

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 begins with a reminder that this isn't home. "You're late on your half of the rent," John says, and I resist the urge to roll my eyes as I hand over the cash I scraped together from pawning one of Mrs. Reed's earrings. This place was never meant to be permanent—just a landing spot, a temporary fix with someone who knew too much about me. But six months later, here I still am, watching my yogurt disappear into his mouth as he leans against the counter like he owns me along with the apartment.

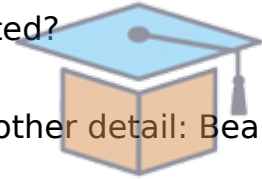
There's something invasive about the way John exists. He eats my food, uses my stuff, and casually steps over boundaries without a second thought. My name on things doesn't stop him. Nothing ever really feels like it's mine here—not even the four walls around me. When he makes a crude comment about my "clients," implying things even he's not brave enough to say out loud, I deflect with sarcasm. But deep down, I know this isn't just about irritation. It's about control. And I'm done letting him have any of it.

The second he leaves, I take comfort in the small silence, the kind that doesn't require me to dodge his petty insults or his sideways glances. Heating up two Easy Macs—the last bit of food he hasn't touched—I hunker down with my laptop and resume my private ritual: searching everything I can find about Bea Rochester. I skip over the articles about her disappearance and instead dive into the world she built. Southern Manors. A brand built on curated charm, overpriced items, and the fantasy of Southern elegance. To someone like me, it's absurd. But to Eddie, it meant something.

The deeper I go, the more I see what he must have seen in her. The website is clean, stylish. Bea is everywhere in it—her voice, her aesthetic, her legacy. She sells not just home goods but a vision of perfection. Mason jar vases. Gingham aprons. Monogrammed pet leashes that cost more than my rent. Everything is refined,

branded, intentional. And I can't stop scrolling. I hate it, but I understand it. This was her world. The world Eddie still inhabits.

One photo grabs me more than the others. Bea stands in a perfectly styled dining room, wearing a gingham skirt and a navy sweater, the kind of outfit that would've made me feel invisible growing up. But on her, it radiates power. Confidence. There's a crispness to her that makes it impossible not to look. I almost laugh at myself—how easy it is to resent her and still want to become her. What would it feel like to be that polished, that wanted?



Another article, another detail: Bea met Eddie in Hawaii. Three years ago. That's the part that makes me pause. A beach romance turned Southern empire. Their story had started like something out of a movie. Mine starts in a shared apartment with chipped counters and a guy who thinks a spoonful of yogurt is foreplay. But I'm not staying in this story.

I can feel the shift already. It started when Eddie smiled at me over coffee. When he listened without pity. When I saw the opening and knew I could step through it. I want to be where Bea was—not just in Eddie's life but in that house, in that world where everything is curated, controlled, and clean. I want to be someone new, someone powerful. Not plain Jane, not the girl who borrows shampoo and hides money in her sock drawer.

So I keep reading. About Bea's brand, her family history, the public image she worked so hard to shape. She was meticulous, thoughtful, private. She kept her name—Bertha—hidden, reinventing herself as Bea. That tells me more than anything else. Because I've done the same. My name isn't really Jane either.

And that, more than anything else, tells me I can do what she did. I can rewrite everything. I can belong. Maybe even more than she ever did.