lingering perfume.



Emily and Campbell eventually made their exit, all smiles and light kisses on the cheek. Their compliments were polite but their language betrayed them. They thanked *Eddie* for hosting, as if I was just a guest in his life, not the woman building a future with him.

As soon as they were gone, I sank onto the couch with my iPad. I needed a plan—a way to tighten my grip before everything slipped out of reach. And if Eddie wasn't going to propose, I needed to show him what his hesitation might cost.

When he walked in an hour later, I already had the UCLA graduate program page pulled up. He greeted me with warmth, leaned down for a kiss, and then paused as he saw the screen. His entire body stiffened.

"UCLA?" he asked, his voice tight.

I kept my expression even and explained I'd been thinking about grad school, how I had to consider my own future. His reaction was immediate—protective, tense, maybe even a little panicked. He reminded me that I belonged *here*, with *him*, and not across the country chasing old dreams.

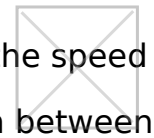
But I didn't back down. I told him I've spent my life depending only on myself, and I can't stop doing that now just because he's here. My tone was measured, my hand on his wrist meant to soothe, not provoke—but I knew I was pushing.

He stormed off toward the bedroom, and I thought I'd blown everything. I'd gambled too hard, gone too far. And the truth was, I couldn't even apply to UCLA—I never

finished college.

But then he returned. And in his hand was a small velvet box.

The moment he dropped to one knee, the world stilled. I didn’t hear anything but his voice saying, “Marry me.” The emerald glimmered in the box, ringed by a halo of diamonds, too large, too bold—and yet, undeniably perfect.



It was dizzying, the speed with which everything changed. My doubt, his silence, the surge of emotion between us—it all vanished under that single question. And beneath the gem’s cold brilliance was the warmth of something new, something mine.

# Chapter 28

Chapter 28 begins with a question I barely realize I’m asking, my words looser than they should be after three glasses of sauvignon blanc. As the car winds down from the country club, everything feels quiet—too quiet—but Eddie’s sigh fills the stillness. I ask if he’s worried, and while his answer isn’t entirely clear, the tension in his voice speaks volumes. His hand finds my knee briefly before returning to the wheel, his face shadowed in the dim dashboard light. There’s a tiredness around his eyes I hadn’t noticed before. I tell him it’s going to be alright now that Tripp is in custody, but Eddie doesn’t seem convinced.

He reminds me that arrests don’t end stories—they begin public ones. There will be press coverage, legal proceedings, accusations, and more rumors. The wine buzz makes it harder for me to focus, but something in his voice feels like a warning. I think of what Campbell mentioned—the incident with the caterer, the sharp edge in Eddie’s temper. But I push the thought aside. Eddie told me to trust him. I said I would. So I press his leg gently, reassuring him that we have each other. His lips brush my cheek and I try to hold onto that moment, even though the faint scent of bourbon beneath his cologne rattles something inside me.

As we pull into the driveway, the lights of the house greet us like a promise. The sheer beauty of it still hasn’t worn off. The grandeur, the quiet perfection—sometimes it feels like a dream I’m afraid to wake from. It’s hard to believe this life is mine now. I watch Eddie from across the room as he checks his emails, his face serious in the glow of his laptop. I pour myself another glass of wine and decide to slip away. That bathtub has become my private sanctuary, the one place where I can pretend the world isn’t unraveling outside our walls.

The water is already steaming when I sink in, and for a few minutes, I just let my mind float. The pressure of the evening, the shadow of Tripp’s arrest, the guilt and uncertainty—it all drifts further away under the warmth. I wonder how long it will take for things to feel truly stable, for that ache of doubt to disappear entirely. Sometimes I convince myself that what I have now is real because I need it to be. Eddie can be intense, yes, but he's offered me something I never thought I’d have: security. A beautiful house, a future, a place in his world. And I want to believe it’s built on something solid.



But there are cracks. Small ones. Tripp’s warnings linger in my mind, even now. He’d said Eddie and Bea were poison. I’d laughed it off then, but now I can’t help noticing how Eddie avoids talking about Bea in detail. And I don’t ask, not directly. Because asking might shatter this version of life we’ve created, and I’m not ready for that. In the quiet moments, I sometimes feel like I’m playing a role I haven’t fully earned. Like I’ve stepped into someone else’s life and everyone is waiting for me to slip up.

The wine leaves me drowsy, but not enough to fully relax. I towel off and move slowly through the bedroom, glancing at my phone for any updates, texts, missed calls. Nothing from Emily, nothing new from the news alerts I’ve set. I check Tripp’s name just in case, but the headlines are quiet for now. Maybe the storm is settling. Or maybe it’s just the eye of it.

I find Eddie in his study, still working, and lean in the doorway for a minute watching him. There’s something magnetic about his focus, his stillness. I want to step inside, wrap my arms around him, but I hesitate. He looks up and smiles faintly. I smile back, but something flickers in me—like the warmth I’d been soaking in has begun to cool. Tomorrow, we’ll go on pretending. But tonight, doubt curls up quietly beside me, and I let it stay.

# Chapter 33

Chapter 33 opens with the narrator analyzing the personality contrasts within their social orbit. At the center is Bea—confident, driven, and remarkably self-assured in a world where appearances reign. Jane, by comparison, plays the part of someone who's simply fallen into things, though the narrator senses there’s more calculation beneath her modest surface. As for themselves, they admit to being neither bold like Bea nor passive like Jane, but rather someone who observes, rarely steering the direction of events. This self-awareness shapes how they recall the ongoing power struggle between Bea and Blanche. The tension was always there—sharp looks, veiled remarks, and flirtations that left behind a trace of competition.

The memory of one evening remains particularly vivid. Blanche had been especially forward, casually brushing her hand against the narrator's arm while discussing color swatches for her home. It was part of the design project, but it felt like something more. Meetings with Blanche became frequent, under the pretense of checking fixtures and finishes, though her compliments always seemed to target more than his taste in wood trim. Bea, never one to ignore a challenge, noticed. She began dropping by unannounced or calling mid-meeting, her tone light but her questions pointed. The narrator had chalked it up to jealousy at the time, unaware it might have been something deeper—perhaps fear of what Blanche knew.

The climax of this emotional triangle arrives when Blanche makes her intentions crystal clear. One evening, after too much wine and too few boundaries, she leans in with unmistakable intent. The narrator falters but ultimately steps away, murmuring something about Bea, loyalty, the weight of promises. Blanche, unfazed, shifts from seduction to accusation. Her words slice through the moment: *You don’t really know her, do you?* She tells him about the fall. About how Bea’s mother died at the bottom of the stairs after a charity event went sideways. About how, conveniently, Bea

inherited everything. The suggestion is never stated outright—but it's enough to haunt.

From that moment, the narrator begins seeing shadows where before there had only been sheen. Old memories gain new interpretations. Like the time Bea fired her assistant, Anna, claiming theft. It had been resolved swiftly—too cleanly. The police were never involved, and the replacement was in place by Monday. At the time, it seemed like effective management. But now, it echoes with suspicion. Anna had worked for Bea for years. She was loyal. It didn’t make sense. Unless Bea had wanted her gone.

All of this begins to unravel the narrator’s certainty. Bea’s kindness starts to feel curated. Her confidence, maybe more like control. And those little moments—gentle persuasion, quiet redirections—start to look like manipulation in hindsight. What once felt like Southern elegance now holds a brittle edge, where charm is a weapon and hospitality a disguise. In Southern social circles, grace is prized, but so is power—and Bea has always played both roles with startling ease.

The narrator now questions whether love was ever the foundation of their relationship or simply another carefully chosen element of Bea’s image. There had been moments—yes, laughter, shared dreams, quiet nights—but even those now feel distant, almost scripted. The idea that Bea could have pushed her mother, that she might have framed an employee, that she might be capable of orchestrating more than just dinner parties—it’s unsettling. And yet, it aligns too well with the pattern forming in the narrator’s memory. Bea doesn’t break under pressure. She adapts. She survives.

This revelation turns internal as the narrator confronts their own complicity. They hadn’t asked questions, had chosen comfort over curiosity, and now that choice weighs heavily. Staying quiet, turning a blind eye—it had been easy then. Now, it feels like a failure. Bea’s world had always been curated, but now it feels constructed, like a stage built plank by plank to present an illusion. And if that illusion had begun with a

push down the stairs, then what else had been staged for convenience?

As the storm of questions brews, the narrator is left with a bitter truth. Bea might love him—or might not—but either way, she’s not the woman he thought he married. The life they built, the business they run, the reputation they uphold—all of it might rest on the same delicate foundation: secrets no one dared to speak aloud. And in this world of polished silver and whispered rivalries, silence has always been the most dangerous tool of all.



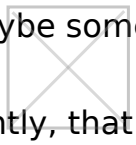
# Chapter 26

Chapter 26 begins with me walking into a place I once avoided at all costs—the church where John Rivers works. It’s not one of the grand Southern churches that stretch across whole blocks; this one looks more like a forgotten government building. Its brick walls are dull, the only indication of holiness being the stained-glass window where Jesus stands among lambs. I’ve put on a carefully chosen outfit—blue pleated skirt, crisp white blouse, matching ballet flats—something that looks polished without mimicking the Emily-and-Campbell type. When I checked my reflection this morning, I felt unfamiliar, but not in a bad way. This version of me feels closer to something real, something balanced between survival and reinvention.

