

One Hand in the Darkness

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I could hear their crying, hear their moaning in the dark.

The light pouring down from overhead cast a gleaming, glowing circle all around me as I strained to peer passed the light and into the darkness. The light held me in a lover's embrace, soft and secure.

I could see her though. I could see all of them. Just barely. The darkness was so complete only the light over my head cast any shadows on their faces. They stumbled. Some crawled. Some just sat in a heap and cried. Their clothes were torn fragments hanging from their shoulders. Tears had carved deep lines down their faces.

I could see her too, her eyes abath with tears. Like so many of the others, she'd been crying her whole life.

"Terrie," I beckoned.

On bare feet she stumbled through the darkness, unhearing.

"Terrie," I called again.

Her head tilted ever so slightly, the flow of tears pausing.

"Mia?" she whispered, uncertainly.

"Yes," I sighed. "Come to me."

"Where are you? I can't see you."

"I'm here. Listen to my voice. Follow it. Come into the light."

She stepped toward me.

"That's it," I said. "Come on."

Her steps quickened to my voice.

"Yes!" I laughed. "Come on."

I reached one hand outside the protective circle of light and into the engulfing darkness.

The icy grip of the dark tasted me and tugged gently at my hand.

"Come on, Terrie," I urged, planting my feet firmly in the circle of light.

Her footfalls were coming faster, more confident.

I stretched to reach her, the blackness creeping up my arm.

She was almost to me.

A shadow loomed behind her. It lay a black restraining hand on her shoulder. "Where are you going, Terrie?" it whispered, its voice imitating comfort and security.

Terrie hesitated. "The light. I--I can't see."

"Oh, my poor darling," it cooed, gently stroking her hair with its dirty claws. "Would you leave me? Would you leave all of us here alone?"

Like whirlwind, a stream of voices echoed through the cavernous space—Terrie's mother, her father, a childhood friend, a teacher, a girl friend, a lover—all of them calling Terrie's name. The girl's face contorted in confusion, "Mia...?"

"Don't listen to him, Terrie!" I said. "Move! Run! Run toward me!"

Terrie tore loose from the shadow, her tears falling again. But her feet had done little more than shuffle for some years and she stumbled, falling full to the black floor.

"Mia!"

"I'm here!" I arched to reach her, my elbow sinking fully into the dark.

The shadow moved behind Terrie with liquid fluidity. It danced around her, slithering under her arms and about her throat, careening my guiding voice in every direction.

"Mia...?" she cried, and I could see as she began to rock and sway that she was losing.

"No!" I cried. "Don't you dare give up! Get up, Terrie! Get up right now! Move!"

Blinded more by her tears now than the darkness, Terrie pushed to her feet, squirming away from the writing shadow.

"Come on!" I said.

"Stay, Terrie..." the voice sighed behind her, its liquid arms cradling her close.

"Don't listen to him! He's lying to you! He's kept you in the dark because he *hates* you! He wants to keep you here forever!"

"NO!" Terrie screamed, her own convictions thrusting her from the shadowy dance. "MIA!!!"

"HERE!"

She ran at me.

"Take my hand!" I cried.

The shadow moved insidiously behind her again. Terrie felt it. She fumbled in the dark, "Where?!"

I was now up to my shoulder in icy blackness. "It's right in front of you!"

She took another step toward me as a shadowy claw slid around her ankle.

Her fingers grazed mine. I grabbed her hand and yanked--

But so did the hand at her ankle.

Terrie screamed.

The shadow laughed, locked its grip, and pulled.

I took one involuntary step into the darkness feeling it fix on me with a ravenous hunger.

I strained for the light. "Give me your other hand!"

Terrie swung her other hand toward me and our wrists locked.

She now hung like a live rope between the light and the dark, kicking and flaying against the clawed grip.

I didn't see the other hand slither across the floor toward me.

"Now," the darkness chuckled throatily as it closed around my ankle, "you're both mine!"

"NO!!" Terrie and I screamed simultaneously, yanking with all our hearts.

Terrie flew at me, both of us tumbling out of the darkness and falling in a heap in the light.

Behind us, we heard a blistering scream and looked back to see two black hands--clawed fingers writhing--disappear back into the darkness, their scaly arms scalded by the light.

We stared after it.

Our breathing ravaged the air.

Slowly, Terrie turned and looked at me.

New tears began to fall, different tears.

I laughed as she flew into my arms, crying.