

Chapter 25

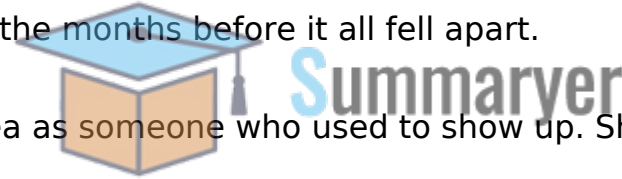
Chapter 25 opens with the kind of small, suburban ritual I never imagined myself participating in: a morning committee meeting. As I walk into Roasted, the local coffee shop where Thornfield's women hold court, I feel oddly composed. The pencil skirt and pink blouse are a far cry from the dog-walking uniform I used to wear in this very neighborhood. I settle in next to Campbell and Emily, both dressed in matching shades of athleisure that scream effortless wealth. Yet, for the first time, I don't feel completely out of place. My binder is color-coded and filled with clippings from garden magazines. Emily praises my organization, and I smile, basking in the glow of performative belonging. I don't mention how late I was up putting it together, or the odd noises from upstairs that I've chalked up to an overactive imagination—or pests, if I'm lucky.

As I open the binder to explain ideas for sprucing up the front beds, my ring catches the light and draws attention just as I'd hoped. Campbell immediately asks about the wedding. I say we haven't set a date, blaming the delays on everything happening with Tripp. It's partially true. Tripp's name hangs in the air like static. Emily leans in, voice lowered, and mentions that the police discovered Tripp had been at the lake. That part is new. Campbell's shock is genuine—she even knocks the table with her knee, rattling the silverware. There's a moment of silence, and I can feel their attention sharpen.

Trying to keep my tone casual, I speculate that the police must've found receipts or maybe a witness. I even laugh a little when Emily quips about Kardashian-style "receipts," but my stomach's in knots. When Campbell whispers, "So... he really did it?" I react too quickly, too strongly. My "of course he did" lands with a thud, and they both look at me. I fumble to recover, insisting the police wouldn't arrest him unless they were sure. It's a weak deflection, but it does the job—for now. Still, I feel the

energy shift. Campbell taps her nail against the table, eyes distant, then murmurs that Tripp wasn't violent—just sloppy, sometimes drunk, but not dangerous.

Emily cuts in, reminding us they'd been having problems. Their looks, aimed at me and then at each other, say more than their words. I push gently, pretending to be curious, playing dumb: "Tripp said there were rumors about Blanche and Eddie..." Their expressions falter for a second. Then Emily shrugs, almost bored. "They were together a lot," she says. "And Bea was never around." Campbell nods, confirming that Bea had all but vanished in the months before it all fell apart.



They remember Bea as someone who used to show up. She planned events, hosted parties, offered advice. Then, slowly, she stopped. Emily hints that something was going on long before Blanche died—something tied to Bea's mother, maybe, and not at all juicy. But I don't buy that. Tripp had mentioned tension between the two women. Now I hear the same echo from them. I can't help thinking the key to all of this lies buried in whatever passed between Bea and Blanche before Eddie ever entered the picture.

Curiosity prickles at me. I ask if Bea had a temper. They hesitate, and I watch the gears turn behind their perfectly glossed lips. These women don't lie outright, but they edit the truth like seasoned politicians. Their silence says more than anything else. Finally, Emily chuckles softly and says Bea was "intense." Campbell adds that she was "driven." No one says "angry." But it's there—in the pause, in the shrug, in the way Campbell quickly changes the subject.

I nod and go back to my binder, but inside, everything's buzzing. The threads are starting to connect. Bea's withdrawal, the whispers about Eddie and Blanche, the vague mention of her mother. Something happened back then—something that flipped a switch in Bea. And whatever it was, it still casts a shadow over everything. I smile at the right times, sip my coffee, and let them think I've moved on from the topic. But I haven't. Not even close.