The girl at the desk greets me with a bright smile, expecting maybe a donation, and she’s not completely wrong. I ask for John, adding an exaggerated Southern drawl, and the smile dims slightly. She points me to the music room, where guitar chords echo faintly down the hall. It smells like weak coffee and old paper, the kind of scent that clings to forgotten places. When I walk in, John doesn’t immediately recognize me, and that half-second of hesitation is everything I need to feel in control. He’s trying to play the part—polished shirt, combed hair, fresh sneakers—but it’s a costume, one he bought with money he blackmailed me for. And I’ve come to shut it down.

I don’t waste time. I tell him I spoke with his “Phoenix contact.” I had called the number he’d given me—the one he dangled over my head like a leash—and discovered it led to a private investigator hired by Georgie Smith. My supposed aunt. She’d been looking for a niece who might’ve gone by the name Helen Burns. I fed the investigator a story—half-truths and well-placed misdirection. I told him I’d known Helen in foster care, that she’d gotten into drugs and drifted away. I made it sound like she was long gone. More importantly, I warned him not to trust John Rivers.

The moment I bring it up, John’s face goes pale. Watching him squirm almost feels worth the price of everything he’s put me through. Almost. I tell him the PI won’t be calling him back. I painted John as a con artist with a pattern—someone who preyed on women like Georgie, making empty promises. It wasn’t true, not entirely. But it was close enough to stick. I see it in his eyes: fear, realization, the collapse of control. He tries to fight back, accusing me of running, of hiding, of using him when I needed a place to stay. Maybe some of that’s true. But none of it gives him leverage anymore.



I remind him, gently, that he has no more power here. And just in case he’s thinking of trying again, I make sure his boss, Reverend Ellis, sees me donate a sizable check for the church’s music ministry. Now, if John tries anything, he’ll have to explain why someone generous enough to support their sound system deserves to be harassed. My name—Jane Rochester—will appear in every church bulletin from now on, right alongside Eddie’s. I want that reminder to burn every Sunday. I leave the building a few thousand dollars lighter but a hundred pounds freer.

As I sit behind the wheel, I tell myself I’m not that girl anymore. I didn’t kill Mr. Brock. But I didn’t save him either. That distinction matters—at least to me. He died in that house, clutching his chest while I sat just a room away. He never asked for help. And I never offered. He let Jane die. Not me—the other Jane. The one who was my best friend, my chosen sister, the girl who used to sleep next to me in that cold room and never got warm again.

Jane had been fragile—too small, too sick too often. She needed care, and the Brocks never gave it. When she caught something worse than the usual stomach bug, her cough rattled her whole frame. Her fever climbed day after day. I begged them to take her to the doctor, but they refused. They said she was faking. That she’d be fine. One night, she wasn’t fine. She died beside me, burning with fever, slipping away while I held her hand and whispered promises I couldn’t keep.

Mr. Brock never faced consequences. But the night he clutched his chest in pain, I didn’t rush to help. I let it play out. Maybe he would’ve died anyway. Or maybe not.

But that night felt like balance. Like justice paid its dues, however late. Jane didn’t deserve to die. He did.

Now, I’m free of John, free of Brock, free of that past. I have Eddie. I have this life. And no one—not John, not the Brocks, not even the ghost of Helen Burns—is going to take it away.



# Chapter 9

Chapter 9 begins with a word—whirlwind—and that's the only way to describe how things with Eddie have moved. But every time I think it, I remember Bea, who once described falling for Eddie the same way. Maybe that's just his pattern: sweeping women off their feet so fast they don't realize they've been picked up until their feet no longer touch the ground.

I've given him another shot, but it's on my terms. No fancy dinners in Mountain Brook, no letting Thornfield gossip circles catch wind just yet. I want the truth about us to emerge when I'm ready, when I've become untouchable in that world. Until then, secrecy gives me power—a kind of silent ownership over the best story in town.

So we date in tucked-away spots with menus I pretend to understand and wine I pretend to like. Our knees brush in movie theaters, our laughter lingers in parks as we walk. His hand always finds mine, his voice always lowers when he speaks to me. It's heady, this feeling—not of being chosen, but of wanting him back just as much. And I do.

Desire wasn't new. I'd wanted things all my life—rings in velvet boxes, soft sweaters on sale racks, a place that felt like it was mine. But I'd spent years swatting away leers and side glances from men who saw want as weakness. That's why this is different. Wanting Eddie makes me feel powerful.

The first time he kissed me, the sidewalk was slick with rain and the air smelled like rosemary from a nearby planter. His mouth tasted of wine, and his hands were gentle, cupping my jaw in a way that made me feel seen. I'd pulled back, sure, but it wasn't rejection—it was strategy. Timing matters. I wasn't going to be just another quick story for him.

So for now, it’s only kisses and hands that linger just long enough to leave goosebumps. I can feel how much he wants more, and I like that tension. Let him earn it. Let him wait.

But it’s not just the heat between us that keeps me drawn to him. It’s the way he remembers things—the way his attention turns toward me like it’s something sacred. One afternoon over sandwiches, I tell a half-truth about a childhood memory involving cream soda, masking my real past with the phrase “my dad” and leaving the rest unsaid. I didn’t expect to say it. It slipped out.

The next day, his fridge is stocked with that same soda, in glass bottles and with a label so elegant it might as well have been imported. He never asked for more details. He just … heard me. And that alone felt more intimate than a thousand confessions.

John has noticed something, of course. His eyes follow me through our apartment like a hawk circling prey. I let him wonder. Let him stew. It’s not his business anymore, and soon it won’t even be his reality—I’m slipping from that world with every passing day.

And then it happens.

While dropping off Bear, I hear it—Mrs. Reed’s voice floating from the kitchen. “Eddie is dating someone.” My heart kicks. I’ve been waiting for this moment. For the neighborhood to begin whispering, unsure who she is, never suspecting it’s the girl who hands over their leashes and picks up after their dogs.

I beam as I hand her the leash. She tries her usual routine, casual curiosity with a sugar-slick smile, trying to draw out anything I might’ve seen or heard. “Have you noticed anyone new around the Rochester house?” I shrug, offer a bland “I don’t think so,” and walk out like the secret doesn’t belong to me.

The second I’m out the door, I text Eddie to confirm dinner at his place. And when I show up, the table is set, candles flickering low, wine already breathing in glasses. Whether he cooked it or not doesn’t matter—he’d planned for me. That’s enough.

Afterward, I sip wine slowly while he lingers in the kitchen, pouring himself whiskey. We kiss again, his mouth warm with oak and smoke. And when he leans into me, I feel something unspoken click into place, like the story we're building just found its next page.

I turn away from him slightly, just enough to catch our reflections in the glass doors. "This has been the loveliest night," I say, not meeting his eyes. "I'm really going to miss this place."



And I mean it. Not just because the house is stunning, not just because it smells like cedar and cinnamon and safety. But because for the first time in a long time, I want to stop running. I want to stay. I want this story to last.

# Chapter 11

Chapter 11 begins with a calculated step into the world of Thornfield Estates, as I craft my first planned “coincidence” with Emily Clark and Campbell Reed. Strolling Adele through the neighborhood provides the perfect pretext to insert myself into their line of sight. I’m not just walking a dog—I’m walking *our* dog, subtly announcing that I’m not an employee anymore but Eddie’s partner, and that detail doesn’t go unnoticed.

Their oversized sunglasses hide most of their expressions, but the tension in their posture and the slight uptick of eyebrows tell me they weren’t expecting this development. I keep my tone light, casual, as if I’ve lived here for years and not weeks, and when I mention Eddie, I see the surprise flicker across Emily’s face. The invitation to her house is extended more out of curiosity than warmth, but I accept, knowing this is exactly what I wanted.

Once inside Emily’s perfectly curated kitchen, I settle onto one of the high stools, carefully mirroring their tone and pace in conversation. They volley questions with careful smiles, all of them phrased like casual chat, but each one seeking gaps in my story. I tread carefully—mentioning how Eddie and I met, how long I’ve known him, never overexplaining, never letting the cracks show.

It’s a test, and I know it. But I pass. Emily offers a glass of juice and an approving smile that almost feels genuine, while Campbell’s congratulations are cool but present—just enough to mark a shift in status.

At that counter, with the hum of a sleek refrigerator and the clink of glasses in the background, I realize the social texture here is deeper than appearances suggest. It’s not just about who throws the best Christmas party or who wears the right shade of beige—these women operate with layered dynamics. The absences of Bea and Blanche hang over us, unspoken but heavy, the past stretching through every conversation like

a shadow.

They talk about community events, neighborhood updates, shared memories that don’t include me, and I nod along, careful not to insert myself too boldly. I laugh in the right places, ask thoughtful questions, and give just enough of myself to appear open without revealing too much. Each exchange feels like I’m picking up pieces of a puzzle I wasn’t invited to solve, but now must.



This meeting isn’t just a win—it’s an initiation. I leave Emily’s house with a half-empty glass of citrus juice and the sense that I’ve cracked something open. They may not trust me yet, but I’m no longer invisible. And in a place like Thornfield, being seen is half the battle.

