

Part IV: Bea

Part IV: Bea didn't feel like going out for dinner with Blanche and Tripp, but she didn't want to break their long-standing routine either. Every other Thursday, the four of them got together, and even when she wasn't in the mood, she showed up. This time, they were trying out a trendy barbecue joint in Homewood, its string lights and metal furniture giving off the kind of ambiance people post on Instagram but rarely enjoy in real life.

She felt removed from the group, especially Blanche, whose conversation seemed increasingly superficial. The once-natural connection they shared had faded, leaving behind strained small talk and polite nods. Football filled the silence between Eddie and Tripp, but it fizzled out quickly, replaced by Tripp's complaints about a neighbor's basketball hoop.

Bea's fingers itched to pick up her phone, but she forced herself to stay present. The setting was idyllic, but her thoughts wandered far from the twinkle of fairy lights. Tripp's gripes about the neighborhood felt dated, and when Eddie gently suggested letting kids play, a flicker of tension cut through the pleasantries.

Blanche, in contrast, appeared composed and elegant tonight—subtly applied makeup, a glowing pink dress, and a nearly untouched wineglass. Bea saw the version of Blanche she missed, the one who used to laugh easily and speak honestly. But she also sensed this image was curated, a mask hiding whatever Blanche wasn't ready to say out loud.

Their friendship had thinned over time, stretched by lives that no longer matched. While Blanche sat on boards and hosted charity luncheons, Bea worked long hours and built a brand—two parallel lives pretending to intersect. Every time Bea tried to ask if Blanche was okay, the answer came in sarcasm or silence.

Still, Blanche's energy tonight seemed lighter, almost hopeful. Bea allowed herself to believe that maybe, just maybe, her friend was still reachable. That hope flickered even brighter when Blanche brought up home renovations, inspired by the work Eddie had done.

It caught Bea off guard, especially knowing the Ingrahams hadn't been flush with cash recently. Tripp's surprised reaction confirmed her suspicion—it wasn't a mutual decision. He looked more interested in his bourbon than the conversation, his third glass leaving him ruddy-cheeked and disinterested.

Blanche shrugged off his confusion with a jab, her tone familiar and sharp. Bea had grown used to hearing those barbed remarks, but tonight, they seemed especially pointed. When Blanche turned to Eddie, her tone softened, and she asked if he'd take on the project.

Eddie's playful reply earned laughs from the table, and Bea reached for his leg without thinking, grounding herself in his presence. Blanche's eyes lingered on that gesture, subtle but loaded, as if she were evaluating more than just a business opportunity. Something unspoken passed between them, and Bea felt it land heavily.

She didn't want Eddie working on Blanche's house—not because of schedules or budgets, though those were easy excuses. Deep down, she felt the weight of something darker, an instinct clawing at her chest. It wasn't about kitchens or curb appeal; it was about proximity.

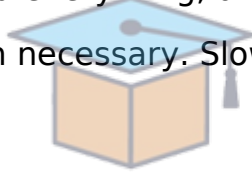
The dinner wrapped up as expected, Tripp tipsy and barely able to walk. Eddie helped him to the car, and Bea headed to their own, her heels clicking over pavement, head buzzing with wine and questions. But halfway there, something in her shifted.

Instead of leaving, she rounded the corner to the back lot where Blanche and Tripp's SUV waited. Under the harsh glow of the streetlight, she saw them—Eddie and Blanche—too close, too familiar. His smile, the one Bea thought was hers alone, now belonged to another.

That realization burned through her, colder than jealousy, heavier than betrayal. Blanche didn't want Bea's backslash or open floor plan—she wanted Eddie. And Bea could no longer ignore what was unfolding before her eyes.

Months passed, and everything changed. Bea's new reality became four walls, stocked supplies, and silence, broken only by Eddie's visits. He didn't come every day, but when he did, he brought food, water, and a suffocating sense of order.

At first, she hoarded everything, unsure if he'd return. But he always did, never speaking more than necessary. Slowly, she began to trust that he wouldn't leave her to rot.



The silence hurt more than the confinement. She longed to know what lies he was telling the outside world and whether anyone missed her. Did anyone even ask about Blanche?

When he arrived wearing the shirt she'd given him—a specific blue to match his eyes—she couldn't help but speak. The compliment was casual, but the pause in his step said it hit deeper. It was the first human exchange they'd had in weeks.

Eddie softened then, acknowledging the shirt and its history. That moment stayed with Bea long after he left. A crack in the wall—figurative, but real enough to let in light.

Soon, he came more often, even daily, and stayed longer. Books followed, small gestures with big meanings. Their shared past slowly became the present again.

She remembered an old leadership workshop she'd hated, and told him the story. He laughed, really laughed, and for a second, it felt like the old days—before Blanche, before the lies. They were together in memory, not conflict.

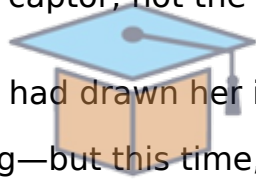
There were still unspoken things between them. But when Eddie sat on the bed, when their shoulders brushed, the silence felt less like punishment and more like possibility. The man who had locked her away was also the man who still smiled like he meant it.

She held onto that thought, even as she fought off a thousand others. If he still saw her as Bea—the woman he'd once loved—maybe there was a way out. Not through force or fury, but through understanding.

She remembered Hawaii. The ocean, the drinks, the ease of that trip. A time when everything felt like it was falling into place.

Blanche hadn't approved of that trip. Called it tacky. But Bea had gone anyway and met Eddie—not the captor, not the liar, but the man who made her laugh by the sea.

That version of him had drawn her in. And now, she was going to bring him back. She wasn't done fighting—but this time, she would fight smart.



Summary