

The light in the center of my darkness

# The light in the center of my darkness

By : FyresydeHerbalyst

Mara is a single mother of two children who moved to GA two years ago to restart her life. Along the way she meets a few people and gets even closer to her best friend. Life threw her a curve ball and now she struggles to keep her secret from those who would restrain her independence.



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# The light in the center of my darkness : Chapter 1

Light in the center of my darkness

My name is Mara and my life is great I guess you could say. Well to someone else it wouldn't be I mean let's face it I am a twenty five year old single mother of two children, living in Georgia on my own and holding down a job. I seem pretty normal right, well let's add in the twist. I am blind. Not legally blind where I can still see outlines, I mean totally world gone black, armageddon blind. You are probably wondering how I got this way, well we'll get into that don't you worry. My big problem is I don't want people to know that I am blind. I like my normal life and I wouldn't change it for the world. I don't need my independence stolen from me because someone else believes I have a handicap.

I didn't start my life out blind, I ended up that way after I had to have emergency surgery to save my hearing and vision. Unfortunately there was nothing that they could do for my vision but I can still hear the sweet sound of my children's laughter and the wonderful sound of music. I met a few wonderful friends when I moved here and got to know them and after everything they stuck by me. Georgia (go figure right) is my best friend and greatest confidant. Dan is my co-worker and he covers for me at work since my boss has no clue nor do any of my co-workers. Rick is my neighbor and he is really fun to be around, a great friend and someone great to talk to.

I sighed as I moved around my house in the quiet afternoon, my music blaring as I danced, did the dishes and tripped over every toy that my children left on the floor. I heard a growl from the front of the house and stopped everything I was doing. I moved towards the front door where I heard Molly growl once again. I placed my hand on her back as she moved me towards the back door. I grabbed my knife off of the entertainment center as I heard the door open. I held my knife up and heard a gasp.

"Mara, Mara it's Georgia, what the hell." I heard her heartbeat as it moved at lightning speed. I put my knife down and took a deep breath.

God Dammit Georgia how many times do I have to tell you not to sneak up on me like that. You know Molly can hear you, she scared the hell out of me. What's up, why the secrecy. Normally you call me first."

She closed the door and moved into the house. I moved out of her way and followed the sound of her footsteps on the hardwood floor. "I'm sorry, I just, I have so much on my mind lately and I worry about you. Are you sure you won't move back in you know me and Jack wouldn't mind one bit. You being on your own scares me, and that neighbor of yours scares me as well. I don't know him too well and he is always here. I don't know what to think about it."

I sighed and moved into the kitchen, felt along it for my drink and then jumped up on the counter. "Georgia, don't worry, he does the yard, he let's me go riding, and he helps me when I need some help around the house. How bad can he be, he is a volunteer fire fighter for goodness sakes."

I heard Georgia as she started to tap her nails on the counter. "I just worry about you. You are so bent on your independence that you don't understand how worried everyone is. You are lucky that your boss hasn't figured you out yet. What do you think he is going to say when he finds out that you are blind Mara? You will lose your job."

I laughed. "You know he never even knew the difference. He never knew about the surgery either. How do you think he is going to react when he finds out that his favorite Camera Operator is blind. It is going to look pretty good that I didn't lose my touch at work even after I lost my sight. I wouldn't mind being shadowed

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either, if they feel that is the way to see I am actually doing my work. Can't you see Georgia, I am the only one of my kind and I won't be subdued just because someone doesn't like the fact that I am blind. Why can't you understand that I want my independence. You and Jack are wonderful to me and I thank you so much, but I have to do this. I really really have to do this Georgia."

I heard a sigh from my side and laughed. "You know sometimes you can be so stubborn. I understand though, you were so good with your life before and you don't want to lose it. What can I say you are my best friend and I worry."

I patted her arm as that was all I could find. "I know you worry, but you have to let me do this. I love you girl, are you still able to watch the kids tonight? Dan and I have to pull an over night tonight and they love you so much. I promise Tori and Teagan won't be a problem."

Her laugh filled up the empty space. "Why do you think I am here? I came early so I could bake some cookies for them. I figured some cookies, juice and a lot of running around would do them some good. Are you taking Molly with you tonight?"

I nodded. "Dan and I are going to drop back by and pick her up. That way I will be able to give the kiddos a good night kiss. I am so sorry, if I trusted anyone else to do this I would find someone else. I know that it takes time away from you and Jack this whole twice a month nights thing and I couldn't be more sorry."

She laughed again. "Jack understands and he knows that it is hard for you. If it would ease your worry then I could have Lotty come over and watch them for a couple months. You know she is in town for a while and she wouldn't mind one bit."

I nodded. "That might be a great idea, get you home more. I know this over night thing must be killing you. If you think she would go for it then let's do it."

I heard her start to move around the kitchen and I hugged her before I moved towards my bedroom and started to get ready for my arduous day at work.

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i<sub>c</sub><sup>1/2</sup> Mara

i<sub>c</sub><sup>1/2</sup> Tori

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½Teagan

½Georgia

½Jack

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i½Dan

i½Rick

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1/2Molly

## Chapter 2: A shower of pain.

After a refreshing shower Dan came and picked me up for work. He laughed as he saw me since I really didn't do anything with my hair, but he wrapped his arm around my shoulder and led me towards the car. I whistled for Molly who then came barrelling out of the house and right into my leg. I laughed as the stress started to melt away from me. We got in the car and headed to our job for the first of two horrendous nights that plagued me twice a month. We brought Molly in with us as we went over to our desks. She quickly placed herself underneath as Dan and I gathered our materials for the daily assignment meeting. I knew the halls by heart after so long, but it was hard to avoid obstacles that people left in my way. Dan and I walked close so he could tell me what was nearby so I wouldn't trip.

"Mar, chair on your right, bump me and start to laugh." I did as he said and then we kept on our way. Everyone in the office already thought we were dating, but it was a fun ruse for us. As we got to the conference room I pulled out a seat that I used all the time and sat down. Since I couldn't see I really didn't take notes, but I did pay extra attention to our assignment.

"Dan, I need you and Mara to go to Collier's Bank and cover the after investigation of the heist from last night. That needs to be in before four. Also you two are assigned to beats for the next two nights, enjoy."

I sighed to myself. We got to sit in a room with a police scanner and listen for anything interesting. Well so much for what I wanted to do before I got off tonight. I nodded my head and doodled something on the paper that made it look like I was writing. Dan on the other hand was taking notes about the heist and what they were looking for. I sighed to myself as we finally left the room.

"You know it would just be easier if they left a sheet of paper on our desk. Now I only have an hour to shoot and edit."

Dan laughed as he whistled for Molly. She trotted out behind us like she owned the place. Everyone had gotten used to me bringing her with, so they didn't mind much anymore. If anyone suspected something, they kept it to themselves.

We switched over to our van and Dan started our trek to the bank. I laid my head back for the short trip and thought deep about how I was to catch the story when Dan interrupted my thoughts.

"Hard to tell you about the story when you aren't paying attention to me. You didn't even respond when I told you that your hair looked crazy and you reminded me of a hyena when you laugh."

I punched his arm lightly. "Dan did anyone use this car during the day?"

He thought for a moment before he spoke. "Not that I know of. We won't find out until we get there if you are going to have to adjust your equipment. You should know it by feel by now though."

I shook my head. "Dan, I think someone at the station suspects something. The last time that I had to work nights, the equipment was out of wack and everything came up odd. I can't lose this job Dan, it is everything to the kids and I."

I felt the car move as he readjusted in his seat. "You know we might need to do a drop back with Molly until winter comes, that way they don't suspect her as a service dog."

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I sighed. "If bossman catches wind of this you know there is going to be hell to pay for the both of us. You won't be able to get a reporters job and everyone is going to expect me to leave since they can't legally fire me. They will make my life hell."

I felt his hand on my arm causing Molly to growl at him, I laughed. "Don't worry Mara, we will do what we can to hold them off as long as we can. Have you been putting in applications at other stations and in other places as well. I can bet that when they do, IF they ever do catch wind of this, it's going to raise a few eyebrows."

I smiled to myself. "Who would have thought huh. A blind camera operator that is the highest rating for sweeps. You have to admit Dan, I do you some good credit don't I?"

He laughed. "Yes Mara you do. All hail the mighty Mara, queen of the Camera Operators."

Our day went smooth and even with an hour deadline we got everything put together smoothly and turned in on time before we moved over to beats. It was quiet once everyone went home and I liked it that way. The only sound in the place was the police scanner as it hummed and chimed in the background. It didn't take long before the crazies were out in force causing Dan and I to laugh with the odd calls that came over the scanner. We had about three hours left on shift when the call came through.

"Attention all units we have a 246 off 5th and Tyler. Closest unit respond. Call was made by the seven year old son of the victim, two shots already fired."

Dan grabbed my hand and we ran out the door. We weren't far from the scene as the office was in the center of the city. It took us ten minutes to get on scene and just two for Dan and I to set up and plan. We stayed back out of the way, but still close enough to the scene to get good shots. I followed the sound of his voice as he moved around the personel rushing to and fro.

"An alleged shooter entered a home what looks to me over thirty minutes ago where two shot quickly followed. The 911 call was placed by a seven year old child in the residence. There aren't many clear facts about this case right now, but -."

Shots rang out all over the place and I felt the ground shake as my ears rang at the closeness. I felt a pain in my shoulder as I moved around the crime scene. I followed the feel of the hard thumps on the ground where I tripped slightly on something solid but not hard. I moved the camera off my shoulder and whistled for Molly. As I waited for Molly to make her way over to us, I reached down and felt the obstruction in my way. I gasped and quickly pulled out my cell phone, I had almost tripped over a service member, by the feel of the uniform it was a cop.

I heard Dan's voice through the hum that was still in my ears from the loud shots and he led me over to the car where he finally stopped to catch his breath. I put down the camera and ran my hands through my hair before I fell to the ground, Molly not far behind me on it.

"Mara, are you alright?" He noticed I wasn't listening so he tried again. "Mara, Mara dammit answer me. Are you alright?"

I nodded and then remembered he wouldn't be looking at me. "Fine, I- I'm fine. My arm hurts a bit, but other than that I will live. No big deal Dan. Are you alright Dan?"

"They, they just all started to drop Mara, I didn't know what to d-." I felt his hand on my shoulder and the growl resonated from Molly. "Molly stop, your master is injured and I need to look at it."

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I put my hand on Molly and gripped her. "Off duty Molly, let him help me." I felt Molly lay down beside me as Dan worked on my arm.

I felt pressure as he pulled something out of my arm and then he tore his shirt to bind me up. All in all it had turned into one hell of a night.

## Chapter 3: sleeeeeeeeeeeep

We got back to the station early in the morning covered in blood and a complete mess. The office was starting to fill and it seemed we were the center of attention. Bossman came over to us and looked us up and down before he spoke frantically.

"Are you both alright, that was completely reckless. What the hell were you two thinking, when the bullets started to fly you should have got out of there. None of the equipment got hurt right? You two go home and clean up and take the day off, don't worry about night tonight we will get someone else to do i-."

Dan grasped my hand and we walked around the boss and straight into the editing room. We pulled all of our footage and started to edit a video that would win a pulitzer prize. Dan laughed for a second about the video before the shots rang out. He put his hand on my arm. "You know you didn't even flinch when that bullet hit you Mara, you kept filming as people started to fall."

I sighed and tried hard to quell the rising nausea at the memory. "I didn't know that people were hurt until I tripped over the fallen officer. I really hope they are all okay."

The sounds from the video started to fill my mind with memories of the panic and fear that I felt back at the scene. I launched out of my chair and ran from the editing room straight to the bathroom where I got violently sick. I stayed poised over the toilet until I was sure that my body had had enough, then I moved over towards the sink. The sound of the door opening scared me until I heard Dan's voice.

"Mara, are you alright? The concern in his voice calmed me a bit. I put my hands over my face and began to rub my eyes.

"I will be, nothing a bottle of Tequila and a long day and night of rest won't fix." I moved towards the door where he stopped me and kissed my forehead.

"I worry about you Mara, you know that. You stress out over the job and wondering what will happen day to day. Bossman is right, it was reckless of us, he would have fired me if he knew just how reckless it was. Let's go finish editing so we can go home."

I nodded and walked slowly out the door and back to the editing room. I took a deep breath and then started to use my cues to edit. It didn't take me long to get everything in order and saved into the system so I could go home and was the blood off me.

Dan drove Molly and I back to the house and as soon as Georgia saw me she burst through the door. "What in the name of hell happened to you? I let you go to work for less than 12 hours and you come back injured."

I sighed and moved past her into the house as I heard her stomp over to Dan. I knew it was horrible for me to leave him to take the fall, but I was drained and in a lot of pain. I went straight to my bedroom and took a muscle relaxer before I stripped down and got in the shower. As the extreme heat rushed down on me I sat in the bottom of the tub and started to cry. I finally untied the makeshift bandage on my arm and let the heat wash away the blood that had dried and accumulated dirt from the work I did to help out the emergency service people. They all knew my secret now and I was scared. If it ever got back to my boss that I was blind I would lose my job for sure.

I stayed in the tub until the water turned cold, then got out, dried off and dressed. I walked out of my bedroom to hear a tapping of nails on my counter. I knew I was in trouble, but after I had emptied the contents of my

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stomach at work, I needed something to eat. I moved to the fridge and grabbed a yogurt and a spoon next to the fridge before I sat down on the couch. I heard footsteps following me and sighed at the inevitable.

"Talk to me Mara. What happened last night?" Georgia's voice was calm, but I could still hear an edge of panic in it.

"Last night we got put on beats. Usually we wouldn't go out but when the call came over the radio that a man had a gun in an occupied dwelling and that a seven year old boy called 911, we basically ran out of the station to the scene. When we got there we stayed as out of the way as we could, but apparently that didn't do us any good. Dan told me he was going to talk to an officer on scene and the next thing I know there are the sounds of hundreds of shots and I felt the pain in my arm. I tried to find Dan, but I tripped over an officer who had been shot in the artery. I put my camera down and called for Molly. I did my best to help them, but now more people know and if they tell Bossman, you know that is going to scream death sentence for my career."

She put her hand over mine. "Are you alright?"

I shook my head. "Not really, it isn't something I am going to be likely to forget. I need a bottle of Tequila and a good 24 hours sleep."

She laughed softly. "Then you do that. I got the kids for you and I will call Jack and tell him that I will be home in a couple days. I am going to make sure you are alright. At least your eating."

I laughed. "I am eating because I emptied my stomach at work when I thought back to what happened." I put the cup in the trash and the spoon in the sink before I hugged Georgia. "I am going to get some rest. My head is throbbing and not sure how much longer I can stay concious."

I walked away as Georgia told me to have a good nap and then I hit my bed and fell asleep. My last thought was "I hope I don't dream about this."

## Chapter 4: unexpected game

I woke up to the feel of a warm body with arms around me. For a split second I was scared until the familiar smell of horses and leather attacked my nose. I took a deep breath and let it out with a loud sigh to let him know I was awake.

"Could you be more obvious Mara, when you went still I knew you were awake. How do you feel?" His voice was like velvet and even though he was my neighbor, the feel of him wrapped around me sent shivers down my spine, which he mistook for me being cold. He wrapped me in the blanket and pulled my body closer to his.

"I feel alright. Still a little tired and emotionally drained, but I am Momma and Momma I must be."

I felt his cheek on mine and I froze completely. "Georgia's got you covered for a night with them, stay in here with me and cuddle. I bet you could use the contact Mara."

Oh if only he knew what type of contact I wanted between us at the moment. Rick was always sweet to me, even after our rather nasty first exchange. After that we became good friends and after I went blind he took up the yard work to save me from spelling funny messages in my yard just because I could. Over the years I started to develop feelings for him so strong that there are times I can't help myself. I grasped his hand and cuddled close, he held me tight and I felt so safe. I couldn't sleep with him this close to me so I sighed.

"Mara, are you okay, am I squeezing you too hard?" I giggled to myself. He could have squeezed the air out of me and I would die a happy woman.

I turned over and put my hand on his face. I smiled and kissed him gently. "You did nothing of a sort." I wished in that moment more than anything that I could see the expression on his face. I hid my face against his chest, but he gently guided my face back up where he kissed me again. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he got up off the bed and planted himself over me. My heart was racing a mile a minute as he tangled his hand in my hair all the while never taking his lips from mine. His body fit with mine perfectly and as he deepened the kiss my body arched into his.

"Wow, um where did that come from?" I didn't answer him I pushed him back on the bed to sit him up and took off his shirt. I had dreamed for so long about running my hands over his hard body. The soft skin a stark contrast to the hard muscles underneath. I moved then and straddled his lap running my hands over his skin. He moved in close to me and started to kiss my neck, the pleasure I felt at his touch made me want to go wild, but I worked hard to stay contained and in control of myself, well for the most part that is.

He lifted my shirt over my head and kissed his way down to my now bare chest. He was kissing, sucking and biting my breasts when there was a knock on the door. I sighed, but took a deep breath.

"Who is it?" Georgia didn't even wait, she opened the door and barged right in. She quickly averted her eyes.

"I'm sorry I knew he was in here but not that you were busy. So um, I am going to go now, sorry I interrupted."

She made a hasty retreat, but it was enough time for us to screw our heads back on straight. I jumped back against my headboard and covered myself up. "I'm so sorry that was rude of me, you came to make me feel better and I was working hard to seduce you."

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I felt movement on the bed and then his lips pressed back up against mine. "You didn't have to work that hard. Mara, you are beautiful and I mean truly beautiful."

I felt the heat rush into my cheeks at his compliment. "I have to say Rick I have thought of nothing but how sweet you are and how good you would feel under my hands." I blushed again. "Alright that sounded a bit wrong, it's hard to talk with you this close to me."

He chuckled before he wrapped his arm around my body. "I like the way you said that, so how about I show you that and then a bit more." He started to suck on my exposed nipples which made my body bow with pleasure. His hand roamed over my body, down my stomach and to my inner thighs. I lost myself in the feel of him and it was then that he entered me and I felt my world shatter into a million pieces of ecstatic pleasure.

## Chapter 5: indecency

I woke up the next morning and the bed was empty except for me. I looked over and felt a tape recorder on the pillow he was laying on. I turned it on to here Rick's voice.

Mara,

I am sorry that I had to leave, but I had work to do over at the ranch. If you have free time today have Molly bring you over and we will have lunch. Last night was amazing and I think since we skipped a few steps, we should go on a date. You are an amazing woman Mara and I don't want you to think that I used you at all. If you are also free friday I would love the chance to take you out. I will leave my cell number at the end of this and I hope to hear your sweet voice. I really care about you Mara and want nothing more than to make you smile. I hope you have a good quiet day and that you get the chance to come see me.

Rick

My mind bubbled and the smile would have lit up my face, that is if I could have seen it. I got up and make my way to the bathroom to splash water on my face and make sure it wasn't a dream. I then got dressed in a pair of jeans and a tank top. I could smell the coffee and couldn't hold back any longer. I meandered into the kitchen where I heard a voice I hadn't before.

"Good morning Ma'am. How are you this morning?"

I looked in he general direction of the speaker and cocked my head to the side. "Who are you?"

She gasped and then I heard a door close. "Mara, I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you last night that my neice was going to be coming today but you seemed a bit preoccupied. This is Lotti, she came to play with the kids today, they were all about to go to the park."

I nodded. "So that was what you were trying to tell me last night." I looked in Lotti's direction. "Nice to meet you, sorry I am usually fuddled without coffee. Just let me get a cup and then I will be good." I heard movement and then a clank as a mug was placed on the counter. I scowled a bit, but drank it anyway. I was in too much of a good mood to let my day go to waste. I whistled and heard the clink of Molly's nails as she walked across the hardwood floor.

I felt her bump up against me and I patted her head. "You feel like a walk today Molly, I think we should go pay Rick a visit as he invited us for lunch. What do you say to that girl, huh?" She bumped into me a little harder and I laughed. I finished up my coffee as the door opened and my munchkins ran in.

I hugged them close and smiled. "Hi sweethearts, are you going to play today while mommy is out?"

"Go to park Momma, we go to park?" I smiled into Tori's hair as Teagan bowled me over, sending me into a fit of laughter.

"Yes Tori, you are going to the park. Teagan be gentle with momma, she can't see and could have landed on the table."

He hugged me tighter. "Momm momm momm." I sighed and tried to untangle myself from the bodies of my kids. I felt Molly come over and gently pull Teagan off me and nudge Tori away. I slowly stood up, then kissed the kids as Lotti ushered them out the door. I dusted myself off and meandered back into my room for a

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pair of socks and then into my closet for my boots.

After I was all dressed I grabbed my keys, whistled for Molly and headed out the door. The feel of the sun on my skin was amazing as I walked down the steps on the porch and sightlessly looked at Molly. "Let's head to Rick's, as always Molly, you lead the way."

Her body pressed against me leading me in the direction we needed to go. I put my Mp3 player in my ears and enjoyed the feel of the spring sun and the gentle brush of the wind against my skin. It wasn't a long walk, but still a walk none the less. I was listening to Conjure One when Molly tugged on my jeans. I pulled my headphones out and listened around me. Her eminent growl was the first thing I heard, next was the shuffle of footprints. I felt my body shake as Molly placed herself against me as she crouched to attack.

For a moment I was nervous until I got my bearings back. Molly and I had been walking for twenty minutes which would have put us right in front of Rick's gate. We made a turn, so I had to be standing in his property.

"If you know what's good for you, you wouldn't push her." I didn't know who I was talking to, but I knew that if they pushed Molly too far it wasn't going to have a good outcome.

"Miss, can I help you with something?" His voice caught me off guard. I looked in his direction and nodded.

"I'm looking for Rick. He told me to come over about lunch time to speak with him. Is he around?"

I didn't hear any movement from around me, the only noise that resonated was Molly still growling at the man to our left. I then heard a gasp.

"My goodness, you're blind. I am so sorry, here I am shaking my head and you can't even see it. My sincerest apologies."

I sighed and touched Molly's head. "Down girl, you can't hurt the stupid it is illegal." I grabbed my phone out and dialed Rick's number.

It rang a few times before he answered.

Rick\* Hello

Mara\* Hey you, so I am here and I think I scared one of your workers.

Rick\* Eh, they scare easy anyway. I am on my way. Give me a couple of minutes to get there.

Mara\* Alright, Molly and I will be waiting on the front porch for you, I really don't need a sunburn on top of everything else.

His laugh made my heart skip a beat.

Rick\* Make the guy get you a drink while you wait as well, at least he would actually be working.

Mara\* Got ya. See ya in a few hun.

I closed my phone and tapped Molly gently on the head. "Lead me to the porch doofus. And you sir, I would like some ice water if you would. It would at least make up for your lack of tact and courtesy."

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I touched Molly's collar and she moved me forward towards our destination. Each step sent a pounding in my heart. Molly then moved and nudged my foot to tell me to step up. She led me over to a chair where she laid down in front of me and started to growl again.

"Ma'am, I can't give you the drink with the dog staring at me like that."

I laughed.. Just think of it like me staring at you and just gimme the damn glass. Quick movements will make her chase you so move slow and she will be fine."

## Chapter 6: Ring of fate

I was on the porch when Rick showed up. I heard his horse a minute before I heard his voice. I nodded my head in his direction.

"Well Mara, seems you put him to work for me. Glad to see it. How about I go get the basket that Dana made for us and hitch you up behind me for that picnic."

