

Chapter 8

A Song of Sorrow

Empty businesses lined deserted roads, their darkened windows reflecting yellow streetlights like distant, watchful eyes. The late hour had emptied Sunnyport's streets, leaving us almost alone as Mom drove us home through the night. An occasional car disturbed the stillness, its headlights cutting through the darkness before fading into the distance.

Along the way, I remembered to ask Mom about the sleepover with Kate, nearly confessing about the party when she mentioned needing to meet her parents first. But at Kate's full name, Mom smiled. She'd known the Longs for years. *Crisis averted.*

Maybe include the dialogue here since it builds mom's character and adds a bit to the mystery.

We turned onto our street. Dense fog huddled over Elm Grove Cemetery, transforming the familiar ground into a vast, white sea. Tops of tombstones stretched skyward like hands grasping for salvation from the briny depths. White tendrils trailed across the road, skeletal fingers clawing into our yard and winding around our ankles as we trudged from the garage to the house.

Love this!

Once inside, I headed upstairs, fog forgotten. My body ached for sleep, and as soon as my head hit the pillow, I had no energy left to worry about nightmares or strange visions. I started drifting away.

A noise buzzed into my consciousness. Just a crackle at first, unclear and sporadic. Slowly it grew clearer, and I realized it was a voice. *Am I dreaming?* It seemed the kind of sound that belonged in dreams, haunting and...

(sad) A girl's voice, growing louder.

No italics needed here.

I sat up. A coyote maybe? The thought brought back memories of camping with Dad, of how he'd taught me to identify night sounds from our tent. Coyotes could sound eerily human, their cries like weeping women. They gave me the heebie jeebies. While the voice was every bit as creepy, it was different somehow. ^{Avoid ellipses used for emphasis.} too melodic, more like singing, and it seemed far away, as if carried on the wind. Something seemed off about it, and suddenly I wished it were just a coyote.

Despite being so tired I could barely move, I climbed out of bed to heave the old window open, letting in a gush of fresh air and the sound of swishing leaves. The voice remained unchanged. Not closer or louder. In fact, it seemed to come from all directions at once. I shut the window tight and locked it.

Is Mom crying?

Light streamed from beneath her door as I tiptoed down the hall, careful to avoid the creaky floorboards as best as I could. Outside her room, I held my breath to listen. Just the soft turn of pages—she liked to read before bed.

Hmmm mmmm mmmm

Startled, my back stiffened at the sorrowful tune I'd never heard before. Wistful, like someone trying to remember the words to a long-forgotten song. Did it come from Aurora's room? My stomach knotted as I crept to her door. I put my hand on the handle and leaned in to listen.

Mmmmm hmmmmmm mmmmm

The humming intensified, tingling in my head. Shoving down my terror, I told myself that ghosts weren't real, then pushed inside and flipped on the light. The brightness blinded me. But as I struggled to see, it became clear no one was in there. Somewhere between relieved and disappointed, I sank onto the bed to think.

MMMMM HMMMM MMMM

← I think it switches to all-caps too fast. Needs more ~~about~~ dramatic buildup.

Don't use bold and italics at the same time. Stick to one. Maybe add quotation marks if need more distinction.

My head jerked around, searching for the voice that boomed like a PA system in my head. It made no sense. I couldn't *see* anyone. Heart pounding, I cut the light and fled to the hall, holding my breath in the silence. ~~Then...~~

MMMMM HMMMM HMMM

My chest tightened, a panic attack threatening to push me over the edge. "H-Hello?" I called, my voice cracking. Trembling, I checked the guest bedroom next. Also empty.

The voice blared again, pounding through my brain in surround sound, the vibrations crawling down my skin. I plugged my ears, hoping to block the noise.

MMMMMM HMMMMM MMMMMM] - I think we can cut this one.

My heart sank. Louder than ever, which could mean one of two things. One: the sound was transmitting directly into my ears. *Um, okay.* Not sure how that would work. Or two: I'd gone crazy, which was looking like a real possibility. I mean, I saw Aurora on the porch. How much more evidence did I need?

Hello? I thought. *Yep, definitely crazy. Now I'm thinking thoughts to an imaginary voice.* No bold. Competes with the voice.

A floorboard creaked behind me. "Gemi? Is that you?" Mom stood in her doorway, wearing the blue nightgown Dad had given her for her last birthday. Her eyes squinted in the dark.

I took a few calming breaths and smoothed a hand over my hair. "Yeah, Mom. It's me."

HMMMMMMM MMMMM HMMMMM]

maybe you can make it quieter now that someone else is here.

