

This phrasing
feels a bit
awkward to me

Chapter 3

On the Fast Track

The bell's sudden ring made me jump, jarring me back to the reality of the emptying lunchroom. Other than a few spoonfuls, I'd been too much of a nervous mess to enjoy my already meager lunch.

"What do you have next, Gemi?" Amy turned to me as she slid the romance novel she'd been scanning through lunch back into her bag.

"What? ^{Pick one} Oh uh, gym," I replied, mentally reviewing my schedule in my head.

Amy sighed. "That's too bad. I have advanced programming. Anybody else have gym?"

"I do." Jess's words caused a ^{Why? I would expect a shiver.} flutter in my chest. He'd been, at best, cold to me that morning. I hoped we ^{could} ~~would~~ finally break the ice. If not, the journey to the gymnasium would be a long one. When I looked across the table at him, he quickly looked elsewhere.

"I thought you finished all your gym credits." Amy eyed him sharply.

Maybe 'his eyes darted elsewhere'.

Jess shrugged. "Guess I needed a couple more."

Amy studied him as one does an intriguing puzzle. When he didn't elaborate, she turned to me and explained, "The gym's super far. Everyone gets turned around the first time. Trust me, you'll appreciate the help." With the issue settled, Amy flashed me a parting smile and left with the others.

Jess said nothing as I chucked my half-eaten yogurt into the trash, nor as he walked beside me, allowing me to enjoy a few minutes of relative peace. I wasn't used to being

around so many people.

We walked at a brisk pace, and I kept expecting to arrive after every corner, only to

turn down another long tube of glass. The storm had passed, and we crossed through a brief

pocket of sunlight before the clouds swallowed the sun again. Finally, the towering doorway

to the gymnasium erupted into view.

"Talk about a hamster maze," I said, peering at the long corridor behind us. "Thanks

for walking with me."

Jess shrugged and glanced toward the gym. "If you want, we can do it again

tomorrow."

His offer surprised me, and I had to school my face to keep from gawking. "That's

okay, I'll be fine," I said, despite an unsettling desire to say yes. I couldn't explain it, and that

bothered me. I preferred things I could understand. *Change to present.*

"We're headed the same way anyhow, so why not?" He shrugged again, as if he

couldn't care less; but his shoulders were tense, and he rocked on his heels.

"Alright," I said, ignoring how my insides quivered as I did.

"Yeah?" A flicker of something—surprise? pleasure?—crossed his face before the

expressionless mask reemerged, his features again as blank as an old photo. His eyes, *bit like*

however, made up for everything his face didn't say. Inside them flowed a sea of pain that I

recognized all too well. I must have stared too long as his jaw tightened, and he hurried into

the gym. Unsure of what to think, I followed him in.

Mrs. Jennings, our gym teacher, pulled me aside while everyone else headed straight

to the locker rooms. She handed me a sleek gray workout uniform. "The fabric is moisture-

wicking and lined with sensors to detect your vitals. Girl's locker room is that way." She pointed to a doorway on the left.

Once we were all dressed and back in the gym, she herded us outside through a climate-controlled tunnel to the outside track. The air was surprisingly crisp and clean, and I wondered if the school had some kind of air purification system that eliminated the nearby canal's usual rotten egg smell for that time of year—a smell that Mom emphatically assured me would fade when the weather cooled.

Mrs. Jennings tapped a device mounted to a band on her wrist. Holographic displays sprang to life around the track. Each student's vitals and performance goals were visible next to their picture. "Alright, class," she announced, "we'll start with some laps. The system will record your progress. Remember, stay within the parameters set for you. Don't worry about what anyone else is doing."

The students murmured and trudged toward the running lanes. Mrs. Jennings motioned for me to wait. "Gemini, since it's your first day, I should explain how our system works." She tapped on her wrist device. I gasped as a mini holographic picture of me in a workout uniform appeared above her hand.

She pointed with her free hand at the flashing numbers next to my mini-me. "The trackers will monitor your heart rate, oxygen levels, and other vitals. For today, just stay within the green and yellow zones. Don't push into the red. We'll establish your baseline performance first, then adjust your parameters accordingly." She studied me for a moment. "Your file suggests exceptional physical ability. I look forward to seeing how you do out there, but let's take it easy to start."

