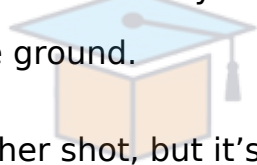


Chapter 9

Chapter 9 begins with a word—whirlwind—and that’s the only way to describe how things with Eddie have moved. But every time I think it, I remember Bea, who once described falling for Eddie the same way. Maybe that’s just his pattern: sweeping women off their feet so fast they don’t realize they’ve been picked up until their feet no longer touch the ground.



Summaryer

I’ve given him another shot, but it’s on my terms. No fancy dinners in Mountain Brook, no letting Thornfield gossip circles catch wind just yet. I want the truth about us to emerge when I’m ready, when I’ve become untouchable in that world. Until then, secrecy gives me power—a kind of silent ownership over the best story in town.

So we date in tucked-away spots with menus I pretend to understand and wine I pretend to like. Our knees brush in movie theaters, our laughter lingers in parks as we walk. His hand always finds mine, his voice always lowers when he speaks to me. It’s heady, this feeling—not of being chosen, but of wanting him back just as much. And I do.

Desire wasn’t new. I’d wanted things all my life—rings in velvet boxes, soft sweaters on sale racks, a place that felt like it was mine. But I’d spent years swatting away leers and side glances from men who saw want as weakness. That’s why this is different. Wanting Eddie makes me feel powerful.

The first time he kissed me, the sidewalk was slick with rain and the air smelled like rosemary from a nearby planter. His mouth tasted of wine, and his hands were gentle, cupping my jaw in a way that made me feel seen. I’d pulled back, sure, but it wasn’t rejection—it was strategy. Timing matters. I wasn’t going to be just another quick story for him.

So for now, it's only kisses and hands that linger just long enough to leave goosebumps. I can feel how much he wants more, and I like that tension. Let him earn it. Let him wait.

But it's not just the heat between us that keeps me drawn to him. It's the way he remembers things—the way his attention turns toward me like it's something sacred. One afternoon over sandwiches, I tell a half-truth about a childhood memory involving cream soda, masking my real past with the phrase “my dad” and leaving the rest unsaid. I didn't expect to say it. It slipped out.

The next day, his fridge is stocked with that same soda, in glass bottles and with a label so elegant it might as well have been imported. He never asked for more details. He just ... heard me. And that alone felt more intimate than a thousand confessions.

John has noticed something, of course. His eyes follow me through our apartment like a hawk circling prey. I let him wonder. Let him stew. It's not his business anymore, and soon it won't even be his reality—I'm slipping from that world with every passing day.

And then it happens.

While dropping off Bear, I hear it—Mrs. Reed's voice floating from the kitchen. “Eddie is dating someone.” My heart kicks. I've been waiting for this moment. For the neighborhood to begin whispering, unsure who she is, never suspecting it's the girl who hands over their leashes and picks up after their dogs.

I beam as I hand her the leash. She tries her usual routine, casual curiosity with a sugar-slick smile, trying to draw out anything I might've seen or heard. “Have you noticed anyone new around the Rochester house?” I shrug, offer a bland “I don't think so,” and walk out like the secret doesn't belong to me.

The second I'm out the door, I text Eddie to confirm dinner at his place. And when I show up, the table is set, candles flickering low, wine already breathing in glasses. Whether he cooked it or not doesn't matter—he'd planned for me. That's enough.

Afterward, I sip wine slowly while he lingers in the kitchen, pouring himself whiskey. We kiss again, his mouth warm with oak and smoke. And when he leans into me, I feel something unspoken click into place, like the story we're building just found its next page.

I turn away from him slightly, just enough to catch our reflections in the glass doors. "This has been the loveliest night," I say, not meeting his eyes. "I'm really going to miss this place."

And I mean it. Not just because the house is stunning, not just because it smells like cedar and cinnamon and safety. But because for the first time in a long time, I want to stop running. I want to stay. I want this story to last.



Summary