I giggled. "You sir, had better not be hitching me up to anything. I will ride behind you as long as Molly can run beside us. No offense Rick, but she is my crutch and knows how to guide me once I am back on the ground."

"Not to worry Mara, I wouldn't have it any other way." I heard his feet hit the ground hard and knew he had dismounted. "Give me just a couple of minutes to get the lunch and we will be on our way." His steps thudded up the stairs and I felt the air change in front of me. Rick bent down and kissed my cheek before he went into the house. I smiled to myself for a few seconds completely wrapped up in myself that I didn't hear him as he approached me, as he grasped my hand I recoiled and gasped.

Molly came up to attention next to me and started to growl. I patted her head. "At ease Molly that was my fault. I wasn't paying attention sweetie." I put my hand out and Rick grasped it and started to lead me off the porch slowly while Molly helped me down the stairs. I laughed to myself which probably got me a few looks, but I didn't mind as I couldn't see their faces. Rick mounted up and then spoke.

"I am going to need your hand so I can lift you up behind me." I put my hand up and he launched me over the saddle. I giggled again at the weightless feel before I remember to call to Molly.

"Keep guard Molly. Stay with us now." I felt the horse start in a slight canter and I felt such freedom. It took a bit before he took the magnificent creature up to full speed, but each moment was freedom and refreshing. I held tighter with my thighs as I freed my hands from around his waist and put them up in the air. It was so enlightening that I didn't even know that we had stopped. I felt the saddle move and for a moment I felt unadulterated fear, but then hands came around me and helped me down. I felt Molly beside me and took a deep breath.

"Mara, are you alright, you look frightened." His voice was a mixture of surprise and concern. I took one more deep breath and sighed.

"It felt so wonderful that I lost myself. For some reason I seem to keep doing that. I am not sure what it is, but it puts Molly on edge since I lose my senses that way." My stomach started to growl and I laughed. "So you were telling me about lunch, is that still on the table?"

Rick chuckled and moved over towards me. I fully relaxed so that Molly wouldn't get worried. He grabbed something from behind me and then grabbed my hand and I felt it again, the sense of losing myself. His calloused hand in mine was sensual and tender at the same time as he slowly led me to where we were going to sit. Molly helped me to avoid all of the things sticking out of the ground that he forgot to mention, but it wasn't too long before we were both sitting on a soft wool blanket. I relished in the feel of the warm sun, the softness of the blanket and the sweet smell on the air.

"I could look at you like this forever Mara, so at calm, at peace and carefree. You are stunning and it takes my breath away." I felt him move closer to me and blushed deeply. His kiss was absolutely mind blowing. I didn't care about lunch in that moment, not one bit.

## The light in the center of my darkness

"Molly go scout for me. Go on." I heard her pad off through the tall grass and my mind sent my body into overdrive. I kissed him deeply and slowly moved myself over into his lap. As his arms went around me I moaned in pleasure. I wrapped my hands into his silky hair and grasped his head to the side. I gently nipped his neck before he took control and pinned me to the ground. My breathing was in ragged gasps as he pinned me down on the blanket, my hands over my head. He kissed down my neck to my shoulders before he moved back up and stole my breath. He sat me up and pulled my shirt over my head, before he started to lick and nip my chest, my hips and the sweetness was slowly making me implode. His hand went to my pants where he unbuttoned them, but I couldn't get them off fast enough. His hands explored my body as he fully stripped me down. He moved away from me for a moment and then when I felt him again, his soft skin was exposed. The spring breeze and the feel of him against me made me melt into liquid gold at his touch.

The moan that escaped him was animalistic and drew one in turn for me. He entered me hard and fast and the pleasure mixed with the quick pain was pure heaven. He started out slowly and a bit more gentle but each movement of him was a new wave of euphoria through every part of my body.

Afterwards we lay in each other's arms when I heard a growl from nearby. I instantly sat up and covered myself. I knew Molly's tones better than my own and as soon as I felt Rick's arms go protectively around me, I knew something wasn't right. I gripped his arm as I heard a metallic sound right beside me.

"You know Rick, I have taken your shit for way to fucking long. I am really getting sick of it. I thought that the lady here might feel the same, but she is just like you. I think it is about time that we take out the trash." I heard another metallic sound and went out of my mind. I could hear the sound of the grass moving but I didn't move a muscle. Molly was on the move and she did her job well. I was scared though, and when a shot resounded in my ears deafening me I started to panic.

"Molly, Rick are you both alright." The only sound I heard was a ringing in my ears, and all I could feel was the cold fear that engulfed my body that either the man I cared for or my guardian was dead.

## Chapter 7: Interregation

I moved around the blanket frantically floundering for my clothes. I grasped a piece of clothing when I found myself being pulled back by my ankle. I started to scream as I dug my nails in the ground with uncertainty. I felt heat wrap around me as I came back to myself. I smelled the familiar scent of horses and leather. I turned around in the familiar arms and felt his face. My ears were still ringing and I couldn't hear a word he said. I was just glad he was alive. My thought then turned to Molly and I started to panic. I whistled for Molly and waited. She didn't come and I started to get worried. I felt myself lifted up and my pants handed to me. I slipped them on as my shirt was handed to me. I quickly dressed and then followed as Rick guided me towards Molly. He stopped me short and then stepped away from me. I stayed very still as I had no guidance. I felt so lost in the alone feeling without Molly by my side.

I felt a hard thump on the ground in front of me and jumped back. It wasn't until I felt the fur of my companion that I dropped to my knees and hugged her tightly. I had never felt so relieved in my life and I couldn't have expressed it in that moment. I knew that both Rick and Molly were safe. It then hit me that somehow the ranchhand had been hurt. I sat hard on the ground and started to cry. I had my life threatened and almost lost someone I cared about over some random person's jealousy. I could have lost more than Rick and Molly, I could have left my children without a mother. I felt my body get lifted from the ground and I was carried over to my horse. I could sense that Molly was nearby and everything seemed so right.

It wasn't too long before we headed back to the ranch and I felt a bit safer. I heard the commotion in the yard and sighed. I knew Molly would keep me out of the fray, but I was still worried about Rick.

"Rick, what's going on?" I guess he could hear the worry in my voice.

I felt a movement up beside me and knew that he came over to touch me. I grasped his hand. "I called the cops while we were back by the lake. Didn't you hear me?"

I shook my head. "I didn't hear anything, just the ringing in my ears. About half way back I got my hearing back. That shot was really loud."

He reached over and hugged me tightly. "I am so sorry Mara, I hadn't a clue that you couldn't hear me. I told you that I called the cops and that everything would be alright. He is injured, not dead. I hogtied him to the saddle so he couldn't do any damage. I am going to hand him over and do what must be done, but Mara they are going to want your statement.

I nodded my head. "I am going to get off the horse then and have Molly lead me to the porch. I don't want anyone to know about my so called 'disability', I do fine without help. Plus, I don't need anything getting back to my boss. I could lose my job and then what would the kids and I do." I moved out of the saddle and whistled to Molly.

She came over to me and put my hand on her back. I petted her as we slowly walked towards the porch. I heard hellos and good days come from around me and I nodded my head and smiled. It seemed that no one noticed and I was glad of that. When I heard steps behind me I sighed and sat down on the swing with Molly at my feet.

"Ma'am is that dog of yours tame?" The female voice sounded a bit pensive.

"Oh she is friendly, she just likes to be close to Momma is all. How can I help you today Miss?" I heard the sound of a chair scrape the floor and knew the woman was pulling a chair close.

## The light in the center of my darkness

"I need to know what you saw out there. I know it must have been difficult for you, but whatever you remember could be very helpful."

I sighed. "Well, Rick, Molly here and I were down by the lake enjoying the day when I heard a rustle in the bushes and then the guy started to tell us that that he was going to kill us. I got scared and then heard the gunshot. I was really worried because two people I care about were in danger. After that it was just a jumble and I don't remember too much."

"You can't remember anything after that?" Her voice held a hint out doubt.

"Look to be honest with you I really don't. My mind was going too fast and I kinda lost it. The next thing that I do remember is riding back with Rick and him having a hogtied ranchhand on the back of his horse. If I do remember something I will let you know though."

She was silent for a moment as her pen went a mile a minute on something I could only guess was a pad of paper. I got up off the swing and looked at her. "If you need anything else leave your info with Rick and he will make sure I get it. I am going to go in and lay down now." I held my hand out to her. "Have a good day Miss."

She shook my hand and I whistled to Molly who led me to the door. I opened it and walked in without a backward glance. Somehow or another I was going to get through this with my secret in tact.

## Chapter 8: The outing of some truths.

It had been a week since the incident by the lake and I hadn't called the woman back. I couldn't and I knew it. I was at work with Dan and I was having a great day when I got a call from my boss.

"Mara, I need you and Dan to get back to the station. There is someone here who needs to speak with you." The sound of his voice had me a bit on edge.

"What's going on, is everything alright? We are in the middle of a story, we just can't up and leave." I was worried and scared that something had happened. Bossman had never called us off a story before.

"There is an officer here to speak with you Mara, about something that happened last week. That is all she will tell me. Are you in some kind of trouble?"

I sighed. "No, I'm not in trouble just some guy pulled a gun on me and a friend while we were out last week. Can you tell her to come back another time, we need to get this done and turned in. I hate not finishing a story."

He sighed into the phone. "Didn't she take your statement at the scene? Why would she want to speak with you a week after the fact?"

I huffed. "She did take my statement at the scene. Please tell her I haven't thought of anything else and that is why I haven't called her. I don't want to speak to them anymore. You know how cops make me antsy. Please do something to get her off my back."

"Just this once Mara and then we are going to talk. You should have told me about this, that way I could have better protect you. You are the best I got, I don't like being faced with surprises though. Is there any more to the story I should know about."

I laughed at his turn of phrase. "I don't think you want to know about my personal life boss. How about we leave it at that."

He chuckled. "I got ya. Alright but remember when you get back we are going to talk."

"Alright, alright. When we get back I will talk to you. I have been doing the editing on this one in camera, so I won't need to fix anything on it. Later boss."

I closed the phone and sighed. "You know I wish they would just leave me alone. I don't need them getting too close to this. But this bitch just seems to be sniffing a bit too close for my taste."

Dan put his hand on my shoulder. "Is everything alright?"

I shook my head. "That damn female officer has been trying to call me all week. What am I supposed to say to her. I didn't actually see anything because I am blind. That would go over like a box of rocks on a glass table. I told her if I remembered anything I would call her, but she seems to be so persistent. I know the guy knew I was blind, but he was going to shoot us. I am hoping that they won't believe him, but I think she knows and I can't have that. If she tells bossman then I will be fired in an instant. You know this stress of people finding out is starting to get to me. Sometimes I just want to tell him and get it over with, but then I would lose my job or be seen as a freak. You and I have a really good thing going here and our shoots are the best. They are going to think that I can't do my job though."

## The light in the center of my darkness

Dan put his hand over my mouth. "You know you are stressing on this a bit more than normal. Talk to the woman and hash it out. You can't put this in jeopardy just because you won't talk to her. Sit her down on your time, in your comfort zone and approach her about it. She won't leave you alone otherwise." His voice was hard and I could hear the worry in it.

"Dan, let's just finish so Bossman and I can have our "talk" and I can go home and relax. You know I hate being away from the kids more than I have to be. I will think on it though, will that make you feel better?"

He laughed. "Yes, and if you need back up call Georgia or I and you know we will be there to protect you."

I pushed him and then picked my camera up while Molly led me to our interviewee. The person waited patiently as I took my call, it was the sound of Dan's voice that made me jump.

"Ms. Paxton, so nice of you to wait for us. Alright let my CO right here set up and then we will get started."

I placed the camera on my shoulder while Dan got her into a brief conversation so I could pinpoint them. I gave him the cue and we were off. The interview itself didn't take long and then we were on our way back to the station as I did the final in camera edit.

I was finished long before we got to the station and smiled to myself as I heard the familiar sound of Dan pulling into the parking lot. Unfortunately a voice met me as I got out of the car.

"Mara, It's Officer Talbot. I am sorry to be so persistent, but I really need to speak with you about a couple of things. Could you please indulge me for a few moments in private?"

I felt Dan beside me as I leaned up against the car and sighed. "This is about as private as we are going to get. I am sorry, but anything you say to me, you can say in front of him."

"Alright then, I guess it will come to no surprise to you that our suspect is screaming up and down that you are blind. Now, I know this isn't true as you see me just fine, but why would he say something like that. Is that how you get guys or something?"

I laughed so hard at her comment as did Dan beside me. "Oh my goodness, is that truly what you think." I reached into my back pocket and Dan grasped my arm.

"Mara, Mara don't. You could blow it all right here. Please don't do that. We are at the station and we don't want anyone to see that."

I put a restraining hand on his shoulder and moved closer to him. "She won't leave me alone until she knows the truth Dan, and to be honest with as much as I have been stressing lately, maybe it isn't a bad thing. You know all I do is stress about this."

He sighed. "No matter what happens I will stick by your side. I promise you that Mara."

I nodded and pulled my sensor stick out of my back pocket and lashed it out to fully extend it. I then whistled to Molly. Within seconds I could feel her heavy body beside me. "Molly could you walk me over to the officer please?" It was slow going to just get across the parking lot, but the intake of breath in front of me told me she got the point.

"You-, you are blind." It wasn't a question and I lowered my head and nodded.

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"Yes, I am. I have been for two years now and I don't appreciate you calling me out like this. If my boss were to find out I might just be fired. I know you mentioned it to him so I won't lie to him about it, but you might have just cost me my job. When you asked if I saw something I almost laughed at you. I haven't seen anything in two years. What happened after the shot, well that is indeed interesting. I couldn't hear since the shot was so loud, I fumbled for my clothes and then Rick handed them to me. I was worried that Molly was hurt and that Rick had been shot. Once I got my hearing back though he told me everything that went on and we left it at that. Then you approached me and here we are now." I folded up my walking stick and put it back in my back pocket. "Anymore questions?"

"Just one. How is it that you are a Camera Operator, but you can't see?"

I giggled. "I was doing this before I went blind, Dan and I just adjusted it to where it worked for us. No one here knows I am blind, well at least they didn't. If they do now, I will have to wait and see what happens.

## Chapter 9: Enlightenment

I sighed as I walked into the building and straight towards the boss's office. I knew it wasn't good and if he knew about my blindness I wondered then if I was going to lie to him or tell him the truth. The whole problem revolved around the fact that I hadn't told him to begin with and I had adjusted to my life so well. I knocked on the door and heard a gruff "come in", yet I couldn't make my feet move forward. Bossman was never easy to deal with but he was justly fair. I heard a hand on the door and jumped back a bit. I stayed put while I felt myself being surveyed.

"Mara, come in hun. We really need to talk." The sound of his voice was tired and strained. I knew that I couldn't lie to him. He had kept me on for a long time even though in the beginning I struggled.

I moved slowly into the room putting my hand out a bit to feel around for a chair. I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, but I had a feeling he noticed. "Whatcha need Bossman, got lots of work to do."

The sigh in his voice told me all I needed to know. "I was talking to that damned officer out there when she let something slip. I need to talk to you about it. I know this is going to sound very insensitive of me, but is it true? Are you seriously blind?"

I dropped my head in my hands and felt the tears well up in my eyes. I knew that my wonderful life was coming to a screeching halt around me. I nodded my head and kept my eyes downcast.

"How is it then that you do such good work. I would have never guessed?" The amazement in his voice surprised me.

"I lived my life as normal as I could. Dan and I changed up our routine a bit, but we made it to where no one would know. I like it that way."

"Seriously, you can still film without being able to see. Do you think that tomorrow I could shadow you and see how you do it. I find it interesting that you can still do it."

I guess the shock must have showed on my face for he started to laugh. "I- well, I would be grateful if you didn't tell anyone about this. I mean I do my best to live life the way I know how and I don't want people to think I am invalid and not treat me like, well me."

He was silent for a moment. "Oh, yes right you can't see that I am shaking my head. Very well then, it will stay between us and Dan of course, but you need to work harder to try and seem normal. That does explain the gigantic dog that you keep with you."

I laughed then. "Molly is more than a service dog sir. She is also a guard dog and a kid wrangler. She helps me to make sure the kids are safe while they ride on their four wheelers, while I am horse back riding and keeps them out of trouble when they are in another part of the house. She is pretty much an extension of me that I can't be anymore. Would you mind if I brought her in. She can guide me from a distance and help me to seem a bit more normal."

He laughed. "That would definitely be one way to scare the people around here but I don't see why not. I mean we need to keep this under wraps as best as possible since I would have to fire you for this. They wouldn't believe that you can actually do it."

## The light in the center of my darkness

I giggled. "Isn't that why you are going to shadow me tomorrow. Now you also know why I don't use the editing room very much. People always move things around and not put them back and it makes my job twice as hard. That is why I use audio cues on the camera and just edit from there."

"That is very interesting Mara. I am looking forward to seeing just how you and Dan figured this out and still do such wonderful work."

"Thank you sir, I appreciate you not writing me off so quickly. I have adapted well to this and I know that I enjoy my job as now you would probably like to watch me do it."

He laughed again. "Is your story for today done?"

I nodded my head. "Yes sir it is, I was going to drop off the tapes right after I left here. Thank goodness the one thing that doesn't change is the video drop off in the studio. Take care sir and I hope you will be driving separately since Molly takes up the whole back seat."

"Alright Mara, bright and early. Curiosity is getting the better of me and I want to see you two in action."

"Yes sir, bright and early it is." I got up and left the room with a smile on my face. I slowly walked out of the room and made my way over to the studio and dropped off the tapes before heading back outside for the day. I had some pressure of my chest and I relaxed as I jumped into Dan's car to head home.

"You seem happy. Did he not know about your blindness?"

I laughed. "Oh he knew, but he was quite intrigued by it and will observe us tomorrow."

I heard his breath catch. "Observe us how? I am starting to worry about this."

I couldn't stop the chuckle. "He just wants to see how we pull it off is all. Let's have a normal day and go from there."

## Chapter 10: A Day with the boss

Morning came long before I was ready and I felt a bit sluggish. I slowly got out of bed when my alarm went off and headed for the shower. I heard movement in the living room and knew that Georgia was already getting the kids breakfast. I turned on the water and felt the relief of the hot water as it pulsed over my skin. It felt so wonderful to relax before I had to go to work. It was going to be a stressful day with the boss watching our every move. I slowly got out of the shower and headed back into my room. Molly growled and I stopped right where I stood. She came over to me and moved me a bit before she let me continue. I saw on the bed wrapped in a towel and felt my clothes laid out next to me. I sighed, never again would I get to see the expression on someone's face or see my kids smile, or know what they looked like when they grew up.

I quickly grabbed my clothes as my phone rung. I sighed and answered as I quickly got dressed.

ME\* This is Mara.

Dan\*Hey Mar, wanted to let you know I am ten out, I am so sorry I am running late today, I got nervous trying to figure out what to wear.

I laughed.

Me\*Thank goodness I don't have that problem huh. I will be ready to go. The house is quiet so I am guessing that Georgia took the kids to Daycare.

Dan\*Well, grab some coffee and I will be there soon to pick up two of my favorite girls.

Me\*You know for being married you are such a charmer still. Honk when you get here.

Dan\*Got it, later Mar.

Me\*Bye.

I flipped my phone closed and walked to the door of my room. I walked into the kitchen and grabbed a cup of coffee as there was a knock on the door. "It's open."

I heard Dan's shuffled steps as he walked in and smiled. "You know Dan here lately you have been tired. I wonder what's going on with you. You know we have a few minutes to talk before we go."

He sighed as I heard a chair move from behind me. "You know, for being you, you are very perceptive. Some problems between the wife and I. She is jealous of the fact that I work with you and she said that if I don't stop working with you she is going to leave me."

I sighed. "You know your wife is odd. Maybe I should talk to her and tell her about my fiance before so flies off the handle. Would that be a good idea?"

He laughed. "A white lie wouldn't hurt. Maybe we could come for dinner tomorrow night and you could bring a mystery guy. I think that would be great to help her out. I don't think anyone else could handle how crazy you are and how neurotic you are."

I moved around the counter and shoved him lightly. "You know if I didn't like you I would have beat your ass for that one. Alright, I will have Rick come over and pretend to be my fiance. Goodness knows I still have an

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old ring from my last engagement.I bet Rick and I could pull it off."

He got up and hugged me."You know I don't deserve you for a partner.Thank you for that so much doing this.I bet it would make Stella back off.Her main issue is that you are single.Well, Mara it's time to go.Round up your things and let's get gone.Gonna be a hard day with the boss breathing down our neck."

I put my cup down in the sink and grabbed my purse along with my phone.I let out a whistle and called to Molly who was by my side instantly.I walked out the door with them and locked the door.As Molly led me to the car I opened my phone to call Rick.It rang three times before he answered.

Rick\* R.C.R. Farms this is Rick how may I help you.

I giggled.

Me\*Wow you sound so official it is so hott.

Rick\*Hey sexy long time no talk to.How are you today.

Me\* Under scrutiny the boss knows my secret and wants to make sure I am doing my job and he isn't just paying me to sit on my laurels.

Rick\*Sounds rough.I miss you girl, when can we see each other again?I am worried because I thought with what happened down by the lake you wouldn't want to see me again.

I gasped

Me\*No, that isn't it at all.I have been super busy with work and I had to pull an over night.Oh Rick I have wanted to see you.How about tomorrow night we have dinner, but I have a major favor to ask.

Rick laughed

Rick\*Now that sounds ominous.How can I help you tomorrow night?

Me\*Well I kinda need us to act like we are engaged.My partner at work is having problems with his wife and she is mad because he works with me and I am single so she thinks he is going to cheat on her.I can't lose him as a partner so we figured to tell her I was engaged to get her off his back.If you aren't up for it that's alright, but-

Rick\*I'll do it.Not a problem at all.What time should I be there?

Me\*We figured about 6pm would be good, it will give Dan time to go home, change and pick her up.Would that be a problem.

Rick\*Not at all.Not in the least 6pm it is.

Me\*Thanks so much and how about you and me have some time to ourselves tonight.I should get off about 5 kids will be in bed around 8 so how about a dessert on the back porch around 9?

Rick\*I would like that, very much.I will see you then.Have a great day at work Mar.

Me\*Thanks Rick.Talk to you later.

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I hung up the phone and smiled to myself as I felt the familiar pull of Dan's car into the parking lot at our job. Once he turned off the car I got out and moved with Molly into the building. I heard gasps and murmurs of how large she was. I pointed to my desk and she went and laid down. I laughed as the boss came out. "Good to see you Mara, I thought with our talk yesterday I scared you laughed."

I laughed. "Not a chance, are you ready for an eye opening day? I can promise you that I am neurotic when it comes to how this is done. Dan should have switched cars by now." I walked towards the exit but heard a growl from Molly that stopped me in my tracks. I felt then a rush of air move past me and knew that Molly was warning me to stop. I got to the door and whistled loudly causing Molly to jump to my side. I laughed at the dumbfounded whispers as we both walked out the door.

I heard Bossman shouting orders behind me as he walked out the door. I opened the backseat door and felt the car shift as Molly got in. I closed the door and moved towards the front seat as Dan came over to the car.

"We got our assignment and Boss is going to follow us there to see how we do this. I know you never let me carry the equipment but maybe today would be an exception."

