

The Dark Room

Julianna Hoyle

It was dark. Extremely dark. So dark Kyla didn't know if her eyes had even opened at first. But it wasn't just dark. The room, at least she assumed she was in a room, was also cold and damp and eerily quiet. Kyla's first instinct was to find a corner, curl up in a ball of fear, and wait to be rescued, with a few bouts of crying every now and then. Who knew? Maybe there were people on the other side of these walls who'd come in at any minute and take her out of the darkness. If she was in the darkness then there was a door and if there was a door then someone must've put her in the darkness and if someone put her in the darkness then there must be someone who could take her out of the darkness.

Though, if she thought about it, she wasn't too sure she wanted to meet the people who'd thrown her in this terrible, dark room. But what could she do? There was nothing to see and there was nothing to hear except her own breathing. If her senses were useless then there was nothing she could do. Then she had an idea. She could treat the room like she would a bedroom: get up, move around slowly, touching the walls as she went, until she found a light switch or a door handle or anything that could get her out of the darkness. Once out of the darkness Kyla could make her next move. So, not wanting to be in the darkness any longer than she truly needed to, Kyla began slowly dragging her feet across the floor, her arms stretched out before her, searching for a wall.

It was slow going at first. If she stubbed a toe that would only slow her progress and if she ran into something important she didn't want to quickly lose it; either would have a significant effect on her progress. But as she continued her quest for the elusive walls of her prison, she did in fact run into something. And *Something* groaned. Solely out of base, primal instinct, Kyla leaped back with a small shriek. She didn't know what it was, this amorphous lump on the floor, and she didn't know if it was dangerous or not. But as *Something* continued to groan, it also began to move, and if it was moving that meant it was waking up. After wrestling with her fears, she decided it would be more helpful to approach *Something* and slowly moved back towards it. After several slow moments her foot found *Something*, but it flinched away from her.

"What the Hell?!" It cried out in a startled, masculine voice. There went her attempt not to spook it. Well, not to spook him.

"It's okay," she cooed tentatively, slowly moving to sit on her knees.

"Who are you?" demanded *Something*. Kyla reached out, cautiously, her fingers found the arm of the man in front of her. He flinched again but didn't draw back. His skin was warm, a pleasant change from the damp and cold of their prison.

“My name is Kyla,” she said, resting her palm fully on his bicep and reaching out with the other to take his hand. “What’s your name?”

“Andrew.” He said shakily as Kyla found his hand and gently curled her fingers around his. He squeezed back. “Where are we?” His voice had grown calmer as he adjusted to the darkness, but there was an edge that would never leave.

“I’m not sure,” Kyla sighed. “Do you remember anything?”

“No. Do you?”

“Nothing,” Kyla sighed before they fell into silence. Why they were there, Kyla didn’t know. Where they were, Kyla didn’t know. Was there a way out, Kyla didn’t know. But there had to be, right? Only one way to find out.

Squeezing Andrew’s hand, Kyla stood and pulled him to his feet.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“You don’t want to sit around in the dark until we starve to death, do you?” Kyla began to let go of his hand, but Andrew’s response was to only grip harder.

“What if it’s a trap?”

“Andrew, we’re already trapped. What could possibly make this worse?”

“Hidden weapons, a hole in the floor, booby-traps--”

“I seriously doubt there are any booby-traps,” Kyla chuckled, cutting Andrew off as she squeezed his hand comfortingly. “We’ll be fine. Just go to a wall and start searching for anything strange or out of the ordinary for a stone wall.”

“Okay,” Andrew conceded as Kyla pulled her hand from his and moved past him. It wasn’t too long until her outstretched hands made contact with something cool and rough.

“I found it,” She called, her voice reverberating slightly off the walls. Shortly thereafter Andrew called out that he’d found his wall as well and they began searching, slowly running their hands up and down the walls, covering every inch they possibly could.

