

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 begins with me walking into a place I once avoided at all costs—the church where John Rivers works. It's not one of the grand Southern churches that stretch across whole blocks; this one looks more like a forgotten government building. Its brick walls are dull, the only indication of holiness being the stained-glass window where Jesus stands among lambs. I've put on a carefully chosen outfit—blue pleated skirt, crisp white blouse, matching ballet flats—something that looks polished without mimicking the Emily-and-Campbell type. When I checked my reflection this morning, I felt unfamiliar, but not in a bad way. This version of me feels closer to something real, something balanced between survival and reinvention.

The girl at the desk greets me with a bright smile, expecting maybe a donation, and she's not completely wrong. I ask for John, adding an exaggerated Southern drawl, and the smile dims slightly. She points me to the music room, where guitar chords echo faintly down the hall. It smells like weak coffee and old paper, the kind of scent that clings to forgotten places. When I walk in, John doesn't immediately recognize me, and that half-second of hesitation is everything I need to feel in control. He's trying to play the part—polished shirt, combed hair, fresh sneakers—but it's a costume, one he bought with money he blackmailed me for. And I've come to shut it down.

I don't waste time. I tell him I spoke with his "Phoenix contact." I had called the number he'd given me—the one he dangled over my head like a leash—and discovered it led to a private investigator hired by Georgie Smith. My supposed aunt. She'd been looking for a niece who might've gone by the name Helen Burns. I fed the investigator a story—half-truths and well-placed misdirection. I told him I'd known Helen in foster care, that she'd gotten into drugs and drifted away. I made it sound like she was long gone. More importantly, I warned him not to trust John Rivers.

The moment I bring it up, John's face goes pale. Watching him squirm almost feels worth the price of everything he's put me through. Almost. I tell him the PI won't be calling him back. I painted John as a con artist with a pattern—someone who preyed on women like Georgie, making empty promises. It wasn't true, not entirely. But it was close enough to stick. I see it in his eyes: fear, realization, the collapse of control. He tries to fight back, accusing me of running, of hiding, of using him when I needed a place to stay. Maybe some of that's true. But none of it gives him leverage anymore.

I remind him, gently, that he has no more power here. And just in case he's thinking of trying again, I make sure his boss, Reverend Ellis, sees me donate a sizable check for the church's music ministry. Now, if John tries anything, he'll have to explain why someone generous enough to support their sound system deserves to be harassed. My name—Jane Rochester—will appear in every church bulletin from now on, right alongside Eddie's. I want that reminder to burn every Sunday. I leave the building a few thousand dollars lighter but a hundred pounds freer.

As I sit behind the wheel, I tell myself I'm not that girl anymore. I didn't kill Mr. Brock. But I didn't save him either. That distinction matters—at least to me. He died in that house, clutching his chest while I sat just a room away. He never asked for help. And I never offered. He let Jane die. Not me—the other Jane. The one who was my best friend, my chosen sister, the girl who used to sleep next to me in that cold room and never got warm again.

Jane had been fragile—too small, too sick too often. She needed care, and the Brocks never gave it. When she caught something worse than the usual stomach bug, her cough rattled her whole frame. Her fever climbed day after day. I begged them to take her to the doctor, but they refused. They said she was faking. That she'd be fine. One night, she wasn't fine. She died beside me, burning with fever, slipping away while I held her hand and whispered promises I couldn't keep.

Mr. Brock never faced consequences. But the night he clutched his chest in pain, I didn't rush to help. I let it play out. Maybe he would've died anyway. Or maybe not.

But that night felt like balance. Like justice paid its dues, however late. Jane didn't deserve to die. He did.

Now, I'm free of John, free of Brock, free of that past. I have Eddie. I have this life. And no one—not John, not the Brocks, not even the ghost of Helen Burns—is going to take it away.

