

Chapter 9: Existence

Something was off.

The room was as unkempt as I had left it this morning: my cotton robe was slipping from the back of the chair, my suitcase was lying open on the rug with my wardrobe creeping out, and my hairbrush was discarded on the mantle. The covers were not made; they were balled up at the edge of the bed from my restless sleep the night before—a restless albeit *dreamless* sleep. But something was off. I just couldn't figure out what it was.

A lovely, musky pine scent wafted through the air. While I was out, Rosa must have sprayed something or lit a candle to take away the musty smell from the night before. There was something faintly masculine but pleasant about the aroma.

My reflection in the serviceable bathroom mirror looked only slightly better than it had yesterday; the nearly peaceful sleep had been rejuvenating. The dark circles were still there but they had shifted from purple to a lighter, healthier gray—if gray could be considered healthy. In preparation for the night ahead, my evening routine continued; I scrubbed my face and brushed my teeth until my gums hurt. I stuck my head out of the bathroom to survey the room once more.

Something was off.

The house creaked as it settled for the night. My eyes swept the empty space but ultimately came to rest on the mirror. Last night Rosa had helped me move the heavy oak bed so that it sat flush against the reflective glass. The bulky sleigh frame was still in the same

awkward place but its reflection was nearly nonexistent. Only the corner of the quilt was visible in the mirror; the rest of the bed was... missing.

I blinked twice, just in case. My toothbrush became forgotten in my hand; it fell to the floor with a click. With a loud gulp I swallowed a mouthful of toothpaste and saliva; the burning in my throat made my eyes water.

The glass had to be bowed; the resulting funhouse effect had disoriented me. I walked slowly toward the massive frame and continued to stare. The cherubs in the corners returned my blank look with their sightless eyes.

That was odd. My bag should have been in the reflection but it was nowhere to be seen. I reached the edge of the bed and froze. Wait a second... I should have seen myself in the mirror but I wasn't there either.

“If you insist on plaguing me in my own room, will you at least put something decent on for goodness sake!” a gravelly voice commanded. The harsh sound resonated in the empty room, echoing throughout the barren space.

Self-consciously, I looked down at myself before distressing over the source of the voice. My blue silk nightgown was short, but far from revealing. A quick scan of the room exposed no intruders. I had to be insane; instead of being scared of a strange man in my room, I was worrying about his opinion of my outfit. A sane person would run away and call the police; Callista Franklyn went looking for the trespasser, wanting to ask what was wrong with her modest attire.

A shadow passed from right to left, across the mirror like it was a television screen. It appeared then disappeared just as quickly. Five breaths later the dark figure came back, crossing from the left this time. I looked behind me—just in case—but saw only emptiness. Back in front of me, I could see it better now; I could see *him* better now. It was like my mirror had turned into a window and someone was pacing on the other side of the pane.

The stranger made a third pass and rubbed his neck. He muttered something under his breath and the gruff sound made me jump. He did not come back, so I was brave enough to walk over and tap the glass. The distinct clinking sound left me shaking my head. The mirror was still there, but where was my reflection?

This house was messing with me. All my research and twisted memories had thrown me off-balance and warped my sense of reality. I would wake up from this nightmare at any moment.

I chuckled at my own silliness and looked up, finding myself face to face with the man. Well, more face to chest; he was at least six inches taller than me. His midnight hair curled around his ears and over his pristine white collar. Brooding black eyes bore into mine; it was as though he was looking into my soul. The stranger would have been devastatingly handsome if he was not scowling at me.

“You are not real,” I whispered. The voice in my head chanted the statement, willing the rest of me to believe the message.

I would wake up soon—I had to. And as soon as I woke up I was checking into a hotel... or mental hospital.

“So says the illusion. I assure you, *madam*, I am more real than you shall ever be.”

This could not be happening. I was talking to myself, not a man in the mirror. People had always said you were in trouble when your hallucinations spoke back to you. What did it mean when imaginary conversations became commonplace?

After a brief fit of hysterics, I peeked back at the glass. The stranger was still there, staring at me as if my head had exploded. Maybe it had.

“Although you do *look* real.” I took a step forward, reached my hand to the mirror, but could not bring myself to touch the glass. The skin around the stranger’s strong jaw looked stubbly and rough. His hair was artfully messy as if it had been worried through with his tanned fingers. My hands longed to run through it too; I found myself wondering if it was as silky as it looked. His eyes were sinfully dark; they held an extremely sarcastic stare directed at me.

“Are you a ghost?” The only way to get a direct answer was to ask a direct question.

“What sort of question is that?” he scoffed.

“An illogical one.”

“Exactly.”

No matter how illogical, I still wanted to know the answer. “Are you?”

He let out a bellowing laugh. I crossed my arms against the unexpected, boisterous reaction. Eventually he found his composure long enough to answer me. “No, I am not a ghost.”

