

PANIC ROOM



by
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The room was large and cool. I sat in the very centre of the space, in the very centre of one of the large white floor tiles. I knew that I was in the centre because I had checked repeatedly. Had to be absolutely sure, so I actually paced out the room, which was, as I have mentioned, sizeable. But the effort of measuring the chorus room of my high school was well worth the effort when the alternative was considered.

"Stupid tables," I muttered bitterly into my knees. Why did this have to happen today? I guessed I had it coming. Everything had been too easy the past month or so, and this particular problem had not reared its ugly head in... oh God, and now I had to count it out... exactly two months, fourteen days, and—I dared to look up just long enough to snatch a glance at the wall clock, which was by some blessing of the interior design spirits directly in front of me—approximately nine hours.

I let out a sharp breath. I felt a little better for having given in to the compulsion, but it had gotten me started on a 'counting run', as I called it, which sucked royally. I tapped my pinkies against the floor. "One," then the ring fingers, "two," the middle fingers, "three," the pointers, "four," and the thumbs, "five." Another sharp exhalation followed, and then I went through the whole thing again. "One, two, three, four, five," breathe. Over and over, faster and faster. Fifty-three times exactly. I counted.

The whole stupid episode started because Mr. Garner insisted on having a rehearsal for the school drama during the February break, when the school was technically closed. He had managed to kiss enough asses in the main office to get the principal to agree to unlock one of the main doors, the auditorium, and the bathrooms for the day. When the cast of the show arrived, Mr. Garner unlocked the door to his science classroom as well and asked for us to wait in there while he went to the print shop to pick up the ad posters we had ordered.

"The sets are drying on the stage," he had said. "So I don't want anybody in there without my supervision," he smiled affectionately. "I'll be back in half an hour. Run your lines while I'm gone. We need as much practise as we can get. And if I see anything wrong with those sets when I get back, I will personally kick all of your butts." He laughed, and we laughed along with him. Mr. Garner was one of those 'cool' teachers, and we were all really glad that he was leading the drama class. However, we also knew that he was a black belt in some form of karate, so any threats of butt-kicking were registered on a subconscious level because, well, he really *could* kick our butts.

So we sat. We ran our lines. I tried my very hardest not to succumb to the expanding bubble of panic that had implanted itself in my mind.

The classroom desks in Mr. Garner's room were long and low. Just low enough that their undersides pressed ever so lightly into the tops of my legs. It only took a few minutes for my claustrophobia to kick in. I whimpered, shivering under my school uniform, then begged for this not to happen, at least

not until I was home and could just curl up under my blankets and cry. But it didn't stop. The bottom of the table sank lower and lower, pressing deeper into my flesh. It broke my skin, ripped my blood vessels, broke through my bones, and came to rest on the seat of my chair. I looked down and was almost surprised to see that my knees were still attached to the rest of me.

Despite this pleasant discovery, I was already hyperventilating and shaking. A voice in my head was issuing commands, compiling lists of compulsions I would have to fulfil if I ever wanted this terror to go away. I had to get out of here fast.

While everyone else was busy joking around, I got up and dashed out of the room, not even pausing to tell somebody that I was leaving. There was still enough sanity left in my mind for me to think about where I should go. I posed the question, and whatever part of me was still functioning screamed back at me, *Chorus room!* I ran as fast as I could down the stairs, into the auditorium, and through a door to the adjoining chorus room.

That's basically how I wound up sitting on my butt in the middle of a vast and empty room with my legs pulled tightly up to my body, my eyes closed, my face buried in my knees, and my palms pressed to the floor with my fingers spread so far apart from each other that it hurt. I whipped my long black hair into as tight of a ponytail as I could manage and squeezed my eyes shut in an effort to stop tears, or at least avoid feeling them roll down my cheeks. At times like this, tears were almost as bad as being touched.

I was hyperventilating so badly that I was dizzy, even sitting down. I started to sob quietly as the terror in my brain grew and grew, eventually taking over me entirely.

