

Chapter 7

Some Things Never Change

After a quick freshening up at Mom's insistence that I look "presentable," we pulled up to the security gate ~~at~~^{Love this description!} Isaac's home. Lofty white pines and English ivy secluded the property from the busy access road and the canal that bordered the back of the property. Well-placed landscape lighting complemented the curving drive leading to the stone and stucco two-story villa. Though not as grand as the neighboring mansions, what it lacked in living space, it more than made up for in curb appeal and sprawling acreage.

The sun, finished with its time above ground, had ducked below the horizon to trade places with a swollen harvest moon peering out over the tree line. Unhurried clouds lingered in the bright moonlight overhead. The house, tall and luminescent with its interior lights like beacons from every window, guided us forward.

"Isaac," Mom announced into a security box at the gate. "Oh, I hate talking into this thing. It's Lizzie. We're here, let us in." A green light and a loud buzz~~soon~~ granted us entry. She pulled forward and around~~to~~ the back of the house where a dark silhouette under the portico awaited us. Tall and trim in a fine-tailored suit, his mere profile commanded attention before I could even make out his features.

He emerged from the shadows at our approach, bringing his attributes into sharp focus: a longish face, trimmed white beard against a tan complexion, and a fitted gray jacket

Awesome intro!
Very immersive!

matching eyes that followed my movements with unmistakable affection. Despite being in his early eighties, his steady stance and graceful movement suggested remarkable fitness.

As I exited the car, he greeted me with an outstretched hand and musky cologne—a nostalgic aroma that, despite my nerves ~~at seeing him after several years~~, drew me into his hug. He'd changed little in the last decade.

"Gemini! It's great to see you! And Elizabeth!" ~~Mom~~ had exited the car and was now by my side. He leaned in to hug her, too, but his grip never released my hand.

Mom kissed him on the cheek. "Hello, Isaac. It's good to see you."

"Lovely as always, Elizabeth, but you, Gemini, you're quite the young lady." His gaze examined every change ~~I'd grown half a foot taller, and my hair hung halfway down my back.~~ His scrutiny stretched on uncomfortably until, without warning, he twirled me ~~around with a flourish.~~

I moved with the spin easily, ~~though surprised by his strength~~ and landed securely back in his embrace, the rush of the movement heating my cheeks.

His lips curled up, a playful gleam in his eyes. "She'll have a line of admirers waiting to dance with her. Just you wait."

"Isaac, you're embarrassing her. And she goes by Gemi now." ~~Mom~~ swatted his arm in a teasing gesture.

"I call her Gemini because that's her name." He released me with visible reluctance, keeping a gentle hand on my back as he ushered us inside to the living room.

"Now if you'll excuse me a moment," ~~he drew away,~~ I need to check on dinner. You're in for a special treat!" He disappeared into the kitchen with Mom following on his heels.

Unsure if I should join them, I remained in the living room to have a look around. Like Isaac himself, the room had changed little over the years: a painting of a Gothic revival

Gothic Revival
is proper noun

Try not to interrupt lists
with em-dashes. Too convoluted.

Carter / Tomb House / 52

Very long list.
Consider splitting each list item into its own sentence.

mansion Grandma Evelyn's family home hung on the wall above the fireplace, a six-foot

metal sculpture reminiscent of a double helix sat in the corner, reflecting the firelight, and

Dad's bronzed baby shoes perched on a wall shelf next to a die-cast car he'd played with as a boy.

The photos on the mantel, however, had two fresh additions. Grandma Evelyn's portrait came first, her emerald eyes drawing me in, and I took a moment to study her.

Something about her smile and expression, like she somehow knew all about me though we'd never met. I shook my head and moved on.

Next came Dad's bright smile, Aurora's hopeful gaze, and somehow a recent photo of me with an uncertain expression. A rather depressing family album—a lifetime of love and loss.

A final, unfamiliar portrait occupied the end, a young man with a striking resemblance to my father, only he had lighter hair and was barely into his second decade. I stared at him, wondering who he could be.

Isaac's voice boomed from the kitchen. "Gemini, we're ready! We could use your help."

"Coming!" I spared one last glance at the young man and hurried into the kitchen. Isaac appeared with a platter some lean brown bird I didn't recognize. Mom followed with a casserole dish while I grabbed the two remaining bowls. We settled at the large wooden table in the dining room, Mom and I together, Isaac at the head.

His careful hands sliced the bird with the same precision he gave everything in his world. "I think you'll really enjoy this."

"What is it?" I asked, observing as he set a piece on my plate, followed by some kind of reddish-looking jelly.