Later that evening, as I recount the details to myself, I notice how natural I’d made it look—how smoothly I’d shifted my posture, voice, even my smile to match theirs. That adaptability has always been my edge. I used to think of it as survival, but now I wonder if it’s something closer to strategy.

But even as I inch toward acceptance, the feeling of not truly belonging doesn’t fade. I can mimic the walk and talk, dress the part, even speak in their soft, Southern lilts if needed—but I’ll never have the shared high school memories, the godparents in common, the husbands who all grew up hunting together. Those bonds can’t be fabricated, and I know that no matter how well I perform, I’m still building from the outside.

There’s also the matter of Eddie. The women didn’t say it outright, but I saw the way Emily’s gaze lingered when I said his name. There’s history there—maybe admiration, maybe something more—and I don’t yet know where I fit in it. It’s not jealousy, exactly, but a recognition that Eddie has been a fixed figure in their world far longer than I have.

Still, I can’t let that stop me. I know how to wait, how to plant roots in rocky soil and let them take hold quietly. This was only the first step. What matters now is staying in the game long enough to turn tentative acceptance into permanence.

# Chapter 16

Chapter 16 begins with a confession that still feels surreal: I’m engaged. Not just in theory, but actually wearing a sparkling, heavy emerald ring on my finger—one Eddie chose long before I even knew a proposal was on the horizon. It’s not just the size or the cut that makes me feel breathless—it’s the fact that someone picked me, saw me, and wanted a future with me without needing to be convinced.

For a girl who grew up being left out, overlooked, and shuffled around, that act of deliberate love carries more weight than gold. Passing the little bridal shop I’ve walked by so many times, I feel something unexpected fluttering in my chest—curiosity wrapped in longing. And when I finally step through its old wooden door, greeted by warmth and low lighting, I don’t feel out of place; I feel like someone who belongs there.

The boutique feels worlds away from the chaotic, plastic-wrapped, fluorescent-lit bridal megastores. There’s no frenzy here—just elegance, charm, and dresses draped like whispers over antique furniture. Huntley, with her picture-perfect blonde chignon and classic black sheath dress, floats toward me with effortless grace, her eyes going straight to the emerald on my hand.

She doesn’t ask how much it cost, doesn’t comment on carats, but I see her expression shift—something subtle, a quiet acknowledgment of status. I never imagined I’d care about fabrics like duchess satin or shades like candlelight ivory, but here I am, sipping champagne and talking veils. Somehow, I’ve crossed into a world I used to only observe from afar.

My thoughts swirl with tulle and French lace as I leave the shop, only to run into Emily outside, clutching a coffee and exuding designer fragrance. Her delight is genuine—she squeals, hugs me, demands to see the ring, and I oblige, though I feel

awkward trying to show it off like I’m used to it. The moment is saccharine and shimmering, and for once, I lean into it without second-guessing myself.

Emily asks the usual questions—when, where, how big—and I realize I’ve barely thought beyond the ring. I’ve fantasized about the marriage, the identity of being Mrs. Rochester, but not the spectacle of a wedding. Now I picture it clearly: Eddie’s family lining rows in a church while mine is a ghost town of empty pews and a single unwelcome guest chewing cereal.

I’m still processing that when I stop by Whole Foods for groceries. The soothing lighting and expensive cheese selections are a comfort, though I find myself missing the simplicity of boxed mac and cheese. I toy with the idea of buying junk food, but the organic hummus stares back judgmentally, and I sigh.

Then comes a voice I recognize, oily and unwelcome—Tripp Ingraham. His appearance has improved slightly since I last saw him, but the smirk is the same, and his words drip with casual misogyny. He mentions my engagement before I even do, proof that Emily’s lips aren’t as sealed as promised.

His tone makes my skin crawl, his insinuations about Eddie and women and boats laced with venom. I make a quick exit, but not before he lobs a final comment that stings harder than it should: “Women have bad luck around Eddie Rochester and boats.” I walk away, but the words follow me like shadows.

Back in the car, unease knots in my stomach, Tripp’s warning slithering between my ribs. It’s absurd, I tell myself—Eddie wasn’t even there when Bea drowned, and they were drunk. Still, the image of her lifeless, pale beneath the water, refuses to leave me.

I try to refocus on the good—the boutique, the ring, Emily’s excited hug—but anxiety curls at the edges of my thoughts. Stepping into the house, I find Eddie already home, looking relaxed and happy in his usual crisp button-down and shorts. His warm greeting should be enough to steady me.

But he sees the tension on my face before I can hide it. “Everything okay?” he asks, brow furrowing. And I smile, but behind it, I wonder: is anything ever as perfect as it seems?



# Chapter 38

Chapter 38 — Chapter 38 marks a strange kind of calm after the chaos, the kind that settles in when wounds begin to close but everything still aches. At Emily’s house, I get the guest room with the floral sheets and a stack of crime novels by the bed. She spoils me at first—smoothies with fresh pineapple, ice cream that soothes my throat, takeout containers I don’t have to clean up after. Even Adele seems to understand this is a safe place. She sleeps at my feet each night, her weight grounding me to the moment. For a few days, I let myself believe that things are going to be okay.

But it doesn’t stay like that for long. Just five days in, the errands begin—innocent at first. A quick trip into the village for pastries, then a detour to Whole Foods for a list Emily’s made. By the third week, I’m walking Major, her shih tzu, like I’ve always lived in this neighborhood. As I stroll past neat lawns and well-trimmed hedges, I start to wonder if I invented the last six months. Maybe none of it happened—no fire, no Eddie, no house in the woods where I believed dreams might come true. But then we pass the empty lot where the mansion once stood, and reality hits like cold water.

All that’s left now is scorched earth, a shell of crime tape, and my own swirling grief. Still, I go there, like someone visiting a grave, hoping for a whisper from the past. I imagine Bea stepping out of the smoke, still composed, telling me there was meaning in everything we went through. But there’s no sign, just the silence of a ruined place. I feel like a girl caught in someone else’s nightmare, let loose just before the ending. The sadness creeps in more than the fear—mourning not just the people I lost, but the version of myself that had once believed in something new.

Just as I turn to leave, with Major happily tugging the leash, my phone buzzes. The number is unfamiliar but local—Birmingham. A man’s slow, molasses-thick voice greets me: “Is this Jane Bell?” I confirm, cautious. He introduces himself as Richard

Lloyd, Eddie’s lawyer, and the name hits like a hard echo. I remember Eddie handing his business card to John, and suddenly the past doesn’t feel so far away. Richard asks to see me—soon. I want to decline, but I look at the scorched place behind me and wonder, foolishly, if this is the sign I’ve been waiting for.

The law office is exactly what you'd expect from someone like Richard. Heavy furniture, leather chairs, hunting magazines, and enough taxidermy photos to give any animal lover chills. He appears in a suit that’s seen better days, looking like he drinks at lunch and flirts inappropriately by two. Still, I paste on the polite smile Eddie once said he liked, shake Richard’s hand, and introduce myself with a practiced ease. “Call me Jane,” I say, trying not to show how unsettled I feel. He leads me to his office, where deer heads and shotgun trophies greet me at every corner.

What comes next shouldn’t be surprising, but it is. Richard says Eddie changed his will not long after our engagement. He admits he tried to talk him out of it, and I hear that familiar ring of disbelief behind his words. But my mind is buzzing too loudly to take offense. Eddie left me something. Maybe it was guilt. Maybe it was strategy. Or maybe he thought Bea would return, and this was his version of damage control. Whatever the reason, I’ve been named in the paperwork.

Richard slides a thick leather folder across the desk—inside, my name now appears beside what once belonged to Bea. Her shares, her company, everything under Eddie’s control after she vanished—now, legally mine. I hold it on my lap, the weight not just legal, but emotional. My fingers don’t tremble, but they feel heavy, like I’m carrying more than paper. I stare down at the folder, wondering if ownership is the same as closure.

I’m told the company is now under my name. Richard makes a few notes, as if this is routine, as if lives and legacies are swapped every day. But for me, this moment isn’t about wealth. It’s about the burden of a story I didn’t write, but somehow became the ending of. A part of me wants to walk out of there and leave it all behind. Another part needs to see this through—to understand what it means to inherit someone else’s

broken empire.

Power, like fire, leaves ashes. What matters is what you rebuild from them.



# Chapter 24

Chapter 24 begins with an innocent question—“Are you okay?”—but what follows reveals how far from okay things really are. The days have become heavy with heat, but my morning jogs bring a short-lived clarity, the kind that comes from movement and quiet. I like the early hours, before the world fully wakes, before the pretense sets in. The air is still, the sun soft, and for a few moments, I feel like myself again—whoever that’s becoming. My runs sometimes cross paths with Emily and Campbell. Emily always waves, but Campbell’s smile feels like it’s being pulled too tightly across her face, as if she’s clenching something behind her teeth. It makes me wonder if she suspects something. Or knows more than she’s letting on.

The wedding dress hangs upstairs, still wrapped in plastic, its elegance now tinged with unease. I’d bought it in a rush of optimism, back when everything with Eddie felt like a fairytale. Now, even the smallest sound in the house makes me tense. This morning, I heard a dull thump—like the one I remember from the night the news came about Blanche. My heart lurched, even though I knew it was probably nothing. Or at least, I told myself that. Afterward, I called Eddie. Just hearing his voice made the world feel less sharp. He always sounds so sure. So steady. But lately, I’ve started to wonder if that steadiness is real, or if it's another performance—just like everything else in Thornfield Estates.