I nodded, wondering what exactly my file said about me and how the school knew what my physical abilities were. Not to mention... How did they get a picture of me in a uniform I'd never worn before?

This is
c0000001

After joining the other students on the track, I fell into what I thought was a

comfortable pace. With a quick look around, I recognized Kate up ahead, her holographic

vitals showing a steady upper green zone despite her impressive speed. Flynn and Rowan

trotted together not far behind me, their holograms showing they were deliberately keeping

themselves in the lowest end of the green. Jess plodded alone a quarter turn behind them, his

display flashing between yellow and red as he pushed himself to keep up.

"Want some running company?" Flynn asked on my right, taking me by surprise. His

curls, like fire in the sun, bobbed up and down on his forehead with each of his strides.

Rowan joined me on my left with a silky laugh. "Maybe she wants to run with me."

"Maybe," Flynn said, his tone dismissive. "But let's let Gemi decide. Gemi?"

I stifled a groan. "If you can keep up, I'll consider it." Without glancing back, I bolted

forward, leaving their protesting voices behind me.

My legs didn't relent until I'd sprinted a full half-turn ahead. The rushing wind awoke

my senses, exhilarating me in a way I hadn't felt in months. I glanced at my own holographic

display and started to see my vitals were still firmly in the green, though on the upper end of

it, despite the speed I was maintaining.

Kate slowed her impressive pace to allow me to catch her. "Flynn and Rowan are

powerful runners, and you left them in the dust! We could use you on the cross-country team.

I'm Kate, by the way."

The invitation feels very sudden.

"Gemi," I huffed between breaths.

She grinned. "I know. We've known about you all our lives."

"You have?"

"Of course. Isaac talks about you often. You're practically legend."

"Oh, no." What exactly had my grandfather had shared?

Kate laughed, her voice a melodic tinkle. "Don't worry. You've got friends here. It's great to finally meet you. Hey, not bad." She gestured to my stats, now in the yellow.

"Thanks," I chuffed, feeling sheepish that I knew nothing about her, or any of the Edens, for that matter.

We didn't talk anymore as we finished our mile, partly because I'd pushed myself harder than I'd meant to and my lungs burned. I hadn't run for ages. Meanwhile, Kate's stats never wavered from optimal green as we made our way to the showers. She didn't even sweat.

When I later emerged, Jess leaned by the exit, his hands in his pockets. He straightened when he saw me. "You got history next?"

Ewwwww...!
 "Yeah, A.P. European History. How'd you know?"

Hated that class...

Too much shrugging...!

He shrugged, "Lucky guess. Wanna walk together?"

"Sure," I said, relieved at his offer. Though he didn't smile, the line between his brows softened. Again, we walked in a comfortable silence, arriving at class just before the bell.

Amy and the other students—basically the same group of kids as our earlier math class—had already taken their seats. I sat between her and Kate. Flynn and Rowan were behind us, and Jess kept his distance in the back. Occasionally, something jabbed my back, but whenever I turned, the boys behind me beamed innocent smiles. I caught Jess watching once, but his eyes darted away before our gazes met, an irritated frown on his face. Finally, the class period ended, and a clamor of eager voices poured from the room.

Maybe teens' L Teens don't call each other kids.

"Do you have a ride home?" Amy asked at our lockers. "Or do you drive?"

"The bus," I answered, a flush of embarrassment heating my cheeks.

"What? Stop it!" Amy wrinkled her nose.

"No license." Driving terrified me. When I'd last attempted it, I backed into a

dumpster only ten minutes in. That was last summer. Then Dad got sick, and it wasn't a

priority anymore.

Amy clicked her tongue. "I don't envy you. Mom drives my brother and me. I'm

hoping to get a car soon. Well, see you!"

"Yeah, see you."

Before she could leave, Flynn and Rowan passed by on their way out.

"Catch ya tomorrow, new girl." Rowan winked, curling his lips into a crooked grin.

Flynn bopped him on the head before dazzling me with a smoldering gaze. "Later,

Gem!"

Kate strolled behind them, rolling her eyes. "I think they like you." She giggled at my

exasperated expression before calling out, "See you tomorrow!"

Amy watched with a scowl from ear to ear. "Edens," she grumbled. Her face softened

slightly as she waved me goodbye.