I laughed. "Not a chance, I do it by myself every day why should today be any different. Let's get going, lots to do and I have a feeling today's video is going to have to surpass every other day so far."

Dan laughed as he drove. "You know I think you are right, but are you sure he is going to be impressed by how we get our stuff done."

It took about half an hour to get to our destination and Dan and I were laughing as we pulled up outside. He had already given me the rundown of our story for the day. I let Molly out of the car and moved to the back to get our equipment. In the silence around me I didn't hear my boss sneak up on me.

"Do you need help carrying anything?" His voice sounded worried as I grabbed my bag and tripod out of the back of the car.

"Nope, I don't need a thing, I have this down to a science. Sit back and enjoy the show boss. Molly came up beside me and followed Dan into the building. We got into the elevator where it was a bit cramped with the boss in as well. Once we got to the place for the shoot I started to set up as Dan explained how we were going to do the interviews so I knew which cues to use for editing and I sighed as he told me there was to be four interview, it was going to be a long day.....

Hours later we were done and I had packed everything up and started back down with Molly out of the building so that I could start my editing for the video as Dan worked on his piece that I would add in later. The boss got into the driver's seat and watched as I did all of my editing before Dan told me that he was ready for his stand up in the video. It took us ten minutes to do both his stand up and voice over before I edited them into the video and then played my final product for the boss. I heard silence after it was finished and I got worried.

"Well, what did you think about it? I mean even for doing a bit of rough editing it sounds good to me and you can't even hear the cues I used to edit it." I was starting to shake as he hadn't answered me yet.

"That was absolutely amazing. I didn't know that you could do something like that. Is that how you have been doing the videos since you went blind?"

I nodded my head. Dan and I came up with a system and it has worked for us ever since. I have to say that it is fun and the stories are always different. We have waded into some shit I can promise you that. I have been in

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the swamps, waded through things I couldn't get off my skin for days and all for the story. So do I still have a job?"

I felt the car shake and tilted my head to the side a bit. "I- I'm sorry I forgot. Not only do you have a job you are safe no matter what. I won't let them get rid of you even if the whole world knows it, you are an amazing camera operator even with the affliction of being blind. You live your life like there is no difference and I won't let them get rid of you, you are too good."

I sighed. "Thank you so much, I really appreciate that. I was really worried when you didn't say anything for a moment."

He laughed. "You did such great work, I forgot you were blind. I will be making some changes around the office to help you out a little bit more though. I don't want you to be put out of using the editor because other people can be rude and move things. I think a few new policies are going to go into effect here soon and you will be able to edit your things at your desk. I will have it outfitted for what you need. I will meet you back at the station Mara. Great job today."

I nodded my head as I felt him get out of the car. I felt movement again and knew that Dan had let Molly in the back seat and he was ready to go. It had been a long day and all I wanted to do was get home and bask in my victory before I had dessert with Rick.

## Chapter 11: A bit of a shock

It was 5:30 before I got home and I was so tired. I opened the door and got rushed by my munchkins. I smiled and hugged them. I was so happy to be home as I took my shoes off and heard Georgia in the kitchen, that I sighed. Georgia giggled as I moved onto the barstool.

"You know if this is how you feel when you get home from work, you need a different job."

I laughed. "You know it wouldn't have been so bad if I didn't have the boss with me all day. Do you think that you could do me two huge favors?"

She sighed. "Depends on what they are. You know I won't turn down a reasonable request."

I laughed again. "Do you think you could make something for dessert tonight for Rick and I. I need to talk with him and he will be here around nine. I figure it would be great for us to talk after everything that has happened and I could explain to him why I haven't called. I also need a nice dinner for tomorrow night when I fake my engagement to make Stella feel better. I swear to you that woman is unhinged in the head to think that I would sleep with Dan. We are friends and nothing more, yet she tries to blow things out of proportion."

"No problem. Dinner will be ready in five and then I will make something nice and sweet for you two so you can relax. Dinner tomorrow night won't be a prob, I will prep it before I go home tonight that way you will have everything ready by the time I leave tomorrow. Do you want me to take the kids as well or do you want them here so she really understands that you are tied down?"

I giggled. "I want them here so that Rick can play father figure and make it look even more genuine. He agreed to this and I have a feeling I am really going to have to think of a way to thank him for it. He has done so much for us and I really really like him. I mean we have been friends for a bit, but wow he is actually an amazing person."

I heard retching noises and then laughing. "Alright Mar, stop gushing it's gross. You know I think you two should sit down tonight and talk about where you are with this thing ya'll have. On one had you two are creepily in tune and on the other you are so pent up lately you put everything but work on the back burner. Everything that is but your kids. Who knows, putting him in the fray tomorrow night might be a good thing. If he does well with the kiddos that might impress you even more to ACTUALLY GET INTO A RELATIONSHIP!"

I hung my head. "Don't yell at me Georgia, you know how much I worry since people tend to flip out about my blindness. I know the docs are trying to find a solution, but I am not banking on that at all. I can adjust but it seems that I meet guys that think because I am blind I am totally crippled as well. Rick and Dan understand and treat me normal, or at least as normal as they can considering there are somethings I can't do on my own anymore. You understand better than anyone else how frustrated I am that I can't just out of the blue decide to change my outfit, or if I feel like taking a drive to see the sunset over the ocean. It is so damn frustrating."

I heard her steps come closer to me and I prepared to get bowled over. I felt her arms go around me. "You know I don't mind helping out and if you feel like changing your outfit, I will help you out. I have this issue about putting your clothes in color order by what you need to do, work, play, business, party and a few more other categories I put in your closet. I will help if you want to dress nice for tomorrow night."

I hugged her back hard. Thank you. So is dinner ready because I am starving and I want a bit of play time with the kiddos before they go to bed."

## The light in the center of my darkness

She laughed and dished out the plates to put at the table. "Of course it is done. I will call them in for you if you like."

I shook my head. "No I want to hear the roundup when Molly gets em going. You know how much that makes me laugh." I walked out the back door of the house as Molly pushed past me. I laughed and whistled.

"Molly, round em up!" I could hear the squeals and giggles come closer to me along with a heavy breath as one of them fell over. I laughed harder as I heard Tori scream "Let go of me Molly, put me down." I moved out of the door way as I heard her claws against the wood planks of the back porch. I was still bowled over and laughed as I got the kids cleaned up for dinner. As we sat down to eat I heard a knock on the door. I quickly got up and answered it with Molly by my side.

"Who is it?" My voice was loud enough to carry past the door.

"Dan, open up. I need to talk to you."

I quickly opened the door and let him in. "Is everything alright. I mean I just left you half an hour ago."

"No it isn't. Stella left me a note. You know how she was accusing me of cheating. Seems like the guilty dog barked first. She told me that she had been cheating on me for about a year now and she wasn't happy with our relationship anymore. That she didn't want to take the kids so I could have them, packed up and left. What the hell did I do wrong. I mean I treated her right, I gave her everything and here I am dammit."

I hugged him to me tightly and let him cry. He had been with Stella for five years and now he was finding out that her love for him was a lie. "I am so sorry Danny, I know that this must be hard on you. At least you found out now instead of years down the road. You can start over I know you can Danny. You are strong enough for this. How about you take a couple of days off. I was planning on doing the same thing here soon and you get those boys of yours taken care of. I am not saying it is going to be easy, not at all, but I know you can do it."

He hugged me again, "I guess we don't have to do the dinner tomorrow huh?"

"How about we do it anyway so you and the boys aren't alone. I wouldn't mind having you for company at any time. How about 6pm you and the boys come over. I have two extra little four wheelers and they can play while the grown ups talk. I promise you that no matter what you can turn to me and I will help out the best that I can. Go home and spend some time with your boys right now, they need you now more than ever now that mommy is gone. Call me tomorrow around noon and let me know how you are doing."

"Thanks Mar, you know exactly what to say to make me feel better. You know if I would have cheated on my wife, it would have been you. So beautiful, gentle and sweet. It definately would have been you."

I was taken aback by the comment and apparently it showed on my face. "I wouldn't do that, I know you are interested in Rick, but I am just saying you are a perfect woman and he is lucky because if I was single six months ago, I would have made a move for you. Good night Mar, the kids and I will be here tomorrow. Sleep well."

He hugged me one more time before he walked out the door. I went back to the table and felt the tension around me. "Alright, what. I can feel you staring at me Georgia, what's the deal."

"Girl he just pretty much told you that he loved you and you don't have anything to say to that other than he needed to sort out his kids. I don't know if you have noticed but he isn't exactly unfortunate looking. In fact he is damn hot."

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"Georgia, really I mean come on, I work with him for goodness sake. I haven't ever thought of him like that. Why would I start now huh?"

She sighed. "Not my business Mar and I need to head home. I have your sweets up on the oven so once the kids are in bed you can have your adult time." She hugged me tight as I sat. "I will be back tomorrow to take them to daycare and then we will come home a bit early so I can work on a special dinner for you guys. I know you kinda need it to help Dan get his single parent legs underneath him."

"I just think it would help if he had someone to talk to that understood where he is now. I think that is more than fair don't you?"

"Don't you think it is going to torture him to have Rick here. I bet he would just like to get you alone to talk about these things. I could tell that when you said that ya'll would have grown up time. He knew you weren't going to back Rick out of the dinner and honestly I don't think you should at all. It could make Danny think that he has a chance."

"Good night Georgia, give hubby and that brat of yours a hug and kiss from me. Take care hun."

"Night, just think some things over."

I sighed as the door closed. After dinner I got the kids into the bath and got them ready for bed before eight and had a bit of quiet time to myself to think on things. I went into my room and stripped down. I wanted to get comfortable no matter who was coming over and pulled on my favorite PJs and pulled my hair into a tight bun. I turned my music on quietly and listened to some nickelback quietly as I did the dishes and cleaned up around the house. The quiet of the evening was wonderful and I was happy that the kids had gone down so easy. It wasn't too long before nine rolled around and there was a knock on my back door. I smiled to myself and invited him in. He smelled so wonderful, a mix of leather from his boots, aftershave and body soap. The smells wafted together into something that made my heart race and my stomach clench.

"Hi, thanks so much for coming over tonight. I am so happy to see you, well you know what I mean."

He laughed as he enfolded me in a hug. I felt myself go weak in the knees and had to work hard to keep myself upright.

"Hey I wasn't going to hesitate to get some alone time with you even if it is just a few minutes. I hear that lately you have been a bit stressed out, what's been going on?"

I grabbed what smelled like cookies off of the counter and brought them outside with us along with two glasses of a beautiful wine that I loved so much. I set them on the table and then sat in the chair closest to the door to keep an ear on the kids.

"Well that female cop from the scene chased me around everywhere, even to work and spilled my secret to my boss. He was mad at first, but I told him that she should ride along with Dan and I for a day to see how we do our job. That made today one of the longest I have had in a while. Between work, the kids, talking to my doctors and everything I haven't had a spare moment to breathe let alone call you and that made me sad because I missed you."

"What did your doctors want to talk about?"

I sighed. "They have been trying to get my hopes up that I would get my vision back, but right now I am not banking on anything in case it doesn't work. I don't want to get my hopes up just for them to go 'Oops we

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thought it would work."

"I can understand that, but I would think that you would be a little bit happy that they are trying to fix the mistake that they made. I mean I can understand but I can say that part of me is happy, because if you got your vision back you would be able to see just how beautiful you are."

I laughed. "I like the compliment there. I don't know, I mean as much as I would like to actually be able to watch my children grow up, being able to be with them and talk with them is enough for me for now ya know. They are my everything and I would give everything in the world for them to be happy. That is how I see it."

"That is a good way to put it." I felt his hand upon mine and it became so hard to breathe. "I hope that they do find something to help you though. I know there are so many things that you miss and I don't like that part of you is sad about it."

I giggled like a school girl. "Aww thank you. That is so sweet. You are right there are things I am missing. I don't get to see the sun rise, my children's faces or even choose something nice to wear. It does make me a bit more on guard, but it is a part of my life I have come accustomed to. Anyway, moving on to another subject I wanted to talk to you about."

He chuckled a bit. "And just what would that be?"

I took a deep breath and smiled. "Us."

## Chapter 12: Hooked on the feeling of him.

I heard a shuffle of feet close by me and my breath caught in my throat. I was worried about what he was going to say about it.

"What about 'Us' do you want to talk about?" The sound of his voice was a bit off, tinged with nervousness.

"Well I know we have been friends for a while, But then there was that amazing time while we were in bed and then again by the lake, for the most part on that last one. I just wonder where we stand with each other. I am going to be honest with you Rick, I really like you. Just wondering if you are the friends with benefits type or if you want more. I'm sorry but I don't know another way to put it."

My cheeks felt hot and my face was on fire. Thank goodness for the darkness or he would have been able to see how embarrassed I was.

I heard movement in front of me and then his hands on my face. "Wow, you know I never thought you and I would be sitting here having this conversation. I have been watching you for so long dreamin you would be mine. I know it sounds cheesy but as you are a blunt person, so am I. I like you too Mara and want more than anything to be the guy you come home to at the end of the day. Yes, I understand that you have kids and that you are a package deal. I wouldn't want it any other way. You are a strong woman to do it on your own and I understand that you are stubborn and headstrong, but I care for you no matter what. Down by the lake when I thought I was going to lose you it was all I could do to stay calm. I was losing the plot when he pointed that gun at you." His hand caressed my face as he kissed my lips.

My body moved of it's own accord, my arms wrapped around his neck, my body pressed to his and then the fire spread through me. I felt my body melt in his hands as I felt his touch in every corner of my body. When he moved away it felt like it was all too soon for my taste. I felt dizzy in such a good way. "Wow, that was amazing. Give me just a second to catch my breath here."

He laughed as I took a deep breath. "I'm sorry it is just, you are amazing and I miss you when I don't get to see you."

I got up off the chair and grabbed his hand. "How about we finish this conversation in side. It is a bit too warm out here for me. Not quite sure why that is though."

He laughed and took my hand as I led him into the house. I dropped the plate into the microwave before I led him to my bedroom. I heard the door close and smiled to myself. I sat on my bed and felt the bed indent beside me. I ran my hands over his arms and smiled as I felt goosebumps travel over his skin. I worked my way to his neck and moved him towards me for another mind bending kiss. He moved over and put his arms on either side of me and gently laid me backwards. I felt his hand roam under my tank top and moaned in pleasure, I felt my body move of its own accord and wanted to get rid of the clothes already. My hands moved down to his jeans and unbuttoned them. I ran my hand down in and caressed his hip with my nails.

His response turned me on even more. The animalistic growl that emanated from his chest was maddening. He quickly sat me up and took off my top, discarding it on the floor as his mouth met my chest. I slid his pants down as far as I could and caressed his skin. Each movement was maddening until we were both naked and he had me pliable in his touch. As he entered me I felt the dam of heat break in me.....

Hours later we lay tangled in each other's arms and I couldn't help but to smile. He held on to me so protectively yet gently. I felt safe in his arms. "You know if it is like this every time we are both going to end

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up in the hospital. I have to say though, I love how flexible you are, makes it so much more interesting."

I heard the laugh rumble in his chest. "You know I have to say that you are right. But the flexibility award goes to you. I didn't know someone could put their leg behind their head like that. You never cease to amaze me Mara, not ever. All I can say is wow."

I giggled. "Yes, well I can second the wow factor on that." I yawned and smiled. "I didn't think I was going to have problems sleeping before, I know I won't now."

"Maybe I should go so you can get some sleep." He moved to get up and I put my hand on his arm.

"No, I would like it if you stayed. If it doesn't inconvenience you at all. I would love some cuddle time if that is alright."

I felt the bed shift again and for a split second I thought he was going to leave, but once I felt his hands around my waist I sighed in contentment. "My dear I will stay here for as long as you need."

I laughed. "Does that mean that you will never leave then." I grasped his hand in mine and smiled to myself.

"If that is what you like then I won't leave, but I will have to go back home at some time if only to get some clothes and work." He laughed then. "Although I must say that I wouldn't be against being tied down so I have an excuse to stay with you."

I turned in his arms and placed my hands on his cheeks. "You don't need to have an excuse to be here Rick, I want you hear. You are an amazing guy and I feel like I am the luckiest person in the world to have met you."

He chuckled. "If only my ex wife thought she had something before she threw away five years."

I gasped. "That reminds me, we don't need to pretend to be engaged tomorrow. Dan's wife left him with the kids. I did invite him and his two sons over for dinner so I could answer some questions about single parenthood for him. Would you still like to come tomorrow night?"

He kissed me before he answered. "How about you and Dan have a talk that way he can understand. I think with me there it would be a bit of a distraction and he wouldn't open up the way he would if it was just you. I will meet you after though and maybe take you for a ride to the falls we found on the property, that is if you can get a sitter."

I laughed. "Getting a sitter is no problem. I have Georgia's neice who said she would be more than happy to watch them for me whenever I needed. I can give her a call tomorrow since Dan and I are taking few days off while we both sort out some things. He needs to sort out his life and I need to sort out what I am going to do about my doctors. If tomorrow I go in for the surgery it will be an outpatient thing but then it would be a week recovery in patches and sunglasses before I know anything. I know I am used to my blindness, but I am not used to having things over my eyes. It would annoy me to no end."

"Mara, you need to do what you have to do, but it can't hurt your vision anymore to try the surgery. When it's ready who knows it might help you to see the sunrise again."

I laughed. "It would let me see you again. I only got to see you for two months before everything in my life got turned upside down. Just the fact it is a possibility makes me happy, but I have learned not to get my hopes up. I take each day a step at a time and that is the best I can do Rick."

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He nodded against my forehead. "I know Mara my dear and I wouldn't want it another way. Get some rest hun, I will be here when you wake up."

I laughed. "Oh this is going to be a shock to Georgia. Well it wouldn't be the first time we have shocked her. Good night, I know I am going to sleep well with you here."

I cuddled up into his body and fell fast asleep. I felt so safe being in his arms, but I could feel a problem looming on the horizon of tomorrow, but I would deal with it when it came.

## Chapter 13: Out of his mind.....

I woke up alone in bed but the recorder was back on the bed with what felt like a wild rose. I smiled to myself as I hit the play button and heard Rick's voice.

Hey Mara,

Sory you didn't wake up to my arms around you but I got a call about a problem over on the ranch so I had to go. I miss you already and I can't wait to see you tonight. I promise I am going to bring you over something special to make up for it. I wanted nothing more than for you to wake up in my arms. Take care of everything you have to do today and I promise I will call at lunch time to let you know just how much I miss you.

Nope, I still miss you

Rick

I giggled at the message and moved into the bathroom to clean up. I had just gotten in the shower when I heard Georgia enter the bathroom. "You know I get here this morning and there is a redneck coming out of your bedroom half dressed with a silly grin on his face. Is this going to be an all the time thing because he scared the crap out of me. I gave him a cup of coffee and sent him on his way."

I laughed. "I don't know if this is going to happen a lot, but I wouldn't complain. Goodness knows I wouldn't come close to complaining. When do you leave to take the kids to daycare?"

She sighed. "We are leaving in about half an hour. I figure by then you will be leaving for work and we will give you a quiet few moments before you have to leave."

"I'm not going today. I need to get a bit of research done and I have Dan coming over with his kids so that he and I can talk about the whole single parent thing. I am then meeting up with Rick around 8:30 so if you could call Lotti and have her come watch the kids I would be grateful. They will already be in bed so she won't have to worry about anything."

"Wow, not going into work. How long you going to be home?"

I hummed for a moment. "I am not sure I think maybe a couple of days so I can get some of the research done that I need and deal with a couple of problems. Boss man won't mind. After everything that has been going on I am in need of a few personal days. Tomorrow the kids will stay home from daycare and I will take them riding with Rick and I. I think it might be time for them to spend time with someone other than us."

"Good idea Mar, alright well I will get them ready and we will be on our way. Your clothes are out for today. I figured you would like to look a bit more human than normal so I brought out your tank top and a pair of capris. I hope you like it. Your lace up sandals are by the bed as well so I hope you enjoy your quiet day."

"Thanks Georgia I appreciate that. I hope you guys have a good day. I think I can handle things for today, I at least want to try. Thanks again for taking the kids to daycare for me. I will be out soon because I have a feeling that Dan will show up early to talk to me. I actually expect him to be here in the next hour. He is always early. Now if you don't mind I going to enjoy the rest of my skin searing shower."

"Alright Mara, take care and remember not to burn your skin off."

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She laughed as she walked out of the bathroom leaving me to relax before the stress of the day got to me. It was another ten minutes before I got out of the bath and I was bombarded by my children.

"Bye bye mommy I miss you." Tori's beautiful voice made me smile.

"Bye sweetie you have fun at daycare today. I will see you tonight." I laughed as she tried to hug the air out of me.

"Bye Momma, bye." Teagan hugged me before he pulled me down to give me kisses. I loved the sloppy kisses and laughed.

"Bye baby, you two go bye bye and have fun today. Mommy will be here when you get home and we will go on the four wheelers and go riding alright."

"Tay Mamma" and "Otay Mommy" Filled my ears as I heard the steps leave the room. I laughed and closed the door behind them and got dressed.

I finished getting dressed and then got a cup of coffee before I activated my voice recognition for my computer. I sat down and started to find out the questions I would need to ask my doctor about the surgery when I called him in a couple of weeks.

I was listening to the page when there was a knock on the door. I paused it and moved towards the door with Molly at my side.

"Who is it?"

"It's Dan, sorry I am so early but I am driving myself crazy while the kids are in daycare and being in that damn house by myself is just driving me up the wall."

I opened the door as a sense of dread swept over me. I swallowed it down and smiled. "Glad to have you here. There is more coffee in the kitchen, I will be there in just a moment, I need to finish something real quick."

"Alright, I will make some snacks so that we can munch and talk. I could really use some of your good advice."

"No prob, just give me a few minutes." I whistled to Molly to keep her by my side. Something was odd about Dan and I couldn't place my finger on it. I walked back into my office and sat down to finish saving the questions when I heard footsteps approach. I whispered "On guard" to Molly as I kept up my pace to get it done quicker. I didn't want to be trapped. I heard the steps stop and Molly huffed out a breath to let me know there was someone there. I kept up with my work pretending to take no notice of it. I finished within a few minutes and then shut my computer down upset with myself that I didn't think to grab my cell phone and put it in my pocket. I got up and tried to move from the room but then I ran into Dan.

"Oh sorry, I didn't notice you there. You need to teach stealth. Excuse me, I need another cup of coffee."

I heard a rustle as he moved out of my way. I walked slowly and carefully to the kitchen knowing that Molly was on guard and I didn't want to startle her and give away the fact I knew he was up to something. I got to the kitchen and grabbed my coffee cup off the counter and poured more in. After I put the cup down I felt him move up behind me and pin my body to the counter. His head was by my ear and started to get scared.

## The light in the center of my darkness

"Dan, what are you doing. Stop, seriously. Let go of me. I know it hurts that she left you, but this isn't the answer. Let go Dan, please."

I felt the pressure of his body leave me and I took a deep breath before I moved over to the fridge to grab the creamer. As soon as my hand touched the door he pressed me up against the fridge and ran his hand over my stomach as he worked his way down. He held my hands above my head and the pressure he had on my wrists hurt. I cried out in pain and he became even more forceful. I took a deep breath and spoke three words.

"Molly take down."

I heard the growl leave Molly's throat as she grabbed him and pulled him off of me. I took ragged breaths and turned away from the fridge to face down as best as I could.