My thoughts keep circling back to Tripp. He’s still lounging in his house, drinking on the porch, making phone calls like his life hasn’t just been upended by a murder charge. He killed her. Or at least, that’s what the evidence suggests. A hammer was purchased. A woman was found with a shattered skull. And yet, Tripp is still free. Still golfing, still being greeted like a misunderstood neighbor instead of a possible killer. I think about what would’ve happened if it were me. A woman with my background, my past. I wouldn’t have been sipping cocktails and calling lawyers from my living room.

I’d be in a jumpsuit, waiting behind bars for a court date I’d never afford.

Eddie’s take on the whole thing is both cynical and infuriating. “This is Alabama,” he says, shrugging. “Money buys forgiveness. Or at least, delay.” He’s not wrong, but the way he says it, so casually, so detached—it gnaws at me. It makes me feel like maybe he understands this system too well. Like he’s speaking from experience. I keep following every article, every update on Tripp’s case. I tell myself it’s because I care about justice, about Blanche. But deep down, I know it’s something darker. I want to see what happens to a man like that. I want to know if the rules ever actually apply.

There’s still no body confirmed for Bea. Her disappearance is a ghost shadowing everything else, and people don’t talk about her anymore. Not really. It’s easier to pretend she never existed. Just another Southern woman who drifted out of her own life one day and never came back. But I can’t forget her. Not when I’m living in her house, surrounded by her furniture, and trying to plan a wedding in the space she once ruled. It makes me wonder if houses remember the people they belonged to. If walls can hold secrets, if floorboards can echo footsteps that aren’t mine.

Late at night, the tension coils tighter. The sounds, the shadows, the empty rooms—it all feels like a warning. The other night, I caught myself locking the bathroom door behind me, even though I was alone. Even though no one was home but me and Adele. When Eddie called, I told him I’d just been feeling off. He offered to come home early, but I said no. I need him to believe I’m okay. Because if he thinks I’m not, everything might unravel.

So I smile when people ask how the wedding planning is going. I nod when they comment on how lucky I am. I pretend I don’t hear the things they say about Blanche or Tripp or Bea when they think I’ve stepped away. But underneath the routine and the rosé and the perfectly manicured lawns, something is rotting. And I think I’m starting to smell it.

# Chapter 13

Chapter 13 begins with a sense of subtle transformation as Jane steps further into the world of Thornfield Estates. The gathering with Emily, Campbell, Anna-Grace, and Landry feels less alien this time—less like she's infiltrating a sorority and more like she's learning its rules. Wearing soft neutral tones, her outfit mirrors Emily's, and even that small detail signals Jane's growing awareness of how appearances matter in this circle.

This neighborhood doesn't just prize manicured lawns and tasteful seasonal decor—it thrives on quiet competition masked as civility. At the gathering, conversations float between landscaping projects, HOA-approved upgrades, and baby shower plans, but each topic serves a deeper purpose: social ranking. When Jane casually mentions getting solar lights for the garden path, she watches their reactions closely—not for approval, but for signs that she's earned a sliver of permanence.

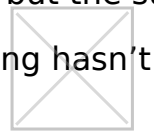
Pregnant Anna-Grace glows as she talks about her latest yard project, revealing she secured donated sod through a friend's father. It's the kind of community favor that's treated like social currency, placing her temporarily at the top of this unspoken hierarchy. Landry compliments the idea, sipping iced tea like a queen observing her court, and Jane marvels at how effortless these women make it look.

But Jane knows it's not effortless at all. There's a choreography to these interactions: the right balance of humility and pride, of casual wealth and public service. She's not unfamiliar with performative social cues—foster homes and group shelters taught her how to read a room quickly—but this version comes with pearls, pastel knits, and expensive strollers.

While the group laughs about football rivalries, Jane offers a vague comment and immediately realizes her mistake. She doesn't know which team they expect her to

support, and in this community, college allegiances are shorthand for values, class, and regional loyalty. Emily offers her a lifeline by changing the subject, but Jane has already clocked the moment—another reminder she's still on the outside looking in.

As conversation turns toward relationships, the women drop hints wrapped in humor: "Eddie's such a catch," Campbell says with a playful nudge. "What's he waiting for?" The tone is light, but the subtext is loaded—marriage is the next logical step, and Jane's lack of a ring hasn't gone unnoticed.



That pressure doesn't escape her. Though the words are friendly, the implication is sharp: security and worth in Thornfield Estates come through commitment. Jane's internal dialogue stirs with unease, knowing that while she's playing the part, she hasn't fully secured her place—and that makes her vulnerable.

At times, she wonders what these women would think if they knew the truth about her past—the shelters, the half-finished degrees, the jobs that didn't come with benefits or holiday bonuses. She wonders what it would take to truly belong here without pretending, but she already knows the answer: it would take a ring and a title. Until then, she is the girlfriend, not the wife, and the distinction matters more than any of them will say aloud.

Still, Jane observes how each woman performs her role. Landry is the chic mom with a firm opinion on organic lawn treatments. Anna-Grace is the sweet Southern wife with a Pinterest-perfect nursery. Even Emily, who once showed signs of rebellion, knows exactly when to smile and when to press—like now, when she casually comments on wedding venues as if asking about the weather.

Jane plays along, matching their energy, but behind the smiles, her thoughts race. She's gathering intel, learning what matters, decoding what counts. And the more she listens, the more she understands how thin the line is between being accepted and being tolerated.

The women eventually move on to planning another committee meeting, their words peppered with phrases like “legacy projects” and “neighborhood traditions.” Jane nods along, offering to follow up on a local nursery that might donate autumn mums. Her contribution is noted with polite smiles, but she can tell—it’s not enough yet.

After the meeting, Jane lingers in her car, watching them wave each other off. There’s a strange hollowness in the moment. She’s inside the house now, sitting at the table, sipping from the same glasses, but the invitation still feels conditional.



In neighborhoods like Thornfield, people don’t say what they’re thinking. They hint, suggest, smile. And Jane, more fluent than she’s given credit for, has learned to smile back—perfectly, precisely, and always on time.

# Chapter 7

Chapter 7 begins with restraint—intentional distance and cautious construction. I won't let him see where I live. Letting Eddie glimpse that run-down complex, the sagging roof, or—worse—crossing paths with John, would strip away everything I've built. So I insist on meeting him in English Village, one of those quaint, manicured corners of Mountain Brook that locals refer to as "villages," as if this curated affluence needed more charm. It's the kind of place where everything smells faintly of expensive candles and old money.

I arrive early, parking several blocks away to avoid the risk of him offering to walk me back. When I reach the bistro, he's waiting under a striped awning, looking like he stepped out of a lifestyle ad—crisp shirt, fitted slacks, and a presence that radiates calm confidence. His hand rests gently on the small of my back as we're seated, and it sends a current through me that feels both thrilling and dangerous. The space glows with soft lighting and quiet elegance—white linen tablecloths, candles in pressed glass, and that hushed tone people adopt when they're used to being served.

The wine he orders is expensive—far beyond what I'd choose on my own—and it reminds me again that I'm not just at dinner, I'm being auditioned for a life. I tuck my menu away and let him take the lead. Maybe it's manipulative. Maybe it's just survival. But when you've grown up with nothing, knowing how to play along is a skill. A necessary one. He asks if I trust him to order, and I say I like everything. It lands with more heat than I expected. His smile deepens, and it's obvious he enjoys hearing that.

Then his gaze shifts, not to my face, but to the necklace. My chest tightens the moment he comments on it. It's not valuable—just a delicate silver chain I lifted from one of the houses in the neighborhood—but the bee charm is unmistakable. I hadn't realized its resemblance until it was too late. He notes its similarity to the pieces Bea's

company once made. Southern Manors. I try to brush it off, calling it a gift, but I know he noticed the way I touched it. My hand goes there instinctively, like I could shield it.

The conversation falters until I steer it elsewhere—asking about his childhood, steering him away from her. He talks about Maine, about leaving as soon as he could. I sip my wine and pretend this is normal. That I belong here, with this man, discussing lobster rolls and coastal fog, not checking my phone every ten minutes in case John's called to complain about rent. When Eddie speaks, it's with the ease of someone who's done this a thousand times before. But not with me. I remind myself that, in this moment, I'm the one across from him, not her.

He talks about his business, how he moved for work, and finally settled here—because Bea wanted Southern Manors to be an Alabama brand. It's clear he feels a sense of duty to keep her dream alive. That's not something I can compete with—not easily, anyway. His voice softens when he mentions her. Not tender, exactly. But careful. Like there are parts of her memory he keeps sealed off. I nod, not pushing, grateful when the food arrives and gives us a new distraction.

I tell him stories about "Jane"—a version of myself that's true enough to feel honest, but crafted carefully. There are real memories in there, yes. Childhood facts. Teen years in Arizona. But the rest is adjusted—bent around the edges, filed down where it's too sharp. And Eddie listens, really listens, as if every word adds another stroke to the picture he's painting of me. By the time dessert arrives, I'm more relaxed than I thought I'd be. The check appears, and he pays without looking at the total. It's not about the money—it's about the ease with which he spends it. With which he holds the world.

