

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 begins with a familiar southern greeting—"Girl, I swear you've gotten even skinnier!"—spoken in a tone meant to flatter but laced with pressure. The summer evening is stifling, and though the church courtyard looks charming under the fading light, I can't shake the sensation of being all wrong. Dressed in a sleek black dress that once felt elegant, I now feel like an outsider among a sea of pastel prints and floral skirts. Emily's compliment floats in the air as I try not to glare at Eddie's back. He said nothing about my dress choice, but surely he knew. I cling to the excuse that I'm a newcomer in this social order, still learning the unwritten codes.

We drift through the crowd, lemonade in hand, pretending everything is fine. Eddie makes small talk with the reverend, while I trail behind Emily, grateful she hasn't once brought up my old job. I'd stolen from her—little things, pieces of her life—and still she greets me with warmth, as though we're real friends. That should make me feel guilty, but instead it makes me cautious. As if her kindness is a test I'm bound to fail. Inside the Family Life Center, auction items glimmer under fluorescent lights, but most of the congregation lingers in the courtyard. It's too pretty out here, too humid, and everyone wants to be seen.

And then everything shifts. Caroline arrives in a flurry of whispers and tension, her fingers digging into my arm. "Tripp Ingraham has been arrested," she hisses. That name lands like a stone in my chest. Emily's already scrolling her phone, confirming the rumor, and across the courtyard I see Eddie turn toward me. The expression on his face—flat, unreadable—tells me everything. He knew. And he's relieved.

Back home, the silence between us is heavy. Eddie confirms what I've already heard—Tripp was taken into custody, something to do with the autopsy. No one knows specifics. I head to the bathroom to shower, stripping off my dress and stepping under

the scalding water like I'm trying to cleanse more than just sweat. When I emerge, steam fogs the mirror and my reflection feels unfamiliar. I whisper affirmations to myself—"You're fine, you're safe"—but I'm not sure I believe them.

Eddie enters the bathroom and begins undressing, moving with a practiced ease I've always admired. He's beautiful in a way that used to make me ache. Now, I just watch, detached, combing my hair in silence until he asks the question I've been dreading. "Were you scared of me?" The words are simple, but his voice is low and tight, and I freeze. Then comes the follow-up: "Did you think I killed them?"

For a moment, I try the usual tactics—soft voice, lowered lashes—but they don't land. So I tell the truth. "Yes. I did." The air between us stills. Then he exhales and says, "At least you're honest." I take his wrist, lowering his arms, trying to pull us back together. I apologize. Sincerely. For doubting him. For not trusting him with my fears.

And part of me means it. But another part knows I'm lying through my teeth. I've lied to everyone here, especially him. He's the one who gave me a new life, a new name, and I've spent months pretending I belong. Pretending I deserve it. And yet, hearing Eddie murmur, "It's alright," as he pulls me into a hug almost convinces me that it could be. That maybe we really could make this work.

As I press my forehead to his chest, I ask him if he thinks it was really Tripp. I want him to say yes, with conviction. To tell me that justice is simple, clean, and done. But instead, he hesitates. "I don't want to think he could've done it," he says. He talks about golf, about drinking, about fights with Blanche. I hear the doubt in his voice. And I can't help but feel it too.

Because the truth is, none of this feels finished. Arresting Tripp doesn't explain the messages. The missing hours. The strange, echoing noises in the house. Something's still wrong. Something's still hiding in plain sight. And no matter how many church functions I attend, or how many casseroles I bake, or how often I tell myself I'm safe—deep down, I know I'm still waiting for the real storm to come.