“I think you’re wrong,” I said with more conviction than I felt. After all, how positive could one be when dealing with the supernatural?

“Am I now?”

“I *think* so.”

“You do not sound very self-assured,” he pointed out.

“That’s because I’m not.”

“Do you think that, of the two of us, I would know if I were a ghost?”

“Maybe...” I certainly wasn’t an expert on the afterlife. Tilly could have been a ghost forever locked in a mirror. This was a different mirror; why not a different ghost? Right. Why not?

“Hmmm...” He crossed his arms and grew serious. “Have you met many ghosts? Not including myself of course.”

“Only one.” Maybe.

The ghost was taken aback by my admission. “And what was he like?”

“She.”

“What was *she* like?” he amended.

“Wonderful.”

“So, you think I am wonderful? Is that why you believe I am a ghost?”

My traitor face blushed at his leering tone. “That’s not what I said.”

“You wound me. What made her so wonderful and me so...?”

“Dreadful?” I provided helpfully.

He frowned. “I am *not* dreadful.”

“Well, unlike you, *she* was pleasant.”

“I can be pleasant.”

“I highly doubt that.”

He gave me the oddest look. It was pretty bad when a figment of my imagination/potential ghost thought I was the crazy one. “Right. There is obviously no reasoning with you.”

I was seeing/imagining ghosts... we were way beyond reasoning. “Obviously not.”

“If I may, I would like to point out one issue with your ghost theory.”

Only one? I could think of a million. When our gazes connected I thought I saw a glint of amusement in his black eyes. Instead of acknowledging his humor, I gave him a skeptical look. “What is that?”

“Ghosts are usually dead.” I nodded but remained silent. What tragedy had befallen this beautiful man? The thought twisted my heart. “And I am very much alive.”

“How do you know?”

Again, he shot me a you’re-not-right-in-the-head look. “Because I haven’t died yet.”

“Maybe you forgot?” My voice lacked confidence when the intended statement came out more as a question.

“Death does not seem the type of incident one would soon forget. Not that I would know from personal experience, mind you.”

“Maybe it was too horrendous to remember,” I suggested, immediately regretting the observation. What if this ghostly man *had* died a horrific, painful death? What type of twisted person wanted to remind someone about such an event?

The stranger gave me a pained look. I awaited his answer, counting each breath he took before his response. Did ghosts need to breathe or was it simply a force of habit?

“Well then, what about you?”

“What about me?”

“If I am a ghost—which I am most certainly not—then you must be a ghost too.”

“I am *not* a ghost.” That was the most ridiculous assumption I had ever heard.

“What proof do you have?”

“I don’t need proof. I know when I was born, I remember my life until this point, and I have yet to die.”

“Maybe it was too horrendous to remember,” the man whispered. The corner of his mouth crooked up in an appealing half smile.

I could do nothing but scoff at his outrageous theory, vaguely aware that it had previously been my own. It appeared as though there was no way to win the argument, so I stopped trying. Besides, arguing with illusions/the undead could never prove fruitful—or healthy.

“Regardless, you can’t be real,” I said again, willing my brain to make the illusion disappear. If he was, in fact, a member of the undead, then maybe he would get mad at me and fly through the wall into the next room or something. Either way, I had to get rid of him if I was going to get any sleep.

He rolled his eyes, managing to make the rude gesture look attractive.

“You *can’t* be real,” I repeated, more for my own benefit than the beautiful stranger’s.

“Why is that?”

“Because there is no one in this room besides me.” I looked over my shoulder, swept the room for hidden guests, found none, and then turned back to the mirror.

“In *my* room,” he informed me rudely.

In his room? The last time I had checked, my name had been on the deed to Barnard Hall. “You think this is *your* room?”

“I know it is.”

“Whatever you say.” I was exhausted and did not feel like fighting with my hallucinations anymore tonight. Until this point, my dreams had been pleasant, comforting, and familiar; now they were turning dark, malevolent, and unpredictable.

“Excuse me?”

As long as the illusion was here, I might as well play along. Maybe if I came up with a solid argument for his non-existence, then he would go away. What was the harm in indulging

for a few more days? Besides, there was no one around to haul me away in a strait jacket— unless the illusion worked for the psychiatric ward.

“Well, if you don’t exist and I don’t exist, then this entire conversation is futile.” It made sense in a convoluted way. What would be the sense in fighting over a moot point?

“Fine. Neither of us exist, agreed?” The beginnings of a smile crossed the stranger’s perfectly sculpted lips. His ruggedly handsome features made my heart quicken.

“Sounds good to me.”

“Excellent.”

“If you have no objections, I’m going to sleep.”

“Considering I am not here, you hardly need my permission,” he shot back.

“Right.” I turned off my light, resisted the urge to turn it back on and see if he had disappeared, and remarkably succumbed to sleep.