

Emilee MacGregor
"Untitled"

With a moan I rolled over in bed and smacked the snooze button on my alarm clock. As a rule I hate getting up, even more so on a weekend when I don't have to work! This Sunday I had commitments to fulfill, though, so I sluggishly sat up and powered on my cell phone which had been charging beside my bed overnight.

It took my groggy brain a second to notice the red notification flag telling me I had a voicemail. Who would be calling me in the wee hours of a Sunday morning? I hit the play button and put the phone up to my ear to listen.

My mother's voice sounded unusually low on the recording, "Emilee, it's your mom. You need to call me." That was it. I felt my pulse spiking. Four years ago I had moved across the country and now I only saw my family for a week each year. Although I tried to call or video chat with them once a week, I didn't expect to hear from them anytime soon. Everything about this felt abnormal.

I took a minute to gather my thoughts. Running into the bathroom, I splashed some cold water on my face. Now feeling a bit more awake I dialed my mom's number. She answered on the first ring. I could tell by the tremor in her voice that she'd been crying.

"Emilee, your dad's missing. He didn't show up for work this morning." My dad was a career firefighter and took great pride in his job. All of us knew there was almost nothing that would stop him from getting to work! This was serious.

There was a catch in my mom's breath when she continued, "and Emilee, his weapon is gone too." My stomach bottomed out and everything faded to black for a minute. I knew exactly what the implications of this were. My dad was not a hunter. The few firearms he owned were family heirlooms and almost never used. There was only one reason for him to take one and wander off alone into the 28 acres of woods my family owned.

I think I knew at that moment that my world had just been shredded into a million pieces. I was in a daze over the next few hours as friends gathered in my small apartment to show support and book me airline tickets to fly home the same day. I remember the tears squeezing out of my eyes when the call finally came to let me know that the search party (made up of his own coworkers) had found my father's final resting place, and the terrible truth was confirmed. He had taken his own life.

The numbness settled in as I helped over the next few days to plan my father's funeral, choose a box for his ashes, write a eulogy, and wade through miles of paperwork. It wasn't until after everything was done and I was laying alone in my parents' bed that it all hit me. I was literally paralyzed with the devastating pain of it all. I was alone. The mourners gone, and my siblings too young to fully comprehend what was going on. Somehow after hours of agony I managed to remember my aunt pulling me aside to tell me that when the time came she'd book my flight back. I needed the help and support of my friends to get me through this.

The next several months were hard, but I found an amazing therapist who helped me start to heal and rebuild my life. I knew nothing would ever be the same for me again. The biggest example of this was how I used to be able to lose myself in a book and escape from all the

troubles of life within those pages. Now the ache of reality persistently bled through no matter what. I developed a crushing anxiety about finishing a book. The unknown of those last few chapters was just too much to handle and I had to put the story down.

Over the next few years I moved back across the country, got married, and changed careers. Through time the persistent pain inside subsided to a distant ache. I now had a job selling books that I still couldn't bring myself to finish.

Last December I stood in front of a display of trending books in my store. This wasn't me, I told myself. I don't read dark books and I don't read romance! I can't say what suddenly switched within me right then. I'd been on a path of rediscovery lately, surprising myself with how much I'd been ruled by a pre conceived idea of who I was supposed to be. Maybe it was another rejection of this restraint which made me pick up a dark romance title from the shelf. Not only that, but it was a series! I hadn't read a series since my father's death, so this was a real gamble.

That first night I picked up the book, I couldn't put it down. Tears poured down my face and I even let out a few sobs as I raced through the pages. The way the main character was forced to face and heal from her own personal trauma resonated deeply within me. As she learned and changed I felt a small part of me start to change too.

Yes, what I had been through had scarred me and I'll never be the same, but maybe I'm not supposed to be. Like the character in the pages of my book, I had discovered that life still had so much beauty and love to offer! I had found my own loving partner who made every day so much sweeter through his unfailing support and companionship. In fact I had accomplished more than my childhood fantasies had imagined!

Maybe that is why I could no longer lose myself in a book. Reading didn't serve that purpose for me any more. Instead what I needed was right under my nose. Reading could be a mirror for me reflecting back both the good and the bad I had experienced. Through this unique point of view I can clearly see the growth and hope in the person I've become.