My body went rigid as I waited to see if she'd respond to the voice, give any sign she'd heard it. ~~But~~ she made no reaction. *Maybe I really am crazy.*

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Did you hear anything just now?"

She shook her head. "Just you calling. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She crossed to me and placed her gentle hands on my shoulders. "You sure?"

I forced a smile. "Everything's fine, Mom."

She pulled me into an embrace, one hand idly stroking my hair. Then she let out a soft sigh. "I know you miss Dad and our old home. You know you can talk to me."

I nodded, but I couldn't. *Combine paragraphs. They are part of the same thought.*

(Not when she was barely coping herself. She had enough to handle without her daughter losing her mind ~~on top of it all~~. I vowed to keep the voice a secret, for her sake.

My shoulders felt light and cold when she pulled away. I didn't hug her nearly as much as I wanted to anymore. "Can I sleep with you tonight?" I asked, like a five-year-old afraid of the dark. My eyes darted to my open bedroom door, and a shiver coiled up my back.

I couldn't face the voice alone.

"Sure, honey." She wrapped an arm around me and led me to her room.

Once there, I slipped into the unused side of the bed, memories flooding back of nights nestled between my parents. A contented sigh escaped as I inched closer to her, just like I used to do. The comforter became my shield against the darkness, and it seemed to work, for the voice kept silent. And for the first time since Dad's illness, a peace settled over me.

Sheets rustled as Mom settled in. "Goodnight, Gemi."

Already half asleep, I mumbled, "Night, Mom." With those words said, I sailed off into a dreamless slumber, the voice's echoes finally fading from my mind.

Chapter 9

Dead Ringer

Matt's eyes flicked to his tablet screen as I entered homeroom the next morning, his fingers moving across it without purpose—a clear sign he was still avoiding me.

~~So~~ I snagged an empty workstation beside Jess instead. He arched a surprised brow at my new seating choice. *Instead implies a choice. What was the option she did not choose? Unclear.*

"Morning," I said, as if I'd done nothing different. As if the cemetery conversation hadn't happened. As if the voice in Tomb House hadn't driven me to sleep in Mom's room.

"Hey," he replied after a pause, his eyes softening. "You look less tired this morning. Sleep better?"

"Much." I pursed my lips, remembering why. What if the voice comes back? I couldn't sleep with Mom every night. — Try to avoid alternating between internal dialogue and narration here. Have internal dialogue before or after narration for clarity. Not between.

"Everything okay?" Just me going crazy. I shrugged. "My house creeps me out sometimes."

"It's hard to be somewhere new." Jess stared hard at his desk, his voice quieter than usual. "Takes time." Something in his tone suggested he could relate, but he said nothing

Last paragraph started w/ Jess talking. Have some Jess narration before the dialogue so we know he's the one still talking.

until it was time to leave for math.

"He's here today," Jess whispered as we stood to go. My stomach knotted. I had to face Mr. Summers eventually. I'd hoped for later, or better yet never at all, though a part of me longed to get it over with.

"It'll be fine," Jess assured me when we'd arrived at Mr. Summers' classroom.

I shot him a dubious look and peeked through the open doorway. Mr. Summers stood at the front, working equations on a holographic display with his back to the room. I hurried in before I could change my mind, again sitting next to Jess, exhaling slowly to calm my nerves.

Two tail fragments. Pick one, make the

Amy entered, noted with a startled expression my new location in the back row, then huffed toward her seat directly in front of me, her tablet screen deliberately angled away.

other its own sentence.

Two tail fragments.

"Good morning, class," Mr. Summers said, turning around abruptly. His hands shook slightly as he adjusted the control panel on his wrist. "I'm sorry I've been absent. We've got catching up to do."

He stood statue-stiff at his podium, eyes fixed on the holographic display he'd positioned there. "Today, we'll be exploring integration by parts. This is where we integrate the product of two or more functions..." The blood vessels on his forehead pulsed red as he spoke. He took great care not to look up at the class—at me—throughout the entire lesson. His fingers trembled slightly as he manipulated the floating equations, his movements mechanical and tense.

When the bell rang, I sprang from my chair, eager to escape, but my relief vanished as

Transition was too fast. Include progression of time before this.

he called out, "Gemini, can I speak with you a moment?"

My eyes glanced longingly toward the doorway. *So close....*

Jess hesitated before whispering, "I'll wait outside."

"Thanks," I nodded, grateful to have a friendly face nearby. I watched a little jealously as he ducked into the hall, then, with a steadying breath, I trudged toward the teacher.

Big gap? Check for extra space. Might just be weird word processor formatting.

