

# Chapter 17

Chapter 17 begins with us outside, settled into those sturdy wooden Adirondack chairs as a quiet fire burns before us, its warmth flickering against the cool evening. The scent of meat grilling in the background mingles with the smoky air, and for a moment, everything feels suspended in peaceful stillness. But smells have a strange way of unearthing memories, and suddenly I'm back in Phoenix, where the heat pressed down like judgment and the dry air turned everything into kindling.

One summer night flickers through my mind like an old film reel—Jane's real cries in the background, Mr. Brock's flushed face looming above, the beer in his hand foaming at the rim. I'd fallen into the gravel, skin scraped and burning, staring up at his ridiculous apron with its cartoonish frog lips, thinking how absurd it was that someone so cruel could wear something meant for a joke. Even now, decades later, that heat prickles under my skin, a shame not quite burned away.

Memories like that don't just vanish; they burrow and wait. And though I've buried that life beneath layers of new beginnings, it still finds me in the quiet moments, like now, when I glance down at the ring on my finger and remind myself that part of my past is over. That man and that place can't define who I am anymore—no matter what John or anyone else tries to say.

Eddie sits beside me, his limbs stretched out, his profile calm and almost statuesque under the twilight. The transformation in him since we met still catches me off guard—he's steadier now, more grounded, and there's a softness around the edges that wasn't there before. I find satisfaction in that, a quiet pride that maybe, just maybe, I've helped bring that version of him to life.

He smiles at the fire, and I think of dresses, lace veils, and storefront windows shimmering with promise. That's when I hear myself say it, out loud and sure: "I think

we should elope.” The idea lands between us like a pebble in water, small at first, but rippling with meaning.

Eddie doesn’t flinch; he just sips his beer and sets it down slowly, watching me. His response is gentle but firm—“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.” That’s what I’ve come to like about him: he doesn’t try to manage or fix me, just lets me be.

“I don’t have much family left,” I admit. “And Birmingham’s full of people I don’t want watching me say vows I barely believe in.” The corners of Eddie’s mouth lift, and I know he’s thinking the same thing about John—about the life I left behind.

He brushes his thumb across my hand and says, “We can do whatever you want. Courthouse, lake, Tennessee—hell, Gatlinburg has drive-thru chapels if you’re feeling adventurous.” It’s meant to be sweet, and it is, but there’s a small pang in my chest at the idea of marrying like that, of our love reduced to a receipt and a roadside photo.

When I pictured eloping, I dreamed of beaches and sunsets, not motels with flickering neon signs and scratchy sheets. I don’t say any of that, though. Instead, I just smile, letting the fantasy fade into silence.

But I know I can’t get married here. Not in this town, not with Bea’s ghost hanging around every corner. I can’t bear the whispers, the comparisons, the way her name would linger in the air like expensive perfume.

Inside, I gather our empty bottles and slide the door shut behind me, the glass sealing away the soft crackle of the fire. Just then, I hear something—soft at first, but repeating. A series of thuds, rhythmic and low, coming from somewhere upstairs.

I pause, heart hammering, straining to hear. There’s nothing for a moment, then more noise, a pattern now, almost like a heartbeat pulsing through the ceiling. I glance back at Eddie, still lounging in his chair, looking at the stars as if he has no idea the world is shifting inside this house.

I step further in, listening. The sound reminds me of that old story from school—the one with the beating heart under the floorboards, guilt pulsing louder than truth. In a strange, instinctive way, I picture Bea upstairs, not a ghost but a presence, heavy and real.

Suddenly, the noise stops. I freeze, waiting. A silence that feels too still, too intentional.

Then—a knock at the door. Sharp. Firm. It jerks me back to the present like a slap, and I drop a bottle, its clatter shattering the stillness. Eddie barely moves, just tosses over his shoulder, “Jane?”



“I’m fine,” I answer, annoyed by his calm. I brush broken glass into a corner and step into the foyer, hands trembling as I reach for the knob. On the porch is a woman in uniform, khakis and a blue shirt, a badge glinting at her waist.

A police officer. My stomach flips, but I keep my face serene. I place my hand casually over my collarbone, where the diamond ring rests, an anchor of status and story.

I remind myself there’s no reason to be afraid. This officer doesn’t see who I used to be. She sees a homeowner, a woman dressed in muted tones and tasteful accessories—someone with nothing to hide.

It’s amazing how much power clothing can hold. A polished look, some expensive jewelry, a carefully chosen tone of voice—they can disguise so much. They can turn a runaway into a wife-to-be, a girl with scars into someone who belongs.