Some time later, Kyla couldn’t be sure how much time passed, considering there was no clock and no moon and no sun for a point of reference. Andrew had given up on the walls after bumping into Kyla for the third time and thought to check the floor. Unfortunately his search proved just as fruitless as their search of the walls. There was nothing--no doors, no windows, no light switches, no trapdoor, no alcoves, not even a single piece of furniture. It didn’t take long, probably three searches of the floor, for Andrew to give up, and after two additional searches of the walls, Kyla gave up as well. She soon found her way towards Andrew, who’d chosen a corner to lay in, and lay beside him, her side pressed to his.

Throughout their searches of the walls and during the breaks they took, Kyla and Andrew made sure to constantly talk to each other or be touching each other as a way to comfort themselves in the darkness.

“Kyla.”

“Mhmm?”

“Do you remember anything outside this room?” Andrew’s voice was quiet, thoughtful, and even a little scared.

“Yes, but sometimes I’m not sure if they’re memories or ideas of what should be.” Andrew hummed in agreement and recognition as he laced his fingers through hers. “Do you remember anything?”

“I think so. There’s one memory that I can’t stop thinking about.”

“Tell me.” Andrew was silent for a long moment and all Kyla had to confirm that he was alive was the warmth of his hand and the sounds of his breathing. Kyla rubbed her thumb in slow circles across the back of his hand as she waited for him to speak. Finally, he did.

“I think I remember the sun. The light, the warmth---”

“The annoyance of it in your eyes,” Andrew chuckled.

“I remember that too,” Kyla grinned. “I also remember faces in a field. Or maybe a meadow.”

“Do you remember who they are?”

“No names, but I think they’re my family.”

“What are they doing?”

“Just sitting. Sitting and smiling. Smiling and laughing. Laughing and watching the little ones play.” There was a pleasant note to his voice as he spoke.

“Kids?”

“Yeah,” Kyla could almost see it all. The light of the sun, the shine off the grass, the smiles of the family. She hoped it was real. “They’re just playing in the sun and the grass. They’re chasing and hiding and wrestling and dancing. They’re enjoying their lives.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Sounds better than here.” The whimsy was gone from Andrew’s voice, replaced by bitterness and despair. “We’re stuck, aren’t we?” It was a question but it sounded more like a statement.

“Maybe.” Kyla squeezed his hand. “But maybe we missed something.”

“You’re too hopeful for your own good.” sighed Andrew. “I don’t think we’re getting out of here, Kyla.”

She frowned deeply. It was entirely plausible that they would die in that room, the thought had definitely crossed Kyla’s mind dozens of times since she’d first woke up, but she just couldn’t accept that there was no way out. If they’d gotten in then that meant there was a way out.

But what could they do?

They’d checked every last inch of the floor many times over, they’d checked all four walls six ways from Sunday, they’d even checked each other for something out of place. There was nothing left that hadn’t been thoroughly investigated except the ceiling, but that was out of the question unless one of them could spontaneously grow to twice their normal height. And Kyla was pretty sure she

couldn't grow to the size of two people.

Two people.

"Andrew!" Kyla shot up and spun to face Andrew, startling him in the process.

"What?!"

"I need to get on your shoulders!"

"What?"

"Put me on your shoulders!" She demanded.

"Why?"

"The only place we haven't checked in this whole room is the ceiling because neither of us can reach it! If you put me on your shoulders, I should be able to reach!" Kyla was so excited she was trembling.

"Kyla, there's no way we can spend hours with you on my shoulders searching the ceiling," Andrew said, trying to reason with her.

"We can take breaks."

"Kyla..."

"Well, do you wanna get on my shoulders?" She snapped. Andrew sighed, sitting in the darkness a few moments more before finally sitting up.

"Fine."

After successfully climbing onto Andrew's shoulders, the pair began their search, starting from their corner and progressing slowly due to Andrew's fear of losing balance and dropping Kyla. She appreciated the sentiment, but it proved to be extremely annoying. After a few hours of a methodical and every shrinking search Kyla began to lose hope. The ceiling was always the same cold, damp, rough stone as the floor and walls, and all the imperfections she found were deadends, natural false hopes that teased her optimism and hope. Her fingers, too, were crying out for her to give up as they began to bleed from the rough stone. Then suddenly, her fingers soon found relief as they touched wood, heavenly, smooth, clean wood that was free of the dimples and divets and depressions of the stone she'd become accustomed to. Wood was so much nicer than stone.