'Get outside and count all the bricks. All the bricks in the wall,' said the voice in my head. But I couldn't go outside. I knew that once I left, I might be ordered to do any number of things, and if I gave in to one compulsion, I would have to give in to all that followed.

During an earlier panic attack, I had wound up running, on the command of the voice in my head, twelve blocks and then nearly sprinted into the busy highway traffic. I had been too scared to go home, and my mother finally had to send out the police to find me. When they got to me, I was banging my fists against a lamppost so hard that my knuckles were bleeding. They were actually scared of me—almost as scared as I was of getting into the police car. I could just imagine the seat belt shattering my ribs. When they asked me why I was hurting myself like that, I told them the truth: it was the only alternative to standing barefoot in the middle of the busy road and screaming at the top of my lungs.

That freaked them out sufficiently that they decided that all five-foot-two of me needed to be handcuffed, *"To protect you from doing further damage to yourself or others."* I had protested, trying to explain myself as best as a fourteen-year-old suffering a panic attack could, but it was useless. They thought I was psychotic or high on drugs. So they cuffed me, put me in the backseat of the police car, strapped me in, and set off towards home. After no more than a minute, I passed out and had to be taken to the hospital.

After that whole fiasco, my Mom had set down three rules for me. First, I was to have my cell phone on me at all times in case I needed to call somebody for help. Second, I was never to go outside during an attack again unless I brought someone with me. Third, I was going to start seeing a psychologist as soon as she could arrange it.

'*Count the bricks.*' Damn that voice. Damn her. She had long ago identified herself as Astrid. My psychologist had told me over and over again not to acknowledge her and that giving her a name only gave my compulsions more power. He did not understand. I didn't name the voice; she told me that was her name, just as she told me what to do. Of course, I didn't name her. I thought Astrid was an unforgivably dumb name. If I had any choice in the matter of the name of my really nasty and demanding sub-consciousness, I would have named her something cool. But I had no say, and at times like these, the terror-fed voice of my compulsions could become stronger than my logical mind, and it was nearly impossible to ignore what she said.

I screamed silently, pressing my face harder into my knees. "Shut up, girl. Shut *up* Astrid!" The only way to fully appease the stupid voice would be to do as she said, but I knew I couldn't leave. In an attempt to make up for it, I started on another counting run. I planned on keeping it up until I couldn't feel my fingers anymore. I just wanted the voice to stop.

My Mom could help me through it. She always could when I freaked out like this. But calling her to come and take me home was out of the question since she and Dad were out of town, visiting my grandparents. I would have to fight through this one on my own. I didn't know of anyone else who could help me. My fingers were already cramping, but I couldn't stop. The tapping and counting were the only things keeping me sane, although any observer would have said otherwise. There seemed to be only one route left now, and although it was completely foreign to me and an illogical one, it was clear even to me that logic was not my forte at the moment.

I was increasingly desperate. I resorted to prayer.

"Please. Please, God," I whimpered into my tear-stained knees. "Please. Send somebody to save me."



Sixty-four minutes. That's how long it took me to lose all feeling in my hands. I simply could not move them anymore. For the moment, I could feel the panic subside by the most infinitesimal margin due to my submission to Astrid's commands, but I knew that it would be back, full force, and soon.

Nine minutes. That's how long it took for the mere storm surge to turn back into a full-fledged tsunami and swamp my brain again. I regained some feeling in my hands. They hurt.

Four minutes. That's how long the silence lasted before I heard a small creak. The door behind me was opening. Three small footsteps, trying to be quiet. It was useless. In panic, the senses of any animal become heightened. Nobody could have sneaked past me.

"Lynelle?" A voice asked quietly. "Lynelle, is that you?"

Me. That's me. Lynelle Davis. But the book character that I was named after was nothing like me, and I hated her just as much as I hated my name.

The intruder took a few more steps. The air from the auditorium had reached me through the open door. The variation in smell and temperature made me want to cry. But the door closed quickly, and the footsteps rushed closer, coming to stand somewhere near me on the left side.