When we leave, he links my arm through his, and we step into the warm night air. My dress brushes his leg as we walk, and it's deliberate—I want him to feel me beside him. We pass puddles glowing under lamplight, and my hair curls slightly in the humidity. I'm tempted to ask him if I can come home with him, not for sex necessarily, but for the quiet magic of entering that perfect house under moonlight. I want to see

what it looks like at night. I want to see myself in it.

“You’re quiet,” he says. I smile up at him and say, “Can I be honest?” He nods, amused, and I admit it’s been a long time since I’ve been on a real date. He agrees. It’s simple, but the moment hums with potential. My fingers toy with the fabric of his sleeve, feeling the weight of everything I still don’t know about him.

Then it happens. A voice calls out. “Eddie!” We turn in unison, and my chest tightens as I spot the man on the sidewalk—another pastel-draped Thornfield neighbor. The kind with a forced smile and too-smooth hair. One of those interchangeable men who all seem to blend together in this neighborhood. Whatever magic existed in our moment vanishes as we brace ourselves for interruption.

And just like that, my perfect night—a date that felt like it belonged to someone else’s life—is now being watched. Judged. Realigned under the weight of someone else’s gaze. But I remind myself: this is the game. These are the people I need to win over. And I’m getting closer. Closer than they realize.

# Chapter 34

Chapter 34 begins with a decision that can’t quite be explained. The narrator finds himself driving toward the lake, unsure if it’s curiosity, jealousy, or something deeper that pulls him there. Tripp had casually mentioned Bea’s invitation earlier, and while they weren’t close, it planted a seed. The idea that Bea would ask Tripp to join a supposedly women-only weekend felt wrong. Something in that gesture stirred a quiet discomfort, a nagging instinct that wouldn’t settle. Maybe it was the look Tripp had given Bea lately—soft, longing, a little pathetic. The narrator tried to convince himself it was only a reaction to Blanche’s obvious interest in someone else. But the thought didn’t ease him.

When he arrives, the lake house is silent, dimly lit, and seemingly empty. He walks through the space, calling out, expecting laughter, maybe music. Instead, he finds Tripp upstairs, sprawled unconscious, snoring with a thick, unnatural rasp. Something about it is off—like his body isn’t just asleep but numbed beyond alcohol. Downstairs, signs of life remain: a purse, a set of keys, Bea’s overnight bag. But the boat is gone. The scene is too carefully staged for comfort, and the narrator tries to convince himself he’s being paranoid. Maybe they’re out enjoying the lake, and maybe he overreacted when Blanche told him about Bea’s mother.

Then he sees her. Bea, soaked and barefoot, walking slowly up the dock like she’s emerged from a nightmare. Their eyes meet, and in hers, there’s no apology—only a quiet defiance. Her posture straightens, chin lifting slightly. That was the moment he knew something had gone terribly wrong. At first, he chooses to believe her version. That Blanche had been threatening her, that Bea had tried to save her, that Tripp had been brought there as a decoy, not a suspect. Bea spins the story well, and the narrator wants to believe it—because loving her had always required some degree of delusion. She kisses him with practiced sweetness, and for a heartbeat, he lets himself

pretend.

Then instinct overtakes reason. He clamps an arm around her neck, tightening until she gasps. The decision is made—not to kill her, but to contain her. To lock away the danger she's become, the woman who might ruin everything. Later, he will justify it: it was the safest way. She couldn't go to prison—not in Alabama, not with a murder this calculated. Not when whispers about her mother's death might resurface. Not when Southern Manors, their shared business empire, stood to collapse under public scrutiny. He tells himself this isn't cruelty; it's protection. Not only of Bea but of everything they built.

Still, he knows it's also about control. He couldn't let her keep killing, and he couldn't let her walk free. The panic room had been a desperate choice. Not smart. Not kind. But necessary. Now, confined to bed with injuries still healing, he reflects on the woman who had briefly offered him escape: Jane. For a time, he believed he could love her. He wanted her to be the answer, the clean break from his mess. She didn't ask about his past, didn't see the edges he tried to hide. But deep down, he always knew—he couldn't erase Bea from his life.

Jane had believed in him without question, and that made her dangerous in a different way. He hadn't loved her—not in the way he should have. But he'd offered her hope, a proposal, a chance at a future he knew he couldn't give. He told himself he was trying to build something new, but every visit to Bea's room, every lie told to Jane, said otherwise. He'd used Jane, shaped her into a blank canvas where he could pretend to be the man he wasn't. And in doing so, he'd broken her trust, maybe even her spirit. She didn't deserve it.

The guilt swells, but love is the tether he can't cut. What happened with Blanche, with Bea's mother, with the lake—it all fed into a narrative too dark to unravel. But he'd tried to handle it. To manage the chaos Bea brought with her. The truth is, he still loves her. And love, in its most distorted form, had driven every choice since. He still believes he saved her that night—not from the police, but from herself.

But now she’s free. Somewhere in the house with Jane. Two women, both smart, both bruised, both tangled in a story he can no longer control. And deep down, he knows: he’s running out of time.



# Chapter 29

Chapter 29 begins with a decision so reckless it surprises even me. Running through the neighborhood in the early morning, I tell myself it's just another jog, nothing suspicious. But my pulse races for more reasons than cardio. I'm on my way to Tripp Ingraham's house—a man recently charged with murder. The logic is flimsy at best, but his late-night texts haven't left my mind. There's a part of me, deeper than instinct, that whispers he's telling the truth. Tripp has plenty of flaws—he drinks too much, says the wrong things, and leans far too hard into entitlement—but something about him doesn't match the profile of a killer.

His house looks abandoned by hope. Overgrown bushes line the front, and dead petals scatter across cracked pavement like remnants of something once cared for. When he finally answers the door, I barely recognize him. His skin is sallow, eyes darkened with exhaustion, and a sour smell clings to the air as I step inside. The place reeks of booze and neglect, a sad echo of someone unraveling. I refuse to sit. I cross my arms and demand he get to the point. Tripp offers a half-hearted smirk, tries to soften the tension with sarcasm, but the weariness behind his eyes tells me he's got more to say.

He talks about Eddie—how perfect he must've seemed when I met him. Charming, wealthy, magnetic. But Tripp cuts through the surface: "He's poison," he says. "And so is Bea." It's not bitterness in his voice—it's regret. He tells me Blanche wanted to move, that she'd started talking about Bea like a weight she couldn't shake. "Bea took her whole damn life," he says, "and still couldn't give her space." The story that unfolds next stops my breath. Tripp admits Bea invited him to the lake that weekend. He thought it was a peace offering. Instead, it might have been a setup.

According to him, he passed out from too much alcohol and woke up alone. The boat was gone. Bea and Blanche were missing. He assumed they'd gone out together. Only

later did he learn they were both already dead. “Rotting in that water,” he whispers, voice cracking. Tripp swears he had nothing to do with it, but his fingerprints are on the boat, and someone used his credit card to buy rope and a hammer. “I was afraid,” he says. “But you still have a chance, Jane. Walk away.” I hear desperation in his voice—real fear, not just self-preservation. That, more than anything, tells me something bigger is at play.

Back at the house, I’m frantic. Tripp’s warning echoes in my ears, and I tear through the rooms like I’m possessed. I rip open drawers, dump out boxes, and flip through every pocket of Eddie’s clothes. Adele barks nervously, circling my feet as if trying to anchor me. Cushions are tossed, books scattered, closets emptied. Somewhere in this house, I’m sure there has to be a trace—a receipt, a weapon, a bloodstain. You don’t commit murder without leaving something behind. You just don’t. But hours pass, and the only thing I’ve gained is exhaustion.

Eventually, I collapse on the floor of the coat closet, surrounded by torn lining and shoe dust. I’m shaking from adrenaline and disbelief. Adele watches me from the hallway, silent now, like she knows something’s changed. I’m not even sure what I’m doing anymore—trying to find proof, or trying to give myself a reason to leave. Tripp might be right. Whatever happened up there on the lake wasn’t just tragic—it was calculated. And even if Eddie didn’t swing the hammer, he knows more than he ever let on.

Just as I’m about to give up, something catches my eye. A jacket, crumpled in the corner of the closet, looks unfamiliar. I reach for it, and my fingers brush against a weight in one pocket. Heart hammering, I pull it out. But it’s not a weapon. It’s a paperback novel. A romance. Not the kind Eddie usually reads. Not military thrillers or finance exposés—but something soft, even sentimental.

And that’s when the worst thought creeps in. Maybe the real clue isn’t about what Eddie did. Maybe it’s about what he *felt*. Maybe someone else committed the murder—but Eddie covered it up out of love. Out of guilt. Out of something that complicates this even further. I sit in the wreckage of our perfect life, surrounded by

broken things, and realize: this story isn’t over. It’s barely begun.



# Chapter 10

Chapter 10 begins with a small but unexpected luxury—soft-scented sheets, the kind Jane never imagined she'd experience. Each morning in Eddie’s bed feels unreal, wrapped in linen that smells like safety and success. After two weeks of sinking into plush cushions, sipping cinnamon-laced coffee, and lounging in comfort, Jane finds herself clinging tightly to a lifestyle that once seemed unreachable.