Wood?

"Andrew!" Kyla cried out, tears springing to her eyes as Andrew stumbled. Kyla had caught him off guard but he was able to regain his footing before either of them fell.

"What? What is it?" He called up anxiously.

"Wood! I found wood!" Andrew gave several loud, excited whoops of joy as a grin spread across Kyla's cheeks, breaking the path her tears travelled. Kyla had to quickly shove down her feelings as her fingers diligently began to search the wooden panel. When she couldn't find a latch or handle, or any other sign of a door, she decided to force it. Kyla warned Andrew of her plan and braced herself, placing her forearms on the panel. Slowly she counted from three before shoving against the wood with all her strength. The give was slight, but for Kyla it was everything. It meant they could get out of the darkness, out of their prison. With

her joy and hope replenished, the small victory fueled her strength and she braced against the wood again, pushing with all her might. In one swift moment the panel gave out and flooded their dark prison with streams of intense white light. Kyla cried out as the light blinded her and tried to get out of the way of the falling panel, but this only served to throw Andrew severely off balance.

Andrew's worry was justified.

Kyla fell backwards from Andrew's shoulders and plummeted towards the rough, gray stone of the floor. Gray. She could see color now that there was light.

But that was her only thought before her body collided with the floor. Luckily she'd had enough sense to throw up her arms around her head, but the rest of her body hadn't been so lucky. Instantly every nerve was on fire and every joint roared out in protest as her vision blurred with the burst of colors that exploded across her eyelids. She broke out into horrible screams of agony, rolling across the floor in pain. Immediately Andrew was at Kyla's side, profusely apologizing as he looked over her body for injuries, but she really couldn't make out any of his words through the intense pain that flooded her senses.

Then she passed out.

When she opened her eyes again, Kyla couldn't see much except for a vague outline a few feet from her and a pale stream of light shining onto her face. It was odd being able to make out shapes after being in the dark for so long but there it was, an outline. Kyla attempted to lift herself from the ground but instantly cried out as every nerve in her body screamed in protest. The outline, startled by her voice breaking the perfect silence, turned and rushed to her side. Looking up at the concerned figure, Kyla assumed he was Andrew, something that was proven true when he spoke.

"It's okay. You're okay," he hummed, easing her head back down onto his jacket. Once the stars vanished from her vision she could make out Andrew's appearance. His skin was dark and matched his wide eyes. He had strong shoulders and a tall frame, as well as a wide face that was complemented by his long, curly hair. His face was kind, just as she'd expected. She smiled.

"I can see you," she croaked. Andrew smiled, moving some hair from her face.

"Nice, isn't it? Seeing another person."

"Means you're not a figment of my imagination."

"Glad to see that fall didn't rob you of your sense of humor," Andrew chuckled.

"I know how much that would've broken your heart." Kyla joked. Then she noticed the smile on Andrew's face become small before quickly fading all together.

"I'm so sorry, Kyla." There was pain and guilt in Andrew's eyes as he stared down at her.

"It's not your fault, Andrew. I'm the one who threw you off balance." Kyla

squeezed his hand reassuringly.

“It is my fault. I...I thought I killed you.”

Kyla’s eyes widened as she stared at him. They were both silent for a while but then Kyla sat up, ignoring the pain that flared behind her eyes, and hugged Andrew. He seemed taken aback at first but soon held her, pressing his face into her shoulder. He wasn’t crying, but she could feel the worry and guilt radiating off of him.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she whispered in his ear. “Just give me a few massages and we’ll be square.”

“I can’t tell if that ruined the moment or not.” Andrew laughed as he pulled away to look Kyla in the face. Kyla grinned at him before they both decided to lie back down. Kyla looked to the hole, squinting until her eyes adjusted. Once they did she could make out the moon, a few silhouetted trees, and what she assumed to be clouds floating across the night sky. But the silver glow from the moon was what really made the scene for Kyla.

“It’s so beautiful,” she whispered.

