

Part II: Bea

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid. I will provide the chapter now.

PART II BEA

JULY, ONE DAY AFTER BLANCHE

I don't know who I'm writing this for.

Me, I think. A way to get this all down while it's still fresh in my mind. I can't let myself hope that someone will find it. It hurts too much to hope for anything right now.

But maybe if I write everything down in black and white, some of it will start to make sense to me, and I can keep from going crazy.

Last night was the first time I understood how easily sanity can slip right through your fingers.

Eddie included a book in the supplies he brought me, a cheap paperback I'd had since college, and I found a pen wedged in the back of a drawer in the bedside table we carried up here just a few months ago.

There's something especially bizarre about this, about writing my own story over the words I read and reread when I was younger.

But it's even harder to write the truth.

Last night, my husband, Edward Rochester, murdered my best friend, Blanche Ingham.

Blanche is dead. Eddie killed her. I'm locked away in our house. No matter how many times I repeat these facts to myself, they still feel so wrong, so crazy, that I can't help but wonder if this is all some kind of awful hallucination. Or that maybe I drowned along with Blanche and this is hell.

That almost makes more sense than this.

But no. Blanche and I went to the lake house for the weekend, a girls' trip that was supposed to give us a chance to spend some time together. We'd both been so busy—me with running Southern Manors, Blanche dealing with Tripp—and to just sit and talk with my best friend, to drink wine and laugh like we'd been doing since we were teenagers had been ... perfect. That weekend was perfect. I'm replaying it all in my head to convince myself that there wasn't any sign of what would happen next.

It's hard to untangle, you see.

I remember Eddie showing up unexpectedly, and the three of us deciding to take the boat out for a midnight cruise. Eddie was driving, Blanche and I were dancing to the music piping out of the speakers. Then my head was heavy, my thoughts fuzzy, and it was dark. Blanche was screaming, I was in the water, and it was warm, warm like a bath, and I knew I had to keep swimming and swimming, but when I got to the shore, Eddie was already there, and there was a blinding pain in my head, and then blackness. When I opened my eyes, I was ... here.

In this room.

It was Eddie's idea to add a panic room to the third floor, after watching some 60 Minutes episode about how they were all the rage in new construction. I'd gone along with it when he'd renovated the house because I wanted our new home to have the best of everything, and if it made him happy, why not?

I would've done anything to make Eddie happy.

And it had been his idea to make it more than just an empty space, too. He'd been the one to suggest the bed.

"In case we get stuck in here for a while," he'd teased, grabbing me around the waist, pulling me close, and even though we'd been married for almost a year by that point, I felt the same thrill that had shot through me the first night he'd kissed me.

I'd never stopped feeling that for Eddie. Maybe that's why I'd never seen this coming. I'd been too in love, too trusting, too—

Eddie came in as I was writing that last entry. I was able to shove the book under the bed before the door was open, so he didn't see that I was writing, thank god. I'm going to have to be more careful in the future.

It's not much consolation, but he looks awful. Eddie has always been so polished, but today his eyes were red and his skin looked a little slack, almost gray. And as insane and fucked up as it is, for a second, I felt sorry for him. I wanted to help him. That's how our marriage had always gone, after all. I was the planner, Eddie was the doer.

I waited for him to say something, for him to at least try to explain what the fuck is going on. I probably should have screamed at him, rushed toward him, hit him. Anything.

But I just sat there, frozen.

I'd like to blame it on the lingering effects of whatever drug he slipped me and Blanche, but from the second he'd walked in, I'd felt paralyzed with some combination of fear and shock.

All I could do was watch as he put bottles of water and packets of peanut butter crackers, plus a couple of apples and a banana, on the table near the door, his back to me.

Eddie killed Blanche.

He killed her, and he could kill me.

Eddie, my husband, my partner. The man I thought I knew so well. Who smiled at me the day we met with such sweetness in his eyes. Who always listened so carefully when I talked about my day, my business, my dreams. Who remembered little, silly things—like my favorite hot sauce or how I always liked my coffee with one regular sugar, one Splenda.

That man, my Eddie, was a murderer.

If I think too much, I feel like screaming, and I'm afraid if I start screaming, I'll never stop, so instead, I'm taking deep breaths, even though the pattern—in for four, hold for four, out for six—reminds me of the yoga class Blanche and I took together just last month.

God, one month ago. It already feels like another lifetime.

Eddie didn't speak to me, just set the food and water down, then went back out the door, and when he was gone, I laid down on the floor and cried, shaking so hard that my teeth chattered together.

How had I married a monster and never seen it until it was too late?

FOUR DAYS AFTER BLANCHE

Today, Eddie came in again, more water, more food, and this time, I tried to talk to him, but as soon as I said his name, he held up a hand, his face closed to me.

