

Part IV: Bea

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid. I will provide the chapter now.

PART IV

BEA

Bea hadn't wanted to do dinner with Blanche and Tripp tonight, but tradition is tradition, and this is theirs—every other Thursday night, the four of them meet up somewhere. Tonight, it's a new place in Homewood, fancy barbecue, overpriced drinks. They sit outside in a courtyard at a wrought-iron table, fairy lights in the trees, and Bea fights the urge to check her phone every ten minutes. She's started to realize how little she actually has in common with Blanche these days, and lord knows, Eddie and Tripp don't have much to talk about. They exhaust football as a topic of conversation before the first drinks arrive, and then Tripp launches into some diatribe about a new family moving into the neighborhood, how they've put up a basketball hoop, how he's

going to

complain to the HOA.

Eddie smiles at him, but his voice has an edge to it as he says, "Or you could just let the kids

play in their own driveway? Maybe the better option?"

"That's what I told him," Blanche says, rolling her eyes and reaching over to shove at Tripp's

arm. She hadn't shown up half-drunk tonight, and her wineglass is still mostly full, which Bea

takes as a good sign.

She also notices that Blanche looks nicer tonight than she has in a while, her makeup subtle,

but pretty, her simple pink sheath dress making her complexion glow.

Another good sign.

Bea knows Blanche is unhappy, knows she's bored with Tripp and Thornfield Estates and her

life, that all the committees and boards she's signed up for aren't filling the void, but it's nothing

they've been able to talk about. Every time she tries to bring it up, Blanche changes the subject or,

if she's had too much wine, makes some catty comment about Bea working all the time.

But tonight, she's relaxed, happy, and Bea is relieved to see it. Maybe the old Blanche is still in

there after all.

They've just gotten their main courses when Blanche says, "You know, we were so inspired by

the work y'all did on your house that Tripp and I were thinking about doing some renovations of

our own."

That's a surprise. Bea knows that money has not exactly been abundant for the Ingrahams lately, but it's not like she can say that out loud.

Apparently, she's not the only one surprised. "We were?" Tripp asks. He's on his third bourbon now, leaning back in his chair, his food mostly untouched on his plate, his cheeks red. He's still handsome in his way, but every time they do one of these dinners, Bea can't help but think how much better Eddie looks in comparison.

Blanche waves her husband away. "I talked to you about it," she says. "You probably just forgot. Or weren't listening. Or were drunk."

There's the bite Bea has gotten used to hearing in Blanche's voice whenever she talks to Tripp.

Tripp is used to it, too, though, and he just snorts, taking another sip of his drink. "Do what you want, my love," he tells Blanche. "You always do."

Ignoring him, Blanche leans forward, focusing on Eddie. "Of course, we'd want you for the job," she says, and Eddie grins as he slices his brisket.

"I was going to say, I hope you're bringing this up because you're planning on hiring me, otherwise this is going to get very awkward."

They all laugh at that, and Bea reaches over to lay a hand on Eddie's thigh, squeezing slightly.

"Your schedule is kind of full right now, honey," she reminds him, and she sees the way Blanche glances at them, at Bea's hand there on his leg.

She can't explain why she doesn't want Eddie working on Blanche's house. She wants

to tell

herself that it's because she knows Blanche and Tripp don't have the money, that this is going to be

a waste of everyone's time, and besides, since she gave Eddie the capital to start his contracting

business, she has a say in what projects he takes on.

But it's more than that. There's something going on here, something she can't quite put her

finger on.

Something about the hard look in Blanche's eyes even as she smiles at Bea.

Eddie pats her hand, and goes back to his food. "I can always make time for friends," he says

easily.

Blanche's smile widens. "Great!" she says. "I already have, oh god, about a hundred and five

different ideas."

The rest of the dinner passes in something of a blur for Bea. She drinks a little more than she's

used to, and she keeps watching Blanche, wondering what this is all about, fighting the urge to

blurt out what she knows about Blanche and Tripp's money problems.

And when Blanche says, "I've always loved how open y'all's kitchen is. Maybe that's something we could do?" Bea comes so close to making a snide comment, she actually feels the

words sitting heavily on the tip of her tongue.

Of course, Blanche wants what they have. Of course, their house is nicer. Of course, Blanche

can't stand it that Bea has come out on top after all these years.

The evening wraps up as it so often does, with Tripp drinking too much. This time, it's bad

enough that Eddie has to help him to the car.

Bea and Eddie are parked on the street while Tripp and Blanche are in the small parking lot in

the back of the restaurant, so Bea goes to the car alone, the keys in her hand.