The master bedroom has become her sanctuary, styled in rich textures and quiet masculinity that contrast sharply with the loud, colorful imprint Bea left on the rest of the house. This room, it seems, is where Eddie has reclaimed space just for himself—and now, by extension, for Jane. As she tiptoes through the house barefoot, warm mug in hand, it feels like she’s stepping into permanence.

Downstairs, Eddie greets her with coffee crafted exactly to her taste—a ritual that started awkwardly and evolved into habit. She jokes about only being with him for the morning brew, and he plays along, making her laugh in a way that eases the walls she’s spent years building. For the first time, Jane feels not just wanted, but appreciated for who she really is, not just who she’s pretending to be.

But beneath the morning banter is a tension Jane doesn’t fully admit, not even to herself. She still walks dogs for cash. She still buys her own clothes, pays for her own gas. The money Eddie offers—his casual mention of credit cards and shared accounts—feels like a gift and a test.

She smiles when he offers to add her to his checking account, though her mind spins at how easily he gives her access to his wealth. For Jane, who has always scraped by, who’s known too many men who offered nothing and expected everything, this gesture is jarring. Still, she plays her role perfectly—grateful, charmed, compliant—knowing it gets her closer to the life she wants.

Then Eddie asks her to move in officially, suggesting she pick up her things from her old place. Jane teases him, plays coy, but inside, she knows she’s already made up her mind. She’s done with her old life—the moldy apartment, the depressing bathroom, and especially John.

The contrast between her former home and Eddie’s pristine mansion hits hard when she arrives at the old apartment. Everything looks smaller, grimier, sadder than she remembered. Inside, John is sprawled on the couch, watching television, still clinging to a routine Jane is desperate to escape.

Their conversation is exactly what she expects—passive-aggressive jabs, veiled insults, possessive digs. John demands notice, complains about rent, and tries to belittle her one last time. But Jane, for once, doesn’t flinch.

She walks out without taking a single item. Not her clothes, not the keepsakes, not even the sentimental tokens she'd pocketed from Thornfield homes. That part of her life is over, and leaving it all behind is the most powerful choice she’s ever made.

Back outside, she’s met with another surprise—Eddie, waiting by his car. Seeing him there, amid the cracked pavement and rust-stained stairwells, shakes her. He doesn’t belong here, and by extension, neither does she anymore.

When she asks if he followed her, Eddie admits it with a sheepish smile. It’s romantic on the surface, but something about it unsettles Jane. The charm is still there, but so is a note of control, of possession—one she’s not sure how to interpret.

Before she can decide how she feels, John inserts himself again. His presence, greasy and bitter, only sharpens the divide between Eddie and the life Jane is leaving. When he claims she owes him notice, Eddie doesn’t argue—he just watches, waiting.

There’s a shift in Eddie’s posture, a quiet tension that simmers beneath his easy smile. Jane feels it too, a tightening of energy between the men. She sees the way Eddie’s fist curls slightly, a flash of something unspoken but unmistakable.

# Chapter 3

Chapter 3 opens with a sensory contrast as Jane steps into Thornfield Estates, her fingers curled loosely around Bear’s leash. Chapter 3 instantly impresses upon her just how different this world is—the grand arching door, the manicured perfection of the exterior, and the clean marble that greets the muddy paws of the dog she’s walking. Eddie, tall and casual despite the polished setting, welcomes them in without a hint of irritation, his easy smile and warm voice cutting through the formality she expected. It throws Jane off balance, but in a good way—this man isn’t like the others she’s met in homes like these.

Inside, Jane finds herself surprised. The house, unlike the hollow designer interiors she’s become used to, feels genuinely lived-in. Chapter 3 lays the foundation for contrast—floral pillows arranged on a bold red couch, a stack of well-thumbed paperbacks by the fireplace, sunlight pooling across deep rugs that look comfortable rather than curated. It’s a space that speaks of someone who reads, someone who remembers comfort alongside aesthetics. She picks up on the subtle clues—photos have been removed from mantels, walls bear traces of things once hung, as if a memory has been peeled off the surface but not quite forgotten.

The kitchen is even more striking. Stainless steel appliances gleam beside copper pans, and the backsplash shines with tiny mosaic tiles that look hand-selected. Chapter 3 makes this space feel not only rich but functional, like people actually cook here, laugh here. When Eddie offers her a cup of coffee, she’s already softened by the scent of cinnamon in the air and the faint scratch of jazz on the overhead speakers. It’s the kind of kitchen where someone might talk too long over coffee because they feel like they can. Jane accepts.

As they talk, Eddie's questions catch her off guard—not because they're invasive, but because they're genuine. He doesn't ask about what school she went to or who her family is; he asks what brought her to Alabama. Jane, careful and composed, says it was just time for a change, though Chapter 3 subtly hints that the move was more of a flight than a relocation. She skips over her years in group homes, the hard years in foster care, and the handful of aliases she's worn like ill-fitting jackets.

Eddie seems content with her answer, nodding, sipping his coffee, and volunteering his own story in return. His wife—he doesn't say Bea's name at first—had loved Birmingham, and they bought the house with dreams of privacy. But that dream is now edged with absence. There's no ring on his finger, and Jane notes it without commenting. In this world, omission speaks louder than explanation.

What catches her off guard is how comfortable she feels. Chapter 3 dwells on that tension—how Jane, someone used to being invisible or overlooked, finds herself seen. Eddie doesn't talk down to her. He doesn't treat her like the help. Their conversation is light, filled with pauses that don't strain. And though she's cautious, Jane can't deny she likes the way he looks at her, not with hunger, but with curiosity—as if he's trying to learn, not consume.

Later, as Jane wanders through the living room again to leash Bear, she mentally compares Eddie's home to Tripp Ingraham's. Both houses are big, yes. Both are filled with expensive things. But where Tripp's space feels like a mausoleum, Eddie's is warm, if slightly wounded. Chapter 3 uses this to underline how wealth can't always cover grief—and how loneliness can settle into a home, no matter how expensive the flooring.

Still, Jane can't help but feel something else here too: potential. For the first time in a while, there's an opening. She might not know all the rules of this world, but she's clever, and she learns fast. She's lived enough lives to know that fitting in is mostly performance, and she's more than willing to play the role.

When she finally says goodbye, leash in hand, the air between her and Eddie still hums with something unspoken. The door closes softly behind her, but Chapter 3 leaves it clear—Jane’s already begun to slip into this world. Not just as the dog-walker. As something more.



# Epilogue

Epilogue — I still think about them—Eddie and Bea. Even after everything that happened, their shadows linger in quiet corners of my mind. One afternoon, while loading groceries into my trunk, I caught a glimpse of someone who looked like her. It wasn’t possible, of course. By then, Alabama was far behind me, along with everything tied to Mountain Brook. I'd moved to the peaceful slopes of North Carolina, using Bea’s money not for extravagance, but for a modest cabin tucked into the trees. Turns out, the South held a gentler side after all—one I hadn’t expected to love.

The SUV that rolled by that day seemed too deliberate, too familiar. A woman in sunglasses glanced out, her figure half-hidden behind tinted windows. In the passenger seat, someone slouched—unclear, indistinct, maybe not even a man. Adele, my dog, barked sharply, her gaze fixed on the passing car, and for a split second, I felt a pair of eyes meet mine. It could’ve been a trick of the light or just my nerves playing games. That was only months after the fire, a time when fear still sat just beneath my skin. I was still raw, always expecting the past to resurface.

I tell myself that Bea couldn’t have survived. The moment she opened the panic room door, flames surged like a living beast, swallowing everything in an instant. I recall the acrid scent of scorched hair and something else—something that smelled too much like roasted flesh. They claimed they found Eddie’s teeth in the aftermath, but part of me flinches at that. I remember watching his teeth fly when I struck him once, hard and desperate, so maybe what they found wasn’t proof at all. That uncertainty festers in me, unanswered. It’s why I still look over my shoulder, as if the past might come driving up in an SUV at any moment.

In quiet hours, I imagine them alive. It’s easier than accepting the alternative. Maybe they faked it all—disappeared to some remote island, far from anyone who’d recognize

them. Bea always had a way of slipping out of tight corners, and Eddie? He was many things, but he wasn't stupid. I envision them on a quiet stretch of beach, somewhere forgotten by maps. Palm trees sway gently, waves whisper over white sand, and they live without the weight of secrets or the burden of legacy.

In these mental snapshots, Bea's skin glows in the sun, her laughter light and untroubled. Her long hair is tied back casually, and her hand finds Eddie's without hesitation. He's changed—scarred, weathered, not the man he once was, but still by her side. I see his fingers, marked with burns, curling around hers with a kind of practiced tenderness. They sit together on worn driftwood or a faded blanket, sharing moments instead of memories, their past buried like the estate they left behind. I can almost hear her say, "We're together now. That's what matters."

There's something tragically romantic in that image—the kind of love story born out of ruin. No money, no mansion, no social status to uphold. Just two people who burned everything down and walked away, hand in hand. It's not forgiveness I offer them in these daydreams, but understanding. Perhaps escaping justice was their final act of devotion. Maybe they believe they're free now, far away from a world that judged them too quickly, or not enough.