"What was in your mind Dan, how dare you attack me like that. Molly hold tight. You have two choices right now Dan, you can leave quietly or you can leave in pieces. How dare you take advantage of the fact I couldn't see you. Did you honestly think that I didn't know there was something different."

His breaths were ragged as Molly held him by his throat. I moved over to her and tapped her on her head lightly to have her let up a bit. "Dan is there anything you have to say for yourself?"

"For months you have been parading around like you are better than everyone. You shake your ass at me every chance you get and I know more than anything that you want me."

I let out a disgusted noise. "No, that would be disgusting, I trusted you as a friend Dan, I told you things about me that no one else knew and I did it because I trusted you as my friend. Dan I don't even come close to liking you like that. How dare you. Dan I want you to leave, I think I am going to get a new job. I don't think I could take being around you right now until you get your head on straight. Get out, right now GET OUT!"

I heard him get up and run towards the door just as my phone started to ring. It distracted me for a split second and he trapped Molly in the closet by the door and rushed back at me. I side stepped him causing him to sprawl on the floor. He came back at me and swung. I heard the air rush by my head and moved quickly. I knocked him off his feet and ran for my phone. I quickly answered it and screamed into the phone as Dan knocked my head into the wall. I was conscious for a few seconds as I heard him laugh before I felt myself slide into the deep water and I started to drown.

## Chapter 14: Thank you goes a long way

I woke up to the sound of beeping, and it was driving me insane. I felt heavy and sore all over, I tried so hard to move, but I couldn't lift my arm to wipe my head. I opened my eyes and remembered it didn't matter because I couldn't see anything anyway. It was then that I felt the tears run down my face. I felt alone and I didn't know how long I had been like this when I started to hear footsteps.

I listened around me and heard the steps stop right next to me. I was so scared, I didn't know who was beside me or what had happened after Dan had attacked me. I felt a hand graze the air next to me and I winced. All movement stopped for a moment before I felt a hand touch me. I started to scream at the top of my lungs worried that it was Dan come to finish me off. I kept screaming until I heard a familiar voice next to me.

"Ay quit it now Mara, you are killin my ears. You're fine, don't worry you are alright. I think you just scared the wits out of every person on this floor. Goodness knows Rick is looking at you like you are psycho."

I stopped screaming and started to breath heavily. I was only half paying attention until Georgia started in on the doctor. "Doc you know even if she was asleep you should have announced yourself to let her know you were there. It is something that you should know from all your years as a doctor."

I felt a hand on mine and jumped a bit until I heard his smooth voice. "It's alright Mara, don't worry anymore I am here and I won't be leaving again. I am sorry I startled you, but I have wanted to hold you for you don't know how long. When I heard you scream over the phone I thought I was going to go crazy. I got there and there was so much blood on the floor I thought you were dead. Dan wasn't there and no one knows where he is now, but as long as you are safe it's-"

"Molly, where's Molly. He had her locked in the closet. Is she alright, please oh please tell me she is alright. She had him pinned down until I was trying to get him to leave."

Someone hugged me tight. "She is fine, she was a bit bruised up but I promise you she is just fine and she is waiting for you to come home." The reassurance in Georgia's voice was what I needed to hear. I hugged her back hard so relieved that Molly was alright. It was then that I got a question in my head that scared me.

"Um, just how long have I been in here?" I heard the silence in the room and knew the answer wasn't going to be good.

"Well, I found about three weeks ago yesterday. You had extensive damage all over your body. he threw you around a few more times before I was able to get there. You have been in and out of conciousness for the past two weeks, but this is the first time you have actually said something to us. Every other time you have been too dazed or just plain out of it. I am so glad to actually see you better but..."

He cut off and I got scared. "Tell me, tell me what you aren't saying. What are you both trying to hide?"

I heard someone get up and I got nervous. "Jeez you two she needs to know. Mara, Dan managed to rape you as well. There was some damage and well. I really think that Rick should tell you the rest." Jack's voice carried through the room and I gasped.

I looked over at Rick so scared when I heard Georgia's voice. "We will leave you two to talk, there is a lot to talk about. We will come back later to see you again." She hugged me and then I heard two sets of steps leaving the room. I heard a shuffle from beside me and wondered what he was thinking about.

## The light in the center of my darkness

"Rick, what are they talking about. What did Jack mean when he said that you should tell me the rest?"

I felt his hand grip me tighter and I got scared. He took a deep breath and then sighed. "Dan raped you and in the process you miscarried a fetus about three weeks along. I think that was the biggest shock for me was that you were pregnant. I remember you said that you were fixed, well for lack of a better word at the moment. The docs can't explain it. I just didn't know how you would react about being pregnant or finding out about all of this. To be honest with you I was upset, very upset in fact not just for the fact that you lost the baby, but because it was part of me and you and I would have stuck by you. Through it all I would have stuck by you. Your boss has been down here a few times and he has talked to us and told us that you can go back to work whenever you are rea-."

My eyes filled with tears and I cried as it finally sunk in that I lost a child, one that I would never get to meet because of Dan. I way finally able to move and I brought my hands over myself and curled into the fetal position. I felt the pain in the furthest reaches of my body but it didn't compair to the dispair that was in my heart. Thoughts passed over me in waves and the loudest one was "He won't love you now, you know he won't love you now." It played over and over in my head as I lay there. At first I didn't notice the arms that wrapped around me and held me tightly as I cried in agony of everything that had happened. I cried for what seemed like hours as Rick held me tightly against him.

"How is it that you don't hate me after everything. How can you sit here knowing that our child died and you not hate me?"

He held me tighter and ran his hands down my hair caressing it lightly. "I don't hate you, oh Mara far from it. I couldn't hate you it wasn't your fault at all. I am not upset with you about anything, you had no idea to know that he had gone crazy. Mara if anything it makes me care for you more that you are alright. I thought my world was going to implode around me when I saw all that blood and I couldn't feel your heart beat. Please, let me help you get through this."

I sighed. "I, I need some time to think about a few things. This is a lot to drop on a person. I do want to know how my children are doing. Do you think that you could go check on them for me?"

He nodded against my neck. "Sure it is about that time where I go and feed them anyway. They are staying with Georgia, but she lets me help out with things when it comes to the kids. I am still not comfortable changing a diaper, but they get fed, bathed and put to bed every night by me."

I nodded. "Thank you for taking care of them until I am able to get out I will make it up to you I promise."

"There is no need to make it up to me Mara, I enjoy it and it has become routine for us. You don't mind do you?"

I shook my head. "No I am not mad, not in the least. Thank you so much for taking care of them while I am here. Can I get a hug before you go please. I really don't want to be alone, but they come first above and beyond anything else. I can't tell you how much it means to me that you are looking out for them and they aren't even yours."

He hugged me tightly and kissed my cheek. "Don't worry about it sweetheart, it isn't a problem at all they are great kids and I feel lucky to know them and you."

## Chapter 15: A long awaited talk.

I was in the hospital for four days after I woke up and I hated it. I was chomping at the bit to get home to my children and back to life but the doc was too mean to let me go. It was half way into the fifth day when the doc came in and laughed.

"You won't be bothering me anymore, I think it is time you get back home to your family. I do want you to see a therapist though, it will help with the nightmares that you have been having. You also need to finish out your antibiotics and do what ever you can to take it easy for a bit longer. Don't just jump back into work."

I laughed. "You know asking me to take it easy is a really dumb thing to do. I am a single mother of two kids, I don't know the meaning to take it easy. I also have to reacclimate myself to home and make sure that Molly is alright and still able to be of service or if I have to put her back through training."

I heard him laugh right next to the bed and I jumped. "You will still need to take it easy for a few more days. Your body is still healing after all that trauma whether you want to believe it or not. If you don't take it easy you will end up back in here and you won't be able to get out for a while do I make myself clear."

I giggled. "As clear as things can be since I am blind, but I understand doc. I will do my best to take it easy. that is the best that I can give you doc if you want honesty. If you don't, well then I will sugar coat it, lie to you and tell you that I will do everything you tell me."

He laughed then. "Alright, do you have a number of someone that can pick you up, I am not sure if you have your cell phone or if you know any numbers, but I am sure we can come up with something to break you out of this prison. Would that sound good."

I nodded. "I don't know the numbers, but I am sure that they left my cell phone around here somewhere. I honestly can't tell you what it looks like but it should either be near me or in the bag that Rick left here two days ago. Could you have someone check for me?"

I heard him move around and put something on the table. I heard the sound of a zipper and knew that he was looking for my phone. It wasn't long before the bag was dropped and I felt him grab my hand and place my phone in it. "Don't be on it too long. We have a lot of people in here on life support."

I nodded and opened my phone to press my voice button. "Dial Rick." I waited as the phone rung and rung until he answered.

Rick\* Just how did you find your phone?

I laughed

Me\* I didn't, the doctor brought it to me so that I could call and tell you that I am being released.

I heard him let out a shout.

Rick\* Oh you don't know just how happy that makes me. I will shower real quick, change and come get you. I can't wait to bring you home baby. The kids can't wait to see you either. They have been on about you non stop. Give me about 30 minutes and I will be there.

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Me\* I can't wait. I will call the nurse in so that I can get a shower and get changed so I will be ready when you get here.

Rick\* That sounds like a plan to me. I will see you soon sweetheart.

Me\* Alright my dear, bye.

I closed my phone and hit the nurse call button that was attached to my arm. I waited a few minutes and adjusted myself on the edge of the bed as I heard steps get closer.

"Ma'am I am entering the room alright. My name is Dana and I am your nurse today."

"Hi Dana, I need help getting into the shower and if you could also pick out some clothes for me, especially since I can't match them on my own, I would be so grateful. Doc said I could go home, but I would love to go home clean and dressed if that is alright."

She laughed. "No problem." She moved across the room and picked up my bag. "Is there anything in particular that you would like to wear?"

I thought for a moment. "Well, if there is a light sundress in there I would be happy. I know that my friend brought me my black flats so something that would look good with them. I hope I'm not being too much trouble. I hate not being able to pick out my own clothes."

"No trouble at all Ma'am, alright how about the multi-colored floor length halter dress and your flats. I will even do your hair before you leave if you like."

I giggled. "That would be wonderful. It has been a long time since my hair has had anything done with it other than be put back."

She walked over to me and put her hand on mine helping me to stand. She led me to the bathroom and handed me the clothes. "Take your time and hit the call button again when you are done and I will grab your brush and do your hair so you look nice. Goodness knows if a guy made me smile like that I would want to look good. You know he stuck by your side through it all, cried we don't know how many times and kept repeating how much he loved you and couldn't live without you. Now go freshen up."

I giggled as I closed the door and turned on the water. It felt so wonderful against my skin that a moan escaped my lips. I washed my hair and cleaned up before I dried off and got dressed. I felt so much more human and alive, the pain in my body had receded and I slowly made my way back out to sit on a chair in heat I could only take for sunlight. I hit the call button again and heard steps as Dana walked in. I heard her laugh as I relaxed in the chair by the window and hummed to myself.

"You know you have such a pretty voice, do you know that?" She sounded so pleased.

"It is one of the few joys I have left. Once I lost my vision, I lost a part of myself. I still have my hearing, but I won't get to see my children grow up, just hear it."

She ran the brush gently through my hair. "If you don't mind me asking, how did you lose your sight?"

I sighed. "Well it was just over two years ago and I had a tumor pressing on nerves and doing a lot of damage to them. If I didn't get it removed I would have lost both my hearing and my sight. Doctors thought that I would get both back once the tumor was removed, but I never got my sight back. I woke up in a panic that my

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world was dark and I felt so alone. I had gotten Molly shortly before so I put her through the service training and not only did she become my eyes, but an extension of me. She helps me wrangle the kids in the house when I need her to, she keeps an eye on them and warns me of trouble, she guards the house while we sleep and she helps me while I work."

"Work, what type of job do you do?" She sounded so intrigued.

I laughed. "Before I went blind I was a Camera Operator for the ABC Affiliate here, once I went blind I stayed with my job and just kept them in the dark about my situation. I made certain adjustments to my way of work and life that fit me just fine. My boss didn't find out until two days before the attack, the man that attacked me was my partner at work."

She gasped. "My goodness gracious that is horrible. They said that your attacker was close to you, but wow your partner. That must have been horrible."

I nodded. "I was scared, I had never felt so alone in that moment. I don't remember too much of it but what I do remember, he better hope that he doesn't cross my path again."

I heard her take in a breath behind me. "I'm sorry I know I shouldn't be crying, but it is horrible to have someone you trusted so much do that to you. I'm done now. Thank you for letting me do that. I have to say though that you are a strong woman, you came out the other side not wanting to be a victim like some women do."

I shook my head. "I won't let myself be a victim, not ever. I have everything to live for and I won't let anyone take that away from me. I am lucky that I was able to get that call out or else he probably would have killed me."

"I am glad too, I am glad you get to go home and get on with life. Some women just don't make it out the other side."

"She is much stronger than that, that is why I love her so much."

His voice was like honey and I smiled. "You're here. I am so glad you are here." I stood up and held my hand out. "Dana, thank you so much." She took my hand and I pulled her into me for a hug. "Thank you for everything, for letting me talk and for letting me talk about something I have held bottled up for so long."

She hugged me back and whispered in my ear. "You are more than welcome. Go home and enjoy your family. May your life be blessed with so much more happiness and joy."

I nodded my head against her and felt her pull away. I stood still unsure of where anyone or anything was, but still I smiled. "You look beautiful do you know that. Absolutely stunning."

I felt the blush rise in my cheeks. "Thank you, I don't feel much different though."

I heard his boots hit the floor as he stepped closer to me. He engulfed me in a hug and his clean scent hit me so hard that it shook me. "I love you too."

## Chapter 16: Coming home

Rick guided me out of the hospital and out to his truck and opened the door for me. We didn't speak the whole way to the truck but as soon as he was in the truck he grabbed me and kissed me deeply. I felt butterflies run through me as he tightened his hold on my back and pulled me as close to him as he could. I felt a wetness against my face and knew it was tears. I quickly pulled back and held on to his face.

"Rick, Rick are you alright?"

I heard him take in a deep breath. "Yes my love, you are coming home so I am doing just fine. I was so worried about you. All that blood and I thought you were dead. I thought I had lost the best thing that had come into my life. Please, please don't ever do that to me again. I know it wasn't your fault and I wish I would have stayed, I just had this odd feeling and-"

I put my hand over his mouth. "Breath Rick, I am alright and that is all that matters. It won't happen again, I promise I won't let it happen again. I will be ready next time and he won't get the chance to put his hands on me again."

I felt him grasp my hands tightly. "Move in with me Mara, stay with me so I know that you are safe, please."

I sighed. "Rick, right now I can't. I am used to my home and until I know what type of working shape Molly is in, I can't do anything. I don't know where my life status is right now and that scares me so much. Dan and I had a system and now that is out the window. I can't just sit around and do nothing, it isn't who I am. I want to give my kids the best and you know that I am too stubborn to take help from anyone. I need to see what the status in my life is before I start to change things. I promise I will give you a key to the place and you are always and I mean always welcome. Give us some time to see where we go and then we will see alright."

I heard him sigh. "Alright Mara. I worry about you but I can understand. It has to be hard for you right now with your world up ended, but know that I will always be there for you. No matter what and I am going to be there so often you are going to get sick of me. Those kids and I have bonded so well it's crazy. They are so much fun."

I laughed. "Yes they are. It is a shame that I can't watch them run and play, but Molly always made sure that they were alright for me. I just don't know what I am walking into right now and I am less sure of what my professional life holds for me. I don't want to have to train someone else on how to work with me, but if that is the only way to keep my job you can bet your ass I will do it. I like my independence and I won't let anyone take it from me no matter what."

He laughed. "Hey, down girl I got it. Alright I will take you back to your place and stay for tonight to make sure that you are alright, tomorrow we will talk to your boss and see what we can find out and then we will go from there. You have to rest for me today though alright?"

I growled and he started to laugh as he put the truck in gear and headed for the house. It was such a serene ride with the windows down and the wind blowing over my face. I felt so at peace in that moment and I loved it. I knew that the trauma was going to come back, but I was strong enough, I always had been. My past was riddled with pain and sorrow, I had learned to cope with it more than most would. I felt Rick grab my hand and I smiled. Not to mention that in that moment I had the most amazing person to help me through it all. As we came to a stop I heard a bunch of voices coming from a place a ways off. I stayed put as I heard Rick get out, the sound of his boots on the gravel and dirt made me smile even more. His steps were so sure and I knew that he would protect me.

## The light in the center of my darkness

"Mar, I'm gonna open the door for you alright." I nodded my head as the door opened and he took my hand to help me out.

He walked slowly as he helped me into the house. Each step was careful to make sure that I didn't trip. He helped me up the front steps and opened the door for me. All of the noise died down except for two voices that brought tears to my eyes.

I was bowled over by Tori and Teagan yelling "Momma". I hugged them tightly to me and I knew that my life was the way it should be in that moment.

## Chapter 17: Ugg!!!!!!

It felt great to be home and back into the arms of those that I loved so dear, but it wasn't all love and roses. I was still jumping at the slightest sound and scared that my phone would tell me that it was Dan calling me. I was scared that he was going to show up at work and hurt me even more. My boss came to see me in the days after I got home and spoke to me about taking a paid leave for a month to get back on my feet and then he would find someone else to work with me, a female that was able to understand what I needed of them. I sighed knowing that I was going to have to take leave whether I wanted it or not.

I had so much going on and I was worried about so much that I didn't even hear my phone ring. the kids were at daycare and I was by myself. I tried so hard to keep myself busy, but I never felt safe. I snapped out of my thoughts when I heard a banging on the door. I ran to the kitchen and grabbed a knife before I walked over to the door.

"Who is it?" My breath was short and my heart was pounding.

"Mara, it's Rick. You didn't answer your phone and I was wondering if you were alright."

I sighed and opened the door. I felt the air rush as he quickly moved towards me. I felt myself engulfed into a breath stopping hug and I moaned with a bit of pain. "Ow, Rick, calm down I am alright I promise. I just have a lot on my mind. I just... I don't... OH FOR FUCK SAKE!!!! I can't keep jumping at every noise I hear. I am getting so sick of this. I am scared that the next noise I hear is him coming through a window, or trying to bust down my door. I can't live like this Rick, I just can't."

He held me tightly. "I told you that you could move in with me. You have held out on me for two weeks now. Please, please. Mara I don't like seeing you like this. I can't take seeing you hurt, hear you cry in your sleep. When are you going to relent and do what is best for you and those kids. I love them as much as I love you and I would do anything for all of you. Relent already and do what is best. I can't stand this anymore."

I sighed. "You don't understand how hard it is going to be to learn a new place. To have to wonder if someone is going to move something and I can end up in the hospital again. The kids would have to readjust and that isn't good for them either. I don't know what to do. I really don't Rick. I am scared and I don't mean your average run of the mill scared, I mean to the point that I want to move back home and not stay here anymore."

I felt myself get released and then he held my hand and pulled me towards the direction of the door. "Put on some shoes, I got something for your ass. I won't have you scared anymore so we are going to work on something."

I felt a little scared. "What do you mean we are going to work on something? You are starting to worry me Rick."

He laughed. "If you won't move in with me and I am damn tired of you being scared, I am going to find a way to teach you to shoot. I know that you knew how before you went blind, but you are going to learn again no matter how I have to teach you. You are going to be a crack shot again, no matter how long it takes."

I laughed. "Yes my dear, let's try to attempt the impossible. Try to teach the blind woman to shoot, how interesting huh? Yes I used to be good, but that was when I could see my target. What do you want me to do now just shoot at random things to scare them away?"

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He laughed. "Down girl, I have just the person who can teach you. Trust me it won't be easy but it can be done and it will because I am tired of your stubborn ass jumping at your own shadow, no pun intended. I will teach you and you will learn or I will hoist you over my shoulder and send movers in here to get you. Don't think I won't."

I moved down his body as I felt my legs give out from under me. "I don't want to be scared, but I don't like the unknown. I hate the fact that I am blind and can't take care of myself. DO YOU THINK I LIKE LIVING MY LIFE LIKE THIS? Do you think this is what i wanted my life to be. Not seeing my kids grow up. Not be able to go four wheeling with them, not getting to see my mother's face or wach your eyes sparkle as you laugh. I hate it, HATE IT Rick."

I felt myself gathered up in his arms. "You know what we are going to do what we have to do to get your vision back, but I want you with me so much. I want to know that you are safe. I will be a caveman if I need to, just to make sure that you and those kids are safe. Now don't force me to put you over my shoulder and carry you all the way over there. I won't give up on this Mara, I want you in my life no matter what the hardship is."

I laughed. "Caveman on me huh? And just how would you do that? Carry me around and make sure that my feet never touch the floor?"

He laughed. "Nope, they will never touch the floor just the bed and the easy chair when I prop you up there."

I giggled. "You act like I already said Yes."

He held me tightly and stood up with me in his arms. "I'm not giving you a choice Ma'am so Ugg."

## Chapter 18: Split Second Decision

I laughed as he carried me out of the house and placed me in the truck before he grabbed my hand and handed me something. I giggled as I felt my flip flops placed in my hand. The door closed and I heard him as he walked around the truck and moved to the other side. I heard the door open and he got in. The truck roared to life and I felt the vibration move through me like a freight train. I smiled to myself and laughed internally at the memories that I missed so much.

I felt his hand creep into mine. "So tell your caveman what you're thinking."

I giggled. "I was thinking back to the days I spent in Ormond Beach at the Iron Horse enjoying Bike Week and Biketoberfest. It was so much fun to have the dance floor to myself when Liquid Soul played my song. I lost myself in the music and I could feel it though every part of my body. When you started up your truck I got the same feeling and it was amazing. I miss going, I miss dancing and seeing old friends there. You would fall in love with J.B. Walker and the Cheap Whiskey Band. They are so amazing and of course David Allan Coe plays there every year and who doesn't like his music. Those were the days. The days before kids, well mostly anyway. I did go to Biketoberfest the year before we left and Mom watched the kids for me. I loved it, so much fun, great memories and the music. Ugh, you don't know how much I would love to go there again. To dance to the music that just fills you up with freedom."

He laughed. "I didn't know you were so wild, going to a bar and dancing. I bet you got hit on a lot."

I nodded. "Yeah, but I never paid attention to it, and why should I. I loved to dance and that was it I didn't go there to meet people, I went for the friends I made in the bands. I have to say that the pictures I have with JB Walker are some of my favorites. Those were great days, such great days. I wish things could be the way they were, but I guess every time I dwell on it the longing gets worse. I like my life, but I don't love it yet. I guess I will have to get there."

He grasped my hand tighter. "I told you before Mara that we are going to do whatever it takes to get your sight back. I don't like to see you like this baby and I hate the fact that you have doubts about your life. Weren't you supposed to talk to the doctors about an experimental surgery for your eyes?"

I nodded again. "Yes, well they said they would contact me when it was ready and still I haven't heard a thing. I get tired of waiting ya know. Now I have to train another person at work so that they can work with me because bossman doesn't want fire me. He better choose someone good because I won't work with someone inflexible." I took a breath. "I'm sorry I hate being idle. I miss work and I miss everything else. How is Molly healing up over at your place?"

He laughed. "I am surprised you remembered her the way you were going on, but I guess you really had to get all that off your chest didn't you."

