

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 begins with a simmering attempt at self-control. I tell myself not to overthink Emily and Campbell, not to crave more than I already have. This life—Eddie, the house, comfort—should feel like a win, like hitting the emotional jackpot after years of scraping by.

But the truth is, discontent lingers just beneath the surface, stirred by glances and offhand comments dressed as compliments. The same feeling flares whenever John crosses my mind, and even though he got his cash and his moment of leverage in that Home Depot lot, I can't fully trust it's over. People like him—people like *us*—don't just walk away when there's still power to squeeze.

The idea that being Mrs. Rochester could shield me from people like John is what keeps me focused. Not just living with Eddie, not just dating him. I need the title, the permanence—the security of a ring.

So I start watching him. Not obsessively, just carefully—looking for signs, anything to suggest he's thinking about proposing. I've never had anyone love me enough to plan forever, so there's no roadmap here, just instinct and hope.

A few days after the committee meeting, Eddie surprises me by coming home early and suggesting we take Adele to the Cahaba River Walk. The invitation lifts my mood; that trail, those trees, and the soft sound of water bring back the early days of us—before things got complicated. We pile into the car, and my heart beats faster than it should.

When we arrive, Adele sprints ahead, chasing squirrels, and I practically bounce with excitement, imagining a velvet box in his pocket. Eddie takes my hand, smiles, and I lean in to kiss his cheek. "You seem happy," he says, and I nod.

But just minutes later, he's on his phone, answering emails, while I sit there, cheeks flushed from heat and embarrassment. A pair of women jog past, one casting a curious look at Eddie and then at me. That look—the silent, condescending *what's her story*—makes my skin crawl.

Trying to break the silence, I go for subtle. "I need a manicure," I say, waving my fingers and hoping he'll take the bait. "All the women at Emily's had perfect nails—and a pile of rings."

Eddie doesn't look up, but he does snort. "Bea always thought that was tacky," he mutters, still typing. "Especially when they just sit at home all day."

That answer stings more than I expect. "I'm not asking for diamonds," I reply lightly. "Just maybe some cuticle oil and a little effort."

He reaches for my hand absentmindedly, bringing it to his lips in a gesture that feels more habitual than heartfelt. When he mentions the village nail salon, I ask if that's where Bea went. Finally, he lifts his eyes from the screen.

"As far as I know, yeah. That's the place," he says.

I push a little more. "Girls from the neighborhood, right?"

"Women," I correct, my tone sharpening. "They're not 'girls' anymore. They're in their thirties, at least."

Eddie gives me a look that's hard to read, half indulgent and half dismissive—like a parent humoring a child. And I hate it. I want to be his partner, not someone he humors.

"You don't have to patronize me," I snap before I can stop myself, before I can remind myself to be the Jane he expects. But maybe that version of me—the filtered one— isn't sustainable.

To his credit, he stops, really stops, and looks at me. "I'm being a dick, aren't I?"

“A little bit.”

And there it is—his real smile, the one that reaches his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m just stressed. But I wanted today to be about us, even if I didn’t do a great job of showing it.”

That apology cracks something open. The mood softens, and I sense a chance to let him in—but also to plant a seed. “I guess I just wonder where this is going,” I say, and I mean it.

He sits up straighter, all attention now on me. I talk about how hard it is to always feel like an outsider, like a guest in someone else's home, no matter how welcome I’m told I am. “When you’ve been someone’s charity case your whole life, you start to resent the feeling,” I explain.

Eddie listens, his hands now clasped, his brow furrowed. I can see he’s wrestling with it—not annoyed, not angry, just trying to understand. He asks what I mean, and I tell him the truth.

“You saw where I came from. You know how different this life is for me.”

“You belong here,” he says, quick and certain. “I don’t want you to be like Emily or Campbell. I love you because you’re not like them.”

I watch his throat work as he swallows back the next part. *Because you’re not Bea*. He won’t say it, but it hangs between us, unspoken and undeniable.

He squeezes my hand again. “I love you, Jane. This house, this neighborhood—that’s all noise. *You* are what matters.”

I’m breathless as I nod, leaning in as he presses his forehead to mine. This should be the moment, the one where he pulls out a ring and seals everything with a promise.

But instead, he pulls back with a sigh. “I’ll try not to be gone so much. Caitlyn can take more at Southern Manors. But I still have to run both businesses. You get that, right?”

I nod again, but inside, disappointment blooms. He said all the right things—but not *that* thing. Still, I tell myself: maybe soon.