But I know better. Trauma doesn't disappear just because you change your view. Even on an island, ghosts can find you. And guilt? It lingers like smoke, impossible to outrun. I sometimes wonder if Bea wakes up gasping, hearing the fire again. Or if Eddie feels that moment replay—the crack of bone, the sound of his world collapsing.

Still, I let them live in my imagination. Because the truth is messier, heavier. If they did survive, I'll likely never know. That mystery is mine to carry, tucked between cracked floorboards and grocery bags. Sometimes it comforts me to believe that they found peace somewhere warm and far away. Other times, it haunts me.

And perhaps that's the real ending—not one of justice or revenge, but ambiguity. A life left open-ended, the way some stories demand. Not everything needs closure. Some scars are meant to remain visible.

# Chapter 8

Chapter 8 begins with a quiet weight—everything in the Ingraham house still holding its breath, as if waiting for Blanche to come back. The rooms haven’t adjusted to her absence. Her handbag still sits by the door, and a neat little pile of rings rests beside the lamp, as if she’d be back any second to slip them on. Even her shoes are still where she must have kicked them off, gingham flats with just enough wear on the soles to show how often they were loved.

I walk in slow, the tension from last night with Eddie still pressing against my ribs. That date had ended colder than I’d expected—just a hug on the sidewalk, no warmth in his goodbye. And now, I’m here, packing away pieces of another woman’s life, one who vanished months ago and still clings to this house like perfume in an old coat. Tripp had asked for my help, and maybe I agreed because something in this place made me curious.

Tripp is slumped on the couch with his usual breakfast cocktail—brown liquor and melted ice—and greets me like I’m staff. He doesn't remember my name. I gave up correcting him. Upstairs, in the second guest bedroom, boxes line the floor, and the air feels still. It's the kind of room designed to impress guests without ever inviting them to stay. It’s all too polished, too impersonal.

Tripp arrives a few minutes later, his footsteps heavy despite his attempt to sneak up. He tries to make it seem like a check-in, but I can read his kind a mile away—the entitled, slouching menace of a man who’s lost his grip on both control and relevance. He rattles the ice in his glass and gestures around like this room, like Blanche, like the mess she left, never really mattered to him. The truth is, it didn’t. Not the way it should have.

He tells me to pack it all. Claims none of it meant much to Blanche, but I don’t believe him. Her jewelry, her books, her carefully chosen throw pillows—there’s too much intention here. It’s strange, the way a space can still whisper about someone, even after they’re gone. Blanche may not have lived for this room, but she definitely curated it.

And then, something odd happens. A lamp beside the bed catches my eye—a tin bucket style with soft blue floral shades. I’ve seen it before. It takes a moment, but I realize it matches something I saw on Southern Manors’ website. When I mention it, Tripp snaps back with a bitter laugh and says that Blanche had the lamp first, that Bea copied her. That Bea wasn’t original, that everything Southern Manors built had started with Blanche.

He says they grew up together, were roommates at Ivy Ridge. That they were close—until they weren’t. And then he says it. Bea’s real name. Bertha.

The name hits harder than I expect. It feels weirdly intimate, like I’ve stolen something. Like I know something I shouldn’t. And it draws a connection between me and Bea that makes my skin prickle. Because I haven’t always been Jane, either. That old name—the one I buried—was once a burden I couldn’t shake, but now it’s more of a warning. This is what happens when you bury too much of yourself and build something too shiny on top.

Tripp watches my reaction. His gaze, though tired and unfocused, is still sharp when he wants it to be. There’s something unspoken in the room, something circling the edges of this conversation. Maybe he suspects more than he lets on. Or maybe he’s just enjoying being the one with something to hold over someone else for once.

I keep packing, but I don’t rush. His words loop in my head, and I realize this house is full of ghosts—Blanche’s, sure, but also Bea’s. Everyone in Thornfield Estates talks about Bea like she was a saint, but Tripp’s bitterness paints a different picture. One of rivalry. Of mimicry. Maybe even of betrayal.

And maybe that’s what makes this neighborhood what it is—women dressing like flowers, houses that match each other too closely, secrets hidden under polite smiles. Everyone’s trying to be someone else. Everyone’s trying to win at a game no one really understands. And me? I plan to win it, too—but on my own terms.



# Chapter 12

Chapter 12 opens with Jane entrenched in her role on the Neighborhood Beautification Committee, a position that has unexpectedly come with a financial burden she wasn't quite ready for. At Emily's casual suggestion, Jane spends over a thousand dollars on sleek solar path lights meant to enhance the common spaces in Thornfield Estates. Though she agrees without hesitation, partly eager to fit in and partly unsure how to decline, the weight of the cost settles on her heavily—not just as a dent in her wallet, but as a symbolic investment in belonging.

As Jane hauls boxes of the lights from her car and unpacks them alone, the glamour of the purchase fades quickly. What was pitched as a community effort becomes a solo task, revealing how roles in this neighborhood are often assigned beneath smiles. For someone who once counted every dollar for bus fare, this kind of spending feels alien, and it reminds her how far she's come—but also how out of place she still feels.

Even the house she lives in—Eddie's house—remains full of Bea's carefully chosen furniture, her books, and the scent of a floral candle that never seems to fade. Jane walks through the rooms sometimes feeling like she's just borrowing someone else's life. Though she now wears nicer clothes and shops at boutiques instead of discount racks, she can't shake the feeling that everything could be taken from her just as easily as it was given.

That unease only deepens when, during one of her solo installation trips to the park entrance, she sees John. His presence drags the air out of the moment. Dressed in his usual way—slightly unkempt, with a smirk that never quite reaches his eyes—John is a link to a version of Jane she's worked hard to bury.

He calls her by name, too easily, as though he's been watching her for longer than she realizes. At first, their conversation is guarded, the way it always is with people who

share uncomfortable memories. But then he says something—something offhanded about a call he got from someone in Phoenix asking about a woman named Helen Burns—and suddenly Jane's whole body tightens.

The name hits her like a punch, bringing with it a wave of dread so intense she can barely breathe. She forces a laugh, brushes it off, but inside, panic spins. Helen Burns isn't just a name from her past—it's a thread that could unravel everything she's built.

John doesn't press. He's cagey and sarcastic, but he doesn't linger. Still, the implication is clear: if someone from Phoenix is looking, her secrets aren't safe. The veneer she's constructed in Thornfield—complete with yoga mats, artisan candles, and solar lights—is far thinner than she wants to admit.

After the encounter, Jane's nerves are frayed. She barely sleeps, her mind replaying every word, every expression on John's face. She wonders if he'll show up again. Wonders if he was bluffing about the phone call or if someone really *is* out there, dredging up the version of her that doesn't wear linen blouses or attend committee meetings.

The next morning, Eddie notices her jumpiness and asks if she's okay. Jane lies smoothly, says she didn't sleep well, that it's just stress from the project. He believes her—at least for now.

The truth is, Jane knows how quickly comfort can slip into chaos. The lights may illuminate the neighborhood walkways, but they can't protect her from shadows that stretch farther than she can see. Even as she smiles through the next committee update, sipping wine and discussing tulip bulbs, her mind is elsewhere.

Her new life isn't as secure as it looks, and the past has a way of finding the cracks in even the most carefully constructed facade. In Thornfield Estates, appearances matter—but secrets matter more. And Jane has too many of them.

# Chapter 17

Chapter 17 begins with us outside, settled into those sturdy wooden Adirondack chairs as a quiet fire burns before us, its warmth flickering against the cool evening. The scent of meat grilling in the background mingles with the smoky air, and for a moment, everything feels suspended in peaceful stillness. But smells have a strange way of unearthing memories, and suddenly I’m back in Phoenix, where the heat pressed down like judgment and the dry air turned everything into kindling.

One summer night flickers through my mind like an old film reel—Jane’s real cries in the background, Mr. Brock’s flushed face looming above, the beer in his hand foaming at the rim. I’d fallen into the gravel, skin scraped and burning, staring up at his ridiculous apron with its cartoonish frog lips, thinking how absurd it was that someone so cruel could wear something meant for a joke. Even now, decades later, that heat prickles under my skin, a shame not quite burned away.

Memories like that don’t just vanish; they burrow and wait. And though I’ve buried that life beneath layers of new beginnings, it still finds me in the quiet moments, like now, when I glance down at the ring on my finger and remind myself that part of my past is over. That man and that place can’t define who I am anymore—no matter what John or anyone else tries to say.

Eddie sits beside me, his limbs stretched out, his profile calm and almost statuesque under the twilight. The transformation in him since we met still catches me off guard—he's steadier now, more grounded, and there's a softness around the edges that wasn’t there before. I find satisfaction in that, a quiet pride that maybe, just maybe, I’ve helped bring that version of him to life.

He smiles at the fire, and I think of dresses, lace veils, and storefront windows shimmering with promise. That’s when I hear myself say it, out loud and sure: “I think

we should elope.” The idea lands between us like a pebble in water, small at first, but rippling with meaning.

Eddie doesn’t flinch; he just sips his beer and sets it down slowly, watching me. His response is gentle but firm—“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.” That’s what I’ve come to like about him: he doesn’t try to manage or fix me, just lets me be.



“I don’t have much family left,” I admit. “And Birmingham’s full of people I don’t want watching me say vows I barely believe in.” The corners of Eddie’s mouth lift, and I know he’s thinking the same thing about John—about the life I left behind.

