



Survivor

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Category: Romance, Action, Suspense

Description: How can the dream of a lifetime of service as a Navy SEAL be over when one mission goes straight to Hell? How do you handle being told your future is over and you're half the man you were? After dedicating his life to the Navy SEALs, a devastated Ollie wakes up in a military hospital only to be told his career is over. Shattered, he struggles for answers with no explanation or solace for those men lost. Dismissed and sent home to recover from his injuries and restart his life, Ollie goes to the one person who always has his back, Onyx his sister.

Watching Ollie deteriorate, Onyx calls a college friend, whose husband owns a company that employs service people, concentrating on those cut loose for whatever reason. A flight to North Carolina may be Ollie's only chance to find himself not only a new start but also the tools necessary to move forward.

Paisley gave it her all but after her last relationship almost killed her, literally, her passion is now focused on her veterinary clinic and the small rescue shelter for unwanted animals she started.

Desperate for help, Ollie stumbles on the town vet. When their eyes meet for the first time, he feels like a bolt of electricity runs through him. Something about the tiny pixie draws his interest and the more time they spend together the more he wants.

When push comes to shove, can Ollie and Paisley survive beyond the difficulties in their lives to come together, or will their future be overshadowed forever?

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Onyx

Knowing today is finally the day Ollie is being released, my nerves are all over the place, for Christ's sake. His progress regarding his injuries is totally right on track. The left hip is healing from being rebuilt and his ankle is plated and pinned. Once he's able to put weight on that side of his body, intense physical therapy will become his best friend. Eventually, he'll be motoring around like normal.

But besides those major injuries, his left side is a canvas of scars from his hip to the ankle. Can't remember how many stitches and staples were used to close him up. Still, it's his mental status that has me super concerned. He's fighting taking the medication, which is only making his outbursts more intense. He's sinking farther into the black hole of depression, which makes the PTSD worse. I've talked to both our mom and dad, who suggested, no argued then demanded that Ollie should come back home to Montana to recover—like Big Sky country can heal everything. Well, that's how our folks think. And since five of their seven children still live in our hometown, I guess their minds are telling them that's the answer.

I've tried to keep them both in the loop of Ollie's recovery as much as possible, but with HIPAA and his security clearance as a SEAL, it has been pretty difficult. Even though he's been put out to pasture, so to speak, he knows too much therefore his medical records are locked up. Being an oncology nurse, I don't have the clearance to unlock them. And the brute asshole my brother can be is being tight-lipped, which isn't helping at all. Thank God I'm pretty good friends with the physical therapy department because that's how I'm getting all my updates.

And the word hasn't been too good. Ollie has had some pretty intense breakdowns

during his PT. I think twice they've had to sedate him because they thought he might get violent. Wouldn't believe it, except a few times when I've gone to check on him while he was asleep and waking him up was interesting. Let's see, I've had a black eye, cracked lip, and sprained wrist. Leave it to my big brother to beat the shit outta me when he's asleep. But I get it, the demons are running wild up there in his head. That's why he's got to get with the program.

Once he's released and I get him settled at home, I'll need to have a serious conversation with him. Ollie feels like he is the only one suffering with, as he puts it, 'the fucked-up head.' Well, he's in for a big surprise because I've been dealing with depression since I left the Navy. The only things that seem to help are the meds and living on a schedule of work, exercise, healthy food, and good amounts of sleep. When I don't follow this routine, my anxiety goes way up and I fall into deep and dark depressive moods. Also, I speak to a therapist every couple of weeks. So big bro and I are going to sit down and really chat.

Though for now, I'm driving to the hospital in my dream ride, a Lincoln Aviator, to get him. So, he's being picked up in style, not that I think it will matter, his mind is scattered all over. He just wants the fuck out. I finally took some time off, which for me is rare, so my supervisor was all for it. I've lost vacation time because I couldn't roll it all over. I spent the last couple of days rearranging my rambling ranch so Ollie will be able to get around. One of the things that made me buy this house was that the bedrooms are separated by the main living areas. My master is way on the other side, so Olls will have his own space and privacy. I also moved the great room around because, for the time being, he's got to get around in a wheelchair, which of course he's not at all happy about. I made these changes throughout the house to make sure he has room to maneuver.

I called the nurses' station about an hour ago and they said that once his release paperwork is done, he is able to break out of there. So, on the way I stopped and picked up a couple of sweet treats for his floor nurses, who have had to put up with

this confused, angry, and unappreciative Ollie. Which is not how he usually is. I want them to know how much we both appreciate them and all they've done for him.

Parking in the employee lot, I scramble through the front doors, greeting some folks I know as I make my way to the elevators. Once on his floor, I walk up to the nurses' area and see Cindie at the desk.

"Hey, girl, brought some sugar to keep y'all hyped up enough to get through your shift."

Raising her eyes, she looks at what I'm holding in my arms then reaches over snatching the top two boxes.

"No way, you stopped at Joe's bakery. Damn, Onyx, you're the best. Got to grab what I want first because once it goes in the break room the vultures will run back there and, before you know it, all of the good stuff will be gone. Screw the diet today."

I look at her, not understanding why she's even on a diet. She looks good. Way thinner than me and I know for a fact she's religious about going to the gym. Well, to each their own.

"How's he been this morning? Any better? Hoping with news of his release he'd cheer up a bit."

