

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 begins with a sense of subtle transformation as Jane steps further into the world of Thornfield Estates. The gathering with Emily, Campbell, Anna-Grace, and Landry feels less alien this time—less like she’s infiltrating a sorority and more like she’s learning its rules. Wearing soft neutral tones, her outfit mirrors Emily’s, and even that small detail signals Jane’s growing awareness of how appearances matter in this circle.

This neighborhood doesn’t just prize manicured lawns and tasteful seasonal decor—it thrives on quiet competition masked as civility. At the gathering, conversations float between landscaping projects, HOA-approved upgrades, and baby shower plans, but each topic serves a deeper purpose: social ranking. When Jane casually mentions getting solar lights for the garden path, she watches their reactions closely—not for approval, but for signs that she’s earned a sliver of permanence.

Pregnant Anna-Grace glows as she talks about her latest yard project, revealing she secured donated sod through a friend’s father. It’s the kind of community favor that’s treated like social currency, placing her temporarily at the top of this unspoken hierarchy. Landry compliments the idea, sipping iced tea like a queen observing her court, and Jane marvels at how effortless these women make it look.

But Jane knows it’s not effortless at all. There’s a choreography to these interactions: the right balance of humility and pride, of casual wealth and public service. She’s not unfamiliar with performative social cues—foster homes and group shelters taught her how to read a room quickly—but this version comes with pearls, pastel knits, and expensive strollers.

While the group laughs about football rivalries, Jane offers a vague comment and immediately realizes her mistake. She doesn’t know which team they expect her to

support, and in this community, college allegiances are shorthand for values, class, and regional loyalty. Emily offers her a lifeline by changing the subject, but Jane has already clocked the moment—another reminder she’s still on the outside looking in.

As conversation turns toward relationships, the women drop hints wrapped in humor: “Eddie’s such a catch,” Campbell says with a playful nudge. “What’s he waiting for?” The tone is light, but the subtext is loaded—marriage is the next logical step, and Jane’s lack of a ring hasn’t gone unnoticed.

That pressure doesn’t escape her. Though the words are friendly, the implication is sharp: security and worth in Thornfield Estates come through commitment. Jane’s internal dialogue stirs with unease, knowing that while she’s playing the part, she hasn’t fully secured her place—and that makes her vulnerable.

At times, she wonders what these women would think if they knew the truth about her past—the shelters, the half-finished degrees, the jobs that didn’t come with benefits or holiday bonuses. She wonders what it would take to truly belong here without pretending, but she already knows the answer: it would take a ring and a title. Until then, she is the girlfriend, not the wife, and the distinction matters more than any of them will say aloud.

Still, Jane observes how each woman performs her role. Landry is the chic mom with a firm opinion on organic lawn treatments. Anna-Grace is the sweet Southern wife with a Pinterest-perfect nursery. Even Emily, who once showed signs of rebellion, knows exactly when to smile and when to press—like now, when she casually comments on wedding venues as if asking about the weather.

Jane plays along, matching their energy, but behind the smiles, her thoughts race. She’s gathering intel, learning what matters, decoding what counts. And the more she listens, the more she understands how thin the line is between being accepted and being tolerated.

The women eventually move on to planning another committee meeting, their words peppered with phrases like “legacy projects” and “neighborhood traditions.” Jane nods along, offering to follow up on a local nursery that might donate autumn mums. Her contribution is noted with polite smiles, but she can tell—it’s not enough yet.

After the meeting, Jane lingers in her car, watching them wave each other off. There’s a strange hollowness in the moment. She’s inside the house now, sitting at the table, sipping from the same glasses, but the invitation still feels conditional.

In neighborhoods like Thornfield, people don’t say what they’re thinking. They hint, suggest, smile. And Jane, more fluent than she’s given credit for, has learned to smile back—perfectly, precisely, and always on time.



Summary