"Thank you for staying, Gemini." Mr. Summers lifted his gaze ~~gradually~~, as if bracing himself. "I'm sorry for Monday. My reaction was... unprofessional." His voice broke at the end, leaving only the sound of his fingers jangling the change in his pocket.

He seemed so sincere and vulnerable standing there that I couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him. I thought back to how he'd called me Aurora. She still wasn't my favorite subject, but I needed to know. "So you knew my sister? We look a lot alike. I'm seventeen now, about the same age she was when—" My words evaporated at seeing his tortured expression.

Why would she include this if Gem doesn't want to discuss Aurora? It would make more sense if Mr. Summers brought this up instead.

He sank into his chair, his eyes squeezing shut. "Yes, I knew her... and... I loved her. When I saw you, I thought—" His voice cracked, unable to finish the sentence. "Well, with all the advances Eden's made, for a moment I... Yes, you look remarkably like her."

His honesty stunned me, leaving me momentarily speechless. He loved her? And what was he about to say about Eden?

Back-to-back questions.

"I have a meeting," he said, seeming to recall himself. He straightened, his demeanor again professional. "But I'm happy to talk more after school."

That is something he really shouldn't tell a student who looked exactly like Aurora.

"I'll come if I can," I promised with an awkward parting wave, then hurried from the room. In my hurry, and still reeling from him admitting to loving my sister, I bumped into

How?

Jess on my way through the doorway.

Was he standing in front of the door?

"Sorry!" I cried, my cheeks flushing.

Jess straightened himself. "No worries. What'd he want?"

"To apologize... we'll talk more after school, if I can get a ride..." I let my breathless voice trail off, hoping he'd pick up on the unspoken request.

"I'll give you a lift," he responded quickly. "I'm not working today."

"Really? Where do you work?"

This would feel REALLY creepy. Lean into that.

"~~Just~~ an animal shelter. I volunteer there a few days a week." He shrugged as if it were no big deal.

"Nice," I said, impressed, but not surprised. Jess and animals made sense. Neither talked very much. They probably found him as soothing to be around as I did.

"See you at lunch?" His voice lifted at the end, eyes brightening.

"I'll be there." I smiled.

His answering grin reached his mahogany eyes and animated his entire face. For a moment, I glimpsed the real Jess, the one who'd been hiding under blank, expressionless stares since I'd met him, ~~and~~ I couldn't help but stare.

Pick one. Both say the same thing.

"What?"

"Your smile looks good on you."

He inhaled sharply. "You think?" He seemed surprised by the idea. "Maybe I should do it more." He cast me one last lingering glance and hurried to the stairwell.

His rare smile consumed my thoughts the rest of the morning and as I made my way

Split to two sentences.

through the cafeteria to the lunch line. When I reached for a standard-issue tray, the lunch

monitor cleared her throat. "Miss Eden? You have the gourmet dining plan." She gestured

toward where the other Edens were collecting their meals.

"Oh, um, this is fine," I mumbled, face heating, then grabbed a spicy chicken

sandwich and sides.

As I turned from the counter, I noticed a freshman frantically waving his hand to pay for his food, the checkout scanner repeatedly flashing red. He was trying to add some extra items to his basic lunch—a brownie and protein shake—but apparently didn't have enough in his account. The cashier was already shaking her head about the extras. The freshman's cheeks burned as he fumbled through his pockets for change, pretending not to notice the line forming or the whispers starting up around him. Without thinking, I stepped back.

Repetitive short sentences. Add variation.

can you make it a hologram? I doubt a

lunch monitor can memorize every student I know their dining plan.

"Here," I said quietly, waving my hand over the scanner. "I'll cover it today."

The boy's eyes widened when he saw my name flash on the screen. "But... you're an Eden."

3rd shrug
this
chapter.
Add different
verb.

"Yeah, well, Dad always said names don't matter as much as what you choose to do with them." I shrugged, thinking of how he'd have handled this moment. The kid, open-mouthed and eyes dazed, nodded in thanks and scurried toward a table with his treats.

From the corner of my eye, I caught Matt watching, his tablet forgotten in his hands. For just a moment, surprise replaced his usual wariness.

Carrying my decidedly non-gourmet meal, I headed toward my old table. Jess sat in his usual spot, chewing a cheeseburger. He gave me an encouraging nod. I hesitated between Matt and Amy, assessing. Matt's fingers paused over his tablet, his eyes meeting mine briefly with uncertainty, like he was trying to reconcile what he'd just seen with what he believed about Edens. But then Amy's shoulders stiffened, and Jennifer shot Matt a sharp look. He dropped his gaze with what looked like reluctance, returning to his tablet. Ashton never looked up.