"Ninny, what's wrong? What happened?"

Ah. So it was Rachel. The nickname she called me by made it perfectly clear, but I sneaked a rapid sideways glance to make sure. Just a brief flash of light hitting my eyes, almost like a lightning bolt, revealed that I was correct and left a burning afterimage of the familiar girl once my eyes shut and the perfectly symmetrical darkness returned.

Rachel and I had known each other since elementary school. Even though she was a year older than I was, we were both in the gifted program, which was a set of special classes for all the kids in all the grades involved. We went everywhere together—trips to museums, the local pool, movies—and, as much as I wanted to deny it, I knew I had some level of girl-crush on her since I met her when she was in second grade. Even at age seven, she was beautiful.

Now, she was in ninth grade, and I was in eighth. We had grown close over the years by attending the school drama classes as well as being on the school's Quiz Wiz team. That's where the nickname came from. She had beaten me in a one-on-one nerd competition, declared me a ninny, and, well, it kind of just stuck with her calling me. She had grown to be extremely intelligent, funny, and talented in every area imaginable. Plus, she was irrationally gorgeous.

Rachel sat down beside me. "Ninny, are you alright?" Something touched my shoulder. Her hand. No. God, *no!*

Completely apart from my will, I let out a shriek and jumped away from her touch, almost leaping across the floor to distance myself from her as far as I could. I rubbed hard at my shoulder, trying to erase the memory of her hand's presence there. Even after I had escaped the touch, I could feel the pressure of her hand forcing its way deeper and deeper into my skin. I pulled myself back to my former seat and curled up again. Somehow, I managed to meet her eyes. She looked confused, concerned, and even a little bit hurt.

"I'm sorry, Rachel," I said quietly. "It's not personal or anything. I'm having a claustrophobic panic attack, and I can't be..." It was strangely difficult to put my sentiment into words without it sounding dirty. "You can't... You just can't touch me right now."

She nodded in understanding assent. Having managed to keep my head turned for as long as I did, I finally allowed it to press back into my knees, restoring some of the comforting darkness.

After a moment, I realised that Rachel was still sitting beside me. In the same way that people can feel when someone is staring at them from behind, I could feel her presence beside me. Strangely, it didn't bother me to have her there. We sat in silence for, I don't even know how long, before she spoke again.

"I could leave if you want me to," she said. I could feel her shifting beside me, standing up.

"No. No, please," I said quickly. "Stay with me." She sat back down. I looked at her across my knees once more. "It's just that... now I'm used to you being here. If you left, it would just mess me up more." I gave a small, almost bitter laugh. "You're stuck with me now, girl." We both smiled, and I closed my eyes again, feeling better already.

Silence claimed the room once more. We simply sat on the dingy white floor, neither of us moving even an inch. An amiable silence engulfed us in its arms. Ever so slowly, for that is how it always happens, I felt myself calming down. I knew it would take me a while, but I could feel my mind returning to its calmer state.

Of course, the universe couldn't just sit back and let that happen.

The door slammed open. "Rachel? Rachel, are you in here?"

Oh, I hope you die a terrible death for this, Garner, I thought as I let out a terrified squeak.

"Damn," Rachel muttered. "Look, Lynn, I'm going to go away for just a second, but I'll be right back." She dashed off. The space she had occupied, now cold and vacant, pressed like a tonne of bricks onto my left side. I could hear the conversation going on at the door.

"What's going on, Rachel?"

"Mr. Garner, it's serious."

"When I asked you to go find her, I meant for you to bring her back to rehearsal! What is going on here?"

The hot, paint-and-dust-scented air hit me like whiplash. I let out a groan and rolled forward onto my knees, pressing my forehead to the cool floor.

"I know, I know, but... look at her, Mr. Garner. Something's really wrong. She has to stay here until she's better, and so do I."

A thoughtful pause. "Okay, fine. But both of you come back as soon as you can."