Waving back, my expression held until she faded from view, then my lips settled into

a guilty frown. I still needed to tell her my last name. Clearly, Edens upset her. Flynn and

Rowan most of all.

Closing my locker door, I gave a small yelp when I found Jess leaning casually next

to it.

"I can drive you," he said, his dark eyes piercing me with their intensity. It was the

first time since math class he'd really looked at me, and as he stood there, his face mere

inches from mine, a rush of anticipation stole the air from my lungs. Feelings I'd never felt

before suddenly fluttered to life.

Overwhelmed, I turned my head to get a hold of myself. What was going on with me?

My heart raced faster than it had in gym class, and I wasn't even moving. I took a calming

HM. Maybe soon. — Or just too much too fast...?
I like slow burns

breath and tried to think clearly. A part of me wanted to accept his offer—he had a soothing manner when he wasn’t rendering me breathless. But more than anything, I craved alone time with my thoughts. I’d never been around so many people in my life.

“Thanks, maybe tomorrow,” I said, blanching at my words. Did I really just say that? Who chooses a bus over a car?

He said nothing at first, perhaps thinking me the oddest girl he’d ever seen. What he actually thought, I couldn’t say. My cowardly eyes stayed focused on my locker door.

“Suit yourself,” he replied, his voice barely audible above the chattering students around us. With that, he walked away, leaving me with a lingering sense of regret.

Yeah, big mistake. The bus, which had been proportionately peaceful that morning, carried a cacophony of noises that could eclipse a chamber orchestra. The freshman or sophomore next to me was all elbows and gangly legs and filled over half the seat.

Fortunately, the ride was quick. When the bus pulled up to my driveway, I hurried past the driver’s unchanging jack-o-lantern grin and nearly danced out the door in joy. I’d survived my first day of school—ever. Now to brave another fun night in Tomb House. Should be a cakewalk in comparison.

Chapter 4

Dream a Little Dream

My feet hesitated at the end of the driveway while I took in the view of my new dwelling.

The two-story Victorian looked remarkably well-maintained after so many uninhabited years. Someone had been caring for it. Fresh baby blue paint gleamed on the siding, and the white gingerbread trim appeared recently touched up, not a chip in sight. By far the best-dressed house on the block, an expansive porch wrapped around it like a ribbon, and a towering turret graced the right corner like a bow. The flawless exterior continued with neatly trimmed bushes in the weedless landscaping.

Standing there, one could easily imagine the year to be 1880 versus the present day if you looked when no cars were driving past. Charming to the passerby. The inside? Let's just say that on my list of least favorite places to stay, it ranked right at the tippy top. Too many painful memories lived within. And not just for me.

Tomb House was Mom's dream. The realtor traipsed my parents through a parade of homes, but it was the only one that caught her eye. She fell in love, and Dad eagerly obliged her. My parents spent their early years renovating it with period-matching wallpaper, new windows and trim, and a fresh coat of polish on the dark mahogany floors, for starters. They breathed new life into the dying shell, resurrecting it with every addition.

We only stayed in Tomb House every couple of years when visiting my grandfather

Isaac on the outskirts of town. My parents couldn't cope with being there after my sister died.

Was
Gem
Here
when they
first got
the house?

Have
opening
this
paragraph.

Couldn't face her memory. So they'd moved us to Colorado shortly after having me. But they couldn't stand the thought of selling the place either, not after everything they'd put into it, not with Aurora's memory so vivid there. So ^{it sat} ~~it's been sitting~~ mostly empty over the years except for our visits. When Dad passed, Mom couldn't handle being on her own, needed someone to lean on. That's when Isaac stepped in to help and... *poof*. We were moving back to Sunnyport and into Tomb House only three months after Dad's funeral. *Yay me*.

It would have been a beautiful place to grow up—before it became Tomb House. Sometimes I imagined my sister Aurora playing in the garden as a toddler or lazing about on the patio benches as a teenager, sipping lemonade and reading novels. Did she even like to read? She remained a complete mystery to me.

I climbed the brick steps to the front porch, where I caught my reflection in the parlor window. The face gazing back could easily have been my sister's, except for the frown. We shared the same chestnut brown hair and green eyes, the same ^{high cheekbones + delicate lips} ~~delicate lips~~. But as I looked closer, a strange sensation came over me. The girl in the window styled her hair to the side; I parted mine down the middle. She wore a pink blouse and a tan skirt in an older style; I wore blue jeans and a red cardigan. The girl was me, yet wasn't. Someone else peeked back through my eyes.

