Chapter XXIII

In Chapter XXIII, the central challenge revolves around orchestrating a convincing deception—specifically, fooling Lill into believing they had called home. The narrator recalls past moments related to Lill's parenting, including Bobbi's imitation of Lill and previous incidents that led Bobbi to cover for herself at school using Lill's voice. With two motel rooms prepared, the narrator feels hopeful about successfully executing this scheme for Lill's benefit, to prevent any complications from calling home too early.

Lill inspects the motel rooms and assigns the girls and boys to separate accommodations. The narrator instructs her brother, Fish, on how to handle an incoming call without revealing anything. Lill then encourages Bobbi to contact her parents, noting their worry over the children's whereabouts. However, as Bobbi approaches the phone, with Lill momentarily distracted in the bathroom, the narrator provides guidance on what Bobbi should say.

Bobbi hesitantly makes the call, pretending to converse with her mother while Fish listens silently on the other line. Bobbi skillfully plays her role, providing fabricated details about their safety and plans towards the hospital in Salina. Eventually, she passes the phone to the narrator, who now must impersonate a calm but shaky version of herself.

During the call, Lill anxiously awaits her turn to talk with Bobbi, who cleverly adopts her mother's stern tone when the call transitions back. Lill, trying to reassure Bobbi's mother, gives the motel's details, indicating that they’re prepared to care for the children. As the conversation wraps up, Lill appears relieved, expressing optimism about the mother’s character, while the narrator feels guilt over the deceit.

When Bobbi and the boys return, they exude triumph, oblivious to Lill's lingering concerns. This chapter highlights the layers of deception and familial care, threading along complex relationships and the thematic nuances of growth, trust, and the lengths one might go to protect loved ones.