The door closed again, and Rachel rushed back to my side.

"Come on, Lynn, sit back up. Get your head off the floor. Lynelle!" Although her voice was sharp, the way she said my name was like music to my ears. I sat back up, still curled into a ball, my hands pressed to the floor again. I was back to square one.

"Good, Lynn, good. You scared me," Rachel said in calming tones. "Now you just sit there, and I'll stay right here, and we'll just wait until you feel better. Okay?"

I nodded weakly, trying to control my breathing and my tears that just wouldn't stop falling. I sat very still, hoping against all hope that nobody would come in again. That nobody would give any cause for Rachel's warmth to be removed from my side again.



We sat on that floor for ten minutes in tranquil silence. It was also exactly what I needed at that point. My attack was progressing through its usual phases, and, right then, nothing could have been better for me than simple calm and complete stillness. There were no distractions; the door did not open again. The only sound other than the soul-destroying cacophony in my head was the steady rhythm of Rachel's breathing. The evenness and dependability of it were very relaxing. I tried to harmonise my breathing with hers. It helped a little and made me wonder about its healing power.

After a time—a shorter time than usual—the voices quieted ever so slightly. I could now feel my heart slowing down, and the dizziness began to fade as my breathing started its slow descent to a more bearable rate. Taking advantage of a moment of calm, I yanked the elastic out of my hair and wrapped my arms around my legs. Rachel saw this and figured out that I was feeling better, if only a little. She moved. I could feel her hand hovering over my shoulder.

"Can I?" she asked. I nodded and felt her hand gently stroke my shoulder. I flinched. "Shh, it's okay," she said quietly, as though to a sick child.

She started to brush her fingers across my shoulders. It seemed as if she knew my back was hurting terribly, though I didn't know how. Her fingertips, knuckles, and the warm flat of her palm pressed softly from my shoulders almost to the base of my spine.

Somewhere inside my head, a rational voice was saying, *Why is she doing this?* I did not, as a rule, let people touch me. It made me feel uncomfortable. On a bad day, a simple tap on the arm could push me over the edge into an attack. So why on earth was I letting this girl put her hand on my aching shoulder? Rachel, of all people! Could she know about my feelings for her? Was I giving out hints all along without even knowing? Any other day I would have grinned like a moron and melted into a puddle for nothing more than a touch of her hand, and even now, I craved it more than I allowed myself to admit.

I must have been more messed up than I had thought.

But I didn't stop her. Quite simply, it felt nice and calming. My back and my whole body were incredibly sore from the tension, not to mention the long time spent curled up in the foetal position, and the heat that radiated from Rachel's hand started to loosen the strain in my tired muscles.

Her quiet voice came again. "Nothing's gonna harm you, Lynn. Not while I'm around."

It was a really strange thing to say, but the words were comforting. Rachel's voice was having the same effect on me that my parents' voices had all those years ago when they used to calm me at night.

I could not tell which of us had moved first, but after I gradually came to my senses, I found us sitting right next to each other, my side pressed to hers, eyes half closed, and my head resting on her shoulder. Her arm was around me, her hand absently stroking my right arm. Even more amazing than that was that my legs were stretched out in front of me and I was feeling about a thousand times better. I sat there, gradually waking up from the nightmare while drinking in Rachel's warmth like some miraculous elixir.

"You know," I said quietly. "You have a really nice voice."

"You're exaggerating," she replied incredulously, still stroking my arm.

"But you do," I reassured her. She had a gorgeous voice. She had a voice that was like... It was like the voice of an angel echoing down from heaven to the ears of the chosen people. One of those baby-faced angels—soft, warm, beautiful, and with that glowing aura of light around them all the time. But I wasn't going to say that. I just couldn't say something like that to her.

Instead, my cowardice decided on a less courageous way of expressing itself. "It's really beautiful. I like the way it sounds, I like listening to you when you talk. It's really... I dunno, really a sweet voice, and I'm glad you use it in the musicals and the choir and all that because... and it made me feel a lot better when you spoke just now because, incidentally, I really like... I mean... the sound of your voice was..."

