

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 begins with a decision that can't quite be explained. The narrator finds himself driving toward the lake, unsure if it's curiosity, jealousy, or something deeper that pulls him there. Tripp had casually mentioned Bea's invitation earlier, and while they weren't close, it planted a seed. The idea that Bea would ask Tripp to join a supposedly women-only weekend felt wrong. Something in that gesture stirred a quiet discomfort, a nagging instinct that wouldn't settle. Maybe it was the look Tripp had given Bea lately—soft, longing, a little pathetic. The narrator tried to convince himself it was only a reaction to Blanche's obvious interest in someone else. But the thought didn't ease him.

When he arrives, the lake house is silent, dimly lit, and seemingly empty. He walks through the space, calling out, expecting laughter, maybe music. Instead, he finds Tripp upstairs, sprawled unconscious, snoring with a thick, unnatural rasp. Something about it is off—like his body isn't just asleep but numbed beyond alcohol. Downstairs, signs of life remain: a purse, a set of keys, Bea's overnight bag. But the boat is gone. The scene is too carefully staged for comfort, and the narrator tries to convince himself he's being paranoid. Maybe they're out enjoying the lake, and maybe he overreacted when Blanche told him about Bea's mother.

Then he sees her. Bea, soaked and barefoot, walking slowly up the dock like she's emerged from a nightmare. Their eyes meet, and in hers, there's no apology—only a quiet defiance. Her posture straightens, chin lifting slightly. That was the moment he knew something had gone terribly wrong. At first, he chooses to believe her version. That Blanche had been threatening her, that Bea had tried to save her, that Tripp had been brought there as a decoy, not a suspect. Bea spins the story well, and the narrator wants to believe it—because loving her had always required some degree of delusion. She kisses him with practiced sweetness, and for a heartbeat, he lets himself

pretend.

Then instinct overtakes reason. He clamps an arm around her neck, tightening until she gasps. The decision is made—not to kill her, but to contain her. To lock away the danger she’s become, the woman who might ruin everything. Later, he will justify it: it was the safest way. She couldn’t go to prison—not in Alabama, not with a murder this calculated. Not when whispers about her mother’s death might resurface. Not when Southern Manors, their shared business empire, stood to collapse under public scrutiny. He tells himself this isn’t cruelty; it’s protection. Not only of Bea but of everything they built.



Still, he knows it’s also about control. He couldn’t let her keep killing, and he couldn’t let her walk free. The panic room had been a desperate choice. Not smart. Not kind. But necessary. Now, confined to bed with injuries still healing, he reflects on the woman who had briefly offered him escape: Jane. For a time, he believed he could love her. He wanted her to be the answer, the clean break from his mess. She didn’t ask about his past, didn’t see the edges he tried to hide. But deep down, he always knew—he couldn’t erase Bea from his life.

Jane had believed in him without question, and that made her dangerous in a different way. He hadn’t loved her—not in the way he should have. But he’d offered her hope, a proposal, a chance at a future he knew he couldn’t give. He told himself he was trying to build something new, but every visit to Bea’s room, every lie told to Jane, said otherwise. He’d used Jane, shaped her into a blank canvas where he could pretend to be the man he wasn’t. And in doing so, he’d broken her trust, maybe even her spirit. She didn’t deserve it.

The guilt swells, but love is the tether he can’t cut. What happened with Blanche, with Bea’s mother, with the lake—it all fed into a narrative too dark to unravel. But he’d tried to handle it. To manage the chaos Bea brought with her. The truth is, he still loves her. And love, in its most distorted form, had driven every choice since. He still believes he saved her that night—not from the police, but from herself.

But now she's free. Somewhere in the house with Jane. Two women, both smart, both bruised, both tangled in a story he can no longer control. And deep down, he knows: he's running out of time.

