

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 begins with Eddie absent. His car isn't in the garage, and I take Adele out for her walk alone, pretending the hollow in my chest isn't disappointment. The puppy's leash is light in my hand, and we head not into Thornfield's manicured lanes, but downhill toward Mountain Brook Village. This isn't just about changing scenery—it's strategy. I want to be seen. By walking Adele where people don't recognize me as the dog-walker, I'm not just someone with a leash—I'm someone connected to Eddie Rochester. That distinction matters more than I'd like to admit.

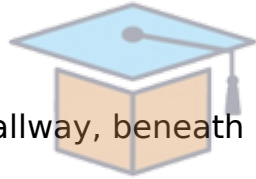
The streets are quiet, store windows gleaming in the early morning light. Adele trots happily beside me, her tail wagging like we're both just out for a pleasant stroll. But beneath the surface, I'm rehearsing an illusion. I pass boutiques with items I've seen inside the houses I work in—overpriced throw pillows, pastel handbags, things that scream disposable income. And just as I'm starting to relax into the rhythm of it, a voice cuts in: "Jane?" Mrs. McLaren. She's holding her coffee like a prop, dressed in head-to-toe athleisure and oozing the kind of Southern sweetness that always feels like a trap.

She steps closer, her gaze shifting to Adele. Her tone stays light, but her words scold. "Probably not safe to have the dogs out of the neighborhood." It's the kind of correction disguised as concern that digs deep. I smile and nod like I've been trained to, hiding the flare of humiliation that burns up my spine. To her, I'm a service worker who stepped too far from the invisible boundary meant to keep me in place. A dog-walker pretending to be something she's not.

I head back toward Thornfield, my jaw tight, and let myself into Eddie's house. Adele's leash clicks against the door as I unclip her and let her out into the backyard. I should leave now—do the polite thing, pretend this was just a drop-off. But I don't. I stay.

Something in me wants to linger, to feel out the edges of this space when no one is looking. And this time, I'm not looking for something to take. I'm looking for her.

There are no photographs on the living room walls, no clutter on the mantel. I notice the gaps where picture frames must have once been. The absence is louder than presence would be. I follow the pull of curiosity, heading upstairs. The second floor is dim, shadows lingering in corners. There's art on the walls, elegant and curated, but nothing personal. It's a house where someone removed their life in a hurry—or had it removed for them.



Summary

At the end of the hallway, beneath a round stained-glass window, there's a table. And on that table sits a single framed photo. Just one. It's Eddie and Bea. They're standing on a beach, and the way he looks at her in the photo hits me like a punch. It's not just that they're attractive. It's the way their bodies align, the way his eyes are fixed on her like she's the sun. They fit. And seeing that makes me feel foolish. Of course he doesn't want me. Not like that.

I'm still staring when a voice says, "That was in Hawaii." I turn, startled, and the keys slip from my hand. Eddie is there, at the top of the stairs, leaning casually, watching me. He doesn't seem surprised to find me in the hallway, and his presence suddenly makes the space feel smaller. "That's where we met," he says. "Hawaii, last year."

I try to recover. I lie, say I was looking for the bathroom. He doesn't call me on it, not exactly. Just gives me that smile that never quite reaches his eyes. He moves closer, talking about the other pictures—how he burned them. Wedding photos, house-building memories. All gone. But not this one. This one, he kept.

I ask why. Why keep just this one image? His answer is simple. He couldn't bring himself to throw it away. And in that moment, something shifts. I see grief, yes, but I also see the door it left open. A void where something used to be. A void I'm stepping into. Not because I want to replace her. But because I want to matter to him.

His hand finds my elbow, fingers warm. "What happened was awful," I say. He nods. But then, his voice drops low. "But you're not sorry. Because her not being here means you can be." His thumb moves against my arm, and every nerve in my body responds. I should step back. I should tell him he's wrong. But I don't.

Because he's not.