It's only when she's opening the passenger door that some urge overtakes her, and suddenly

she's hurrying across the pavement, ducking around the side of the restaurant to the little lot where

Blanche and Tripp's car is parked.

She sees Eddie and Blanche clearly in the streetlights, standing next to Tripp's massive SUV.

Eddie must've already gotten him in the backseat because it's just the two of them, just her

husband and her best friend, standing there.

Blanche is standing close to Eddie, too close, in Bea's opinion, her face awash in the orange

light. She's smiling up at him, and Eddie is smiling back.

It's the same smile he turned on her in Hawaii, the deep one that gives him a trio of wrinkles at

the corner of his eyes, the smile that had made something in her chest feel warm, because she'd

somehow known he didn't smile like that at everyone.

That smile she'd thought was just for her, and now it's Blanche's, too.

Bea feels numb as she turns away from them, her heels clicking on the asphalt.

So, this is what Blanche wants. This is what the "renovations" are about.

She doesn't want Bea's house.

She wants Bea's husband.

SEPTEMBER, TWO MONTHS AFTER BLANCHE

This is going to sound bizarre (but then again, what about this doesn't?), but I'm settling into a routine

in here.

We're settling into a routine.

Eddie doesn't come every day, but every three days. Every time is the same. He brings food and

water, enough to get me through until the next time he sees me. Actually, more than enough. I've got

extra bottles of water lined up against the wall.

For the first few weeks, I hoarded all of it, rationing out food and water to myself in case he

didn't come back, but—another bizarre thing—I've started to trust that he's not going to just leave me

up here to starve to death.

He still doesn't talk to me, though, and there are a million questions I want to ask him.

Not just the

obvious things like, "Why the fuck are you doing this?" but little things. I want to know what he's told

the world about me, I want to know what's happened to Southern Manors.

Do people here miss me? Do they miss Blanche?

There has to be some way to get him to talk to me.

I think if I don't talk to someone soon, I'm going to lose my mind.

Today, finally, a breakthrough.

Thanks to a shirt, of all things.

When Eddie came to bring me supplies, I noticed he was wearing the blue dress shirt I got him for

our last anniversary. It was the exact same shade of blue as his eyes, which is why I'd bought it, and

he still looked great in it. He's been looking better in general lately, more like himself.

And so I said, "You look good."

That surprised him. Instead of turning away from me, he glanced down at himself, like he'd just

realized what he was wearing. Saw the significance of it.

"Thanks," he said at last. "I forgot you got this for me."

"I got most of your clothes for you," I replied, "except for that godawful houndstooth tie you like.

That was all you."

He smiled a little at that, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "I love that tie."

Well, now you can wear it all the time, I guess.

The words were right there, a pithy comeback, the kind of thing he used to like from me. But I

held my tongue because I knew it would just make him leave. And I needed him to stay.

"It did look good on you," I said. "Which was very irritating."

A snort, then he turned for the door, and was gone. I'd wanted him to linger, to keep talking, and it

was hard not to feel disappointed. But there was a looseness to him as he left that hadn't been there

when he came in.

It's a start.

OCTOBER, THREE MONTHS AFTER BLANCHE

Eddie came back today, which surprised me. He'd just been here yesterday, and I was used to waiting

three days between visits, counting the time as best as I can up here.

He brought more food and water with him, but I still had plenty, and after he dropped them off, he

just stood there by the door for a long while, his hands in his back pockets.

"Do you want some more books?" he finally asked, and it took me a minute to respond.

"That would be great," I said, and meant it. He doesn't know I've been using this one as a journal,

and I could really use some more reading material.

He nodded and, as he left, said, "Bye, Bea."

He hasn't done that before. It's the first time I've heard my own name in weeks.

Another day, another visit from Eddie. He's coming every day now. Not staying long, and twice now,

he's been here while I've been asleep, and I wonder if that means he's coming at night. I don't have

the best sense of night and day right now, but I still sleep, and I assume that I must be keeping a semi-

regular schedule. I don't know why he'd suddenly be coming up at night, though.

But no, I told myself that I can't do that, can't try to guess at his reasons or his motives. If I do

that, I'll go crazy.

Well, crazier.

Eddie stayed for an hour today. Maybe longer.

He didn't even bother bringing food and water, and for the first time since I woke up in here, I felt

something in my chest loosen, like I could breathe again.

He'd brought me books like he promised, and as soon as he came in, I held up one of them, a

political thriller I remembered him reading. "This was maybe the stupidest book I've ever read," I

told him, and he crossed the room, taking it from my hand, studying the cover.