What on earth was I talking about? I sat bolt upright. Ugh... I should've said the thing about the angel and the cloud! At least that was poetic!

I turned to Rachel. "Um, so—sorry." Now I was going to have to explain myself. "See, when I get an attack, I go through these phases, right? And, um, at one point I always end up fixating on one thing and just talking about it incessantly to distract myself from the fact that I'm still kind of panicking so —"

"Lynelle," she interjected. "It's okay! I don't mind. I understand that you don't feel well right now, and... just do what you need to do to feel better, it's all right. Besides, I appreciate the compliment." She grinned. "Really, I do."

I caught sight of her radiant smile and started to laugh at the same time she did.

"Come on," Rachel said. She stood up, holding her hands out to me. "We should get back."

I remained seated, staring anxiously, suspiciously at her hands. I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"Lynn?" she called, meeting my eyes. "It's okay, you can do it. I won't hurt you."

Spurred by her words, which would have melted my heart in any other situation, I decided that taking her hands would not lead immediately to my death.

Before I got the chance to change my mind, I reached up. Her welcoming arms helped me to my feet, and I groaned slightly as my sore muscles were forced into motion. We stood for a moment, smiling at my small victory, my hands held softly in hers, before I flung myself onto her. I wrapped my arms

around her and pressed my face into her shoulder. I could feel her jump slightly in surprise, but then she obligingly wound her arms around my back.

I cried a few tears for the fear that was still in me. I knew I owed her an apology or at least an explanation, but I couldn't bring myself to speak. Another phase had come over me, right on schedule, and I needed someone's arms—her arms—around me to keep me from shattering into a million tiny fragments and being ripped off the face of the earth. She held me tightly as I shook, soft words melting in my ear, "Lynn, Lynn, it's okay, I'm here."

The tears stopped as quickly as they had come, but I could not let her go yet. I could hear the pulse in her neck right next to my ear—steady and unwavering. I tried to focus on it. I could smell her through the fabric of her shirt. A warm combination of skin, soap, and sunshine. It was as comforting as it was surprisingly satisfying.

But I was holding her too tightly. I knew I must have been hurting her; I could almost feel her bones shifting under the pressure of my arms. I managed a quiet "sorry", but as I attempted to let her go, Rachel simply tightened her own arms around me and told me that it was all right.

When I finally pulled myself away from her, I tried to be as bright and happy as I could, thinking that perhaps I could trick myself into actually feeling bright and happy.

"So," I said. "How do I look?"

Rachel, smiling at my feigned exuberance, eyed me in a jokingly critical way. "You look..." she thought for a moment, trying to come up with something funny to say but finding nothing. Her face fell; she seemed sad. "Exhausted," she finally concluded.

"Oh," was my brilliant reply. "Well. That's probably because I am really exhausted." I rubbed my face and jumped up and down a little, trying to get my blood flowing. "Any better?"

Rachel laughed a little, as if giving herself courage for the words she was about to say. "Come closer," she sought my eyes. "Let me—" She reached out and tugged at the collar of my shirt, straightening the rumpled material. Then her hand moved up, pushing at a lock of hair that had fallen across my face. "There. Pretty as always, Lynn." Her fingers ran through my hair, but her hand paused on my jaw line, just below my ear. She touched my neck, her thumb resting on my cheek. Her face lost all its humour and became serious again.

I was very confused. "Rachel?" I asked quietly.

She did not respond. She just took a step closer to me. I couldn't really process what was going on. There was a look in her eyes that I had never seen before.

Then, all of a sudden, she leaned down towards me. I closed my eyes out of pure instinct. *This was not happening.* She was... she was kissing me. I still couldn't allow myself to believe what was going on. Her mouth was pressed ever so gently against mine. I did not respond immediately, out of shock, but I couldn't hold for long. Nothing could hold me back from Rachel now.

