

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 opens with a gathering at Eddie's place—the official site of the Neighborhood Beautification Committee's latest meeting. Or rather, *my* house, as I've been trying to remind myself, though the words don't always feel true. As I carry the empty wineglasses to the sink, I can't ignore the dull ache of being in a beautiful home that doesn't entirely feel like mine yet.

Most of the committee meeting had been fluff—half-hearted discussions about seasonal wreaths and Pinterest boards masked a more obvious motive. Everyone just wanted a peek inside the house, to mentally rearrange the space that used to belong to Bea. The way their eyes darted from the mantle to the corners, quietly assessing what had changed or stayed, was impossible to miss.

Campbell and Emily lingered after the others had left, insisting they wanted to help clean up. But I knew better—they weren't here for housework. They were here to poke around, to prod at the shell Bea left behind and maybe get me to crack.

Campbell complimented the house, noting it felt “brighter,” which Emily agreed with through a lazy sip of wine. I knew nothing major had changed since they were last here, so their comments had to be about more than curtains or lighting. It felt like code for something else—maybe a passive-aggressive way of saying *it's still hers*.

I lobbed a compliment back about Bea's taste, lightly laughing, hoping to seem self-aware but not insecure. It was a tactic—to see if they'd bite, reveal something unguarded. And when Campbell mentioned how jealous Blanche had been over Bea's Birmingham Magazine spread, I felt like I was finally hearing something honest.

Their small talk about past feuds between Bea and Blanche made the ghost of this house even louder. I didn't mind. I *wanted* these glimpses into Bea's life, hoping that if I could piece her together fully, she'd stop feeling so present in every creak and

hallway.

But reminders of Bea weren't limited to conversations. Last week, a floral delivery showed up unannounced—part of a recurring order Bea had set up. Eddie had never canceled it, and now lilies and magnolias sat in the entryway like her lingering perfume.

Emily and Campbell eventually made their exit, all smiles and light kisses on the cheek. Their compliments were polite but their language betrayed them. They thanked *Eddie* for hosting, as if I was just a guest in his life, not the woman building a future with him.



As soon as they were gone, I sank onto the couch with my iPad. I needed a plan—a way to tighten my grip before everything slipped out of reach. And if Eddie wasn't going to propose, I needed to show him what his hesitation might cost.

When he walked in an hour later, I already had the UCLA graduate program page pulled up. He greeted me with warmth, leaned down for a kiss, and then paused as he saw the screen. His entire body stiffened.

"UCLA?" he asked, his voice tight.

I kept my expression even and explained I'd been thinking about grad school, how I had to consider my own future. His reaction was immediate—protective, tense, maybe even a little panicked. He reminded me that I belonged *here*, with *him*, and not across the country chasing old dreams.

But I didn't back down. I told him I've spent my life depending only on myself, and I can't stop doing that now just because he's here. My tone was measured, my hand on his wrist meant to soothe, not provoke—but I knew I was pushing.

He stormed off toward the bedroom, and I thought I'd blown everything. I'd gambled too hard, gone too far. And the truth was, I couldn't even apply to UCLA—I never finished college.

But then he returned. And in his hand was a small velvet box.

The moment he dropped to one knee, the world stilled. I didn't hear anything but his voice saying, "Marry me." The emerald glimmered in the box, ringed by a halo of diamonds, too large, too bold—and yet, undeniably perfect.

It was dizzying, the speed with which everything changed. My doubt, his silence, the surge of emotion between us—it all vanished under that single question. And beneath the gem's cold brilliance was the warmth of something new, something mine.



Summaryer