"Is this the one where they replace the president with a clone?"

"It was the vice president," I reminded him, "but yes."

Reading the back, Eddie smiled faintly. "I bought it in an airport. No one can be judged for the

books they buy in airports."

"I remember that," I said, and suddenly I did. We'd been going to a conference in Atlanta. Well,

I'd been going to the conference. Eddie had come with me so he could go to some

football game there

the same weekend.

“Women and Leadership, Leaders and Womanhood,” I said. “Some workshop like that.

Three

days of lectures with titles like, ‘A Gentle Hand: Commanding Respect without Fear,’

and ‘Women on

Top.’”

He smiled. “You hated that shit.”

“I did,” I replied, nodding. “That one was especially bad, though.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, remembering that weekend, how miserable and bored I’d felt,

overdressed in my pencil skirts, wasting my time.

I could still see the woman who led one of the group workshops, standing in front of us, her hair

short and prematurely gray, a cream-colored cashmere cardigan nearly swallowing her birdlike

frame.

“We keep so many things in our brains,” she’d said. “More than men do. They’re allowed to only

worry about business, while we have to worry about business and our families. Our children. I bet if

I were to ask a male CEO, ‘How much milk do you have in your fridge right this second?’ he’d have

no idea. But all of you know.”

The woman had smiled, beatific, then lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“You all

know, don’t you?”

A wave of chuckles and knowing nods, and I’d looked around thinking, Are all of you for fucking

real?

I told Eddie that story now, and he laughed, folding his arms across his chest. "Right, but every day, when I got back to the room and asked how your day had gone, you'd said, 'Fine.'"

I shrugged. "What was I supposed to say? I was the one who'd chosen to go. I didn't want to admit that you were right, and it was a waste of time."

I didn't add that things had been strained between us then. That we'd been arguing more, even before Blanche and her renovations.

I didn't want him to remember that.

"That weekend wasn't exactly a barrel of laughs for me, either. I ended up giving my ticket to the

Falcons game to one of my clients, so I think I mostly watched ESPN in the hotel room and ate bad room service."

He glanced around then, and I realized he was looking for a place to sit.

But of course, there wasn't one, because this wasn't my parlor, it was a cell.

A cell he'd made.

Thinking fast, I patted the bed next to me. "It's surprisingly comfy," I said, smiling a little. This

was the most we'd talked, and I wanted him like this, relaxed and a little more open.

He hesitated, and for a moment, I thought he'd leave instead.

Then he sat.

The mattress dipped under his weight, making me lean toward him more, and I caught the scent of

his soap, and underneath that, the clean, warm smell that was just Eddie.

That weekend in Atlanta hadn't been all bad. Even with the tension between us, we'd taken

advantage of that big hotel bed every night.

Things had always been good between us in bed.

Eddie looked over at me, his eyes very blue, and my mouth went dry.

He wasn't looking at me like he hated me, like he wanted me gone. And there had to be a reason I

was still here, after all.

Blanche was dead, while I was alive.

That had to mean something.

"We should've gone on more vacations," I said, letting my gaze drift to his lips. "Maybe back to Hawaii."

I glanced up at him then, and his face was open to me, finally. His eyes warm, his lips parted, the

Eddie I knew.

The Eddie I understood.

And suddenly the best way to get out of here was very, very clear.

She hadn't come to Hawaii to meet a guy. She'd come to sit in the sunshine and drink overpriced

frozen cocktails. To look out at the Pacific Ocean, which she'd never seen before that trip. In fact,

the only ocean she'd ever been to was the Gulf of Mexico, that one summer Blanche's family took

her to their place in Orange Beach.

Blanche hadn't approved of the trip to Hawaii. "It's tacky," she'd told Bea, wrinkling her nose

as she'd tucked her hair behind her ear. "And you can afford better. Do Bali or something. Fiji, even."

But Bea had wanted Hawaii, so that's where she'd gone, and Blanche could get fucked with her

judgy face and pointless opinions. She was just jealous, anyway. Tripp hadn't taken

her anywhere

since their honeymoon in Italy, and Bea knew for a fact he was still paying off the credit card bills.

But she sat there in her beach chair day after day, looking out at the ocean—as blue as she'd

hoped it would be—and Blanche's words had spun around her mind. Should she have gone

somewhere a little more exotic? Somewhere harder to get to? Somewhere where she wasn't

spending her days avoiding families and honeymooners?

It was always a balancing act, separating the wants of the girl she used to be from the needs of

the woman she was now.