I nodded. "Yes, it has been weighing on me. A bit too much I think, and I know that this is going to sound horrible but I am scared that since you can play with them more than I can, my kids will love you more than they love me. I am so scared they are going to think I don't love them because I can't play with them as much as they want me to. I feel like a failure Rick and it is driving me crazy. I can't take it anymore. My family pacifies me and tell me that I am doing fine that I am a great mom considering my disability. The word that gets me the most is disability. I am not crippled, I can still do things for myself, so why is it that my family loves to throw around the word disability. I get so sick of hearing it that I stopped talking to them. Georgia takes them to Tifton for me for my mother to pick up. She always tells me that my mother was sad I wasn't there. So I call my mother to talk about it and all I hear is disability this and disability that. I get so sick of

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hearing and her not letting me explain that I don't want to hear it anymore. It is like I am not just crippled, but that I am a baby now."

I felt the truck lurch to a stop and jerked a bit in the seat. "Is that why you don't talk to your mother. Mara Lynette Hodges, how dare you do that. Your mother, sister and father are all you have left. What if something happened, like what happened with your brother, you would never forgive yourself. You need to make your mother listen if it is the last thing you do. In fact how about we take the kids down there as a surprise to her. That way not only does she get to see the kids, but she gets to see you and you two can hash out what you need to in person instead of over the phone."

I thought back, back to the time I lost my only brother and the words I never got to say. I nodded again. "Let's do it. How about when the kids come home we feed them and go. It is only a six hour drive and I want them to meet you as well. Rick, thank you. You don't know how much it means to me. You are right I shouldn't waste a moment. I am going to call my mom and let her know. I don't want her to be banging the ass of my dad when we pull up and they are like bunnies I swear."

He laughed and put the truck back into gear. I was happy, happier than I had been in a while. The amazing man in the seat beside me was everything to me and I wanted so much to be with him. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone and hit the button. "Dial Mom." I smiled as the line started to ring.

Mom\* Hey sweetie how are you?

Me\* Hi Momma, are you busy?

Mom\* No not at all, what contemplating what to do for dinner is all.

I giggled.

Me\* How about adding four to that menu. Is dad home this week?

Mom\* What are you talking about?

Me\* Well when the kids are done with daycare in about two hours, I figured that we would come for a surprise visit. I have missed you.

Mom\* I have too, your dad is home for a few more day so he will be happy. Are you going to be able to bring their four wheelers?

Me\* Sure, got a truck to put them in.

Mom\* You said four, is Georgia coming down with you?

Me\* Nope, Momma I have someone special that I would like you to meet. You might have seen him in passing, but he is very special to me and I want you and dad to officially meet him.

Mom\* You mean that cutie that wouldn't leave your bedside. He wouldn't talk to anyone either. So what is he to you.

Me\* He is my boyfriend. Very special to me indeed.

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Mom\* Well then I will tell your dad, he will be happy to see you as well. I might invite your sister over as well so the kids can all play together.

Me\* That would be great, I have some things I would like to speak with you all about if that is alright with you.

Mom\* More than alright we will see you tonight sweetie.

Me\* Alright mom bye.

I hung up the phone and smiled as we continued on to Ricks. I looked in his direction and giggled. "So I guess that this gets me out of shooting lessons for a bit huh?"

He laughed. "For a couple of days, but don't think that you are going to get out of it. I bet your dad would agree with me on this."

I nodded. "Yeah I know he would, but that is alright I am fine with it, the idea has merit. Let's go pack your things and then go back to my place so we can pack things for the kids, give them a bit of a snack to hold them over and then be on our way."

He grasped my hands and placed them on his face and I felt him nod his head. "I am glad they only had a half day of daycare today. We should be able to make it there by six."

I giggled. "Yep and then you are going to get the twenty questions from my family. I hope you like to drink cowboy because I know at this moment they are restocking the liquor cabinet and buying some beer just for me."

He sighed. "Well, thank goodness that I love you huh?"

I grabbed him up and held him tight. "You know we have some time before we have to go back to my place so how about I save a horse and ride a cowboy?"

## Chapter 19: expect the unexpected

It was an hour after arriving at his place that we finally got out of the bed and he started to pack. I felt him put my clothes next to me and I smiled to myself. He chuckled as he moved around the room.

"You know if I didn't know any better Ms. Hodges I would say you have an afterglow going."

I laughed. "You know Mr. Shelly, if I didn't know any better I would say the same to you. Now then why don't you get packed so we can be there for when the kids come home so we can go."

I felt his hand in mine all of a sudden and I jumped then I felt my face heat up. "I'm sorry Mara, I didn't mean to scare you. You know there are times you act so normal that I forget."

I laughed. "That is alright. I like it that way, it just takes me by surprise when someone acts normal around me instead of tip toeing like I am going to break."

He led me from the room and I felt the strap to his bag and smiled. I felt the sun on my skin and reveled in the warmth of the outside and just how great it felt. I heard him open the door to the truck and I helped myself in and closed the door. I felt the sun disappear and knew he was leaning on the door. "I will be right back, I am going to give them a few things they need to know that way things will run smooth while we are gone."

I nodded. "That's fine and I love you but you are blocking the sunlight hun. Take your time but hurry because we need to be there for when the kids come home."

I heard him laugh as he walked away. I hummed to myself as I put my feet up on the dashboard and basked in the heat of the sunlight. It felt wonderful and the slight breeze made it even more blissful. It felt like seconds had passed before I heard the driver's side door open and the truck start up.

"Sorry it took so long baby, I guess I had a few more instructions for them than thought. I hope you weren't bored."

I shook my head. "No to me it felt like seconds, I must have fallen asleep it felt so good out here. I am so sorry."

He laughed. "No need to be sorry Mara, I didn't even notice. I felt bad for making you wait so long. Now off we go back to your place so that we can get the kids ready to go and I promise to help you pick out clothes, especially since I want to take you for dinner while we are down at your folks place."

My head shot up and I grasped his hand tight. "Anywhere I want to go to dinner? Please oh please?"

He squeezed my hand. "Yes, anywhere you want to go to dinner. I would do anything for you baby, I love you."

I jumped up and down on the seat like a little kid. "I can't wait, you won't need to wear anything special, just bring your appetite and love of seafood."

"I-I am scared now, my goodness. Either way whatever it is you like. Now we are pulling in now and it looks like someone is here. I don't recognize the vehicle. Do you know a silver car?"

I started to shake. "It wouldn't happen to be a silver prius would it?"

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"No, no it isn't a prius, it is more like an SUV, a Chevy Trail Blazer."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know that one. I wonder who it could be."

I heard Rick open the door to the truck and get out. He came over and opened the door for me and I heard a voice on the porch. "Hey guys I was wondering where you were. Mara Mom said she couldn't pick them up so I did it for ya."

I sighed. "Thanks Lotti I appreciate it. Thank you for bringing them home, but we are going to get ready to go. Tell your mom that we won't be in town for a few days. We are all going to go down to my parent's place."

We walked up to the house and Lotti opened the door for us. "Would you like me to pack the kid's clothes while you guys get things together. That way you guys can get on the road quicker."

I nodded my head. "Sure pack them five outfits each and put together a full diaper bag for me. Rick and I will go pack my clothes before we get the four wheelers into the back of the truck so we can go."

"Alright will have that done in about five minutes. Anything else you need for me to do?"

I nodded. "Could you make them a snack to hold them over until we get there?"

"Sure thing, you get done what you need to and I will take care of the rest. Are you going to take Molly with you?"

I gasped. "Oh shit, Molly. I wanted to check on her and I got sidetracked by a caveman dammit."

I heard Rick laugh from my bedroom. "I will race over and get her, she can fit in the truck as well. I don't want you to be without her any longer than you have to."

I heard the door open then close and then his truck roared to life. I went into my room and sat on my bed and waited for Rick to get back when I heard steps approach me.

## Chapter 20: A scary thought

The footsteps were familiar and I felt a chill down my spine as they came closer to me. He was gone, they told me over and over again that he had gone. I felt a hand on my shoulder and shot off my bed and into the corner screaming at the top of my lungs.

"Mara, Mara it's me Lotti. Are you alright? I was coming to tell you that I was done with the kid's things and that Rick was back with Molly."

I was breathing heavily and I could feel the tears streaming down my face. How could it be? steps sounded just like his. Her gate, the pressure of her steps sounded just like Dan's. I stood up and shakily stepped out of the room past Lotti and straight out the front door into the sun where I sank to my knees. I put my head in my hands and started to cry. I felt do scared yet so relieved at the same time. It was when I felt familiar arms around me that the tears really began to fall. In a cascade of fear I gripped onto Rick tightly. I felt his hand run down my hair comfortingly but the shaking didn't go away. Something was off, something was way off and I couldn't tell what it was.

"Mara, are you alright? Lotti said you freaked out on her when she put her hand on your shoulder. What happened baby?"

I shook my head, my forehead rubbing into his shirt. "The steps, it sounded just like him. Same exact steps, I thought he came back. I was so scared. I, Rick I can't stay here. We need to go somewhere, anywhere, but I can't stay here anymore. Let's go, grab the car seats and let's go."

He hugged me tighter a moment before he let me go. "Alright, I will have Lotti get the car seats for us, we will go pack your clothes and you can hug Molly a bit before we go. Have you talked to Georgia lately?"

I shook my head. "Not really. She lays my clothes out for me and says good morning before she takes he kids, but other than that we really don't talk. I know something is wrong there as well, but she won't talk to me about it. I don't know what else to do though. So let's get things done Rick, I want to go."

He grasped my hand and led me towards the house. As we passed Lotti he spoke quietly to her and I heard her steps go towards the door as he led me towards the bedroom. I sat on the bed as he whistled and my heart lept up into my throat. I heard nails click on the lenolium floor as they came close to me and the I felt a massive furry head place itself in my lap.

"Molly, oh my Molly." I slid down onto the floor and hugged her close to me and cried into her fur, glad that she had healed. I held her like that until I heard Tori and Teagan enter the room. I let go of Molly and held on to them tightly before we all walked out the door and piled into the truck and headed down to my mother's. It was definately going to be a trip I wasn't going to forget.

## Chapter 21: intro to family and friends

The drive down to my mother's place was mostly quiet other than than the constant chatter of the kids. Part of me still didn't feel right and I didn't like it in the least. I wondered how it could be that she could walk just like him, be just like him. It played in the back of my mind the whole six hour trip down. When the truck stopped I heard the squeals from both my children and my parents and put on a brave face for them both. I waited until I heard the truck door open. Molly started to growl, but the redneck drawl made me smile.

"Oh stop you big shit. I want my daughter, not you." He grasped my hand and pulled me out of the truck gently and placed me on the ground. I giggled as he put his arm around me and led me towards the house. I stopped for a moment and stuttered.

"What about the kids? I need to help get them into the house Dad, please?" He laughed.

"Your mom and that guy are getting them, don't worry everything is alright." I felt him pull me in the direction of the house. "You know that your sister is here, but we figured to surprise you you with a few more people as well. It has been a long time since you have been home. I hope you don't mind, I know it is going to be a lot of commotion, but I promise tonight it will be quiet tonight. I think we will initiate the new guy into the family."

I laughed then. "I take it ten rounds of bullshit to go with ten rounds of crown. I can't wait to hear how this goes. By the way Daddy dearest his name is Rick and you will call him as such. I will give him the run down on how to play at some point today, now what have you gotten me into?"

He laughed. "We invited Crys, Dan, Spaz and a few other friends. They have all missed you so much. I promise they aren't going to attack you all at once, they all promised, but they do want to see you. Now how about we get you in, get you a drink, wrap that guy back around you and get that mut of yours back at your side. The kids will have more than enough playmates here to play with. Now come with the adults and talk for a while, we have someone to keep watch on the kids."

I heard a squeal and a scream and knew who it was in a minute. "Spaz, Crys holy crap. I missed you so much." They came over to me slowly and hugged me tightly. I hugged them back and laughed. "It is so good to see you, well you know what I mean. How are things going guys?"

Crys laughed. "Jay misses her aunt and cousins so much that she cries. What else am I supposed to say, it is same ole same ole chica. I was just making up the crying thing by the way. We do all miss you though."

Spaz laughed. "Alright right Crys, back off hun. "Things are great Mary is getting so big and Dan comes around to see her all the time even though we aren't together anymore. I know your co-worker's name was Dan so I am kind of worried about how things are between you two. That is why he has stayed back. If you would like to see him, let me know and I will go get him for you."

I nodded. "Things aren't different between him and I because of what went down so you can bet I want to see him, well talk to him. That is unless he wants me to roll him down the hill in a trash can again."

That sent everyone into fits of laughter. It was hours later when everyone finally cleared out and I was exhausted but the night was far from over. My family hadn't had a chance to really get to know Rick yet and he had to pass the ten for ten test my father was going to give him.

Hoo boy it was going to be a long night.

## Chapter 22: sisterly discussion

We sat down on the back porch, my head on Rick's shoulder as we spoke to each other. He laughed as I explained the rules to bullshit and he looked at me oddly.

"Alright Mara, explain it to me slowly now, it was hard to understand with you mumbling so fast."

I giggled. "Alright here we go. you are going to dole out the whole deck and put them in number order, it makes it so much easier. You are going to go in order and lay down one, two three or four of the number that you are to play. I will play a round and show you how to play that way you get the gist of it. I just need you to put my cards in order for me and run me through which ones are which. DAD GET YOUR ASS OUT HERE AND PLAY ME A ROUND. BRING ME A DRINK WHILE YOU ARE AT IT PLEASE!"

Rick started to laugh at me and I turned my head at him. "Do you always do that to get your way?"

I giggled. "No, but it is easier than getting up and walking around a place I don't remember since they remodeled."

"Ah I get it, well then alright. Enjoy the game and I promise to pay attention."

I laughed. "I can bet you will have a shot glass named for you by the time we leave. I know you two will get on so well. Now watch and learn."

I heard the door open and the sound of laughter fill the empty space around me. "You know it isn't fair that you are going to play first round. Your ears are much more keen than the rest of us and you can tell when we are lying."

I laughed. "Don't worry I won't give your secrets away. Now pour that crown that I hear on ice and pass out the cards."

It took a while to get everything set up and my parents left us alone while Rick went over my cards with me a few times until I had them down pat. I felt bad for slowing down the game but my family was nice enough to understand. They came back out when I knocked on the window and we started the first round.

My dad poured a shot and I heard it put in front of me. I grasped it off the table and sank it before we started to play.

"Dad dealt so mom you go first." And so the game commenced, my mother started with ace and we wound our way around the deck. I laughed as I caught them in turn. I smiled and turned towards the smell of Rick's intoxicating cologne. "Do you get the hang of it?"

He laughed. "Yea, I got it, but I bet you won't be able to spot when I bullshit."

I giggled. "Give me one round and then I will tap you everytime you bullshit. I bet I can catch you every time."

He laughed. "What do I get if I win."

I lost it in laughter as I heard a shot put in front of me. "IF and that is a big if we can't discuss that there in front of my parents. I don't mind hearing about sex, but my PARENTS don't need to know about my love

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life."

I heard a chair fall over beside me and two groans. The laughter that filled the porch was Rick's and I put my hand over my mouth to stifle a giggle. "I was talking about that Mara, I was thinking dinner and a movie. Is your head always in the bedroom."

My father laughed hard. "Her brain isn't in the bedroom, it is in the gutter. It has always been in the gutter."

I heard my mother laugh. "No her brain left the gutter a long time ago and graduated to the sewer. Of course being my daughter that isn't surprising. Now how about round two, we will line up the shots and start. Rick why don't you shuffle and deal and we will put you to the test. We have to see if you are good enough for our daughter."

I giggled and thought for a second. "Momma where is Mel, I thought she was going to stick around so I could talk to her."

My mother sighed. "She didn't think you would want to talk with her so she left."

I nodded my head. "Momma, I will be right back, I am going to go grab my phone from my bag." I stood up and whistled Molly to my side. I put my hand on her back and smiled. "Lead the way girl."

I got close to the door and Molly warned me. I opened the door and walked inside. "Lead me to the table molly, I need my purse. Can you get it girl." She started to move and I felt myself bump into the table. I heard a jingle and felt cloth placed into my hands. I reached inside and grabbed out my phone. Pushed the button and said my sister's name. The line rang and then she suddenly picked up.

Mel\* Hello

Me\* Hey, I didn't get to talk to you while you were here. I missed you girl.

Mel\* I missed you too, but I figured after the last talk we had, you wouldn't want to talk to me.

Me\* Mel, look it doesn't matter. Things happen, things are said. We are sisters and shouldn't that be what matters. I would really like to see you in person.

Mel\* Not funny Mara come on now. Why do you still say that when you can't see?

Me\* Because I am not an invalid. I live on my own, work and take care of the kids. Why can't you see this Mel. I am doing great on my own.

Mel\* I understand that, but goodness can't you see how hard it is for all of us to see you like this. You are trying to live normal but how can the rest of us see you as normal now.

I laughed.

\*Me\* The same way you did before. I bet if I was born like this it would have been so much different. If you would like come see me tomorrow, I will be here hanging with mom and dad.

Mel\* Alright, I will see what I can do. Talk to you later sis, love you.

Me\* Love you too Mel.

## Chapter 23: confessions and surprises

With Molly's help I walked back outside and into silence. I sat down in my chair and waited, but still nothing. I sighed. "I know you guys were listening in, so what do you want to say?"

I heard an intake of breath from my father. "It's hard for us to treat you normal since when you were in the hospital you couldn't do things on your own and now you insist that is the only way you want to do things. We forgot how to treat you normal after those first six months. It is really hard to retrain yourself."

I stood up quickly and moved over to the card table. I knew I was going to stumble over things in my way, but I didn't care. I slid my hand across the table and grasped my shot glass before I reached over and grabbed the crown out of the ice. I heard a chair slide back and footsteps move closer and I frowned.

"Dad, sit your ass down this isn't something I haven't done a million times since Michael died. I think I have poured so many shots that the liquor just magically finds its way there now." I undid the lid to the bottle and poured myself a shot. I listened close to hear when the glass was full, then sunk it before I put the cap back on the bottle and replaced it. "You guys don't seem to understand, I have worked so hard to get this far. I do most things by myself and just because something happened with my co-worker doesn't mean I am going to hide in a corner. I want you guys to help me feel normal. Even if I am to stay like this for the rest of my life, I want to be as normal as possible because it helps me to know that I am doing something right with the kids. It is hard to be a good mother to the kids since there are somethings that I refuse to relearn because it would make me feel like I can't do things. That is why Molly is trained the way she is. She sticks with the kids when they are four wheeling, makes sure they stay safe while I am busy and rounds them up for dinner when I need them inside. She isn't just a guard dog, she is a babysitter, a rancher and a friend."

I sat back down and felt a hand on my thigh and I smiled. My mother's voice permeated the air. "I didn't know it was so difficult for you. The few times that I was at your place I thought you were just putting on a show for us."

I patted Rick's hand before I got back up. "No mom, ask Rick. He's asked me to move in with him, but it is hard since I don't know my way around his place." I turned in Rick's direction. "I want to though he makes me so happy. Now if you guys excuse me, I am going to lay down."

Rick put his hand on my and pulled me down to him for a kiss when he whispered in my ear. "Good night love, I will be in bed soon. Would you like me to take you?"

I shook my head. "No baby and don't worry about it. Enjoy your time with my family, they are going to have a lot to talk to you about. How about tomorrow we go to the range and you can start my instructions. I don't think my dad would mind letting me use his card."

He laughed. "How about we wait till we get back to the ranch? Let's enjoy the time with your family as a vacation before we go back into the rush of everything."

I nodded into his neck. "Alright, I love you Rick." I stepped away from him and moved towards the house. I heard Molly get up and I smiled to myself. "Off duty girl. I can get there I promise. Good night all. Love you mom and dad."

I opened the door and walked inside. I held my hand out in front of me as I reached into my back pocket for my guide. I got to the door of the room without incident when I heard a voice from across the house.

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"Well damn girl it has been a long time. Thought you was avoidin us girlie."

## Chapter 24: A lot of yum

That southern drawl cut through the air like a sweet perfume. I squealed and turned towards the sound. I walke carefully towards the front door and engulfed my uncle in a bear hug.

"Uncle Charlie I missed you so much. When did you get here, I didn't even hear the truck."

He held me tightly and lifted me off the floor and spun me around. "Girl I thought you was never gonna come home. Why is there some guy on the porch? Did you bring him witcha?"

I giggled. "Uncle Charlie you be nice, do you understand me. His name is Rick and I like him so you behave yourself or no more cookies."

I heard him sigh. "Looks like Shadow out there likes him." I laughed at my dad's CB handle. "I am gonna go grab a drink off the porch and say hello before I go to bed. Good night sweetie." He kissed me on the head and moved around me. I smiled and moved back towards my room. I put my hand on the door for a moment before I entered.

There were so many memories in the house that they all flooded back in a movie of laughs, pain and sorrow. I opened the door and walked into the room. I sat on the bed and thought of some of the great memories of my brother and sister and of the pain and loss when I heard the door open. I froze for a moment until I heard Rick's voice.

"You have an interesting uncle there baby. My goodness, putting him together with your Dad was fun to watch. I snuck away to spend time with you. Your mom gave the the whole 'go make sure she is alright' thing with a wink. Not quite sure what that means."

I giggled to myself. "That was the be quiet if you are going to play wink. I know that very well, hence the whole check on me thing. Do you think you could help me find my PJs? Just in case you aren't in the mood so I can get some rest."

I felt his arms go around me and his lips against my neck. "Not in the mood are you kidding have you seen yourself lately. You... Oops, sorry. You are gorgeous Mara, sweet, kind and independent to a fault. How could I not love you or not be turned on by you? I mean really. Now how about we forget about clothes for right now huh?"

I laughed and ran my hands under his shirt. I heard him take in a sharp breath and I smiled to myself. I ran my hands over his tight abs and bit my lip. I felt his hands on my shoulders as he gently laid me back on the bed. I felt my shirt bunch up right under my breasts and his lips pressed against my ribs. My hands went to the back of his head as my body arched into him. It felt so good as he worked his way up and took my shirt slowly off. He then kissed my collar bone, my neck and then my cheek before his wonderful lips found mine. I wrapped my arms around him and melted as his body covered mine. I cound feel the rough denim of him pants on the inside of my thigh and my breathing came in gasps. His hands worked to unfasten my bra as I moved my hands down to undo his belt. He groaned into the kiss as I unbuttoned his shirt and slid it slowly over his arms.

I smiled as he gently bit my lip and and unbuttoned my pants. my hands roamed over his skin in a loving caress as he lifted me off the bed and cradled me to him as he sat up and placed me in his lap. I ground my hips into him as I wrapped myself around him and kissed him deeply. I felt one of his hands glide down to my hip as the other took off my underwear and threw it goodness knew where. I got down on my knees in front of

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him and put my hand on his chest as I slid off his boxers and threw them to the floor. I moved back and straddled his lap, the hard length of him pressed against my inner thigh. I threw my head back as he kissed from my collar bone to my chest where he sucked and bit gently which caused me to gasp. I felt the heat in my body become stifling and I wanted so much to have him impale me but his kept up with such tender teasing.

"Keep that up and I am going to take control away from you." I moaned deeply into his ear.

