

Chapter 12

Free Admission Today Only

A cool breeze followed us to the farthest corner of the school parking lot, where Jess's black Infiniti sat alone. The car seemed meticulously cared for: immaculate interior, classic controls gleaming on the dash, the faint but sweet smell of cherries. So that's where the cherry smell came from! The engine purred when he turned the key.

Include
her remembering
smelling
the cherries
from Jess.
Ex: That explains
why he smells
like cherries.

"Do you always park so far away?" I craned my neck to look back. The school had

shrunk to a speck in the distance.

"Easier to get out. I hate getting pinned." The way he said 'pinned' ^{inside apostrophes} there seemed to be something deeper there than parking lot strategy. His fingers tightened on the steering wheel before deliberately relaxing.

"What are you streaming?" I asked, buckling in, trying to ease the sudden tension.

"Classical guitar. It relaxes me." He adjusted the volume, and melodic thrumming filled the space. The soothing notes wrapped around us like a warm embrace. "Do you like it?"

Memories of Dad's office flooded back—him working late into the night, a similar music playing softly in the background. Tears threatened as I answered, "It's nice. Makes me think of Dad."

Maybe have
him offer
to turn it
off. Not everyone likes listening
to tear-jerking music. Have Gemi
establish she WANTS to listen to it.

"You miss him." He stated it like he understood. Jess kept his eyes on the road, but I caught the shine of moisture in his eyes.

"Too much," I whispered. "Is it still hard, ~~you know~~, missing your mom?"

"Always." He frowned, his voice softening. "There's so much I wish I could tell her.

I'd like a paragraph describing Jess here!

Gemi is looking at him. We should be able to see his sadness.

She was easy to talk to."

"She sounds lovely."

"Yeah, especially when she laughed." His lips pinched together, as if the memory brought him pain rather than joy, then he cleared his throat. "If you wanna talk, about anything, you can call me. Anytime."

He recited his number, making sure I could hear it over the humming engine. "There, now it's in that perfect memory of yours." He glanced sideways at me, a playful gleam now in his eyes.

"I'm stuck with it now," I smirked, grateful for the lighter moment. "Guess I'll have to."

"I hope you do." His words were soft, but something about the way he said them made my insides melt.

Jess pulled in front of the cemetery and cut the engine. Silence hung between us like a heavy cloud, full of things neither of us quite knew how to say.

"Thanks for the drive," I murmured, fingers fidgeting with my backpack strap.

He studied the row of houses, leaning forward slightly to see better. "Which one's yours?"

"The blue one." I pointed at the Victorian with a glower.

He shifted in his seat, reading my reluctance. "It's fine if you don't want me to see it."

"You want to come in?" I asked, surprised.

His face brightened, chasing away the earlier shadows. "You said strange things have been happening there. *Now* I'm curious. Never been in a haunted house before."

My lips puckered as I fought a grin. "Sounds like I'd better give you the tour. I usually charge admission, but I'm feeling generous today."

He laughed, and we both climbed out. As we trekked across the old brick street toward the house, a sudden awkwardness slowed my steps. I'd been with him most of the day, but walking with him to the house suddenly felt more intimate than anything else we'd done so far. Well, except for that one moment in the cemetery when he'd caught me...

Can you clarify this?

Heat instantly flooded my cheeks, and I fought to force the memory from my mind.

"Is this the right way?" Jess asked, pausing at the flower-lined sidewalk that led to the porch.

"Y-yes," I croaked, keeping my face down so he wouldn't see my embarrassment. "We can go in this way."

"After you." He held an arm out and waited for me to pass. I stepped around, acutely aware of the nearness of his skin as I passed, of the heat radiating from his chest. Just like...
-that day in the cemetery...

No more thinking about the cemetery!

Odd fragment. Because everything I'd felt then had just been my imagination. My overactive, not quite sane, imagination. Jess couldn't feel that way about me. Could he?

No italics here.

Eager to slow my quickening pulse, I forced my attention to the approaching house.

What trauma or insecurity makes her think he can't like her?
The exterior had an almost calming charm about it. The spring green of the sugar maples nestled the tall gables above, white overhead puffs floated in a heavenly dome that mirrored the cheerful blue of the Tomb House's sides. Against the serene backdrop, I could almost forget that any darkness lived inside.

*It's her house. This description implies she is unfamiliar with it.
Add more familiarity!*

"Mom?" I called when we'd gone in. The hook where she hung her purse sat empty. The hall clock struck five, our only response. "She must be out. C'mon this way." I gestured toward the kitchen, glad that my pulse had returned to a more levelheaded rhythm.

"This you?" Jess paused, nodding at a photo in the foyer of Aurora under a lilac bush.

"My sister," I said dryly. "I'm not on the wall yet."

