

Chapter 38

Chapter 38 — Chapter 38 marks a strange kind of calm after the chaos, the kind that settles in when wounds begin to close but everything still aches. At Emily's house, I get the guest room with the floral sheets and a stack of crime novels by the bed. She spoils me at first—smoothies with fresh pineapple, ice cream that soothes my throat, takeout containers I don't have to clean up after. Even Adele seems to understand this is a safe place. She sleeps at my feet each night, her weight grounding me to the moment. For a few days, I let myself believe that things are going to be okay.

But it doesn't stay like that for long. Just five days in, the errands begin—innocent at first. A quick trip into the village for pastries, then a detour to Whole Foods for a list Emily's made. By the third week, I'm walking Major, her shih tzu, like I've always lived in this neighborhood. As I stroll past neat lawns and well-trimmed hedges, I start to wonder if I invented the last six months. Maybe none of it happened—no fire, no Eddie, no house in the woods where I believed dreams might come true. But then we pass the empty lot where the mansion once stood, and reality hits like cold water.

All that's left now is scorched earth, a shell of crime tape, and my own swirling grief. Still, I go there, like someone visiting a grave, hoping for a whisper from the past. I imagine Bea stepping out of the smoke, still composed, telling me there was meaning in everything we went through. But there's no sign, just the silence of a ruined place. I feel like a girl caught in someone else's nightmare, let loose just before the ending. The sadness creeps in more than the fear—mourning not just the people I lost, but the version of myself that had once believed in something new.

Just as I turn to leave, with Major happily tugging the leash, my phone buzzes. The number is unfamiliar but local—Birmingham. A man's slow, molasses-thick voice greets me: "Is this Jane Bell?" I confirm, cautious. He introduces himself as Richard

Lloyd, Eddie's lawyer, and the name hits like a hard echo. I remember Eddie handing his business card to John, and suddenly the past doesn't feel so far away. Richard asks to see me—soon. I want to decline, but I look at the scorched place behind me and wonder, foolishly, if this is the sign I've been waiting for.

The law office is exactly what you'd expect from someone like Richard. Heavy furniture, leather chairs, hunting magazines, and enough taxidermy photos to give any animal lover chills. He appears in a suit that's seen better days, looking like he drinks at lunch and flirts inappropriately by two. Still, I paste on the polite smile Eddie once said he liked, shake Richard's hand, and introduce myself with a practiced ease. "Call me Jane," I say, trying not to show how unsettled I feel. He leads me to his office, where deer heads and shotgun trophies greet me at every corner.

What comes next shouldn't be surprising, but it is. Richard says Eddie changed his will not long after our engagement. He admits he tried to talk him out of it, and I hear that familiar ring of disbelief behind his words. But my mind is buzzing too loudly to take offense. Eddie left me something. Maybe it was guilt. Maybe it was strategy. Or maybe he thought Bea would return, and this was his version of damage control. Whatever the reason, I've been named in the paperwork.

Richard slides a thick leather folder across the desk—inside, my name now appears beside what once belonged to Bea. Her shares, her company, everything under Eddie's control after she vanished—now, legally mine. I hold it on my lap, the weight not just legal, but emotional. My fingers don't tremble, but they feel heavy, like I'm carrying more than paper. I stare down at the folder, wondering if ownership is the same as closure.

I'm told the company is now under my name. Richard makes a few notes, as if this is routine, as if lives and legacies are swapped every day. But for me, this moment isn't about wealth. It's about the burden of a story I didn't write, but somehow became the ending of. A part of me wants to walk out of there and leave it all behind. Another part needs to see this through—to understand what it means to inherit someone else's

broken empire.

Power, like fire, leaves ashes. What matters is what you rebuild from them.



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