I kissed her back.

Oh... Oh, man. It was... I could hardly have even described the feeling. I felt it throughout my whole body. Her kiss seemed to fill my head with a beautiful blue light that shone before my eyes like the sky at dawn. The warm sunlight coursed through my body, eradicating the cancerous remains of panic and leaving behind nothing but the sweet uncertainty of Rachel's kiss. Her lips were soft on mine, and her left hand drifted forward and came to rest lightly on my waist. The touch gave me goose bumps.

After a thousand years that lasted no more than a second, she pulled away from me. All that I could think was... *no*... It felt too right to be kissing her, and I was not going to just let it be over in a flash. I took a step forward, placed my hands on her shoulders, and drew her back to me.

I kissed her, and I could feel her smile under my lips. My knees turned to jelly, but by that time, Rachel had wrapped her arms around me and held me tight. My fingertips brushed the perfect skin on the back of her neck as our kiss deepened, and her lips erased all the pain and fear of the past hours.

Finally, we broke apart. We stood gazing at each other, my eyes lost in her soft, dark, liquid-brown ones. But suddenly the softness left them, and she dropped my hands as though they had stung her.

"Oh, God, Lynn..." she covered her mouth. "I—I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I didn't mean to..."

There was a distinctly audible beating of my heart in the silence that followed.

"But I did, Rachel," I said quietly after a highly uncomfortable pause. And it was stupid; I knew it then. I was stupid for believing in fairy tales like a small, lonely child.

I'm a moron.

"What?" Rachel said, sounding distinctly as though she really did not want to know.

Well, I was a moron, but there was no going back now. "There's nothing wrong, Rachel. *I* wanted it." My eyes flicked to her, searching for some sign of hope, I guess, but I was too embarrassed to look at her.

"Lynn..." she whispered, somewhat sad, somewhat regretful. She hugged me, but in a sisterly way now. "I'm really sorry, Lynn. But... we can't. It just can't happen. I mean, I have a boyfriend..." she trailed off.

Oh, right. Her boyfriend. James. Stupid, rather ugly, James. James, the boy who nobody in the school could figure out why Rachel was dating. James, the person who was at that moment taking the top spot on my "People I Want to Kill" list.

I did not hug her back, and soon she let me go. "All right," she said. "What we should do is just... just pretend this never happened, right, Lynn? Just keep things the way they were. You and I should stay friends and nothing else, okay, Lynn? Because anything else would be the end of us."

I nodded sadly, avoiding her eyes and knowing that I had no other options if I wanted to keep Rachel in my life at all.

"Okay, Rachel. I'm sorry..."

Okay, then," she said. On the surface, it was all settled—our feelings buried, our love murdered. But I had known her for too long for it to get past me—the way her voice caught ever so slightly in her throat. There was a part of her, I knew, that did not want to just gloss it over, to pretend that we had never... that we didn't want... that what had happened between us had not happened.

There was another awkward pause. I was getting tired of them. "So..." she began. "How do you feel now?"

I looked at her in disbelief and a way that conveyed the utter idiocy of her question.

"Oh. Right. I mean, are you okay to go back to rehearsal? We've been gone a long time."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good to go," I lied, wishing for nothing more than to die on the spot. So much for believing in miracles. Even more than before, I wanted to get under my covers and cry.

Rachel led the way to the door to the auditorium, opened it, and walked through. When she turned around, she saw me standing there, staring at the door frame. For some reason, I was scared to walk through the door, even though the attack was over. She held the door open for me, and when I did not walk through, she offered me a hand. The helping hand of a friend.

"Come on, Lynelle," she said gently. "It's going to be all right."

I took her hand and passed through the auditorium door. I fought hard as tears threatened to spill down my cheeks all over again. But I was stronger than to let that happen to me. It's going to be all right, I echoed Rachel's words. It's going to be all right... because she's still here. Because I was holding her hand. Because what happened could never be erased.

But most of all, it's going to be all right because I still love her.

The End