

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 begins with a quiet weight—everything in the Ingraham house still holding its breath, as if waiting for Blanche to come back. The rooms haven't adjusted to her absence. Her handbag still sits by the door, and a neat little pile of rings rests beside the lamp, as if she'd be back any second to slip them on. Even her shoes are still where she must have kicked them off, gingham flats with just enough wear on the soles to show how often they were loved.

I walk in slow, the tension from last night with Eddie still pressing against my ribs. That date had ended colder than I'd expected—just a hug on the sidewalk, no warmth in his goodbye. And now, I'm here, packing away pieces of another woman's life, one who vanished months ago and still clings to this house like perfume in an old coat. Tripp had asked for my help, and maybe I agreed because something in this place made me curious.

Tripp is slumped on the couch with his usual breakfast cocktail—brown liquor and melted ice—and greets me like I'm staff. He doesn't remember my name. I gave up correcting him. Upstairs, in the second guest bedroom, boxes line the floor, and the air feels still. It's the kind of room designed to impress guests without ever inviting them to stay. It's all too polished, too impersonal.

Tripp arrives a few minutes later, his footsteps heavy despite his attempt to sneak up. He tries to make it seem like a check-in, but I can read his kind a mile away—the entitled, slouching menace of a man who's lost his grip on both control and relevance. He rattles the ice in his glass and gestures around like this room, like Blanche, like the mess she left, never really mattered to him. The truth is, it didn't. Not the way it should have.

He tells me to pack it all. Claims none of it meant much to Blanche, but I don't believe him. Her jewelry, her books, her carefully chosen throw pillows—there's too much intention here. It's strange, the way a space can still whisper about someone, even after they're gone. Blanche may not have lived for this room, but she definitely curated it.

And then, something odd happens. A lamp beside the bed catches my eye—a tin bucket style with soft blue floral shades. I've seen it before. It takes a moment, but I realize it matches something I saw on Southern Manors' website. When I mention it, Tripp snaps back with a bitter laugh and says that Blanche had the lamp first, that Bea copied her. That Bea wasn't original, that everything Southern Manors built had started with Blanche.

He says they grew up together, were roommates at Ivy Ridge. That they were close—until they weren't. And then he says it. Bea's real name. Bertha.

The name hits harder than I expect. It feels weirdly intimate, like I've stolen something. Like I know something I shouldn't. And it draws a connection between me and Bea that makes my skin prickle. Because I haven't always been Jane, either. That old name—the one I buried—was once a burden I couldn't shake, but now it's more of a warning. This is what happens when you bury too much of yourself and build something too shiny on top.

Tripp watches my reaction. His gaze, though tired and unfocused, is still sharp when he wants it to be. There's something unspoken in the room, something circling the edges of this conversation. Maybe he suspects more than he lets on. Or maybe he's just enjoying being the one with something to hold over someone else for once.

I keep packing, but I don't rush. His words loop in my head, and I realize this house is full of ghosts—Blanche's, sure, but also Bea's. Everyone in Thornfield Estates talks about Bea like she was a saint, but Tripp's bitterness paints a different picture. One of rivalry. Of mimicry. Maybe even of betrayal.

And maybe that's what makes this neighborhood what it is—women dressing like flowers, houses that match each other too closely, secrets hidden under polite smiles. Everyone's trying to be someone else. Everyone's trying to win at a game no one really understands. And me? I plan to win it, too—but on my own terms.