Not again. I reached to touch her, thinking that would dispel the vision—because my brain had to be playing tricks on me—and our palms converged with an infiltrating chill. My hand snapped back, and the tingling faded. But not the girl. She stood plain as the old house before me.

She even winked.

The hairs on my arms stood on end and I shut my eyes, thinking that if I blocked her out, then maybe she wouldn't be real. *Because she couldn't be.* Aurora died eighteen years

ago. She wasn't gazing back through my reflection. *It's not real.* My heart pounded as I tried to rationalize away my fear.

When I looked again, my reflection held only the sad, lonely girl I was when I awoke that morning. What else did I expect? But as my chest heaved with relief, an unpleasant thought struck me—*what if I see her again?*

I hurried inside before any other lunatic visions, or thoughts, could invade my head.

Stupid house!

Inside, the lemon scent of recently polished hardwood floors greeted me in the

entryway. Aurora's smiling faces lined the surrounding walls, her many eyes following my every movement. After that morning's mirror incident and the hallucination on the porch,

those familiar photos felt more unnerving than ever.

included - photos of mom?

"Mom, I'm home!" I called, determined to ignore them as I hung my backpack on my

hook.

Mom's soprano voice echoed through the hall. "In the office, Gem!"

~~Mom recovered.~~ I headed to the kitchen to regroup with a snack. I didn't want to

worry Mom with my sighings of her dead daughter. No use derailing her day, too.

A single banana nut muffin occupied the bread box. My heart lifted—Dad and I used

to share them at breakfast, him relaying tidbits from his science journals while I pretended I

hadn't already read them. I grabbed the muffin and a glass of orange juice. Sitting alone at

the island, I stared at the empty seat beside me, imagining him there, barely tasting the muffin

as I swallowed it down. I could almost hear Dad's voice: "The things we fear most, Gem—

bean, are usually the things we least understand. Break the problem down into smaller pieces

you can examine. Sometimes the monster under the bed is just a shadow that needs a little

light." That was so like him to break even the scariest things down into puzzles I could solve.

If only he were here now to help me make sense of these strange visions.

With my snack finished and a fresh resolve to follow Dad's advice about breaking down problems, I joined Mom in her office. Papers and folders spilled around her on the floor, and I caught glimpses of the familiar Eden tree logo on some documents before she shuffled them away. ^{Redundant} ~~The same logo I'd seen on the school building that morning.~~ I wondered what exactly my parents worked on in their time at Eden. Mom's field of research focused on the genetics of aging, and Dad's on medical genetics, ~~but~~ beyond that, my parents were always vague about what they actually did. Had she been clearing out these old papers because of our move back to Sunnysport, or was there another reason?

Could you rephrase this to not be a rhetorical question?

"Hey." I leaned against the doorframe.

"Hi, sweetie!" Mom's normally neat hair fell in disheveled waves over her temples.

"How did your first day go? Were the kids friendly?"

"About that," I said, hesitating. "Apparently, the Eden Research Institute has a strong connection to the school. Everyone knows I'm Isaac's granddaughter. Couldn't you at least have given me a heads up? I mean, their logo is right by the front entrance."

Mom's hand paused mid-sort through her papers, her shoulders tensing slightly. "Oh, ~~that, oh, dear... I didn't think...~~" She looked up, her eyes suddenly tired. "I just thought it would be easier for you to discover things on your own. Was it a problem?"

The fragility in her expression made me backpedal. "No, not really. Just caught me off guard." I decided not to mention the students' reactions or Mr. Summers calling me Aurora. She had enough to deal with.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I should have told you." She sighed, studying me. "I thought about you all day. It's hard to do something new."

"It was no big deal." I shrugged. "If millions of kids across America can manage public school, I figure I can too."

"Well, I'm proud of you."

Probably better to not have I her hesitate in her response since she likely anticipated these questions.

My chest tightened. I hated talking about myself. "Looks like you're making

progress."

"Trying." She straightened, wincing a little as she stretched her back. "I should have

tossed most of these papers years ago. I don't know why I hung on to them as long as I did.

