

*Excerpt from “Behind the Scenes” – Paolo’s story*

“Maybe a window’s open.” Troy moved toward the nearest one. “Holy –” He shied backwards, knocking over a broken easel and sending up more dust with the clatter.

“What?” Paolo coughed. “What happened?”

“Sorry – false alarm. Sorry. I caught a reflection in the window of that mirror by the door, and thought I saw something move.”

“A reflection of a reflection? Rookie mistake.”

“Yeah, don’t tell anyone – I could never hold my head up again.” He exhaled. “But that mirror’s creepy, right?”

The room darkened further as they considered the mirror. This time, they both exclaimed when a shadowy form appeared across its surface.

Then a flashlight beam swept toward them, and the figure in the mirror doubled as Rachel joined Dylan in the doorway. “Guys?”

“How about a little warning next time?” Paolo snapped.

“We told you we were coming up,” Rachel retorted, holding up her radio. “Not our fault you didn’t answer.”

Both men reached for their walkies, clicking through channels of utter silence. “Dead,” Troy said.

“Batteries?”

“I charged them all before we went to dinner.”

The four of them looked at each other for a moment, then Rachel nodded. “Looks like you were right, newbie. It was Dylan’s idea to come up,” she added. “She had a feeling something was happening up here. The radio silence pretty much confirmed it.”

“Good instincts,” Troy said.

“Sorry we startled you. Though it was pretty funny,” Dylan snickered, playing her flashlight beam around the attic with interest.

Rachel rubbed the base of her skull. “Guys,” she said, “this headache’s getting vicious. Ben’s got the only EMF, but I proclaim this a hot spot. Not sure I can stay much longer.”

"Let's switch it up," Troy suggested. "You and I can head back downstairs, and Dylan and Paolo can stay up here."

Dylan's surprise turned to dismay, quickly hidden. Paolo scowled. Rachel traded her radio for his dead one, insisting that hers had worked perfectly as of five minutes ago, and Troy told Dylan to be careful. Then they disappeared into the servants' hallway and clattered down the stairs as the last glimmers of sunlight faded from the air.

There was a long moment of silence in the new dark. Whatever it was rustled in the corner again. Dylan shifted uneasily, her flashlight beam jumping into jagged life.

"So," Paolo said, trying for natural. "Do you smell flowers here?" He clicked on his own flashlight, shining it on the crib in front of them.

"Flowers?" She moved carefully closer. Her flashlight flicked up toward his face as if checking for mockery. He heard her take a deep breath. "Hmm."

"And?"

"Yeah," she said slowly. "Like a perfume my gran used to wear. Old-fashioned. Lily of the valley, maybe?"

"Maude? Is that you?" Paolo called into the dark. "We aren't here to hurt anyone. But if you'd like to talk to us, we'll listen."

Whatever was huddled in the corner rustled as if in response. When he sent his flashlight beam toward it, crazy shadows chased themselves across the mirror by the door. He paused, swept back and found the mirror again, trying to light it without a glare.

"I think it's just an animal," Dylan whispered.

"In the corner, yeah. But that mirror..." Paolo raised his voice again. "Maude? Was that your mirror? Are we in your way?" He took a step, then whispered over his shoulder at Dylan. "Did you just feel a draft?"