

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 opens with Jane entrenched in her role on the Neighborhood Beautification Committee, a position that has unexpectedly come with a financial burden she wasn't quite ready for. At Emily's casual suggestion, Jane spends over a thousand dollars on sleek solar path lights meant to enhance the common spaces in Thornfield Estates. Though she agrees without hesitation, partly eager to fit in and partly unsure how to decline, the weight of the cost settles on her heavily—not just as a dent in her wallet, but as a symbolic investment in belonging.

As Jane hauls boxes of the lights from her car and unpacks them alone, the glamour of the purchase fades quickly. What was pitched as a community effort becomes a solo task, revealing how roles in this neighborhood are often assigned beneath smiles. For someone who once counted every dollar for bus fare, this kind of spending feels alien, and it reminds her how far she's come—but also how out of place she still feels.

Even the house she lives in—Eddie's house—remains full of Bea's carefully chosen furniture, her books, and the scent of a floral candle that never seems to fade. Jane walks through the rooms sometimes feeling like she's just borrowing someone else's life. Though she now wears nicer clothes and shops at boutiques instead of discount racks, she can't shake the feeling that everything could be taken from her just as easily as it was given.

That unease only deepens when, during one of her solo installation trips to the park entrance, she sees John. His presence drags the air out of the moment. Dressed in his usual way—slightly unkempt, with a smirk that never quite reaches his eyes—John is a link to a version of Jane she's worked hard to bury.

He calls her by name, too easily, as though he's been watching her for longer than she realizes. At first, their conversation is guarded, the way it always is with people who

share uncomfortable memories. But then he says something—something offhanded about a call he got from someone in Phoenix asking about a woman named Helen Burns—and suddenly Jane’s whole body tightens.

The name hits her like a punch, bringing with it a wave of dread so intense she can barely breathe. She forces a laugh, brushes it off, but inside, panic spins. Helen Burns isn’t just a name from her past—it’s a thread that could unravel everything she’s built.

John doesn’t press. He’s cagey and sarcastic, but he doesn’t linger. Still, the implication is clear: if someone from Phoenix is looking, her secrets aren’t safe. The veneer she’s constructed in Thornfield—complete with yoga mats, artisan candles, and solar lights—is far thinner than she wants to admit.

After the encounter, Jane’s nerves are frayed. She barely sleeps, her mind replaying every word, every expression on John’s face. She wonders if he’ll show up again. Wonders if he was bluffing about the phone call or if someone really *is* out there, dredging up the version of her that doesn’t wear linen blouses or attend committee meetings.

The next morning, Eddie notices her jumpiness and asks if she’s okay. Jane lies smoothly, says she didn’t sleep well, that it’s just stress from the project. He believes her—at least for now.

The truth is, Jane knows how quickly comfort can slip into chaos. The lights may illuminate the neighborhood walkways, but they can’t protect her from shadows that stretch farther than she can see. Even as she smiles through the next committee update, sipping wine and discussing tulip bulbs, her mind is elsewhere.

Her new life isn’t as secure as it looks, and the past has a way of finding the cracks in even the most carefully constructed facade. In Thornfield Estates, appearances matter—but secrets matter more. And Jane has too many of them.