

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 begins with mounting tension as I fall into a pattern I recognize too well—restless pacing, opening doors for no reason, searching for things that can't be seen but are deeply felt. Since Eddie brought me to the lake house, something in me hasn't settled. A hollow kind of loneliness creeps in, curling around my spine, making me feel more like a shadow in Thornfield Estates than someone who actually belongs here. I catch myself imagining how absurd it would sound to tell Emily or Campbell about what really happened there. "Hey girls, Eddie casually showed me the house where his wife might have died. Totally normal, right?"

Instead, I keep the words buried, even as I notice whispers following me. At Roasted, two older women sip coffee and murmur about Bea, speculating on whether the killer meant to take out one woman or both. Their casual tone—that awful assumption that "it always is" the husband—crawls under my skin. I wonder, do they mean Tripp? Or Eddie? One is about to be my husband, and yet both names float through conversations like storm clouds with no clear source. My soy hazelnut latte grows cold while I listen, unnoticed.

The uncertainty gnaws at me until I do something reckless—I text Tripp Ingraham. I tell myself it's just for clarity, to learn the truth, but I know better. We meet at a pub I've never been to, the kind of place I'd usually avoid, especially since it reeks of old wood and older regrets. I dress plainly—no flashy jewelry, no Southern Manors polish—just a simple beige dress that makes me look meek. Tripp arrives smug, greasy confidence wrapped in worn flannel and beer breath. "So," he says, "you here to ask if Eddie and Blanche were screwing?"

His bluntness jolts me. I wasn't expecting him to say it out loud, even if I've been thinking about it constantly. I try to steer us back on course, saying I just want to know

how he's doing, pretending concern. But Tripp's not fooled. He reads between the lines, maybe too easily, and suddenly I'm not the only one fishing for answers. He confesses that he doesn't believe there was anything between Eddie and Blanche—not really. "Blanche was loyal," he says. "Even when she shouldn't have been."

But his bitterness returns quickly. "Bea took her whole life," he mutters. "And now they're both at the bottom of a lake." The way he says it makes me shiver, but the conversation drifts from revelation to resignation, and I can tell he's finished talking. Whatever he knew, I've squeezed what I can from him.

Back at home, I dive into Facebook profiles, searching for images, anything to link Blanche and Eddie more intimately. But her page is gone, deactivated or scrubbed by family, and any pictures she's tagged in are dead ends. I've been so focused on Bea, convinced she held all the answers, but now I realize I've overlooked Blanche—the woman at the center of everything. That oversight may have cost me more than I know.

Later, I'm soaking in the tub when I hear Eddie's footsteps down the hall. I brace myself, pretending calm. But he doesn't greet me. Instead, he says, "Why did you have lunch with Tripp Ingraham today?" My stomach knots, heart hammering in my chest. I ask how he knows, and regret it instantly. Thornfield may be glossy on the surface, but its residents have nothing better to do than watch, whisper, and report.

Eddie steps closer, and for the first time, I feel the sheer size of him as a threat, not a comfort. He accuses me of slipping cash to someone I should have cut off. I'm too stunned to lie. He knows about John. About the blackmail. About Phoenix. He even has the number—written down, tucked away in his wallet all this time. "You know why I never called it?" he says. "Because I trust you, Janie."

That should feel reassuring. It doesn't. I sit on the edge of the tub, dripping and cold, holding a piece of paper that might as well be a ticking bomb. But it's not the number that shakes me. It's the way Eddie looked at me when he said, *That's what you do when people threaten you.*

Because that wasn't a suggestion.

It was a rule.



Summaryer