“The moon?” Andrew asked, holding her hand.

“Well yeah, but I was mostly talking about the light.”

“Yeah. I think I like it more than the sunlight.”

“I can’t wait to see it. And all the colors too.”

“They are pretty amazing.”

A smile reached Kyla’s mouth as she thought about the family Andrew had described earlier, bathed in the warmth and light of the sun. She couldn’t wait to experience it herself. More than that, she couldn’t wait to be out of this stony prison.

“Do you think we can get out?” She asked.

“We have a door now.”

“We should go.”

“We will.”

“We should go now.”

“We aren’t doing anything yet.” Andrew said, sitting up in order to look her in the face. “You fell five or so feet from my shoulders and dislocated your shoulder. You have to rest.” His comment earned him groans and glares and grumbles.

“We can’t afford to wait, Andrew.” She retorted. “If we wait any longer we could starve.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that you’re hurt and weak.” He argued.

“And that doesn’t change the fact that very soon we are going to die. And dying isn’t an option.”

Andrew sighed and held his face in his hands. After a long minute he ran them up his face and into his hair before looking back to Kyla.

“Fine.” He pointed his index finger at her. “But we’ll wait for the sun to rise.”

And they did.

When the sun showed it was about mid-morning, Kyla carefully climbed onto Andrew's shoulders, although it proved far more difficult after her fall. Eventually she managed to mount his shoulders and they approached the hole. The light of the sun was intense and forced Kyla to squint as she stared up through the ceiling, but she managed to get a grip on the sides of the hole. Due to her injuries Kyla wasn't strong enough to lift herself out of the room so Andrew put his hands under her thighs and pushed her up. With his help her head popped through the ceiling and she got enough leverage to use her arms and push herself the rest of the way. The moment her body hit the warm stone around the hole she started to giggle, then she started to laugh, then she started to cry. She was out! She was finally out of that dark, damp, suffocating room!

But Andrew wasn't.

Kyla sat up and took in her surroundings, searching for anything that could help her pull Andrew out of the room. As she looked around she saw trees and grass, a pale blue sky with a bright sun, rough rock formations, everything that would suggest she was outside. But her gut instinct, the one that had told her there was a way out, the one that had told her Andrew was good and trustworthy, the one that hadn't been wrong yet, told her she was still inside. Maybe she was out of the darkness but they were far from being out of their prison.

Kyla soon found a large branch and took it in both hands before heading back to the hole. Sitting at the edge, her legs curled beneath her, she lowered the branch and waited for Andrew to grab it.

"Can you reach it?" She called.

"Almost! Lower it some more!" Andrew called back. Kyla did as she was told by moving to lie on her stomach. Thankfully it was just enough for Andrew to grab hold. "I got it!"

"Okay! Jump on three!" She hollered. "One...two..."

"Three!" Andrew launched himself off the ground as Kyla pulled. For a moment it was easy, as if Andrew weighed no more than a feather, then Andrew's full weight pulled on the stick. Kyla cried out as the pain in her shoulder intensified, burning its way from her arm into her brain. Every thought that crossed her mind demanded that she let go, free herself from this torture, but somehow her hands held fast to the branch and she pulled Andrew towards her, pushing her legs up and under her to try and gain leverage.

What was probably a few minutes felt like an eternity as Kyla struggled to pull Andrew out of their dark prison. When his hands finally found purchase on the outsides of the opening he released the branch to rely on his own strength. His release had sent Kyla flying backwards but she gratefully sprawled on her back, huffing and puffing from the exertion as Andrew finally pulled himself out of the hole to lay on his belly. As he lay there, relaxing in the warmth of the sun, his heavy breaths mixed with Kyla's and they stayed like that, lying in the false sun,

drinking in the light they'd been deprived of for so long. There were no words that passed for several long minutes, but when Andrew pushed himself to his hands and knees he looked at Kyla, the look of relief and joy shining out from his eyes like the sunlight they sat in as he smiled at her. It broke her heart.

“We’re free!”

Maybe there was light in this false field, but they weren’t out of the darkness yet.

They weren’t free.