"Peking Duck," he said with an air of pride. "I developed a taste for it while attending conferences in Beijing. Try it with the sauce."

I hesitated, not usually liking to mix my food, but Isaac's gaze held ~~such~~^{so much} expectation that I couldn't didn't want to disappoint him. The flavor surprised me. "Really good."

He glowed with satisfaction. Yet beneath his warm smile lurked an intensity that suggested this was much more than a mere dinner for him.

Mom smiled. "This is wonderful. Thank you for having us."

Isaac set down his fork, his words heavy with emotion. "It's my pleasure. I've missed so much over the years. With James gone, and you back in Sunnyport... You're my family." His face flushed as he fought for composure.

Guilt coursed through me. It hadn't occurred to me how ~~Isaac~~^{my dad's} death affected him, nor had I thought about him living alone for so long. In this new light, his tight hugs and long touches suddenly made sense. In his shoes, I'd crave affection, too.

Mom squeezed his hand. "We'd love that. Besides, if you keep cooking like this..."
 ¶ she trailed off, her smile faltering as if she'd momentarily forgotten where her sentence was going.

I glanced up to see Isaac studying her with concern, but rather than comment on her slip he merely replied graciously with "I think I can manage that." ^{= New paragraph} He drank us in with growing excitement, then slammed a palm down, making Mom and me jump in our seats.

"Such a delight to have you both here! And to have you back at Eden, Elizabeth. Several directors are looking forward to seeing you next week." He sipped his wine, his eyes sharp despite his casual tone, reading her reaction.

Mom tensed a little. "Oh? Such as?"

"Richard Dyer for starters."

"Oh Richard, of course." Mom's shoulders relaxed as she lifted her glass.

Richard was Dad's friend. I'd met him and his wife Leslie at the funeral. They acted like they'd known me for years, though I'd only just met them. Kinda weird, really. The way they kept sneaking glances at me when they thought I wasn't looking.

"Why, were you thinking of Stefan?" Isaac continued. "He's asked about you several times. I suspect he has a flame for you."

Mom choked on her champagne. "He's still at Eden?"

Isaac nodded with a wry smile. "That he is. In fact, he's CEO now. He's really one of our brightest. You were college friends, were you not?"

Mom stilled, and I couldn't be sure, but I thought I detected a slight frown before she nodded and said, "We go back a long way." Mom swirled her glass, her eyes glazing.

"What kind of research do you do at Eden?" I asked, thinking of my earlier conversation with Jess, ~~but also of my parents~~ and the work that had been such a big part of my parents' their lives.

Isaac brightened, as if he'd been waiting for me to ask. "We have many departments." His eyes traveled to the window where the most determined stars had broken through the moon's overreaching veil. "Have you noticed your school's unusual design? Eden sponsored its construction." A shadow of longing crossed his face. "I insisted on the observatory-style architecture. Evelyn spent countless nights mapping the stars." He looked upward in silence, then pulled his gaze from the window. "You'll find similar touches at Eden's main facility. You should come and see it."

Maybe a bit of introspection before dialogue here.

Q "I'd love that. Maybe I could shadow Mom for a day. Mom?" I glanced at her hopefully.

She surfaced from her thoughts. "Oh?" Her glance flashed to Isaac, as if checking for approval. At his nod she continued, almost hesitant. "Y-yes, of course. It is a beautiful building." Her half-smile wavered before her gaze drifted away again.

Isaac excitedly tapped the tabletop, attention fixed on me. "You're welcome anytime. You know, I think this deserves another bottle of wine." He disappeared into the kitchen, his footsteps full of barely contained energy.

Watching him leave, I thought of Jess's warning about Eden, about the way the other students had reacted to my connection with the institute. ~~Yet somehow, it hadn't seemed like~~ ^{didn't feel} the right time to ask about any of that. Mom picked at her food, lost in her own thoughts, while the house settled around us with the weight of decades of memories. Memories I knew little about.

A visit to Eden seemed like the perfect way to uncover some answers about my family... and perhaps about myself. ~~Yet as I considered the thoughtfully placed photos on the mantel, at Grandma Evelyn's piercing green eyes that seemed to see directly into me, I wondered who was this woman that had inspired the architecture at Eden, and why I felt so drawn to her.~~ — Change into its own sentence.

From the kitchen came the sound of Isaac humming to himself as he selected the wine, a cheerful yet haunting melody. Like everything else about this evening, it felt both perfectly natural and part of some ~~hidden~~ larger plan.

Avoid using ellipses for dramatic pauses.