He blew out a breath, his eyes darting from photo to photo. "Mr. Summers wasn't kidding. Could've sworn it was you." He pointed to an older portrait, the same one Isaac kept on his mantle and one of the few that weren't of Aurora. "Who's this?"
 wasn't - it's singular

Again, the green eyes ~~seemed~~^{saw} to see right through me, arresting me mid-step. I had to shake myself back to my senses before I could reply. "My grandmother. She died long ago."
 "She's beautiful," he said. The portrait ~~seemed~~^{had} to have no hold over him, for his eyes were already back on me. "Like you."

My pulse quickened, and I glanced away before it could become a gallop. *He just called me beautiful.* That had to mean something, right? Hope fluttered in my chest, and I worked to suppress my smile of pure glee. "Want a snack?"

"Uh... sure."

What kind? He followed me to the kitchen, accepting milk and a blueberry muffin while I took only juice. There was no way I could eat with Jess in the house. Jess, on the other hand, scarfed his muffin down and even accepted two more when he'd finished.
Is he the type of person to eat 3 muffins at someone's house without guilt?

"It's a nice house," he said between bites. Though he sat on a stool, his legs were long enough he could rest his feet flat on the floor. Mine dangled in the air ~~before me~~.

I scrunched my face at his statement.

"I'll bet you miss your home in Colorado."

Command or question?

"Yup."

He demolished the two muffins in record time, then turned his full attention to me.

"Tell me about it?"

"Really?" I asked, grateful for the chance to talk about my old stomping grounds. It made Mom sad whenever I brought it up.

"Go for it." He leaned on the counter, looking so unguarded I couldn't help taking a mental snapshot. I hung "Tranquil Jess" on my mind's secret wall next to portraits of Dad, one of the many perks of my infinite memory storage. Then I let my mind drift to my former home, every detail still crystal clear.

I started with the pink roses—my favorites. They burst from the front hedge in packed clumps all summer, brightening even the gloomiest days. ~~Next~~, I told about the two-story deck in the back with its view of Pike's Peak—the snowy mountaintop at 14,000 feet framing the Colorado Springs skyline. ~~and what was probably~~ ^{him} It was what I missed most about the city.

When the weather kept me inside, I had my study nook[•] shelves overflowing with encyclopedias, journals, and classics. Perfect for my active mind.

~~And~~ ^{There was} finally^V my room, with paw prints collected from hikes with Dad, and

constellations on the ceiling. Dad spent an entire afternoon placing the plastic stars as accurately as possible, telling me how Grandma Evelyn had taught him all their names. I loved the Dioscouroi best—the twin stars of Gemini. Dad told me how the brothers shared such a deep bond that when one died, the other offered to split his immortality so they could alternate between heaven and earth forever. Something about their story of eternal connection always drew me in, though I could never quite explain why.

Jess absorbed it all, occasionally asking questions if I left something out. ^{It was} As if he were drawing it all in his head. The thought made me smile, so I colored a picture for him with words.

When I'd finished, he stared at me with wider eyes, and I wondered if he saw me differently now that he knew more of me. I beckoned him with a wave. "C'mon. Let's continue the tour ~~of this one~~."

We went into the family room, one of the few spaces free from the box mania infesting the rest of the house. My parents kept it furnished for our occasional visits. A

How did
he accomplish
this? From
memory,
maps, etc?

across from

Victorian-style couch and loveseat filled the middle, sitting ~~opposite~~ a hearth in its original dark wood finish. The trim, which Mom had painted white, brightened what would have otherwise been a dreary space. A bay window overlooked the front lawn and street, ~~and near~~ that, a door led back to the entryway foyer. A piano perched along the wall near where we entered.

"Do you play?" he asked.

"Since I was five." My fingers caressed the piano's top.

"Can I hear a little?"

"If you like." I could hardly contain my eagerness, not caring ~~at the moment~~ that the piano had belonged to Aurora. A piano is a piano, and I loved them all. I hadn't practiced since the move, and I craved the instrument's predictability, the way the chords and notes made perfect sense when nothing else did. — Make complete sentence.

Add more to this paragraph because it is a powerful moment. What do her fingers feel like? Is she improving (improv) or recalling a piece she's seen before? Why does she associate this with her dad?

My fingers found the familiar keys, starting with a simple melody that hung in the air like a haunting memory, growing with cascading chords until it crescendoed into something breathing, something alive. The piece gained momentum, and my hands leaped between octaves, pouring out everything—Dad's death, the new school, Aurora, the voice. All my emotions spewed onto the keys in forte. When I finally wound down to a solitary bass note, my breaths coming in fast, the entire house sighed with relief. How does this differ from how she usually plays.

Wow. What was that?" Jess asked, brows raised.

Remove italic

I shrugged, still breathing fast and embarrassed that I'd gotten so carried away.

"Something I heard once. It stuck with me."

"I enjoyed watching you," he murmured. "When you play, you forget everything else, give a physical description of her change - (Eg- shoulders intense)

I get to see the real you."

His words hit too close. I stood, needing to break the spell before I got too emotional.

"Ready for the ghost tour?"

"Ghost tour?"