Another mai tai, too sweet, but she drank it anyway. No, Hawaii was good. Hawaii was accessible, and that's part of what Southern Manors was selling, right? Class, but in a comfortable

way. She might do an entire Hawaiian line for next summer. Hibiscus blooms painted on glass

tumblers. Napkin rings in the shape of pineapples. A cheeky hula girl print.

Thinking about work calmed her as it always did, made her brain cease that constant circling,

like she was forever looking for the places where she'd stepped wrong, or could step wrong. She

never had that uncertainty and self-doubt when it came to her business.

Bea pulled her iPad out of her beach bag where it sat next to the three magazines and two

books she'd picked up at the airport, but knew she wouldn't read.

Within a few minutes, she had a page of ideas for the summer line, and was trying to think of a

name for the collection that would be fun and catchy, but not overly cutesy. Another

fine line she

walked all the time, but easier.

She was on her third attempt (“Something with Blue Hawaii? Too dated?”) when a shadow fell

across her chair, and she heard someone say, “Working at the beach? I’m not sure if that’s

inspiring or depressing.”

It was the smile that did her in, almost from that first moment. Looking up at the man standing

there in striped trunks and a white T-shirt, one hand casually in his pocket, his sunglasses spotted

with dried seawater, his hair falling over his brow like he was the hero of some rom-com she’d just

stepped into.

Bea smiled back, almost without thinking. Later, she’d realize that he was good at that, at

breaching walls before you’d even had a chance to put them up, but on that sunny afternoon, there

hadn’t been anything sinister about his charm.

“Beats working in an office,” she heard herself reply, and his grin had deepened, revealing a

dimple in his left cheek.

“I’ll drink to that,” he replied, and then he was offering her his hand, that smile as bright as

the sun overhead.

“I’m Eddie.”

Eddie. It was a boy’s name, Bea thought, but it suited him because there was something boyish

in his smile.

And she liked that. Liked it enough that she let him sit in the empty chair next to her

and that

she accepted his invitation for dinner that night.

Why not? she'd thought. Wasn't this the kind of thing that was supposed to go along with this

new life of hers? Expensive vacations, fancy cocktails, dinner with a handsome stranger?

They ate in the hotel restaurant, near the big plate glass window overlooking the sea, the sky a

violent mix of pink, purple, and orange, a candle flickering between them, expensive wine sweating

in a bucket of ice by the table.

Looking back, Bea could see how it was almost too perfect, too much of a romantic cliché, but

at the time, it had just felt exciting and ... right, somehow. Like she was finally getting everything

she deserved.

They talked, and she was surprised at how easy it all was. How easy he was. He was from

Maine, originally, and loved boats. He was in Hawaii because he had a friend looking to get into

the yacht charter business, and they were scouting out other companies, seeing how it was done.

And she'd told him about growing up in Alabama, leaving out the more Southern gothic aspects

of her childhood, focusing on the fancy boarding school, the debutante scene, the all-girls college

she'd attended in South Carolina. As she spun out her tales, she realized that she was doing it

again, papering parts of Blanche's life over the less savory parts of hers, but she'd been in the

habit for so long that it hardly registered anymore.

Over dessert, laughing sheepishly, a little chagrined, rubbing his hand over the back of his

neck: "You are really fucking beautiful."

Shake of his head. "And I am clearly really fucking drunk," he added.

But he hadn't been. He'd had one old-fashioned earlier, and his wine was mostly untouched.

Maybe it should have alarmed her, that he was faking being drunk as an excuse to say something like that to her, a woman he'd just met.

But it didn't alarm her. It interested her. It felt like it might be a hint at a weakness in a man

who, from what she could see, had no reason to be weak. Good-looking, smart, successful ...

Bea would eventually find out that he wasn't in Hawaii "on business" like he'd said, that the

charter yacht idea was closer to a pipe dream than an actual pursuit, but by then it was too late

and she didn't care anyway.

"I'm sure you get that a lot," he went on, and Bea had looked at him, really looked at him.

His eyes were blue, and there was just a hint of red high on his cheekbones, from the sun she

thought, not booze or embarrassment.

"I do," she replied, both because it was true and because she wanted to see how he'd respond.

If the script he'd come up with in his head had counted on her playing that mythical creature boys

sang about, the pretty girl who didn't know it.

But he didn't seem flustered at all. He narrowed his eyes slightly, tilting his glass at her. "So,

beautiful and smart enough to know it.”

“And rich,” she added. Also true, and again, she wanted to see the look on his face when she