It was like looking at a stranger who shared Eddie's familiar features. This cold, dangerous man was no one I knew, and when he left, all I felt was relief. This time, there were no tears, no shaking.

Maybe writing all this down is helping after all.

SIX DAYS AFTER BLANCHE

It's been two days since Eddie was last here, and in that time, I've felt myself growing calmer, saner. I still don't understand what his plan is, or why he's keeping me here, why I'm not at the bottom of the lake with Blanche. But there has to be a reason, and I'm going to figure it out.

I have to be smart.

Smarter than Eddie.

It's the only way I'm getting out of this alive.

Bea didn't mean to be late, but traffic was bad and the rain hadn't helped.

By the time she slides into the booth opposite Blanche at their favorite restaurant, La Paz, Blanche is already on her second margarita and the chip basket is nearly empty.

As soon as she sits down, Blanche signals the waiter, pointing to her glass, then to Bea, who

tries not to be annoyed. She does usually get a margarita, it's just that tonight, she hadn't planned on drinking.

And she clearly doesn't do a great job of hiding that annoyance because her voice is sharper than she'd intended when she says, "A three margarita Tuesday, huh?"

Blanche just shrugs and drags another chip through the little blue dish of salsa. "Smoke 'em if you got 'em!" she says, bright and, to Bea's ears, fake.

Something has been off with Blanche lately, but Bea can't figure out what it is. It might be Tripp; he and Blanche have only been married a year, but there's already a brittleness there, a tension. Just last week, Bea went over to their house for drinks, and had to sit through two hours of the two of them steadily chipping away at each other, flinging little barbs, little insults wrapped in affection.

And sitting across from Blanche now, Bea sees that Blanche's eyes look a little puffy, her skin a little dull. She wishes she hadn't made that crack about the third margarita.

When their drinks are set in front of them, Bea picks up the heavy glass with its salted rim and touches it to Blanche's. "To us," she says. "And not drinking those sugar-bomb monstrosities from El Calor anymore."

That makes Blanche smile a little, as Bea had hoped it would. El Calor had been the cheap Mexican place near Ivy Ridge, the school she and Blanche had both attended as teenagers. They'd gone in nearly every Friday night, long before they'd turned twenty-one, and ordered the most obnoxious margaritas on the menu, frozen concoctions that came in giant bowls and were bright red or blue or neon green, colors that stained their lips and teeth.

Bea still has a picture of her and Blanche their senior year, sticking out their tongues for the camera, Blanche's purple, Bea's scarlet, their eyes shining with alcohol and youth.

She loves that picture.

She misses those girls.

Maybe tonight is the chance to recapture a little of that?

But then, Blanche lifts her menu and Bea sees the bangle around her wrist.

Without thinking, she reaches for Blanche's hand, and examines the bracelet. It's pretty, a thin silver circlet with a dainty charm—Blanche's zodiac sign, Scorpio, picked out in diamonds.

"We have something similar to this coming out next year," Bea says, turning Blanche's wrist so she can better see the bracelet. "But we did an enamel backing on the charm, and we're offering colored stone options. I'll get you one."

Blanche jerks her hand back, her elbow nearly upsetting her drink, the movement so sudden, so aggressive, that for a beat or two, Bea doesn't pull her own hand back and it just hovers there over the chips and salsa.

"I like this bracelet," Blanche says, looking at the menu and not meeting Bea's eyes. "I don't need another one."

"I just thought—" Bea starts, but then she drops it, picking up her own menu instead, even though she always orders the same thing.

So does Blanche, but you'd think the secrets of the universe were encoded among the various descriptions of burritos and enchiladas, that's how intently Blanche is staring at her menu now.

The silence between them is heavy and awkward, and Bea tries to remember the last time she felt this way around Blanche. Blanche, who's been her best friend since she was a nervous fourteen-year-old, away from home for the first time, trying to fit in at a new, fancy school.

Once the waiter has taken their orders—the usual for both of them, Bea's enchiladas verdes, Blanche's tortilla soup—that same silence returns, and Bea wonders if she's going to be forced to scroll through her phone when Blanche says, "So, how's the guy?"

Another spike of annoyance surges through Bea.

"Eddie is fine," she says, putting extra emphasis on his first name, which, for some reason, Blanche never wants to use. He's always "the guy," occasionally "that guy," and once, at a lunch with some of their friends from Ivy Ridge, "Bea's little boyfriend-person."

It was something Bea had heard Blanche say a lot over the years, her go-to dismissive phrase, but Bea had never had it directed at her before, and she'd ended up leaving lunch early.