James liked to call me his little packrat." She went quiet at the mention of his name. —

But she was the one who mentioned James. whenever I talked about him.

The familiar burn returned to my eyes. "I should go do homework," I said, turning

away before she could see the pain on my face. Pain that manifested

"On your first day? There's a sushi place downtown. Want me to order in?"

I paused in the doorway. "Sure, sounds good."

"Oh, and Gem!" Her voice caught me before I could sneak off. "Your grandfather's

back in town. He wants us to have dinner with him tomorrow night."

Dinner with Isaac? It'd been ages since I'd seen him. "Um, okay," I replied, throwing

Mom a smile to mask my unease.

Isaac had always been... complicated. His striking gray eyes, when they studied me,

seemed to search for something in me, though exactly what I could never figure out. This

made me feel like I was being measured somehow, and continually unsure if I'd met

whatever bar had been set.

Mom's blue eyes pierced through my pretense. "Don't worry. He's excited to see you.

He hated missing you at the funeral."

My stomach tensed as I shoved aside memories of dry heaving in the funeral parlor

bathroom and sneaking out early. "Sure, Mom." I retreated toward the stairs, fighting to keep

my face neutral despite the churning inside.

weird verb

With my backpack in hand, I headed upstairs to ~~grab~~ some much needed alone time. I

passed by my parent's room first, or Mom's now. A heaviness settled in my chest at the

thought of her sleeping in there without Dad, and I plodded onward. The incident on the front

change to "now just Mom's room."

But how does her make her feel?

Two different thoughts, no connection.

Not clear what Gem! is referring to. Carter / Tomb House / 29

porch still haunted me, and I soon found myself at Aurora's door, which came next. How many times had I snuck in here as a child, holding my breath with each careful step, seeking traces of the sister I never knew? Taking a deep breath, I turned the knob and entered.

Why is she going in there now?

The roses hit me first, exactly as I remembered them: in the lampshade, comforter, curtains, and even the rug. My gaze drifted to the telescope by the window, and a memory surfaced: me at seven or eight, carefully stretching up on tiptoes to peer through the eyepiece, heart pounding at the risk of being discovered in this forbidden space. I slid open the familiar pocket doors along the left wall, already knowing what I'd find. The closet remained fully loaded. A hairbrush and comb still sat on the vanity as if she'd just done her hair. Everything from Aurora's last day remained perfectly preserved under a white veil of dust, just as it had been when I'd visited as a child.

Why is it forbidden?

My parents rarely talked about my sister. They'd taught her at home, like me. Beyond that, I knew very little—just that they kept her room frozen in time like she might saunter through the front door one day.

The sorrow and loss overwhelmed me as I stood there among her things. Who was she? Who had she hoped to be? For the first time, I wanted to know her, and I felt cheated at never having had the chance. I exited into the hallway and closed the door.

Why only just now?

My feet shuffled onward to the fourth and farthest room from the stairs. *Mine*. I could have chosen the spacious guest room where I'd stayed during weekend visits. But for what I refused to call a permanent stay, I preferred my smaller, out-of-the-way retreat. After a day of being watched and whispered about at school, I needed a space that felt... normal. The rest of the house had a strange aura to it, like the unsettled feeling you get when you know you've forgotten something.

A bit disorienting because she only has one parent now.

Pick just one question.

Tall stacks of moving boxes greeted me when I entered, still unopened. Unpacking

meant the end of my past life, and I wasn't prepared for that. Nor was I ready to face the

memories they concealed. Yeah, so not going there. *Going where? She's already at the boxes. Yeah, so not going there.*

My eyes strayed to the rustling leaves of the maple outside. The swaying greens

soothed my frayed nerves and thankfully blocked my view of the cemetery across the street

where Dad and Aurora ~~were~~ ^{are} buried. Nothing kills a view like tombstones.

My thoughts then shifted to Mr. Summers' startled expression from that morning.

~~He obviously knew Aurora, but...~~ Why had he called me Aurora? The raw emotion in his eyes suggested more than just surprise

at a resemblance. There was history there, something painful. Would he even show up

tomorrow? *My mind cleared these thoughts over as those thoughts stayed with me as I worked through the training tutorial on my tablet*

and tackled my first homework assignments, through the impromptu sushi supper with Mom,

and as I climbed into bed. Along with the vivid memory of Aurora staring back at me in the

parlor window and her impeccably preserved room down the hall, they brewed the most

disturbing dream of my life—one I prayed to never have again.

