

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 begins with a jolt of pain and regret. My skull throbbed like it had been split open from the inside, and the nausea rising in my stomach felt thick and threatening. I turned to the side, waiting to throw up, but nothing came. Instead, I choked and spat onto the floor, staring at the blood, wondering how I had failed to see this unraveling. Bea had always been the sharpest person in any room. Of course, she wouldn't stay trapped forever. And I should've realized it—should've planned for more than just a locked door and a clean story. Panic had driven my decision, not strategy.

Lying there, busted and broken on the floor, I tried to move, but my ribs screamed and my arms gave out. Downstairs, I could only imagine what Bea and Jane were doing—calling the police, maybe? Toasting to my downfall? I almost hoped it was something simple like that, because anything else was worse. The idea of the two of them forming some alliance? That terrified me more than prison ever could. Jane had always seemed innocent, but she wasn't stupid. Bea, on the other hand, was never innocent. And now they were both loose, and I was helpless, exactly where I'd never allowed myself to be before.

It hadn't started this way. I hadn't gone to Hawaii looking for a target. Bea showing up had been a fluke. But when Charlie spotted her, sipping a drink near the pool, everything changed. Charlie had recognized her instantly—"That's Bea Mason," she said, like it meant something. To her, it did. To most women, Bea was a name, a brand, a symbol of reinvention. I hadn't understood the hype until I did a little research. Self-made. Two hundred million. An empire built from home decor and Southern nostalgia. She wasn't just wealthy. She was powerful. And power had always pulled me in like gravity.

Charlie was rich, yes, but it was old money—structured, supervised, limited. Her family gave her just enough to sparkle but never enough to actually burn anything down. Bea, though, had real capital. Her own name on the bank accounts. I started to see the potential, the gap she might have in her life, the opening I could fill. And when I finally approached her—casual, friendly, curious—I did it with the kind of confidence that comes from study, not luck. I knew what to say, how to lean in, how to make it seem like I belonged in her orbit.

Charlie had faded from my mind quickly after that. I left the resort without much fuss, packed my things, and rebooked a stay somewhere closer to where I suspected Bea had gone next. It wasn't stalking. It was strategic timing. Bea had mentioned her love for beach markets and hotel bars. I found the places she'd likely go and waited. Eventually, our paths crossed again, and I made sure it felt organic. I didn't force it—I gave her just enough curiosity to approach me. That was always the trick. Not chasing. Letting people think they were choosing.

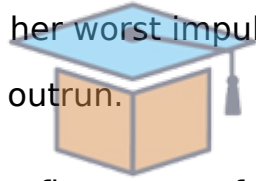
The thing is, Bea was sharper than I gave her credit for. She didn't fall for flattery or gimmicks. What got her was sincerity—crafted, of course, but sincere enough to feel real. I told her about my modest upbringing, my struggles with purpose, how I admired what she'd built. I said I wanted to create something of my own. That I wasn't intimidated by strong women. She responded well to that. She wanted someone who saw her as a partner, not a competitor. And I played that role flawlessly.

But the further in I got, the harder it became to separate the performance from reality. Bea fascinated me. She was poised, calculating, decisive. But there were cracks—moments when she drank too much, when she looked too long at nothing, when she flinched at certain questions. I chalked it up to stress. Maybe trauma. I didn't realize then that beneath all that Southern polish was someone who'd done whatever it took to survive. Including getting rid of people who got in her way.

Later, when she told me about her mother's death, the version I got was sanitized—tragic, accidental, sad. I didn't ask for more. I didn't want to know. I had

seen the public records—no charges, no suspicions. But there was a small voice inside me that kept asking questions. And when Blanche hinted at the truth, the timeline made more sense than I was willing to admit. That's when I started thinking: if Bea was capable of that, then what else had she done?

Even knowing all this, I hadn't intended for it to spiral like this. Locking her away wasn't part of some master plan. It was desperation. I wanted to protect the company. I wanted to protect myself. But deep down, I also wanted to protect Bea—from the outside world, from her worst impulses, and from the consequences I knew she wouldn't be able to outrun.



Summaryer

Now, bleeding on the floor, every fantasy I'd built is collapsing. Bea is free. Jane might know the truth. And all I can do is wait and wonder which of them will come through the door first—and whether it'll be with help or with vengeance.