I glanced around, spotting an empty seat at the Eden table. I didn't feel ready to join them yet, despite Flynn beaming me a friendly grin, and my eyes settled on an empty table two rows over.

Are there not other seats to choose from?

Oh! Num!

"Sorry," I mouthed at Jess, who flashed an exasperated glare at his friends, and headed for the empty table.

Before I got there, Flynn stepped into my path, brilliant ginger curls framing his face, his voice an equal blend of charm and self-assurance as he said, "Hey, Eden. Please tell me you're not planning on sitting alone."

I sighed. "Not now, Flynn. I'm not in the mood for company."

Scene starts as continuation of ending scene from last chapter. Why start a new chapter? You can easily include the rest of this scene in the previous chapter instead of chopping it up awkwardly.

Chapter 10

She's With Me

Flynn's expression softened with what looked like genuine concern. "Rough day? All the more reason not to isolate yourself." He gestured toward the Eden table. "Come sit with us. Kate's been asking about you."

When I hesitated, he added, "Look, I get it. Finding your place here is complicated. But you belong with people who understand what it means to be an Eden." He offered his hand instead of presuming to touch me. "At least give us a try. Better than sitting alone."

"She's not alone, she's with me," Jess said, setting his tray down beside me.

I shot Jess a grateful look as Flynn's smile tightened at the edges.

Flynn raised an eyebrow. "Interesting choice." His tone remained casual, but something in his eyes hardened. He turned back to me. "The offer stands, Gemi. You'll find we make much better allies than others might."

"Who I spend time with is my business," I said, but with less edge than I'd intended.

Flynn leaned closer, his voice dropping to a confidential tone. "Fair enough. I respect that."

He straightened with an easy smile. "See you at the party Friday? I think you'll find it illuminating. See for yourself what being an Eden really means." He turned his face to the side and winked, making sure Jess wouldn't see. I felt my cheeks heat at the mention of the party. I hadn't told Jess I was going.

Why did he pause here. Maybe add brief description. Or remove ellipses.

To Jess he said, "See you around, Jess. Enjoy your..." he looked down at our trays with obvious disgust, "lunch. Better enjoy it while it's still hot." His eyes flashed to me on the word "hot", then, smirking, he turned and left, his designer sneakers squeaking against the floor.

This would be a good spot to end Chapter 9.

Jess watched Flynn leave, then turned to me, his expression ^{was} more concerned than hurt.

"You're really going to his party?"

Suddenly, I couldn't seem to look anywhere but at the table. "With Kate," I mumbled, fidgeting with my napkin. "She offered a ride."

He exhaled slowly, running a hand through his wavy dark hair. "Gemi, I'm not trying to control you, but... you don't know him like I do."

"Jess," I sighed, setting down the napkin, "I already made the plans. Besides, I hardly know anyone, ~~and~~ you weren't talking to me, remember? I could use some friends."

His shoulders sank as he looked down at his tray. "You're right. I'm in no place to judge after how I treated you yesterday." He looked up, his words hesitant. "You forgive me?"

"That depends." My fingers, ~~seemingly~~ unable to sit still, fiddled with my tray.

"On?" Jess leaned in closer.

"Tell me why you were at the cemetery?"

He sucked in his lower lip, then leaned back with a sigh. "I was upset, so I went to see Mom."

"Your mom?" My eyes widened as understanding hit. "She's there?"

His eyes drew into himself and he whispered, "She died over a year ago, in a fire."

"Jess, I'm so sorry." And for the first time, I understood how inadequate others must have felt when they said those same words to me.

Pain tinged his voice. "I don't like to talk about it. Sometimes I visit her."

Chapter 10
then
makes
Jess +
the party
central focus

Maybe add
a bit more
hesitation?

Not a question

Why would he
share this
specific detail
if he doesn't
like discussing
it?

A knot formed in my throat as I imagined him at her grave, just as I'd been at Dad's. Finally, I understood why he was so easy to be around. We both carried the same hurt.

"Am I forgiven?" Jess asked, breaking the silence.

"Forgiven," I assured him, watching his brows relax. "I am curious, though," I continued, noting how his brows quickly crinkled again. "What were you upset about?"

A wry smile tugged at his lips. "You."

"Me?"

"Are you that surprised?" he asked with a low laugh.

"Well, yeah, ~~honestly~~." I dropped my gaze, blushing at his confession.

"I was angry at you, or... about you. I didn't know how to be your friend. Seeing you at your dad's grave," he paused, and I raised my eyes to see him gazing earnestly at me, "I realized I wanted to be, despite what you are."

