

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 begins with a confession that still feels surreal: I'm engaged. Not just in theory, but actually wearing a sparkling, heavy emerald ring on my finger—one Eddie chose long before I even knew a proposal was on the horizon. It's not just the size or the cut that makes me feel breathless—it's the fact that someone picked me, saw me, and wanted a future with me without needing to be convinced.

For a girl who grew up being left out, overlooked, and shuffled around, that act of deliberate love carries more weight than gold. Passing the little bridal shop I've walked by so many times, I feel something unexpected fluttering in my chest—curiosity wrapped in longing. And when I finally step through its old wooden door, greeted by warmth and low lighting, I don't feel out of place; I feel like someone who belongs there.

The boutique feels worlds away from the chaotic, plastic-wrapped, fluorescent-lit bridal megastores. There's no frenzy here—just elegance, charm, and dresses draped like whispers over antique furniture. Huntley, with her picture-perfect blonde chignon and classic black sheath dress, floats toward me with effortless grace, her eyes going straight to the emerald on my hand.

She doesn't ask how much it cost, doesn't comment on carats, but I see her expression shift—something subtle, a quiet acknowledgment of status. I never imagined I'd care about fabrics like duchess satin or shades like candlelight ivory, but here I am, sipping champagne and talking veils. Somehow, I've crossed into a world I used to only observe from afar.

My thoughts swirl with tulle and French lace as I leave the shop, only to run into Emily outside, clutching a coffee and exuding designer fragrance. Her delight is genuine—she squeals, hugs me, demands to see the ring, and I oblige, though I feel

awkward trying to show it off like I'm used to it. The moment is saccharine and shimmering, and for once, I lean into it without second-guessing myself.

Emily asks the usual questions—when, where, how big—and I realize I've barely thought beyond the ring. I've fantasized about the marriage, the identity of being Mrs. Rochester, but not the spectacle of a wedding. Now I picture it clearly: Eddie's family lining rows in a church while mine is a ghost town of empty pews and a single unwelcome guest chewing cereal.

I'm still processing that when I stop by Whole Foods for groceries. The soothing lighting and expensive cheese selections are a comfort, though I find myself missing the simplicity of boxed mac and cheese. I toy with the idea of buying junk food, but the organic hummus stares back judgmentally, and I sigh.

Then comes a voice I recognize, oily and unwelcome—Tripp Ingraham. His appearance has improved slightly since I last saw him, but the smirk is the same, and his words drip with casual misogyny. He mentions my engagement before I even do, proof that Emily's lips aren't as sealed as promised.

His tone makes my skin crawl, his insinuations about Eddie and women and boats laced with venom. I make a quick exit, but not before he lobbs a final comment that stings harder than it should: "Women have bad luck around Eddie Rochester and boats." I walk away, but the words follow me like shadows.

Back in the car, unease knots in my stomach, Tripp's warning slithering between my ribs. It's absurd, I tell myself—Eddie wasn't even there when Bea drowned, and they were drunk. Still, the image of her lifeless, pale beneath the water, refuses to leave me.

I try to refocus on the good—the boutique, the ring, Emily's excited hug—but anxiety curls at the edges of my thoughts. Stepping into the house, I find Eddie already home, looking relaxed and happy in his usual crisp button-down and shorts. His warm greeting should be enough to steady me.

But he sees the tension on my face before I can hide it. “Everything okay?” he asks, brow furrowing. And I smile, but behind it, I wonder: is anything ever as perfect as it seems?