He brushes his thumb across my hand and says, “We can do whatever you want. Courthouse, lake, Tennessee—hell, Gatlinburg has drive-thru chapels if you’re feeling adventurous.” It’s meant to be sweet, and it is, but there’s a small pang in my chest at the idea of marrying like that, of our love reduced to a receipt and a roadside photo.

When I pictured eloping, I dreamed of beaches and sunsets, not motels with flickering neon signs and scratchy sheets. I don’t say any of that, though. Instead, I just smile, letting the fantasy fade into silence.

But I know I can’t get married here. Not in this town, not with Bea’s ghost hanging around every corner. I can’t bear the whispers, the comparisons, the way her name would linger in the air like expensive perfume.

Inside, I gather our empty bottles and slide the door shut behind me, the glass sealing away the soft crackle of the fire. Just then, I hear something—soft at first, but repeating. A series of thuds, rhythmic and low, coming from somewhere upstairs.

I pause, heart hammering, straining to hear. There’s nothing for a moment, then more noise, a pattern now, almost like a heartbeat pulsing through the ceiling. I glance back at Eddie, still lounging in his chair, looking at the stars as if he has no idea the world is shifting inside this house.

I step further in, listening. The sound reminds me of that old story from school—the one with the beating heart under the floorboards, guilt pulsing louder than truth. In a strange, instinctive way, I picture Bea upstairs, not a ghost but a presence, heavy and real.

Suddenly, the noise stops. I freeze, waiting. A silence that feels too still, too intentional.

Then—a knock at the door. Sharp. Firm. It jerks me back to the present like a slap, and I drop a bottle, its clatter shattering the stillness. Eddie barely moves, just tosses over his shoulder, “Jane?”

“I’m fine,” I answer, annoyed by his calm. I brush broken glass into a corner and step into the foyer, hands trembling as I reach for the knob. On the porch is a woman in uniform, khakis and a blue shirt, a badge glinting at her waist.

A police officer. My stomach flips, but I keep my face serene. I place my hand casually over my collarbone, where the diamond ring rests, an anchor of status and story.

I remind myself there’s no reason to be afraid. This officer doesn’t see who I used to be. She sees a homeowner, a woman dressed in muted tones and tasteful accessories—someone with nothing to hide.

It’s amazing how much power clothing can hold. A polished look, some expensive jewelry, a carefully chosen tone of voice—they can disguise so much. They can turn a runaway into a wife-to-be, a girl with scars into someone who belongs.

# Chapter 5

Chapter 5 begins with a reminder that this isn’t home. “You’re late on your half of the rent,” John says, and I resist the urge to roll my eyes as I hand over the cash I scraped together from pawning one of Mrs. Reed’s earrings. This place was never meant to be permanent—just a landing spot, a temporary fix with someone who knew too much about me. But six months later, here I still am, watching my yogurt disappear into his mouth as he leans against the counter like he owns me along with the apartment.

There’s something invasive about the way John exists. He eats my food, uses my stuff, and casually steps over boundaries without a second thought. My name on things doesn’t stop him. Nothing ever really feels like it’s mine here—not even the four walls around me. When he makes a crude comment about my “clients,” implying things even he’s not brave enough to say out loud, I deflect with sarcasm. But deep down, I know this isn’t just about irritation. It’s about control. And I’m done letting him have any of it.

The second he leaves, I take comfort in the small silence, the kind that doesn’t require me to dodge his petty insults or his sideways glances. Heating up two Easy Macs—the last bit of food he hasn’t touched—I hunker down with my laptop and resume my private ritual: searching everything I can find about Bea Rochester. I skip over the articles about her disappearance and instead dive into the world she built. Southern Manors. A brand built on curated charm, overpriced items, and the fantasy of Southern elegance. To someone like me, it’s absurd. But to Eddie, it meant something.

The deeper I go, the more I see what he must have seen in her. The website is clean, stylish. Bea is everywhere in it—her voice, her aesthetic, her legacy. She sells not just home goods but a vision of perfection. Mason jar vases. Gingham aprons. Monogrammed pet leashes that cost more than my rent. Everything is refined,

branded, intentional. And I can’t stop scrolling. I hate it, but I understand it. This was her world. The world Eddie still inhabits.

One photo grabs me more than the others. Bea stands in a perfectly styled dining room, wearing a gingham skirt and a navy sweater, the kind of outfit that would’ve made me feel invisible growing up. But on her, it radiates power. Confidence. There’s a crispness to her that makes it impossible not to look. I almost laugh at myself—how easy it is to resent her and still want to become her. What would it feel like to be that polished, that wanted?

Another article, another detail: Bea met Eddie in Hawaii. Three years ago. That’s the part that makes me pause. A beach romance turned Southern empire. Their story had started like something out of a movie. Mine starts in a shared apartment with chipped counters and a guy who thinks a spoonful of yogurt is foreplay. But I’m not staying in this story.

I can feel the shift already. It started when Eddie smiled at me over coffee. When he listened without pity. When I saw the opening and knew I could step through it. I want to be where Bea was—not just in Eddie’s life but in that house, in that world where everything is curated, controlled, and clean. I want to be someone new, someone powerful. Not plain Jane, not the girl who borrows shampoo and hides money in her sock drawer.

So I keep reading. About Bea’s brand, her family history, the public image she worked so hard to shape. She was meticulous, thoughtful, private. She kept her name—Bertha—hidden, reinventing herself as Bea. That tells me more than anything else. Because I’ve done the same. My name isn’t really Jane either.

And that, more than anything else, tells me I can do what she did. I can rewrite everything. I can belong. Maybe even more than she ever did.

# Chapter 35

Chapter 35 — Chapter 35 begins with shock, not from violence, but from the unexpected appearance of someone long presumed dead. After barely escaping Eddie's violent outburst—where a silver pineapple became a weapon—the protagonist finds herself face-to-face with Bea Rochester. Not only is Bea very much alive, she seems curiously unfazed by the revelation that her husband tried to kill someone else. Calmly requesting wine as if hosting a routine dinner party, Bea leads them into the kitchen. Her demeanor is collected, even graceful, a woman completely at home in a space the protagonist had only borrowed. Every gesture, from choosing the right bottle to pouring the glasses, reinforces that this was always Bea’s house—her life.

The storm outside mirrors the tension between them, creating a cinematic backdrop as they sit in the gothic dining room, candles flickering and wine glasses full. Bea and the protagonist could almost be mistaken for queens of some dark fairy tale, meeting to settle a throne. As they drink, Bea reveals what she knows—or claims to know—about Eddie’s deceit, infidelities, and the tangled lies connecting them all. She speaks of Eddie’s manipulation, suggesting that both she and the protagonist had been drawn into his schemes. Blanche’s name surfaces, not as a footnote, but as the center of a deadly narrative. Bea implies that Blanche’s death was not an accident and that her own confinement was part of Eddie’s twisted plan.

The protagonist listens, but doubt simmers beneath the surface. Bea’s story, while confident and well-rehearsed, doesn’t fully hold together. Certain details don’t sit right, and her seemingly casual tone only raises more questions. The protagonist observes every inflection in Bea’s voice, each pause or omission. It's not just the trauma or the alcohol—something doesn’t add up. Could Bea be twisting the truth to suit her own version of events? As these thoughts stir, the protagonist also reflects on how easily appearances had fooled her before. It’s hard to tell where truth ends and performance

begins in this house built on secrets.

In this moment, the protagonist realizes she's not just a bystander in Eddie and Bea's drama. She's become entangled in a deeper history—one layered in betrayal, manipulation, and power plays. Bea's polished calm and enigmatic storytelling mask motives that remain unclear. But even as doubt creeps in, the protagonist can't ignore the weight of Bea's words. If any part of what she said is true, then everything the protagonist thought she understood about Eddie—his charm, his lies, his love—has been poisoned by intent. And if Bea is lying, then her survival, and the violence she claims to have endured, may not be what it seems either.

What adds a chilling depth to this chapter is how both women navigate their trauma through ritual: the wine, the storm, the setting of a table neither of them fully owns anymore. It's a negotiation of control. Bea, by acting unbothered, regains power. The protagonist, by asking careful questions, reclaims her agency. But power here is fluid, traded silently between them in glances, sips, and subtle shifts in tone. They are survivors—different in their methods, but alike in the quiet understanding that truth won't come easily, and safety might be an illusion.

A major theme woven through their interaction is the role of performance in survival. Bea is theatrical, but calculated. The protagonist, though shaken, has begun to see the strength in peeling back layers rather than adding more. She notes how Bea's control falters just slightly when details don't line up, and in that flicker, there is an opening—a possible glimpse at something raw and unscripted. The dynamic has shifted. No longer just a guest, the protagonist now sees herself as part of a larger, darker game. Not a pawn, perhaps not even a queen, but something altogether different.

By the end of the conversation, the wine is mostly gone, but the real intoxication has come from the revelations. Whether or not Bea is telling the truth, the damage has already been done. The protagonist can no longer pretend innocence. She is implicated now, pulled deeper into the undercurrent of betrayal, and left to decide how much of Bea's story she's willing to carry. As the chapter closes, the house creaks

under the pressure of silence and secrets. And above all, one thing is clear—none of them, not even the supposedly dead, are finished playing their part.



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