In the dream, I found myself in the passenger seat of a car. A young man was driving.

warming from the vents. The driver seemed vaguely familiar, with his hair slicked back from

his young, eager face, his crisp white shirt tucked into a crimson cummerbund.

"I love you," I mouthed when his green eyes met mine.

He brought my corsage-adorned hand to his lips. "I love you to the stars and back," he

whispered, warm breath tickling my skin.

Everything afterward happened with crystal clarity. Tires squealed along the slick

sleet from our right, growing louder before the door imploded, crushing into my arm and hip.

Glass shards floated before me—suspended diamonds mesmerizing in their beauty—until

Emphasize here that this is a dream and sequence and not a time skip or scene change.

Less questions in paragraphs. A lot of time passed all at once. Maybe just have her doze off while doing homework.

another vehicle slammed into us from behind. My eyes squeezed shut as the glass pierced my corneas. We rolled, metal crunching from every direction, our limbs flying haphazardly. I couldn't tell up from down. With a groan, the ceiling caved, pinning me deeper into the seat. Briefly, I felt a rush of cold air from where the windshield used to be before everything faded to...

Darkness.

Something beeped steadily beside me. My body felt strange, like a fish packed in ice, my limbs heavy and refusing to move. Why was it so cold?

"Hush now, shh," Dad murmured. Was he talking to me?

A woman sobbed loudly. I soon realized it was Mom as she suddenly cried out, "No, not Aurora! Please, God, don't take my Aurora. James, don't let him take her!"

She sounded so pained that I longed to comfort her, but nothing would work. Panic rose as I realized I might never move again, my body already as cold and still as fallen snow.

#

A scream erupted, distant at first, then exploding in my ears, trapping me in an inescapable chamber of sound. I bolted upright. The surrounding darkness added to my panic until my fingers found my phone. The screen's glow revealed familiar white ^{moving} boxes, my bedroom... and my raw throat named the screamer. *Me.*

I wrapped my sheets around my shivering arms, my heart racing. The numbing cold from the dream terrified me more than anything I'd ever experienced. A car crash killed Aurora. ~~Had I somehow experienced her death?~~ *It was just a dream... right?*

I forced myself into my usual panic attack routine: *breathe in for four seconds, hold for seven, out for eight.* Over and over, until my heartbeat steadied.

This section gives away that this is a memory and not a dream. Maybe have this part be its own separate dream later on. The crash is more than enough this early on.

Too disturbed to sleep, I watched the hours crawl until my alarm buzzed at six forty-

five. Another day at Sunnyport High couldn't be worse than staying in Tomb House. That

thought alone got me out of bed, happy to be anywhere Aurora wasn't.

—No major changes needed
here. Work on smaller edits.
Great end to the
chapter!

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” His eyes lingered before he headed toward the other entrance, leaving me with more questions than answers. *What was he doing here, anyway? And what did he know about Eden that I didn’t?*

I watched him disappear among the headstones, then shook myself out of my daze and hurried back to the street. There, a man leaned against a sleek black Taurus, his attention fixed on Tomb House. His dark clothes matched his vehicle, the monochrome effect making him seem like a shadow given form. When he turned to watch me, his grin widened as if I were exactly who he’d been waiting for, telling me his presence had nothing to do with the cemetery. My steps faltered at his disconcerting smile, and a chill ran up my arms despite the afternoon warmth. I kept my eyes on the brick road, then on the paved path to the porch, feeling his gaze boring into my back the whole while. Before going inside, I couldn’t resist glancing over my shoulder one last time, finding him still watching. He tilted his head slightly, slid his sunglasses into place with deliberate slowness, and drove away with practiced smoothness.

Unsettled, I went inside. “Mom! Sorry I’m late!” I made my way to her office, my mind racing with Jess’s warning. What had he meant when he said the Edens weren’t like everyone else? And if I was one of them, what did that make me? Something in his tone suggested it was more than just wealth or privilege that set us apart. As I prepared for dinner with Isaac, I couldn’t shake the feeling that tonight I might finally learn truths my family had kept hidden from me—truths that could change everything I thought I knew about myself.