

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 — Chapter 36 starts with a confession neither of us expected. *He loved you.* Hearing those words from Jane shakes something loose inside me. It's not because I believe her—it's because part of me wishes I didn't. Jane wouldn't want to believe it either, which makes her saying it feel like a jab more than comfort. But the tone in her voice? It doesn't sound bitter. She looks at me with something close to understanding, and that unsettles me more than anger would have. She is not who Eddie thought she was. Maybe he never really knew either of us.

There's a sharpness to Jane that mirrors something I recognize in myself. That calm exterior, the muted wardrobe, the ability to blend in with a neighborhood like this—it's all camouflage. What gives her away are her eyes. They're too bright, too alert. As she sits across from me, sipping wine like we're just two friends catching up, I see the gears turning behind her gaze. She doesn't believe the story I've told, not really. I think she's letting me speak because she wants to hear what kind of liar I am. Maybe she's still deciding whether to become one, too.

Her reaction reminds me of Blanche at the funeral. She never said anything directly, but I saw something in her eyes—doubt that couldn't quite become suspicion. Blanche had always believed herself cleverer than she was, but sometimes, even people like her can get close to the truth. I wore plum that day, not black, because grief doesn't have to dress predictably. Later, I sat in Mama's old chair, finishing a bottle of wine, trying to wash away the last image I had of her—confused, not scared, right before she fell. Or rather, right before I helped her fall.

It hadn't taken much. A gentle push as she stumbled near the stairs. I didn't plan it, but I didn't stop it either. The sound of her head hitting the bottom step still visits me in dreams. Not nightmares—just echoes. I told myself it was mercy, that she was

always chasing another prescription or drink, that she'd already been fading. But deep down, I knew I didn't do it for her. I did it for me. Because freedom sometimes looks like blood on hardwood floors.

That wasn't something I ever told Eddie. I let him think Mama's death was just another tragic accident, and he accepted it. Maybe because he had secrets of his own. Things didn't fall apart until Blanche started digging. She didn't confront me directly until that dinner, the one after she caught me and Tripp in that bathroom. She accused me of stealing everything—my brand, my charm, my place in Eddie's life. But Blanche always underestimated how much I could take before I snapped.

I gave her a peace offering the next morning, a gluten-free pastry and a smile. She took it. The lake trip was my second gift. Tripp was bait. He annoyed her so much, she drank more than I expected, which only made the rest easier. She passed out before the boat even drifted far from shore. And when the hammer came down, it was almost clinical. Quick. Quiet. No screams—just water lapping at the side of the boat as she slid into the lake.

It should have worked. Girls' trip gone wrong, a drunk husband as the scapegoat. Tripp wouldn't remember anything—I'd made sure of that with Xanax and vodka. And everyone knew he and Blanche had problems. Maybe they'd think she drowned. Maybe they'd find the damage and think it was him. Either way, I'd be clear.

But then Eddie showed up. Standing there on the dock, looking like someone who didn't belong in the script. Panic on his face, confusion in his stance. He ruined everything. He didn't even have to say anything—I knew the second I saw him that the story had changed. Men like Eddie think they control the narrative. But what they don't realize is how easily stories unravel when they enter the scene without understanding the role they're walking into.

Jane leans in now, her voice tight with urgency. *We have to tell the police.* She says Eddie could've killed me. That he murdered Blanche. I almost laugh. Because none of this is about justice. It's about control—who holds it, who lets go, and who never

needed permission to begin with. I pull my hand away from hers. *Later*, I say. Let me enjoy the air, the wine, the illusion of choice.

Jane won't wait forever. I can see that now. She's sharper than Blanche ever was, more dangerous too, because she still thinks she has a conscience. She might go to the police, she might not. But either way, the game has changed again.

And I'm still playing.