His words reminded me of our meeting in the cemetery when he alluded to the Edens being different. The warning in my gut returned. "And *what* am I?"

He dipped his head into his hands, clearly distressed. "Oh, man, I shouldn't have said that."

"Hey," I said, backing off, ^{I was} afraid of losing the progress we'd made in our relationship.

"I don't get it, but I want to be friends. When I'm with you, I feel like I can just be me."

Jess lowered his hands and stared down into them. "I thought after yesterday that I might have blown it. And then how I acted after Flynn came over here... I'm just trying to protect you."

"Protect me from what?" I held my palms out. "It's like everyone's in on the secret but me. If you won't tell me about Eden, at least tell me what happened between Ashton and Flynn."

Ouch.
Maybe change it to "even if you are an Eden."
Section would need slight changes if above suggestion is implemented.

Jess shook his head, then glanced across the cafeteria, where Ashton sat with her head down. "I shouldn't talk about it."

"Please?"

Jess hesitated for a long pause, then blew out a resigned breath. "About a year ago, Flynn asked Ashton out. He was nice at first, and she liked him. They dated awhile, but he changed... turned into a real ass. It's Ashton's business. I'm telling you because I want you to be careful of him." He placed a warm hand on mine. He let it linger there before drawing it back, leaving a tingling sensation where his hand had been.

"Thank you," I murmured, staring at where our hands had ~~just~~ touched.

The bell rang, breaking the spell that had settled over us. We emptied our trays and headed to the gym, where Mrs. Jennings had us running more laps around the track. Though I started out with Jess, I got lost in the invigorating feel of exerting my muscles, surprised at

how effortless it felt to pull ahead. Change to: "Pulling ahead felt effortless."

I soon found myself alongside Kate for a few turns. "Friday's a go," I panted, my breathing more labored than hers.

"Yay!" Kate cheered. "We'll get ready at my place before heading over. Gotta get you ready for your coming-out party." She gave me a wicked grin.

"Um, right," I replied with the last of my air. We finished our runs with me struggling to keep up with her, then headed for the lockers. - Did they go together or separate?

Later in history class, Amy turned with open curiosity when I again sat by Jess. I smiled at her, hoping she would finally break the ice. ~~But~~ no such luck. She turned away in her seat, her jaw set in a stubborn line.

"Amy? Can we talk?" I asked at her locker after school.

She stiffened, but nodded, her fingers nervously adjusting the teal streak in her hair.

I feel like Jess would say as little as possible here since it is not his drama to share.

Time is moving very abruptly here. We have jumped through 4 different settings in one page. Smooth out and clarify the passage of time.

Split this line into 2 sentences.

"I should have told you my last name sooner," I said. "I'm sorry about that. It's just... you were being so nice to me. I didn't want that to change."

She stilled, as if my words had taken her by surprise, ~~but~~ then her back straightened, and she slammed her locker shut. "It's fine. Still doesn't change anything."

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked, disappointed at her quick dismissal. I couldn't believe this was only about me being an Eden.

"You're hanging out with Flynn and Rowan," she huffed. "I really don't care for them."

"No, I'm not. They just won't leave me alone."

She crossed her arms. "You're going to their party. That counts."

"Because Kate invited me, and you weren't talking to me." My arms folded, mirroring hers.

Her eyes blazed. "Clearly, you value the Edens over us. I don't know why I even bothered to help you. As if you needed it!"

"I did," I said carefully. "And I'm grateful. Really. Jess told me something happened between Ashton and Flynn. Can we talk about it?"

Her breath hitched. "He what?" Her eyes darted over my shoulder toward Jess, who was suddenly looking somewhere else. She scowled at him, then sighed as she swung her gaze back to me. "Mom's waiting. How 'bout we talk tomorrow at lunch?"

"Really?" I blinked in surprise.

Shouldn't she ask Ashton before saying anything?
"Yeah, I owe you that much, I guess. I'll see you." Without waiting for a reply, she

spun on her heel and disappeared down the hallway.

Once she was out of view, I turned to find Jess eyeing me from his locker, his eyes

searching my face. "How'd it go?" Jess, you literally saw everything.

"We'll talk tomorrow."

Does she really need to clarify Jess when he's standing right here?

Don't throw him under the bus, Gem!

Jess slid his hands into his pockets, his expression thoughtful. "You'll work it out. Speaking of talking, do you want me to go with you to see Mr. Summers? If not, I'll find something else to do until you're done."

"No," I shook my head. "I'd like you there, I'm a little nervous about meeting him."

"You got it."

↳ Didn't Mr. Summers say the meeting was optional?