

# Chapter 27

Chapter 27 begins with an everyday question that carries more weight than it seems: which dress to wear. I hold up three options—an understated cream dress, a sleek black one, and a standout plum piece from Bea’s Southern Manors collection. That last dress means something. It represents Bea’s legacy, the brand, the woman I’m still trying to understand. But when Eddie glances at my choices and picks the cream one without hesitation, I nod and comply, even though a small part of me sinks. It’s beautiful, yes, but safe—forgettable. Later, standing beside women whose diamonds sparkle brighter than the chandeliers, I’ll realize just how right I was.

The Country Club of Birmingham is more than grand—it’s intimidating. Walking through the entryway, I feel like I’ve stepped into a world built on money, manners, and mirrors. Everyone is dressed in a kind of wealth that doesn’t need explanation. I trail behind Eddie, holding my clutch tightly, trying to match the effortless smiles I see all around me. The air buzzes with a mix of gin, gossip, and judgment. I try to remind myself that I belong here now. But I don’t feel it. Not even close.

As Eddie disappears to fetch drinks, I’m left on my own, watching polished strangers flit between conversations. That’s when Emily spots me. Her welcome is bright, practiced—genuine in tone but not in substance. She loops her arm through mine and introduces me to the group, women who smell of gardenias and look like they’ve never known a bad day. I nod, smile, answer questions about the house, the dog, our upcoming wedding. Outwardly, I pass. But inside, I feel like a borrowed accessory—fitting the theme, but not part of the story.

The conversation turns, as it always does, to gossip. Caroline mentions Tripp Ingraham, her voice low but loaded. She jokes about scandal, but there’s an edge in her tone. Tripp’s name doesn’t feel distant—it lands in my chest like a warning. I try to

stay still, to sip slowly. The women laugh, shifting between concern and curiosity, but none of them know what I know. Or suspect what I suspect. That beneath this glittering crowd, there are secrets no one wants aired.

Emily changes the subject to lighter things—vacations, skincare, diamonds the size of marbles. Yet even with her attempt to pivot, I can't shake the feeling that danger is as much a part of this group as the champagne flutes they're holding. Someone mentions how Eddie's been drinking more lately. It's said casually, as if discussing the weather. But my stomach knots. I make a joke, brushing it off, pretending it's just stress or the excitement of the wedding. They nod, distracted by a passing waiter with more wine.

Then, the photographer circles back. Flash after flash captures these women laughing at jokes they don't mean, sipping from glasses they rarely finish. I smile for the camera, feeling my face tighten into something practiced. This is the part of the night that matters to them—the image. The evidence. Not the awkward silences or the half-heard confessions. I realize the photos won't show how Emily's grip tightened when Tripp's name came up. Or how Caroline's expression soured just slightly before her joke.

At one point, someone asks about my background, and I offer just enough to be polite. Not enough to be real. When talk of Tripp returns, and someone asks if we know him well, I find my exit through faith. "The Lord sees what's done in darkness," I say, smiling. It draws a few raised brows and a couple of forced chuckles, but it works. The conversation shifts, just as I'd hoped.

As the evening ends, I walk out feeling like I've passed a test. I stood still under scrutiny and didn't flinch. But I also know this—whatever world I've entered, it's not built to forgive. It's built to forget. And if I'm not careful, I might be next.