Now Blanche drains the rest of her margarita and repeats, “Eddie.” Folding her arms on the table, she leans forward, the sleeve of her tunic coming dangerously close to a splotch of salsa by her wrist. “I never trust men who go by nicknames like that,” she says. “Like. Grown men. Your name is Robert, don’t be Bobby, for Christ’s sake, you know? Or Johnny for John.”

“Right,” Bea can’t help but reply. “Like when a guy is ‘the third’ but goes by ‘Tripp.’”

Blanche blinks at that, but then, to Bea’s surprise, laughs and sits back. “Okay, touché, you bitch,” she says, but there’s no real heat in it. Bea feels some of the tension drain away, and wonders if this night will be salvageable after all.

But then Blanche leans forward again to take Bea’s hand. She’s drunk now, Bea can tell, that third margarita finishing the job the first two started, and her grip is surprisingly tight.

“But seriously, Bea. What do you know about this guy? You met him at the beach. Who comes back from vacation with a boyfriend?”

“A fiancé, actually,” Bea says, looking Blanche in the eyes. “He asked me to marry him last week. That’s why I wanted to have dinner with you. So I could tell you. Surprise!”

Bea holds her hands out awkwardly to either side of her face, wiggling her fingers, and smiling, but she knows she’s not going to get it, the moment she’s seen other women have, the moment she gave Blanche. That pause and then the squeal and the tear-filled eyes, the inelegant hugging, the immediate plans for showers and parties, questions about rings and dresses and honeymoons.

No.

Blanche, her best friend in the entire world, doesn’t give her that.

Instead, she sits back against the booth, her lips parted in shock. Blanche is blond right now, and the color is well done, but it’s too harsh on her, and for a second, she could almost be a stranger sitting across from Bea.

Then after a moment, she gives another shrug, rattles the ice in her glass. “Well, at least let Tripp set you up with a pre-nup.”

Their food arrives then, and as the waiter sets their plates down, Bea can only stare at Blanche, waiting until they’re alone again to lean closer and hiss, “Thanks for that. Really supportive.”

Blanche throws up her hands, that silver bangle sliding up her skinny arm. “What do you want me to say, Bea? That I’m happy for you? That I think marrying a really hot guy who just strolled up to you on a beach is a great idea?”

“It wasn’t exactly like that,” Bea says, putting her napkin in her lap and glancing around.

They’re keeping their voices low, but she still feels like they are just a few seconds away from creating a Real Housewives of Birmingham scene, and that’s the last thing she wants.

It’s the last thing that the old Blanche would’ve wanted, too, but with this new Blanche—too thin, too drunk, too blond—who knows?

“You don’t get it,” Blanche insists, and now, okay, yes, a woman at another table is glancing over, her eyebrows slightly raised. “You’re rich now, Bea. And not, like, normal person rich. You aren’t a successful lawyer or doctor. You are on your way to having Fuck You Money, and this guy knows it.”

“And that’s why he’s interested in me, right?” Bea says, feeling her face go hot even as every other part of her seems cold. “Because I’m rich. Which, coincidentally, is also what bugs you. Obviously, being my friend was a lot easier when I was some ... some fucking charity case for you.”

Blanche scoffs at that, sitting back in the booth hard enough to rattle it. “Okay, fine. I’m just trying to look out for you and remind you that you can’t just attach yourself to anyone who’s nice to you, but seeing as how that’s your entire deal, I guess I’m wasting my breath.”

Bea is almost shaking now, can’t even conceive of eating her dinner, and she pushes the plate away and picks up her drink. The ice has melted, the margarita has turned salty and sour and too strong, but she downs it anyway.

“I just want you to be careful,” Blanche says, her expression softened. “You hardly know him. You’ve been together, what? A month?”

“Three months,” Bea replies. “And I know everything I need to know. I know he loves me, and I know I love him.”

Blanche’s face twists. “Right. Because love is definitely all that matters.”

“I know things are rough with Tripp right now—”

“They’re not ‘rough,’” Blanche argues, making air quotes with her fingers. “It’s just that marriage is a lot more work than you’re thinking.” Then she shakes her head, puts her fork down.

“But then again, he’s hot and you’re rich, so hey, maybe it’ll be easier for you two. Maybe that’s the secret.”

Anger drains out of Bea so quickly it’s like someone pulled a plug.

Blanche is jealous of her.

That’s what all this is about.

Blanche is jealous. Jealous of her money, jealous of her success, and now, jealous of her man.

Bea never imagined that Blanche would ever want anything of hers. And now, she wants everything.

Which makes it easier for Bea to gently take Blanche’s hand. “Can we declare a truce?” she asks softly. “Because it’s going to be super awkward to have you as my maid of honor if we’re not