Elaborate a bit more for clarity. Something that explains WHY Jess would want

"It's okay if you're scared. Maybe she'll go easy on you." I stepped closer, grinning. "her" to go

He snorted, his eyes wary. "I can handle a ghost. It's you I'm not so sure about." easy on ~~her~~ him.

My brows rose in mock innocence. "Me? What do you mean?"

He counted on his fingers. "Let's see, perfect memory, you play the piano like

Beethoven, you run like the wind, you're scary smart, and you're" he halted at his pinky finger.

"And... what?"

Change to ellipses to imply words faded. Not abrupt stop.

"And... you make me smile. Not an easy trick." As if to prove his point, his lips

curled into a big, corny grin. I shook my head, sure he'd been about to say something else,

though I loved how the smile softened his features. He was handsome when he didn't scrunch

his face into a scowl. And his eyes, the color of smoky quartz sometimes dark, but warm

when the light hit them just right— Word scowl interrupts the sequence of attractive descriptions. Takes away immersion.

Pull it together!

"If you can handle all that," I said, praying he hadn't noticed me fangirling him, "a silly ghost should be easy. Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," he said, shaking his head.

Is he uneasy or amused?
A bit unclear.

"Come along then." I skipped toward the stairs. His deep chuckle echoed up the steps

behind me.

"This her room?" he asked when we'd reached her door.

Put this first to show the change in location.

"You can go in. She won't bite."

Jess narrowed his eyes at me. I merely raised mine in reply, waiting with an expectant smirk on my face. Repetition ↑ Move this sentence to previous paragraph.

Jess rolled his eyes and stepped inside. The room seemed harmless in the daylight. He

drank it silently, then asked, "They keep her things in here? Like she might come back?"

What is he looking at specifically? What draws his attention?

This implies
she has a
history of
messing with
people. Maybe
explain why it's
mock innocence
instead of
genuine
confusion.

Split into
2 sentences

"Yeah, kinda creepy, right?"

He nodded. "She liked roses, like you." His eyes moved to the telescope in the corner.

"And stars too, apparently." → I forgot when he learned this about her.

Record the
action first
and then
Gem's
reaction.
Keeps reader
in the
moment.

"Runs in the family," I shrugged.

Something in what I said must have bothered him, for he abruptly pivoted toward the door. "I'm done." Sadness colored his voice despite his blank face. — Make this its own paragraph.

And just like that, what had started out as a joke on my part about the "ghost tour"

struck home. I didn't want to be in there anymore, either. Melancholy practically oozed from the painted walls onto anyone who ventured inside. In need of relief, I hurried out to join him.

We stood solemnly in the hallway, readjusting to the time jump that came from crossing her bedroom threshold.

Make sure audience knows he means her room.

"Which one's yours?" Jess asked.

being I was fresh out of outfits for the rest of the week.

"Looks like you have a lot to do in here," Jess sympathized.

add specific clothing item

"Tell me about it. If I don't find my clothes, I'll be wearing Mom's tomorrow." Hmm,
not a bad idea.

Add that
the outfits
are in the
boxes.

He moved restlessly around my room, checking the window lock, then leaning out.

"You have an escape ladder?"

Maybe
emphasize that
he checked
the window
first to
show purpose
and urgency.

"Um, no?"

Passive voice - Makes Gem sound like victim
trapped by fire

"You're high up. You could get trapped in a fire." His voice tightened. Of course he'd worry about that—his mom.

He inspected the ceiling, and then quickly returned. "At least your smoke detectors are wired to power. Surprising in a house this old."

Not parallel list structure.

"Surprising?"

"Most people just use battery-powered ones. Someone took extra time to install these."

Have Gemi → "Probably my parents when they fixed up the place."
think about "Probably." He looked thoughtful. "I can bring a ladder Saturday after work, if you
how her parents want." ← Show that Jess really wants to bring the
would consider ladder. Otherwise it just sounds like a
every possibility. "That'd be great," I said, trying not to sound too eager. polite offer he didn't mean.
"I'm off at four. I can swing by after." His eyes swept the room. "How can I help in
here?" ← What is he looking at?

Dreading the thought of him rummaging through my disorganized mess, I hesitated.
His car was so neat and clean—what would he think of this chaos? "You've already done so much for me today. Don't worry about it." ← Maybe have her recall something she doesn't want him to find.

"It's no problem." He shook his head, a gentle determination in his eyes. "I actually like organizing. Let me help."

I scanned the towers of unlabeled boxes surrounding us and frowned. Why didn't I label them? The thought of accidentally opening a box of underwear and nighties made me cringe. Still, something in Jess's steady gaze made me reach for the scissors on my desk. I cut open the nearest box, checked that all was kosher, and handed it to him. "You can unpack this."

Jess peered inside. "Some breakables in here." With careful movements, he began laying items on my bed, handling each one like it might shatter.

"Just knick-knacks and things." I tried to keep my voice light. "They can go on my dresser."