He took his hands from around me and I got confused for a moment until I ran my hands up his chest and tried to place my hands around his neck and I felt his hands placed there. I smirked and pushed him back against the bed. I kissed my way from his hips all the way up to his neck. He was panting as my hands wrapped around his engorged penis and with each kiss I stroked him until his moans blended together. I felt his hands go around my hips again and he squeezed tightly as I rocked up against his hard cock.

"Please, please." He begged over and over again. I raised my hips up and filled my hot body with him. Pleasure exploded through me as Rick lost control and flipped me onto the bed. His movements were slow and sweet, it was amazing. I felt myself turn to gold under his touch. As he sped up my moans blended with his and I felt the heat in body rise until I thought my body was going to explode...

## Chapter 25: A discussion

A couple of hours later we lay in each other's arms and I kissed his chest. I was so happy to be with him and lucky that he loved me enough even with everything that was going on. I propped myself up on my arm and smiled. "Rick, I want you to know how much I love you. You are the sweetest guy I have ever met and I am so lucky to have you in my life. I wonder what it is I have done to deserve someone as wonderful as you. I know that I have been a bit of a stubborn ass and I am sorry, I- I don't really have an explanation as to why, but what I told my family is the truth. More than anything I want to be with you, all the time. I don't know how to thank you for being as wonderful as you ar-..."

His lips met mine and I wrapped my arms around his neck and held him close. I felt him chuckle into the kiss and I smiled. He pulled back and smiled at me. "Now Mara if you do that we will have a repeat of earlier, and I am not sure if my fragile body could handle so much loving from such a luscious woman. You amaze me Mara, just when I think you can't surprise me anymore you do. I really love you so much, more than I have loved anything in my life and I want you to know that I will do whatever it takes to have you in my life."

I felt tears running down my face as he held me to him. "You know I would really like that. I am worried about the kids though, if we move again I am not sure how they will adjust. We moved from Georgia's into our own place and to move them again might do more harm than good. I promise you Rick I am not trying to be stubborn, but it is the kids I worry about. You have bonded so well with them and I don't want you to just leave. Rick, I am so scared, so worried that you will one day leave us and they will hurt and their hearts will break, that I will also hurt and my heart will break."

He held me so close and so tight that the world felt right. "I won't leave, I won't ever leave you Mara, not you or them. Ever, and I mean Ever Mara. I love you so much more than I could ever explain. When I thought I lost you I lost my world. I took the kids home with me and kept them with me when I could. When I wasn't with them I was with you and those were the only two places that I wanted to be. Georgia came over to my place once and started to scream at me that I didn't know what I was getting in to but I didn't listen and I am glad I didn't. She was angry that I was taking you away from her and she went crazy. When she woke Tori up I shut the door in her face and put her back to bed. I love them because even though they are a part of you they are their own people and that makes them beautiful and unique. You guys are all amazing. I do have a confession though."

My heart started to race and I could feel pain in the pit of my stomach, but I steadied myself and took a deep breath. "What would that be?"

He laughed. "I have loved you for a while now. When we were friends and would hang out I was trying so hard to cover how much I cared for you. When you lost your vision I wanted so much to be there to comfort you. Mara you stole my breath the moment you introduced yourself to me, just how odd it was that you were so upbeat even though the odds were stacked against you. You amazed me every day with how you just kept pushing on through things that just kept coming at you."

I laughed. "When I had such a great friend in you, I knew I could turn to you if I needed to. Every time you hugged me, you took my breath away. I can still see your face clearly even though my world is dark. You have no idea what I would give to see the faces of my kids, to see your face again, and that of my family. I want so much to be back to normal and do the things I love to do. For that matter I would just like to dress myself."

He held me tighter and I could hear the smile in his voice. "When we get back I want you to call those doctors and ask them what the hold up is. Who knows maybe that will move them a bit. Tell them you aren't getting

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any younger. I want you to be nothing but happy. Now my love let's get what little rest we can, goodness knows your parents are probably going to have some things planned for us."

I nodded my head into his shoulder. "Probably, but they will give us some time to do something for ourselves. So how about you get out your swim trunks and we will steal off to the beach for a little while, just you and me. I will show you a little bit about the way that I grew up."

"Alright, sounds good to me. Tomorrow afternoon we shall steal away and relax in the ocean my love."

I curled up tighter into Rick. "Goodnight my dear, I love you now sleep before I don't let you sleep at all."

He turned my head and kissed me deeply. "Goodnight love."

## Chapter 26: Badass boys

Morning came quicker than I would have liked and two little bundles of fun decided it would be fun to jump on mommy and Rick. They bounced on the bed and fell on us. Rick automatically grabbed Teagan and started to rough house with him. I grabbed Tori and wrapped her in my arms and showered her in kisses while she giggled at me, and that was how we were found.

"You know if I didn't know any better I would say that the earthquake last night came from this room." My uncle said from the door with laughter in his voice.

I smiled. "Well Uncle Charlie, you wouldn't be completely wrong. How can I help you this morning?"

I heard him groan. "Well my dear I was told to escort you to breakfast as we are stealing your playtoy over there and your sister is going to come see you and pick up the kids. You are going to hang out with your mother for the day."

I put my head in my hands. "I swear to every Goddess I can think of Uncle Charlie if you and Daddy go crazy I am going to make you two look like tinker toys, do I make myself clear."

His roar of laughter filled the room. "Knowing that you could actually do it we will behave. Just because you said that we will behave. We were going to be nice anyway and take him to some of the mud trails around here, but now I think we'll take him just so you don't nag him to death."

I growled at my uncle causing him to laugh again. "That is my little hellcat girl. Now get out of bed and come eat before me and biggin eat it all."

I pretended to pout. "You would starve your own niece and nephew, how could you Charles Montgomery. I understand that you two roadhammers gotta eat when you can but how could you do it at the expense of your favorite niece and nephew? Huh?"

There was silence for a moment and I got out of bed and walked to the door and hugged him tight. He hugged me back and whispered in my ear. "Don't make me tell your mother what you were doing last night. It might make her blush."

I stepped back and laughed hard. "Oh Uncle Charlie even at her age my mother could teach me a few things, now be a dear and take me over to our bags so I can change the kids then we will be in."

"I will do you one better sweetie, get comfortable on the floor and I will bring them to you, that way you don't have to injure yourself."

I growled to myself but nodded my head. In that moment I knew I was going to have to have the same talk with him that I did my parents. It wasn't long before I heard a bag dropped onto the carpet in front of me. I opened it up and got fresh pullups for them and had Rick help me with the clothes. We were all dressed and Rick even helped me to braid my hair back. He led me to the table where I sat down and then heard a plate dropped in front of me and got a kiss on my head.

"Morning Daddy, how did you sleep?"

He laughed. "Well, it would have been better if all the banging would have stopped before 3am."

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I blushed. "Sorry Daddy but he is hard to resist. Anywho, I heard from my favorite uncle that you guys are taking Rick to the trails? That is a long trip and we just did a six hour drive yesterday."

I felt arms around me and a kiss planted on my neck. "It is alright hun, it will give me a chance to bond with them. That way you and your mom can spend some much needed time together. Goodness knows you two haven't had a lot of it in the past two years. Now shut up, eat your damn breakfast and lemme hang with the guys. Too much estrogen here for me."

I started to giggle until I felt the tension in the room. I stood up and walked over to my parents carefully. "Calm down guys he was playing, goodness knows who wears the pants in this relationship blind or not. Now calm down, there is no call for raised hackles. Daddy you be good to my guy or I will string you up on a trout line and use you for gator bait, understand?"

I heard my mother laugh and knew that the situation had blown over. I hugged my dad tight and then went back to scarfing down my breakfast with a single minded intensity. Great sex will sure make you hungry.

## Chapter 27: Mel

The guys left not long after breakfast and my sister arrived not long after that. I was sitting on the counter laughing with my mother as we worked on the green beans for dinner. My sister walked in with my nephew and I smiled at the sound of his voice. I slowly lowered myself off the counter and moved to the entrance to the kitchen. I felt myself engulfed in a hug from my knees down. I bent down and hugged my nephew tightly and gave him a kiss on his cheek.

"Hey little man, I missed you guy. How are you?"

"Good. Missed you." His words were so much clearer than I remembered, and it made me smile more.

I put my hands on his shoulders and smiled at him. "Can you stand still for a second little buddy I want to see how much you have grown."

I ran my hands over his face and felt the differences in the shape. My eyes got wide at how tall he had gotten in the time I had been away. I smiled again and hugged him tightly. "I love you sweetie. Sorry Aunt Mara was gone for so long. I will come back more, I promise."

"Kay." He ran yelling for Tori and Teagan and the noise level in the house rose three fold. I felt a hand on my shoulder before my sister hugged me tightly.

"I have missed you Mara, so much." I heard a catch in her voice and I hugged her close to me.

"I missed you too Mel. I am so sorry it has taken me so long to come home." I held her tighter to me and smiled, I finally felt home at last.

I heard her sniff as she pulled back from me. "I am going to take the kids for today so you can go shopping with mom, but I want to spend time with you tomorrow so mom is babysitting for us both."

I nodded my head. "That would be good Mel, you and I have a lot to talk about and a few things we still haven't talked through."

She sighed. "You're right we do, but for now have fun with mom today and enjoy. You really deserve it. Rick is a great guy, I got to talk to him for a little bit yesterday and he was amazing. I mentioned your name and his eyes lit up. Hang on to him girl and I hope he makes you happy."

I nodded. "Oh Mel, he does, he really does. I just wish I could give more to him than I am now."

She patted my shoulder. "You are who you are and that has always been enough. Now get going you and mom don't have much time."

I felt her quickly move away from me and I stumbled a bit, but regained myself quickly and moved back towards the kitchen to counter. I moved to finish the green beans to find they weren't there anymore. All of a sudden the house was silent and I felt disoriented. I placed my hand on the counter and took a deep breath, I put my head down between my legs to get the nauseated feeling to go away.

I heard a gasp and felt arms surround me. "Oh baby I am so sorry. I didn't think, I am so so so sorry."

I held up my hand. "Momma don't worry I just got a bout of vertigo. It happens, just breathe Momma."

## The light in the center of my darkness

I reached into my back pocket and noticed that my guide wasn't there. I felt lost for a minute until I heard claws on my mother's tile floor.

"Molly, on duty. Can you take me to the room to get my socks?" I felt Molly start to move and I stayed in step with her perfectly. She had me at the door and in the room in no time and in. I grabbed my socks out of the bag I left by the bed and stood up. "Molly, front door and grab my shoes."

I waited for a few moments and then felt them dropped in my lap. I leaned over and kissed Molly's head before I put them on. I gasped as I thought, I tried to remember if I brought Molly's service gear so I could take her with me into the shops my mother wanted to go to.

"Molly get your gear." It was worth a shot in my eyes, if anyone would know where her things are it was Molly. She came back a few minutes later with her halter and short lead for me to put on her. I normally didn't do it because I felt like it restrained her too much, but she knew that out in public in new places there was a need for it. I harnessed her up and attached her short lead to her and then went back into the living room.

"Mom, Molly and I are ready to go." It didn't take long before I felt my mother's hand on my shoulder.

"Good so am I, so let's hit the Mall." She laughed as she walked out the door. I let go of Molly's lead and smiled.

"Molly get my things please then head out." I felt my purse in my hand first and put it on my shoulder next came my keys and my cell phone just slightly wet. I wiped it off on my pants and attached it to the holster I had put onto my purse. Molly and I then walked out the door where she proceeded to guide me to my mother's truck. I opened up the door and let Molly into the back seat before I hopped in myself. I forgot just how tall my mother's truck was and the climb was horrendous but I made it with a bit of effort.

We were off then, a 30 mile trip to the mall of horrors to do the one thing I really despised... Shop.

## Chapter 28: Too beautiful to describe.

When we got to the Mall I got out and grabbed Molly's short lead and smiled as she waited patiently for me to grab my things. I put everything in place and then took a step to let her know that I was ready. She guided me through the parking lot and into the Mall I hadn't been in since long before I left. My mom sighed and then laughed.

"You know we really need to get you a new dress love, you don't have any new ones that I know of."

I laughed. "Not like I can see myself in it Momma. What does it matter if I have a new dress or not?"

I heard her huff. "I don't get to spoil my kids anymore and today you are getting a new dress whether you like it or not now, let's go. I want to find something that is beautiful and sexy at the same time, something that screams "I am young and beautiful no matter what you think."

I laughed. "If it will make you happy Momma, I will do it, but note the displeasure at this alright?"

I heard her clapping and jumping up and down and I giggled. She took me from store to store and nothing I felt seemed right to me. We finally left the Mall, our task unsuccessful. I felt the truck lurch and a sudden turn that almost sent me toppling over into the door, all the while my mother was apologizing.

"I'm sorry, but I forgot about this place. It was opened about six months ago, it is a beautiful dress shop. I bet we could find what you need here."

I rolled my eyes. "Alright Momma, I did promise. I will check it out with you, but if we don't find anything we are done, I am tired."

My phone rang and my voice ID told me it was Rick. I smiled as I answered.

Me\* Hey baby how are you?

Rick\* Those are some great trails. Anywho I called to ask if you would go have dinner with me tonight?

Me\* Um sure. Anything I should know?

He laughed

Rick\* Dress real nice. Your Dad told me about this beautiful place that over looks the ocean and I know you won't be able to see it, but I know you and the salt air.

I giggled.

Me\* Well lucky for you my mother was taking me to buy a dress then huh?

Rick\* So it is my lucky day. Well listen I need to get some things done before tonight, but I promise I will pick you up at six for dinner.

Me\* Six sounds great Rick, I love you and I will see you then.

Rick\* Alright baby I love you too.

## The light in the center of my darkness

I hung up the phone to my mother laughing hysterically. I followed the sound of her voice and smacked her gently in the arm. "Alright Lady what the hell is going on. You take me dress shopping and now I am going out to dinner with Rick. What do you know?"

I heard her gasp. "I don't know a damn thing. I just like you to have nice things since you never know when you will need them. Now how about I get you a few dresses to try on?"

I shook my head. "I want to pick them by feel, please. I want to have a choice. Just tell me if it isn't the right color for me. You know what colors I will do."

She laughed. "Alright start at one end and work your way where ever and we will go from there."

I moved around the store with one of the women who took the dresses that I liked. I was half way through the store when I felt the most beautiful dress. I could actually picture myself in it. I told the woman to take it straight to my mother to check.

I heard a gasp from across the store and then my mother calling me. "Mara, try it on, please, I want to see it on you."

I nodded, took the dress and let the woman help me into the dress. It was a perfect fit and I felt like an exotic princess in it. I allowed the woman to lead me from the dressing room when I heard gasps from all over the store. I put my head down and moved back towards the dressing room when I felt a hand grab me.

"Mara don't move. My goodness you look absolutly stunning in that dress. I think that is it. How do you feel in it?"

I slowly spun and felt the fabric caress me. "I feel like an exotic princess Momma, I love this dress. What about the color. Does the color look alright on me."

She laughed. "Mara dear, I think that dress was made just for you. We will take it and go home and get you ready. We only have a few hours before Rick comes to pick you up. Do you trust me to get you everything you need?"

I nodded. "Of course Momma. You do that and I am going to go change out of this. Thank you Momma, thank you so much."

It wasn't long until we were back at the house and my mother had me sitting on a chair in the bathroom and she was working on my hair and nails. I felt like I was getting royal treatment and when I stepped into the dress I felt complete. My mother grasped my leg and slid my shoes on just as the doorbell rang. She handed me a long slender wallet and ushered me out the door. I heard the front door open and Rick's voice, which made me smile.

"Sorry I am running a bit late, was trying to get everything... Settled. Wow Mara you look absolutly stunning love." I heard his cowboy boots hit the floor and I smiled. He grasped my arm gently and spun me around.

I blushed as he turned me around. "Do you like it?"

I heard his intake of breath. "Yes more than anything, I can't even begin to describe how beautiful you look right now. As I said you always find a way to surprise me. Now shall we go, I want you to myself for a while."

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I smiled and nodded. "Yes, let's go. I am intrigued to know what brought all this on my dear."

He laughed. "You will just have to wait and see."

## Chapter 29: An odd proposal

The trip wasn't far and I could smell the sea air, the crisp fresh scent that I had grown up knowing. I smiled as the truck came to a stop and he quickly moved to open my door. I giggled as he helped me out and walked me cautiously up the stairs and into the restaurant. I smiled to myself as the hostess greeted us.

"Welcome to Blue at Topaz, how may I help you?"

Rick grasped my hand a little tighter. "Yes reservation under Spencer."

"Yes, sir table for two on the balcony that overlooks the ocean. Right this way sir." He slowly guided me through the tables and mazes of people. I clung tightly to him afraid that at any time someone would pull out their chair and trip me. He never let go of me and I was so happy about that. As we reached the table he pulled my chair and slowly guided me to it. I sat down and nodded to him. I heard his chair pulled out and giggled as he scooted it noisily towards the table.

"Your server will be with you momentarily. Thank you for choosing Blue at Topaz." I heard the retreat of her heels and smiled.

"You know for all the years I have lived here, I have never been here. I would have loved to have seen it."

He sighed. "The walls are a deep sea blue color with reflected lights off them making them look like light reflections under the water. There are gold, silver and green accents everywhere, but it all pales in comparison to you my love."

I blushed scarlet as he grasped my hand. The meal had come and we ate and talked about everything and anything that came to mind no matter how weird it was. I felt myself let go of the fear that I had bottled inside and smiled.

"Rick, I have to confess something. I know I have said it already, but I want you to understand that I am serious. I want to live with you, to be with you always."

He quickly pushed his chair back. I smiled as I heard him move around, until everything around us went silent. I got worried about him and called out "Rick" to him.

"Here love, there is something I want to tell you." His voice was a little off and I wondered about it.

"Tell me, you mean ask me?" I was frantic that I had read him all wrong.

"That will come my dear, but first there is something that I have wanted to tell you for a while. You are frustrating, stubborn and pigheaded."

I thought I was going to cry right then and there, but I felt him grasp my hand and I heard a laugh in his voice. "But I wouldn't love you if you were any other way. Mara, the first time I met you I was so afraid that you would be as stuck up as you were beautiful. I was so glad that you weren't and you are such a beautiful, down to earth, kind and caring woman. I couldn't imagine my life without you Mara. I want to ask you Mara Hodges will you do me the honor of being my wife and making me complete?"

I smiled as the tears fell down my face. "Yes Rick, I will. More than anything I would love to." I felt him put a ring on my finger. It felt heavy in weight but I smiled and got up as he straightened and kissed him

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passionately. It was the happiest moment in my life.

<http://www.polyvore.com/mara/set?id=29644550>

## Chapter 30: Peaceful lake interlude

After dinner he took me for a walk on the beach and it felt so wonderful, the sand beneath my feet was so familiar, so like home.

I felt his hand tightened on mine. "Did you have a great night my love?"

I smiled and blushed. I had an amazing night Rick, I love you so much. But, I can promise you that the night isn't over yet. You and I have one more place to go and I know you will like it. Do you have your GPS with you?"

"Of course I do my dear, what are you taking me?"

I giggled. "Just enter the address as I tell you sweetheart and trust me."

I gave him the address and prepared for a forty five minute drive. He turned on the radio and my favorite song was on. I closed my eyes and lost myself in the music and started to sing along with it. I felt so relaxed, so elated that I didn't notice that he was clapping. The sound startled me and I blushed and turned away.

"No, Mara that was beautiful, I loved it. You should sing more often, your voice is like honey. Can you sing another one for me?"

I giggled and turned the track on the CD. I heard the familiar notes to the song and smiled to myself.

Evanescence - You

The words have been drained from this pencil  
Sweet words that I want to give you  
And I can't sleep  
I need to tell you  
Goodnight

When we're together, I feel perfect  
When I'm pulled away from you, I fall apart  
All you say is sacred to me  
Your eyes are so blue  
I can't look away  
As we lay in the stillness  
You whisper to me

Amy, marry me  
Promise you'll stay with me  
Oh you don't have to ask me  
You know you're all that I live for  
You know I'd die just to hold you  
Stay with you  
Somehow I'll show you  
That you are my night sky  
I've always been right behind you  
Now I'll always be right beside you

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So many nights I cried myself to sleep  
Now that you love me, I love myself  
I never thought I would say this  
I never thought there'd be  
You

My voice rang clear through the truck and I smiled to myself when the song ended. I didn't hear a sound from Rick and I started to get worried. All of a sudden I heard a snuffle from beside me. I reached quickly for his hand and smiled.

"I didn't know I sung that badly." I started to giggle.

I felt the truck come to a stop and I got worried. I heard Rick unbuckle his seatbelt and quick as lightning he was across the bench seat. He grasped my face in his hands and kissed me deeply. "My goodness baby, everyday. Everyday you show me so much of yourself and each new part of you surprises me and makes me love you more."

He undid my seatbelt and pressed my body to his. His arm went around me and pulled me as close as we could be. I moaned into the kiss and grasped on to him tightly. I could feel my body heat up and I started to unbutton his shirt. His skin was hard and smooth under my hands. I gasped as I felt a raised patch of skin over his heart and I raised my face to his."

"You got a tattoo?" I smiled

"Uh huh, but if you keep that up I am going to want you right here and now. I don't think the dress would survive it."

I giggled, then I advise you to get back into that drivers seat and finish the drive, we can't be more than ten minutes from there. I have no restraint right now Rick."

I felt him reluctantly pull away from me and the truck went back into gear. I smiled to myself and stretched out as much as I could on the seat and waited for us to reach our destination. I smiled to myself as I knew the place so well.

I must have been lost in thought for the truck came to a halt again and I heard Rick get out. I smiled to myself as he came over to me and helped me out of the truck. I took off my sandals and put them on the floor board and slowly pulled him with me. I knew exactly where I was going and I felt on top of the world. I led him to the edge of the lake and then slowly unpinned my hair. I smiled to myself as I shook my long tresses loose before I felt him come up behind me. He wrapped his arms around me tightly and kissed my neck, I leaned back into him, my hands grasped the legs of his pants as he gently started to nip at my neck.

I playfully pushed him away and turned around. I faced him as I unzipped my dress and let it fall to the ground. I heard his intake of breath as he tried to close the distance between us. I put my hand on his chest and started where I had left off unbuttoning his shirt. I smiled as I slowly let it fall to the ground. I ran my hands over his skin and bit my lip as I felt his hardened muscles. I ran my fingers lightly over the top of his pants before I reached for the button on his pants and slowly took them off.

He moaned as my fingers brushed up against his skin. I slowly slid back up his body and started to kiss my way from his chest to his neck. I felt him go down on his knees in front of me and hold me tight. His hands moved from my legs up to my back and he undid my strapless bra. As his hands moved back down my body

## The light in the center of my darkness

he took off my panties and put them on the ground. I grasped his hand and led him down to the water. I heard him laugh as we stepped into the warmth of the water. I quickly slipped away from him and deeper into the water. When he caught up with me I wrapped my legs around his waist and kissed him deeply. His hard cock pressed against my body and I moved one hand down to stroke him as one hand moved around me to hold me and the other slipped between our bodies and he started to slowly caress me.

