

## 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.



Summaryer