

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.

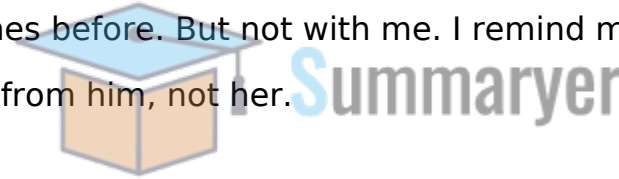
I arrive early, parking several blocks away to avoid the risk of him offering to walk me back. When I reach the bistro, he's waiting under a striped awning, looking like he stepped out of a lifestyle ad—crisp shirt, fitted slacks, and a presence that radiates calm confidence. His hand rests gently on 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.