Oh my body lit on up like fireworks on the fourth of July and his breath became ragged. I melded my body into him and his hand moved around to hold me in place. I smiled into the kiss and impaled myself upon him. His hold on me tightened and I felt his head roll back. I started out agonizingly slow, each movement pressed me harder against him. His hands cupped my ass and he tried hard to gain control but I smiled before I kissed him again. I worked myself over him and felt him fill me, each movement was a new wave of pleasure and heat into my body. He then stole control from me, he moved faster and harder, pumping my body down on his hard cock. My body rocked with the pleasure and I felt the orgasm build. He grew even larger inside of me, his ragged gasps for breath, teeth on my neck and I felt us explode together. He held me tight against him as the convulsions of pleasure moved through us.

Talk about magic. I had never felt as wonderful as I did in that moment.

## Chapter 31: The weight of the world

We made it home well after three am me covered in his shirt and my clothes in my hands. We were as quiet as could be as we snuck into the room. I was greeted with a cold nose to my hand so I petted Molly before I moved over towards the bed. I felt around on the nightstand and finally found my hair tie. I put my hair up and crawled into bed when I felt a small body already there.

I nearly jumped back and screamed. I put my hand over my mouth and took a deep breath before I went back towards the bed and felt the body of my daughter Tori in the bed. She took a deep breath and rolled over. I slipped into bed and wrapped my arms around Tori as I snuggled her against me. I felt the bed move and Rick's arms went around me making me feel so alive and safe. I loved him more than I ever knew was possible. I closed my eyes and fell asleep to him humming the song I had sung earlier....

Tori stirred in my arms, but I couldn't make myself move to wake up with her. I heard whispering around me but paid it no heed. I felt the bed shift as I heard a knock on the door. I put a pillow over my head and moaned as I rolled over. Two nights with little to no sleep and a lot of activity made me so sleepy that I just didn't have the energy to get up. All of a sudden the room was silent except for the sound of Molly's breathing on the chest at the end of the bed. I smiled to myself as I closed my eyes again and fell back to sleep....

When I finally awoke I smiled to myself and stretched out. I heard a panting next to me and I put my hand out for Molly. She nudged my hand and put something soft over my arm. I sat up and felt the fabric. I giggled to myself as I got up and stripped down then wrapped a towel around myself. I moved into the hallway and quickly into the bathroom for a quick shower. One thing that had never changed at my mother's house was the spare bathroom. I dropped all my things down on the side of the sink and started the bath.

I sank into the water and felt it envelope me. I sighed with relief and let it wash over me. Things were wonderful in that moment and I never wanted them to end. I stayed in the bath for about an hour before I got out and got dressed. I wistled as I left the bathroom and called Molly to my side. I had her guide me into the living room where I stood in the middle of the floor and listened to what was around me. Outside I could hear the kids playing and squealing so I went that way first.

As I opened the door I heard a bunch of voices surround me and Tori and Teagan's wet bodies assulted me as my feet hit the porch. I giggled and hugged them back.

"Are you two playing in the sprinkler by chance?" I heard giggles and heavy footsteps come from the side of me.

"Of course they are. We needed to distract them while we put some pieces of the deck together." My Dad's voice rang clear throughout the back yard.

"Why was Tori here when we got in? I thought that Mel was taking them for the night?"

My dad came and put a sweaty arm around me. "Tori didn't want to be away from us so she started screaming up a storm. Mel asked us to come pick them up since they were keeping Layton awake. We didn't mind. I didn't know she snuck into y'all's bed. I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "No dad it wasn't a problem at all. Just a shock that was all. Now get back to work, don't leave my fiance to do it all."

## The light in the center of my darkness

He laughed and walked away. For once it felt the weight of the world was off my shoulders and I couldn't have felt any more elated.

## Chapter 32: Remembering

All too soon we had to return home and part of me was dreading it. I loved spending time with my family and getting to hear their voices. As soon as we walked in the house I hit the machine and started to set things down as I heard the footsteps of the kids and Rick enter. One message caught my attention and stopped me in my tracks.

"Hey Mara this is Dan, I wanted to apologize for everything. I know that I turned into a real ass and I should have taken care of you instead of hurt you, but for so long I watched you, bent my will to you and I wanted you to do a bit of giving yourself. Seems like even in that aspect I had to take it from you. You didn't even think to look my way, when you could see and when you couldn't. I don't know if something about me repulsed you or what, but I guess that in the end your little self righteous ass got what you deserved. That backwoods hick won't want you after what I did to you so I hope you enjoy your ruined life alone. Oh and by the way I hear that my sister has been helping out over there. Such a gentle soul she can be, until someone messes with her."

I felt myself fall to the ground. Pieces of the puzzle started to click together in my head and I shivered. Lotti was his sister. How could I have not picked up on that? My brain went into overdrive and I felt my breath coming short. It was so much more than I could handle in that moment and I jumped when there was a knock on the door. Rick went to open it as I worked to catch my breath. I heard whispered words and knew that something was wrong. I pushed myself up off the floor, gained my composure and moved towards the front door. As I got closer I heard it then and I had to keep my heart from beating out of my chest. It was her, she had showed up not long after we had and I knew that something was wrong. I walked up behind Rick and placed my hand at his back.

"Lotti, is everything alright?" I tried my best to sound concerned as it seemed that was what she wanted.

I heard her snuffle and I put my hand out for hers. "It's Dan, he, well he has gone missing. He left me a note saying that it wasn't enough anymore and he couldn't live his life. He was going somewhere to end it. I am so sorry to bring this to you but I don't have anyone else. My aunt won't talk to me and seems to have fallen off the face of the planet and now to top it all off I am going to lose the only close family that I have. I, well I don't know what to do Mara."

I patted her hand and moved outside to sit on the porch with her. There was no way I was going to let her inside the house with the kids. I turned to face Rick and sighed. "Rick hun, can you call the doctors and reschedule my appointment. I know they said they wanted to get me in immediately for that surgery, but I want to make sure that Lotti is alright."

At first he didn't respond and I got really nervous. "Sure hun. How about we reschedule for tomorrow. I can understand and I think they will too. I will bring you two drinks, it got hot real quick today didn't it?"

I nodded and went to sit on the porch. Lotti sat slouched over and I couldn't tell at that point if her problem was real or not. I didn't care though, there was a chance that this woman could kill me and I was going to be

## The light in the center of my darkness

on guard. Her quiet sobs broke my heart. She had been watching my children for a while now and they loved her so much. I became worried and I felt things change around me.

"You don't seem to understand the hold you have on my brother. It is odd to me that he would leave his beautiful loving wife for a stuck up, crippled bitch like you. The fact that he is going to kill himself over you, now that is ridiculous. Compared you his wife is a super model, yet he decided that he wanted you. Ugh you disgust me and I should have taken you out when I had the chance. Now I don't know what to do. Georgia won't talk to me, my own aunt for goodness sake. She knew nothing about what I was planning, but she distanced herself once I came into the picture. It was like she knew. She hid things on me, things I had put into place here to hurt you. She backed away from you because we are family. That is why Dan wanted you, he saw you over the years and wanted nothing but you. You, you you you you. What is it about you Mara that just makes people want you so damn bad. Me, well hell I want you to, I want you dead."

I felt my heart leap into my throat and knew that it was my time. I felt her put her arm around my neck and pull me closer. I felt memories pass through me, the day my daughter was born and the look in her eyes. How it felt to hold my son for the first time. The laughter and tears, good times and bad. I could feel something sharp against my neck and knew it was it. I took a deep breath and said what would be my two final words.....

## Chapter 33: The shocker

"I'm sorry." The pressure against my neck didn't increase, yet it didn't disappear either. I was scared but all of a sudden the pressure was gone as was the presence beside me. I heard struggling and movement from nearby before the presence was back. I sniffed the air and noticed that it wasn't the same presence as before. I quickly jumped up and started to run before I was pulled back.

"Don't struggle Mara, I just want to talk to you. I am sorry about what went down. I don't know what I was thinking, I don't know what came over me. You trusted me and I completely let you down."

I pushed against him. "Let me down. LET ME DOWN!! ARE YOU KIDDING ME. THAT IS A MILD UNDERSTATEMENT DAN. I WAS IN THE HOSPITAL IN A COMA DAN. LET ME DOWN OH DAN THAT WAS SO FUNNY."

He grasped me harder and I screamed out. "Mara. I am serious. I know that I can never make it up to you but you have to believe me that I never wanted to hurt you. My sister had no right to try and kill you. I am sorry for that as well. She is a very protective sister and thought with you gone I would be alright, but if you died I would have killed myself as well. I love you Mara, more than you could ever understand. I have dreamt about you for years and wanted nothing more than to hold you and love you like Rick does now."

I yanked back as hard as I could and heard my shoulder pop. I grasped it and moved away from him. "Dan, you took my kindness and mistook it for weakness. You don't know right now what I could do to you and not feel bad. I trusted you with everything and you threw it away. Take your psychotic sister and get the hell out of my life. I don't ever want to see you again. Cross my path and I will find a way to kill you where you stand. Do I make myself clear?"

He hugged me tight to him while I tried to wriggle out of his grip. I then felt him thrown away from me and the sound of bone hitting bone. I stood there for a moment just to make sense of everything before I moved.

"Rick, enough. Let him go. It isn't worth it." I felt a hand on the small of my back and held him tightly.

"Are you alright Mara?" The worry and panic in his voice shook me to the core.

I nodded. "My shoulder hurts a bit and might need to be put back in place, but I am alright. I thought for a moment there I was dead and I couldn't tell you I loved you one last time."

He held me tighter to him. "I love you Mara and I won't let anyone take you away from me. I was on the phone with the cops. I am so sorry I left you alone with her. I can see the mark on your neck and baby I am so sorry. I should have been there, I don't ever want to lose you Mara."

## The light in the center of my darkness

I held on to him. "You won't lose me Rick, not ever. Now let's get back inside to the kids and you can tell me the amount of colored damage we will have to repair."

He chuckled. "How about we go inside and I check out the damage and you call the doctor and start to pack your things. Remember you did promise to move in with me."

I laughed. "Of course I remember love. Just like I agreed to marry you. Now go check out the damage and I promise to make the phone call."

## Chapter 34: some new info

The cops arrived about two minutes too late. Dan and Lotti had gotten away and I was left there bruised and scared. Rick held me tightly until I pulled away from him and walked off. I had had it with the stress in my life. I walked into the woods and felt my way to my secluded area. It was a place I had found when I had first moved in and now it was mine and mine alone. As I reached there I sat down and started to wring my hands. I could feel the depression start to set on me, the pain that I pushed into the back of my mind. I couldn't live this half life any more. I couldn't live without my sight and I didn't want to anymore. Either the doctors were going to come up with something or I would find a way myself. I wanted to see my children grow up, to be able to see the look in my husband's eyes when he sees me in my wedding dress and I was to the point where I would stop at nothing to get it.

I felt around on the ground and found a branch. I hefted it and started to beat on a nearby tree. I used all my strength to beat that tree until I had no strength left in me. I fell to my knees on the ground and put my head in my hands. I had finally had enough, and it wasn't my family that pushed me, but myself. I sat there for I don't know how long before I heard a familiar voice screaming my name. I looked around in the direction it was coming and quickly wiped my eyes. I moved quickly through the woods and closer towards my place. I didn't want anyone to find the little spot of mine. As childish as it was, it was my only place to be alone away from it all. All of a sudden the yelling came closer.

"Mara, please Mara where are you?" Georgia's worried voice sounded from about a hundred feet behind me.

I took a deep breath. "Here Geo, I am right over here. I figured you weren't talking to me because of everything that was going on."

She grabbed my hand. "That wasn't it. They were family and I was ashamed of them. I should have stepped in sooner and I am sorry that I didn't. You have always been there for me and at the first shot for me to repay you I turn my back. When Rick called me and told me you just walked off I got so worried. Mara, you mean the world to me and I don't know if I could ever forgive myself if anything happened to you."

I took my hand back snatching it out of her grasp. "You not only turned your back on me, you drew the lines quite clear that even I can see them. Don't worry about it Geo, I will get myself home, but maybe you should get back before the cops think you are in on it too. There is part of me that thinks you are. You know if I didn't know any better I would swear that the reason you came out here was to finish me yourself. I have always felt something off about you Georgia Lynn and now I think I know what it is. So I advise you to step back and disappear before I do tell them you were in on it and tried to kill me. You are just a psycho as the rest of your family."

I heard the crunch of twigs as she stepped forward. I stood my ground and clenched my fists at my sides. I was mad and I wasn't going to back down anymore. I took a step forward and heard a hesitation in her step. I smiled. "That's right Georgia I am not putting up with shit anymore, now you have two choices, you can be a good girl and leave or I can stomp you where you stand. I am done with the games, the lies and the betrayals. All I want is a happy life with my guy and my kids. Why is it that you have something against me anyway, what have I ever done to you?"

She took in a deep breath. "Do you know that six months after you got here while I was having sex with my husband he called me your name. He wanted you, they all want you and I just don't get it. Dan's wife didn't get it either so when he started to go crazy we both decided to egg him on. I mean come on, if we could both see you destroyed it would make us both a bit happier. When he went too far we both felt bad so we covered the medical bills. You are right I was in on it, but not in the way that you would think. I don't like you Mara

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and that is my problem because, well you are just too damn pretty for your own good. I tried to defile you in some way, but it wasn't possible. I don't know how you do it and it pissed me off to no end. So in the end I sorta got what I want and well from there who knows."

## Chapter 35: Accusations and Vows

She took a step forward and I held my ground. I was so tired of the running, of the hiding, it was time for me to face my own demons. I moved forward slowly and hesitantly. "You know it could be a good thing they were screaming my name other than some two bit hooker. At least I gave them something to fantasize about. I mean if you gave over every trick you have already then what is the point of even trying to pretend any longer." I giggled. "At least now you know what the men in your family really crave. I wouldn't have anything to do with them, but at least now we know." Each word was a step in her direction until I could feel her breath on my face.

"You are arrogant, snide and nothing but a bitch. I don't know why in the hell any man would want you. For goodness sakes I remember when you still had your sight and were as meek as a mouse and timid as a house cat. When you lost your sight and your whole world Jack and I were there to pick of the pieces and watch the children. Now that you think you are all that someone really should take you down a peg."

I felt the air move around me and found myself pushed backwards. I braced myself and moved forward, I wasn't going to lose ground. I felt the air shift again and this time I moved with it and landed a punch right on her jaw.

"You know Geo, it is definitely good that I wasn't actually going to hand you over custody of my children, I mean come on now, like I couldn't tell that there was something up. Give me a break I am blind, not stupid. You were waiting for the chance to screw me over and I knew it. I am done with you Geo now go, I don't want you back here again or I will take you out, do you understand?"

I heard a grunt and rustling coming from in front of me. I braced myself for another attack and but I heard a sigh. "You know I would have thought you were weaker because in the time I have been helping you, well you haven't fought once. I was wrong, but you still need to watch your back. I won't give up so easily and we are definitely not through. The two of us will never be through as long as I breath Mara, I really hope that you understand that."

I nodded my head. "Well then I need to make sure the next time we meet you just stop breathing. Geo, I am done being nice no matter what. I have had too much shit in my life to worry about being nice now. The next time we do meet I will take that pretty head of yours off your shoulders for you. You can bet your ass that after this moment it is no holds barred." I turned away from her and headed back through the woods that I knew so well. I was done with it all and the more I stood there the more my body pressed me into the final bouts of anger that would have me kill her where she stood.

As I stepped out of the woods I felt arms engulf me and the familiar scent of horses and leather. I embraced Rick and smiled into his chest. I felt his intake of breath as he saw the scratches across my skin from where I brushed up against a tree when Georgia pushed me. His hands held me so protectively yet gentle at the same time and I felt at home.

"Are you alright Mara, not hurt at all?" The question lumed before me and I just smiled.

## The light in the center of my darkness

I shook my head. "Not hurt at all. Those are just scratches and nothing to worry about." I felt myself being led back through the yard. I felt the steps under my feet and moved up them until I felt the cool air on my face, a stark contrast to the heat of the Georgia air in the middle of the summer. Rick led me to a chair and then I heard his steps disappear and return moments later. It was a few seconds before I smelled the sharp scent of alcohol and knew what was going to happen. I braced myself for the sting and kept my face passive.

"She vowed to kill me Rick. The next time that her and I meet." I paused for a moment. "I really want to feel that woman's blood on my hands, everything that happened was because of her and now I just want it all to end."

I felt his intake of breath. "One thing at a time my love, let's call your doctor and see what we can do about those beautiful eyes of yours. Then we will talk vengeance."

I nodded. "One day things will go right, one day where I don't have to watch my back and wonder what is coming at me. And when that day comes, you can be sure that I will be the happiest person ever, but until then....."

## Chapter 36

Days had turned into weeks, weeks into months and still the doctors were stumped on why they couldn't find a matching donor for me. I didn't worry about it too much, Rick and I had gotten into a routine. Each Sunday he would pick out the clothes for the kids and hang them up within easy reach. Kids dressed themselves as I moved around the kitchen to make coffee and grab the paper. Molly was ever constant by my side, a ghost of protection and made sure I was always taken care of. As I set the paper out for Rick and then head into the shower. When I get out I go to the bed and find my work clothes on it. I smile to myself and get dressed.

I walked back into the kitchen and smell a breakfast that is just amazing to the senses. I sat down at the table as a plate was put in front of me and a fork in my hand. I dug in to the sensuous smells and enjoyed every moment of the blissful bounty that assulted my tongue. It was like an orgasm in my mouth. I moaned into the mouthful causing Rick to laugh. I could feel the blush creep into my cheeks.

"You know if you didn't have to go to work soon I would say that we needed to go have a bit of fun. My question is, why do you want to go back to that crappy job. There are networks and districts that want you, yet you go back to that job like it did something for you."

I looked in his direction. "Rick, it did do something for me. After I lost my vision they didn't fire me. I worked hard to train this new girl into what I need I don't want to have to do it again." I put my hand against his cheek. "I love you honey, but you have to understand what it means to me that even with my disability they trust me enough to let me still work there."

I could feel him nod against my palm. "I just worry about you. I don't want Dan to hurt you anymore. He can get to you there, you are vulnerable."

I laughed. "Rick, I have never been vulnerable. Trusting to an extreme yes, but never vulnerable. I can kick ass if I need to I just didn't want to do it. So breathe my love and understand that I got it alright."

He nodded again and huffed out a breath. "Doesn't mean that I like it. Now let's get going so that you aren't late. This chick doesn't pick you up for work and that kinda sucks."

I laughed and nodded. "Yes I know but it is a job and we need the money. Here soon I will be able to take myself so don't worry alright. I know this is going to be a strain for a while, but I have confidence that the doctors will pull through for us."

He grasped my hands and pulled me close. "I don't have a doubt in the world that they will. Now let's go wait for the bus and then get you off to work."

The kids ushered out the door and to the bus and kissed me goodbye. I hugged them both and then started to meander down the road. I could feel Rick beside me and it was a comforting feeling. He didn't have to touch me for me to know that he was there. Each step he took resounded through me and deep into my heart. It was a course and step I was so sure of it had become a part of me. I felt his hand reach for mine which told me I

## The light in the center of my darkness

was close to his truck. I smiled as he led to me to the door and we got in. It was at that moment my phone decided to ring. My caller ID didn't pick up a name but I answered anyway since I didn't have my new co-worker's number.

Me\* Hello

Guy\* Maribella is that you?

Me\* Tate, h- how did you get this number.

Tate\* I called your work and told them it was an emergency.

In the seat next to me I could feel Rick shift back and forth, then his hand was on my shoulder. "Is everything alright Mara?"

I nodded my head in his general direction.

Me\* Tate what the hell do you want. I thought this was all over and done with between us. We settled everything that needed to be settled in court, right?

Tate\* Then how come I never get to see my children?

I let out a quick bark of a laugh.

Me\* Really Tate. After all this time you finally want to see the children that you decided weren't worth your time over four years ago. Why now, now that they are settled and have a dad in their lives?

Tate\* What the hell do you mean they have a dad in their lives. Mara they are MY children and I won't stand for anyone else raising them. Of course in your condition I bet I could get those kids taken from you.

Me\* Tate, just because I am blind doesn't mean that I can't take care of them. Don't even think of taking my children from me. You signed them over to me when you went into the military. They won't give the children to you so it looks like they would go to my mother.

Tate\* I think not, I have a power of attorney that states they go to my mother.

I laughed at that one. I could feel Rick's fear as his hand gripped my shoulder.

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Me\* Tate you don't have custody so your POA means nothing at all. I have a living will that states if anything happens to me they go to Rick. Any contesting of that means you drop to the bottom of the list you scum sucking cock juggler. Now go back to the crypt keeper and leave my family the hell alone. While you are at it lose my number and don't try to find it again.

Tate\* Don't think that this is the last of it Mara. We will meet face to face and then everything will come out in the open. Even your little quirks that your boyfriend doesn't know. By the way Merissa and the rest say hi.

I giggled.

Me\* Good times, good times. Tell them I said hi back and don't worry my fiance has nothing what so ever to worry about.

I hung up the phone and sighed. "Well to make a bad situation worse, pitbull Tate is now on my case."

Rick sighed as well. "Who is Tate?"

I put my head in my hands and almost started to cry. "He is my ex husband, the children's sperm donor for lack of a better word."

I felt Rick's body language change. "Do what? Why didn't you mention this before?"

I shrugged. "The last time we saw each other there was a court room and a restraining order against him."

## Chapter 37

I could feel Rick getting more and more uneasy as he sat next to me. "Why didn't you tell me about their father."

I laughed at Rick. "Did you not ever think to ask, I mean they are 17 months apart for Goddess sake and well it isn't like I am the virgin mary."

I heard the steering wheel squeak as his hands gripped it harder. "How much of a problem will be cause for us? I mean because you know we have been through enough and your drama is starting to wear a little thin."

I was shocked. "How dare you, you were the one that said you would stay with me through it all. I am sorry if all of my drama is just too much for you to want to be with me. I guess that I got my hopes up too high in thinking you were perfect. If a little drama scares you away, if my disability is too much for you then I am sorry. Just drop me off at work and I will call a taxi to pick me up. I can't believe you said that to me."

The rest of the ride was silent and the tension was thick enough to cut with a knife. His truck stopped and I rushed out with my bag and no goodbye. I slammed the door as I shut it and heard Molly get out of the back of the truck. I was angry and beyond angry that he yelled at me even though he didn't get my side of the story.

As Molly led me into work I put my mind on the job and what I had to do, went to my mailbox and pulled out the tape recorder with my assignment on it. I listened to it and headed to get my gear. I heard a growl and paused for a moment in my tracks. I felt a hand on my arm and started to go crazy until the voice calmed me.

"Mar it's just me. I wanted to let you know that Dan is on his way to jail. His sister is here cleaning out his desk. that was the warning that Molly gave you alright?"

I nodded. "Thank you boss, I appreciate it. Is Jenna ready to go, I need to get out of here before I go after blood."

"She is headed out to a news truck right now to get things going." I nodded my head and went towards the back door with my equipment and Molly right beside me when I heard a voice yell after me.

"Your time will come Mara, count on it. Not today but someday so watch your back." I was angry. I stopped what I was doing and set my equipment down.

"Georgia, do you think I actually give you a second thought. I can see right through you, so don't bother with hollow threats."

Before she could say another word I picked up my stuff and walked out the door. I smiled to myself as I heard Jenna call my name. She wasn't the brightest person in the world and it took me two weeks to train her to what I needed her to do, but what could I say sometimes it is just what had to be done.

