

Chapter 1

On a dreary February day, amidst relentless rain, the protagonist drives from Center Point to Mountain Brook to fulfill her duty as a dog walker in the affluent Thornfield Estates. The journey begins at the Reeds' household, where Mrs. Reed expresses a performative sympathy for the protagonist having to walk her collie, Bear, in such unpleasant weather. This act underscores the primary concern in Thornfield Estates: appearances.

Mrs. Reed's disingenuous empathy contrasts sharply with the protagonist's indifference towards her and the superficiality of the residents' charitable endeavors, which seem more about social status than genuine philanthropy. The protagonist, equipped with a pragmatic army-green raincoat against the rain, sets out with Bear, pondering on the luxurious yet hollow lifestyle of her employers versus her own modest living conditions.

Her observations reveal a stark disparity; while every McMansion boasts lush backyards rendering dog walkers technically unnecessary, the demand for such services is driven by desire rather than need, highlighting the extravagance that defines the community. Not only does Mrs. Reed live in a lavish home far too large for mere inhabitants, but this opulence is mirrored throughout the estate. The protagonist reflects on her employment with various families within the neighborhood, such as the McLarens, the Clarks, and Tripp Ingraham, noting the token gestures of respect afforded to her as the help — a shallow attempt by the wealthy to assuage their guilt.

As she navigates the neighborhood, the contrast between the manicured perfection of Thornfield Estates and the drab reality of her apartment becomes evident. Despite her attempts to beautify her small, leaky apartment, it cannot compare to the vibrant, meticulously maintained homes she services. The neighborhood, alive with the buzz of maintenance crews, stands in stark opposition to her own simple existence. Even as

she muses on the luxury of a Burberry jacket she saw at Mrs. Clark's, the protagonist is sharply aware of the chasm between her world and that of her employers — a chasm underscored by her rain-soaked, pragmatic attire and a yearning for something better amidst the affluence that surrounds her.

