

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.

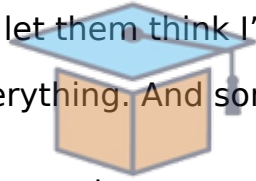
Bear and I loop past a row of nearly identical homes, the kind where every porch has a welcome mat and no one ever actually answers the door. Maintenance vans and landscaping trucks buzz along the road, making it feel more like a showroom than a neighborhood. Every detail is curated, right down to the 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.