I hopped into the passenger side of the van and we headed off to our story. I smiled as I thought to myself the hell that I could raise for the fact that Tate contacted me. I then frowned at the whole mess with Rick and what I was going to do. I was so unsure about everything that I just wanted to curl up and cry. Nothing had been working out for a donor and the man I loved more than life itself didn't want the drama that came with loving me. I felt so defeated inside that I didn't hear Jenna when she said we had pulled up to our destination.

## The light in the center of my darkness

It took me a moment to get out of the van. I was actually starting to doubt myself and I didn't like it one bit. I shook my head violently and kept going with my work. I was not going to be undermined or feel like I wasn't able at all. I grabbed my equipment and let Molly lead me towards where I needed to be. I set up and put all of the equipment where it needed to go so that we could do our first shot when I felt a presence near me.

"Jenna, we have to get this done, we still have two more stops to makes." I was getting impatient with everything that had been going on and I snapped just a bit.

"It's not Jenna, but good thought my dear. Tell me how much fear do you feel when you can't tell who is near you and who means you harm."

Tate's voice assuited my ears and made me so angry. "I don't feel fear, do you not see the big animal next to me. Coming close was your mistake and I can promise you with one word I can make sure you don't sit for the rest of your life."

He snickered. "I bet that boyfriend of yours was pretty pissed off when you didn't tell him about me. Bad girl. I was the best time of your life and you know it was true." His hands went gently down my body and I felt like I was gonna vomit.

"No Tate you weren't the best I have ever had, not even in the top ten for that matter so stop thinking you are God's gift to man already. Touch me again and if Molly doesn't get to you I sure in the hell will. I may have lost my sight but I still have other senses that are just as good. Fuck with me and see how quickly I drop your sorry ass."

"Baby I don't want to fuck with you I just want to fuck you. That sweet body of yours, I bet your guy loves to get you in the sack so quick. You are the one I can't get out of my mind and I want to have you over and over and over even if you tell me no. That was always the best part, hearing over and over that you wanted me to stop. Made me so horny I would just about burst. Do it for me again Maribella, do it and let me feel the fear run across your skin."

I felt his hand grab my arm and I wrestled myself free. "Don't you ever lay your hands on me again. I am not the same girl I used to be, and trust me I won't let you do anything to me again you horse humping bitch. I am done with you and uh Tate, aren't you violating your restraining order."

He grasped me rougher this time, his hand snaked around and found it's way between my legs and he rubbed hard. "I may be in violation my love, but the feel of you against me is worth so much more than you could ever imagine. I bet right now you are so hot for me that you can't stand it."

I bent forward a bit and heard his intake of breath as he thought he was getting what he wanted. I came up full force and bashed my face into his. He let me go and I turned on him, kicking him with all of my strength. I didn't let up as the assault of kicks hit one after another. I felt relief when I heard him grunt in pain until I felt strong arms around me then I tried to fend those off as well.

"Stop, Ma'am stop. You need to stop kicking that man." It was a voice I had never heard before and I was a little scared of who it could be.

"He is in violation of a restraining order and he was trying to sexually assault me and me being the victim you want me to stop."

"Ma'am you worked him over nicely, now please let me do my job." He sounded final in his decision so I walked a bit farther away from him.

## The light in the center of my darkness

I went to turn around but got angry. "Don't you know you never lay your hands on a blind person without telling them first. Who are you and what gives you the right to touch me."

"I am officer hodge and your partner called us when he started to harass you."

I laughed then. "Harass me. He harassed me a long time ago, hence the twenty mile restraining order and the no contact with his children. He decided to break through all of that just because he wanted a piece of ass."

I felt a hand grab me and I pulled away and walked to where the van was. I sat in the van and pulled my phone out of my pocket, fondled it for a minute before I turned on my voice command. "Call Mom."

I waited as the phone rang and then I heard a giggling voice pick up the line.

Girl\* Hello

Me\* Hey Lissa is Mom there?

Lissa\* Mara, are you alright you sound shaken.

I shook my head but answered anyway

Me\* Yea I am fine Lissa, can I talk to Momma?

Lissa\* Sure hold on a sec. Mom, Mara is on the phone, something's wrong.

I could hear rushed footsteps and then the phone being passed off.

Mom\* Mara, honey is everything alright.

I felt the tears blur my vision from that one sentence, I wanted to be home so bad that it hurt.

Me\* Tate broke the restraining order Momma, he came after me today.

Mom\* Oh my honey I am on my way up with your dad.

Me\* Momma can I come home?

Mom\* Why would you need to come home dear, you have a wonderful job, a great guy and we are looking forward to a wedding.

I felt all of the pain spring loose from my chest.

Me\* Momma, I hope you can wait forever for that wedding. Rick is mad at me, told me he doesn't want to handle the drama that comes from loving me.

I heard my mother gasp.

Mom\* Baby girl if you need to come home you know you are always welcome. Your daddy and I will be up there tomorrow morning to help you get your things together. We built an apartment like place outback if you feel you don't want to share a room with the kids. I know they love having their own rooms so maybe, well maybe it will be good for you and we can find you a donor here.

## The light in the center of my darkness

Me\* Thanks Momma, how about you give me a couple of days. I want to see how some things play out. I will call you and let you know. I don't want to put you and daddy out.

Mom\* You aren't love, you didn't ask for any of this to happen to you. You are strong my dear and you will do what is right for you.

I nodded with a bit of a smile.

Me\* Thanks Momma for letting me talk. I love you.

Mom\* I love you too baby girl.

I hung up the phone feeling a bit more relieved. I heard footsteps approaching and froze in the seat. Molly wasn't growling so apparently they weren't out to hurt me. "Mara, Mara are you alright?"

Rick's voice sent the tears shooting back through me and I crumpled down into the seat. I nodded my head but didn't look his direction. "I am fine, so you can go. I don't want to bring anymore of my drama into your life. I am heading home soon, my mom and dad built a place for the kids and I to live on their property and I don't think anything is working out the way it should so I am going to go home. I am sorry I came into your life and caused such a problem. We will be gone soon."

I felt hands on my arms. "Don't you dare leave me Mara, I love you so much. I was just mad because you didn't tell me about Tate, but you are right I could have asked about their father anytime and I didn't do it. That was all on me and you may come with drama but I love you no matter what. Please, please don't leave me Mara. I love you and those children more than you could ever know. I was wrong this morning and when Jenna called me crying that some guy was pushing you around I thought Dan had come back to finish you off. I couldn't ever lose you, stay. Let me make it up to you and stay."

I shrugged my shoulders and looked his direction with tear stained eyes. "When you said that I felt my heart break Rick. I mean seriously break, I am not sure what I am going to do. I love you but you are right I bring a lot of drama and if I don't get my sight back, well who would want to love a crippled woman?"

He pulled me to him and grasped my face gently. "I would love her because even without being able to see, she sees me for who I really am. Mara I love you with everything I am and if I have to spend the rest of my life showing you then you can bet your beautiful ass that I will."

I giggled then and smiled. "I love you more than you could ever know. How about we go home and talk some things over."

## Chapter 38

Jenna decided that she would do the job for the rest of the day and make sure to clock me out. She understood that I couldn't lose a days wages. I hugged her and thought that maybe she wasn't as scatterbrained as I had once thought. I was in Rick's truck before I knew it and he was humming to the radio. I smiled at the quiet sound of his voice as it rang around the cab. I giggled as the song came to an end. All of a sudden my favorite song graced the radio, I put my head in my hand and sung along with the words. Each word a piece of my soul and how I felt about my life.

I said I wanna touch the earth  
I wanna break it in my hands  
I wanna grow something wild and unruly

I wanna sleep on the hard ground  
In the comfort of your arms  
On a pillow of blue bonnets  
And a blanket made of stars

Oh it sounds good to me

I said cowboy take me away  
Fly this girl as high as you can  
Into the wild blue  
Set me free oh I pray  
Closer to Heaven above  
And closer to you  
Closer to you

I wanna walk and not run  
I wanna skip and not fall  
I wanna look at the horizon  
And not see a building standing tall

I wanna be the only one  
For miles and miles  
Except for maybe you  
And your simple smile

Oh it sounds good to me  
Yes it sounds so good to me

Cowboy take me away  
Fly this girl as high as you can  
Into the wild blue  
Set me free oh I pray  
Closer to Heaven above  
And closer to you  
Closer to you

I said I wanna touch the earth

## The light in the center of my darkness

I wanna break it in my hands  
I wanna grow something wild and unruly  
Oh it sounds so good to me

Cowboy take me away  
Fly this girl as high as you can  
Into the wild blue  
Set me free oh I pray  
Closer to Heaven above  
And closer to you  
Closer to you

Closer to you

Cowboy take me away

Closer to you

I giggled as the song came to an end and then heard an intake of breath from Rick. "That was amazing Mara, how the hell do you sing like that. There is so much feeling in it I don't even know how to express what I just heard in your voice."

I could feel the blush creep up my cheeks. "It is something I have always wanted and the song really gets to me sometimes. I guess that and wide open spaces are my favorites, but of course you know I am not much of a country girl."

"True, so do you want to start our conversation here or wait till we get to the house?" His tone noted just how scared he was.

"I guess here is fine as long you don't swerve off the road or kick me out. Rick, what was that this morning? I mean you were just cruel about everything. I don't mention Tate because he is a bad memory of the past that I don't ever want to think about. He may have given me two beautiful children, but it was by force and that is something you need to understand. Would you want to tell someone about such painful things."

It was quiet for a second as he thought. "No, I wouldn't and I could have asked so you didn't have to volunteer painful information like that. I should have known that it was something that was horrible for you to relive. Are you serious about leaving?"

I thought for a moment. "To be honest I called my mother earlier to ask her if I could move back home. I mean with everything that has gone on I don't think I am in the right place in my mind and with it looking like I won't get a donor from here, maybe moving home is something that I should do for a while, see if I can get a match there. You would think it wouldn't be that hard, but apparently no one is RH positive. I guess that it is just my luck that this would happen, but I can't penalize the children for it ya know. I guess if that is what is good for us, then it is what we will do."

I heard the breaks squealing and I put my hand out in front of me to stop my collision with the dash board. I was about to yell at him when he grabbed me. "No I can't lose you I don't care what else you do, but you can't leave me. I love you with all my heart and I just can't lose you or those children, you all mean the world to me. I would lose my brain if you left, it would break my heart."

## The light in the center of my darkness

It took me a second to regain my bearings, but when I did I wrapped my arms around him and then gibbs slapped him. "How dare you do that just to get my attention. You could have killed us both. Please tell me what is on your brain, cause I know that you need us, but I have to get my own head straight about what I want. Think on this one, what if down the road after we get married, I start to regret things. I don't want to regret anything in my life and if having to go away to get my head straight is what I need to do, then by damn I will. Don't think for just one second that I am going to put anyone but my kids above myself. I mean you have to look at it like this, I know what is best for me Rick. It isn't about convincing me to stay it is about giving me a good reason that I wouldn't regret it in the long run."

The quiet that was between us was so heavy and thick that you could cut it with a knife. "Mara, I- well I don't know if I can give you a reason other than I love you with all my heart and I will do everything I can to get you a donor for your eyes no matter where we have to go. I don't care if we have to leave the country for it. If you want to see then I will do everything in my power to make sure that you get it. It doesn't matter to me if you are blind or not, I love you all the same. Now how about we get to the house, the kids will be there soon and I think you might want to get their afternoon snack ready for them. I will look up a few different options while you weigh yours up. I know I can't make up to you the comments I said, but I want you to know that you are the only one for me and that I want nothing more than to be with you forever. Now let me help you out of the truck and into the house so that we can get things done."

I nodded my head and waited as he came over for me. He led me carefully into the house and I headed for the kitchen, Molly's nails clicking on the floor was the only sound that could be heard other than the steady footsteps that hit the floor. I moved quickly into the kitchen to get the kids favorite snack together as I heard Rick pounding on the keys to the computer. I heard the door open and an intake of breath.

"Hey Mara, I brought them home for you. Have a good one."

I smiled. "thank you Emily, I greatly appreciate it." I walked out of the kitchen with two plates in hand and put them on the table then turned to embrace my children. I gave them both a kiss and then sent them over to the table. It was that I heard a cheer from the office.

I rushed to the office with the guidance of Molly to feel Rick envelope me in a hug. "I got it, I got a response to the email that I sent out two months ago. There is a donor. In Washington there is a donor. They are ready whenever you are."

My breath caught in my throat. "Are- are you sure? Are you serious? I don't- I don't know what to say, now this is so sudden.

## Chapter 39

I was in shock, total shock that there had been a donor. "When, when can they do it? I mean I really want to see again. How long do we have?"

Rick danced me around the floor. "They said that immediately would be better because you will be bandaged for two weeks before they will check your vision. So what should I tell them?"

I smiled. "Let me call my mother and see if she can come watch the kids for that long. Wow, this is amazing." I dialed my mother. The phone rang twice before she picked up frantically.

Mom: Mara, are you coming home baby, is everything alright?

I giggled.

Me: Momma, I have great news and bad news at the same time.

Mom: Give me the bad news first... Usually that makes the good news better.

Me: I have to leave for two weeks and I need you to come watch the kids.

Mom: Alright, where are you going and why?

Me: I have to go to Washington to get ready for a transplant they are ready to do immediately.

My mother started to scream on the phone and I could hear her crying and screaming "Thank God" over and over again. I heard the phone get picked up.

Dad: Mara, what the hell is up with your damn mother. I haven't ever seen her like this. She is completely crazy.

Me: Dad I am going to Washington for a transplant immediately. I need mom to come watch the kids that way I can see again.

Dad: Hell Yeah, and if she doesn't come I will. One of us will be there within six hours, you get yourself packed and ready to go. Are they paying for the tickets?

Rick: Yes, they are paying for tickets, food, accomodations and everything while we are there. They really want to get this done.

Dad: Good, well your mother is staring at me, I think she wants the phone back.

Me: Thanks Dad, love you.

Dad: Love you too Marabear.

Mom: I will be there in six hours, maybe seven because I have to pack but I will be there tonight so you can leave tomorrow.

Me: Alright I will have Rick let them know that we can leave tomorrow morning.

Mom: Good now I am going to get off the phone so I can get hustling. I love you Mara.

Me: I love you too Mom. See you tonight.

I hung up the phone and Rick was already typing up a furious email to the hospital in Washington as I started to smile. It felt amazing that I would be able to see again, my children, the sunshine and the man that I was madly in love with. I moved around until I was sitting in a chair near Tori and Teagan. I felt a small hand on my left arm and looked with my sightless eyes in that direction.

"Mommy, is everything okay?" Tori's sweet voice broke the silence, the worry evident in her voice."

I grasped her lightly and sat her on my lap. "Baby, everything is just fine. Mommy is going to have to go away for a while, but Granny will be here while I am gone. When Mommy comes home, she will be able to see you and enjoy things with you."

I heard Teagan gasp. "Mommy is it true, is it true. You will be able to see us again and do things again."

I smiled. "Yes baby, Mommy will be able to see again, see you for the first time. Even though I am here with you everyday, Mommy has never seen you and she would really like to see what beautiful children she has."

Teagan hugged me tightly. "If it makes you happy Mommy, then we will be happy too. I love you Mommy and I am going to miss you."

I kissed the top of Teagan's head and smiled into his short hair. "I love you too my son, and I will call you as much as I can and talk to you. Mommy is really excited about this, about being able to see again. So this little time apart could change our lives babies, alright?"

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I felt them both nod their heads into my shoulder. "Why don't you two start on your work while Mommy is packing and we will have a movie night together. Your choice on the movie alright?"

They sent up a cheer and moved quickly to their rooms and I smiled to myself. I heard heavy steps move across the floor and then Rick sat down and grabbed my hand.

"They said that they will email me back in an hour with our plane tickets and accommodations after the surgery and everything. So don't worry they are getting things done. I am going to go pack our things and get everything together. How about you go relax in a bath for a little bit. I think this is a lot to put on your brain along with everything else. If we don't kill each other from this, I think we will be alright. At least, I think we should be. I know we have a lot to talk out and as long as you don't go running screaming in the opposite direction when you see me then I think we will make it."

I started to giggle at him. "I won't go screaming the other direction, I have been able to map out your face and features and you are handsome my dear. Yes, we have a lot to discuss and things that one should know about the other, well mostly what you need to know about me, but it will be alright. I think a bath sounds wonderful, do you think you could braid my hair back for me and pin it up so it doesn't get wet?"

I felt Rick shaking with laughter before I heard it. "Sure, not a problem. Now let's get you settled while I get everything together."

I sat still as Rick braided my hair and pinned my long hair in a crown at the top of my head. I smiled as I felt it and then giggled to myself. "Hey Rick, are you sure you aren't gay because you did a pretty darn good job." He laughed loudly then. "No, Tori taught me how to do it to her. Said that Georgia used to do it for her all the time and she liked it so she walked me through it. It really took me a while to get it."

I smiled. "Well I am glad my daughter could teach you something useful. Goodness knows if we have another kid and it is a girl, you will have a useful skill."

He paused. "You know I think you are right. It would be good to have another baby running around. Who knows, maybe in the future there will be."

I smiled as he started the bath for me. I was so lucky to have him in my life and I was so happy in that moment even without my sight. I wondered how my life was going to change. I heard the water go off, I stripped down and let Rick help me into the tub. I felt him put a towel behind my head and he grabbed my hand and put something in it.

"Gonna give you something soft to listen to, need to get your stress down and this will work wonders on you. Once you are done dinner should be ready, we should be packed and everything will be right on track. You don't need to worry about a thing."

I smiled. "Yes I do. I have to worry about you burning the house down with your cooking. As long as I don't smell anything burning I think we will be okay."

He gently tapped my shoulder. "Alright you smartass, just lay here and relax for a while. I will handle what needs to be done."

I nodded, put on the headphones and relaxed even more into the tub. As the music moved through me I relaxed and everything started to slow down in my head. I started to think clearly and I started to weigh the pros and cons of getting my vision back. I was so accustomed to my life and I was happy with everything, but it seemed like there was so much that I was missing. I got lost in my thoughts and drifted slowly to sleep. It didn't feel like long before Rick was tapping me on the shoulder.

I jumped a bit at his touch. "Sorry Mara, I didn't mean to scare you, I did try to call your name and forgot about the music. Dinner is ready love and your mother called to say she would be here in an hour. Seems I let you sleep a little bit too long. We leave at 4:30 in the morning and you are going to need as much rest as you can get because as soon as we get there with Molly, you will be having a consult with the doctor."

I took in a deep breath and nodded as Rick helped me out of the water and into the bedroom to get my PJs on. As I walked out to the table with Molly at my side, I wondered how long it would take her to get used to me not needing her help all the time. Would they let me keep her since I didn't need her anymore. I couldn't lose my Molly, and that would be one stipulation to all of this. She was a part of our family now and I couldn't ever see my life without her in it.

As we sat down to eat the conversation was lively and I even joined in even though my heart was breaking for the fact that I would have to leave my kids behind. After dinner we settled in for a movie of the kid's choice,

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of course it would have been Gnomeo and Juliet. I giggled with them and smiled as I tried to picture it in my head. it was half way through the movie when my mother arrived. Everything seemed to be moving so fast and before I knew it I was being ushered to bed by my mother.

I got into bed and felt Rick cuddling up to me and I felt that scared feeling once again. "Rick, I am scared. I am afraid my life is going to change."

He nodded into my shoulder. "It just might, but you are going to be able to make the choices on how your life changes. No matter what you choose I will walk this path with you."

I nodded. "Thanks Rick. I love you so much."

I felt him smile into my shoulderblade. "I love you too Mara. So much I love you."

With that we fell asleep and I knew that 4:30 was going to come quicker than I was ready for. I had had so many changes in my life, this was just another step in the right direction.

## Chapter 40

The trip to Washington didn't take too long, but even being blind the timezone hopping was killer. Everytime I checked my phone it was earlier and earlier. I was glad that Molly was allowed to fly in the cabin with Rick and I, but I had to do the one thing she never loved. I had to put her in her service vest for her to be able to fly with me. I was scared and it was interesting that both Molly and Rick picked up on it. I was in between the both of them on the flight and smiled as one grabbed my hand and the other one nuzzled my shoulder with her massive snout.

"Don't worry Mara, we are almost there and then we can check you in for your exams and then we will rest until they call us for the surgery alright?"

I nodded. "Just wondering what my life will be like if this works and I am able to see."

Rick patted my hand. "You will have the world at your feet. Not like you don't already, but my goodness you will be a force to be reckoned with. It is definitely going to take some time to get used to, but you will be amazing."

I smiled. "You know it would be good to know what I am wearing for once and choose my own clothes and know that they match. I always wondered if someone was dressing me funny since I couldn't see."

Rick chuckled beside me. "Well, you never had to worry about that from me, I figure that jeans go with everything so you should be fine. Of course no matter what you wear, you look amazing."

I nodded and tried my best to relax back in the seat for the remainder of the trip. I drifted in and out of sleep with all of the noises around me. I was scared, and more than scared for the first time in my life and I didn't know how to express it. What if I had pinned my hopes on something that might never be?

The Captain came over the loud speaker telling us that we were making our descent into Spokane and I became even more nervous. I felt the jerking motions of the plane and sweat started to bead up on my forehead. I felt like my world was lurching to and fro and it worried me. It wasn't too long until we were on the ground and Molly, Rick and I were the first ones off the plane and into the airport. It didn't take long until I heard my name screamed across the airport terminal. Rick directed me to the noise and I smiled as Molly moved closer to me.

"Mara, my name is Jennifer and I am to take you to the hospital. We are going to get the preliminary tests done so that we can get you in surgery first thing tomorrow. The transplants will only be good for so long so we are really in a rush. Now we are going to collect your things and get you straight over to the hospital. The dog will not be able to come, unfortunately but I will find a wonderful place for her to be."

I shook my head. "No, Molly comes with me through this. I know she can't go into the OR with me, but she can wait in my room. She has walked this journey with me from the beginning and her and I will finish this together. She is an extension of me and I am going to need her in the two weeks that I am bandaged to help me get around."

I heard a huff of air and knew that Jennifer was not pleased. "I am not sure how I am going to get this cleared as animals really aren't sanitary and we need a steril environment."

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I laughed. "Well, she is a service dog so it doesn't matter, the rules really don't apply to her, now shall we get going so we can get this over with?"

I felt Rick at my elbow and Molly at my leg as they both led me out into the parking lot and into a waiting SUV. Molly was placed in the back and our bags were in the back seat with us. The ride to the hospital took about twenty minutes and then I was rushed in, to an elevator and down a long hallway. Jennifer didn't say much to us as she rushed us through the hospital to the room that would be my home for the next two weeks. Rick moved through at my side and I heard our bags rattle on his shoulder.

"Alright here we are. The nurses will be here to get you ready within a moment. The doctors will be along soon, registration will help you out with everything that you know and hopefully this won't take long so that you can get some rest. I know that it has been a long day for you and we want you to rest before the procedure tomorrow. Did you bring anything comfortable and warm to wear for the procedure?"

I nodded my head. "Yes I did, I don't like being half naked in those gaudy robe that you guys have. Do you need me to change now?"

"Yes Mara, we need you to change now that way once everything gets started it will run smoothly."

Rick grasped my hands and put the clothes in it. I touched Molly and moved her forward with me into the bathroom. It took me a bit to get things in order and then I brushed my hair and braided it back. The next two weeks of my life were make or break for me. At least that is what I thought then.

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