

Part VI: Bea

Part VI: Bea begins with a familiar sensation—the presence of Eddie beside me again, his thigh pressed close and the scent of mint on his breath. It should have made me recoil, thinking of what he’s done, but instead, it made the next move easier. Knowing he came here expecting intimacy gave me the power I needed. I’d planned for this. Brushed my hair until it shined, pinched color into my cheeks, rehearsed how I’d lean in. My survival now depended on reminding him of the version of me he first loved. The version he married. If I could keep him tethered to that memory, I might just stay alive.

Sliding my hand into his, I focused on the familiar—his calloused skin, the comfort of shared history. I told myself not to think about Blanche, not to let her name surface in my mind, even as the man who murdered her sat across from me. Instead, I remembered how much I once wanted him. That electric hunger, the desperate way I used to crave his touch, his attention. It wasn’t a lie back then. I just had to tap into that again. And as I moved closer, kissed him the way I had in Hawaii, it came back surprisingly fast. My lips knew their way. My body responded like it always had. For a few minutes, I believed it too.

But it wasn’t long before reality pushed its way in. Eddie broke the kiss, face red, breath shallow. He stood so quickly it startled me. The shame on his face cut through my plan. He said he shouldn’t have come, and my heart dropped. I reached for him, gently holding his wrist, trying to soothe his panic. The energy in the room snapped tight, like a thread ready to break. But I didn’t let go. I told him it was okay. That I wanted him. That I still loved him. He kissed me again—deeply this time. And then it happened. Bodies tangled, words forgotten, boundaries blurred. Reader, I fucked him.

Afterward, when our breathing slowed, I thought maybe I’d won. I traced lazy circles on his chest, whispering that I loved him, that I’d never hurt him. I didn’t say the other

part out loud—that if he let me go, I’d never tell. I thought I was giving him reassurance. But instead, I’d pushed too far. Eddie pulled away, cold now, distant. He got dressed silently, and this time, he left without looking back. I stayed in the bed, furious with myself for miscalculating, wondering how long it would take to earn his trust again.

The memory of Eddie and Blanche laughing together over lunch still haunted me. That day in the village, I was just supposed to browse store windows, maybe scout a new location for a Southern Manors display. Instead, I saw them—my husband and my best friend—smiling over salad like they were co-stars in a pharmaceutical ad. It wasn’t just their closeness. It was the visibility. Their ease with being seen. The fury that surged in me had nothing to do with jealousy. It was about humiliation. About the way they made me small.

I crossed the street before I could stop myself, appearing at their table with a brightness I didn’t feel. Their startled faces almost made the moment worth it. I pretended not to notice the blueprints spread out between them—an innocent work meeting, they’d say. But I knew better. Blanche had been inviting Eddie into her house, her plans, her wine. She’d even used my own back porch as a showroom, showing Eddie a Pinterest board and calling it a dream. He just smiled. Played along. He always did.

Later, while we made dinner, Eddie told me I’d embarrassed myself. His words came sharp, slicked with condescension. I said nothing. I knew silence would provoke him more. And it did. He walked out with my wine glass in hand, the screen door slamming behind him. We didn’t talk about it again, but I saw it in Blanche’s face the next time we had coffee. The smile that didn’t reach her eyes. The apology that wasn’t really one.

“You always overreact, Bea,” she said, scraping whipped cream from her drink like I was the one who needed to be handled delicately. I let the comment hang in the air, memorizing her tone. She didn’t think she’d done anything wrong. She thought I was

the problem. And maybe, to her, I was. But two days later, when I picked up Eddie's phone and saw a selfie from Blanche—just her face, exaggerated frown, nothing sexy—I knew everything I needed to. It wasn't about what she wore or said. It was about access. About intimacy. And she'd crossed a line.

That photo, innocent on the surface, cracked something open in me. It wasn't about whether they'd slept together. It was about the certainty that they *could*. That they might. And that neither of them feared what I might do if I found out. I was already the joke at the table, the overreactor, the one drinking too much and talking too little. But now, I had clarity. And maybe that was more dangerous than anger.

Because clarity comes with purpose. And purpose always leads to action.