Shaking her head as she takes in what's in the boxes, I wait for her to make her choices which she wraps in a couple of napkins.

"Sistah, your brother is really suffering. Not only from his injuries and the depression, but don't think anyone is able to address the loss of some of his team members. It's literally tearing him apart. I've heard him call out during his

nightmares and, Onyx, it brings tears to my eyes to listen. Try to be calm and tolerant of his erratic behavior. It's understandable and all the shrinks are worrying about is making sure he's 'okay' to get back to life, so they can throw him into it and move on. He needs to talk to other survivors who have made it out of similar situations and are actually able to assimilate in this ever changing world. Sorry, don't mean to get on my soapbox but I see it all the time when our 'people' come back from combat, fucked up and hurt. I'm here if you need help. Kind of like your brother, he's one of the good ones. Hate to see him in pain."

Reaching over, I grab her hand and squeeze. We used to work together on the oncology floor, but Cindie got burned out and moved down here. I think she fits in better here anyway. She leads with her heart all the way.

"Thanks so much, sweetie, I'll keep that in mind when I'm dealing with the usual shit he throws my way. If all the paperwork is done, I'll go get his grumpy ass now and give y'all a much-needed break. Again, means the world the care he's gotten here. Ollie might not say it, but I so appreciate it."

"Girl, you know we take care of our own. Someone has to."

As she looks at the computer then grabs a release folder with all instructions on what's next for Ollie, I take in a deep breath and prepare. This isn't going to be any fun, but we're family and that's what family does for each other. I smile to myself because again, that's one of Mom's favorite sayings.

Turning, I head down toward his room, expecting the unknown because lately that's how I've had to roll when dealing with Ollie.

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Ollie

Son of a bitch, where the hell is Onyx? This waiting is starting to freak me out. Now that I finally got the okay to leave, I want to get the hell out of this place. I know deep down they did right by me, but my head isn't seeing it that way. The dark keeps coming to the surface, and I need to rearrange the way my mind is working. Just as I grab my cell phone, my sister walks in smiling brightly.

“Hey, Olls, ready to break outta this popsicle stand?”

As anxious as I was getting, just hearing her ridiculous question I can't hold it in. I start laughing, and for some reason, my laughter keeps getting louder and louder until tears are running down my face. Tears that have nothing to do with me laughing at all.

“Oh, Ollie, brother of mine, it's going to be okay. I got you, promise. We'll get you back to normal, whatever the hell that means. Let's take it one day at a time, okay? Come on, let's get you and your stuff together and get out of here. I think you've had enough. Ready to go?”

Holding on to Onyx for dear life, the tears just keep falling and she holds me tight to her. We've always been close. Even when I was on a mission, if there was a way to get word back, usually mine went to her, then she would fill in the rest of the family back home. Onyx has always looked up to and supported me, no matter what. Taking a minute to get myself under control, I gently push my little sister away, turn, and grab some tissues to clean my face off. Snot and tears aren't a good look. Especially with all that shit all over my face. Thank God my beard has been growing in since

I've been Stateside.

“Okay, Half-Pint, ready when you are. Hey, Onyx, serious for a second, I'll try not to be in your way and as soon as I can, I'll get outta your hair. Don't want to be in your way or cramp your single style.”

She gives me a sad smile and shakes her head.

“Olls, told you the fur babies and I are glad for your company. I even took some time off so we can just hang and do whatever, no schedule at all. Well except your PT but besides that, it's going to be just a brother and sister hangin' out.”

Again, I start to chuckle because when Onyx tries to sound badass it just comes out cute. Giving her a chin lift, I look around to make sure nothing is being left behind. Even though I hate the wheelchair, there's no way in hell I'd be able to walk on my own right now. With my hip and ankle, I'd been told probably at least four weeks before they even try to let me attempt to put total weight on it by myself outside of therapy. I get it, even though I've lost a ton of weight, I'm still topping the scales between one ninety to two ten. And that's a lot for a SEAL, but time and time again I'd proved that my height and weight wouldn't and didn't hold me back. But for someone to have to hold me up could get messy.

Onyx has her arms filled with bags of shit the hospital gives you on release and my folder with instructions is on my lap. Just as I start to wheel myself, the door opens and in walks my nurse, Cindie.

“Okay, Sweet O, ready for your last ride from me?”

Then she wiggles her eyebrows for effect. Both Cindie and Onyx start giggling and it's infectious, so I join in. Well, today is starting off great and I'm getting out of here, so going to take this as a win. I'm still smiling as both ladies and I start the

journey out of my room and back into the real world. I just pray that I somehow can find a way to fit in and be of some service. Feel and be useful.

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So much for a good beginning of the day. I'm ready to lose my shit, sitting next to my sister, stuck in fucking traffic. We've been barely moving for like an hour. Looking at Onyx, I can tell she's getting frustrated and worried about how much more I can take. The pain medication is starting to wear off and I'm feeling like I've been run over by a freight train, for Christ's sake.

"Sis, can't we get off this dead-ass highway and take the back roads? I'm dying here, can't get comfortable, there's no room for my legs."

"Olls, like I said, should have sat in the back seat and spread out, but no, you know better. Well, suck it up, Buttercup, can't do shit now. We're getting off at the next exit so just put your seat back, close your eyes, and enjoy the ride. I'm doing the best I can, Oliver."

Wow, she's totally pissed at me now, using my given name. She and Mom only call me that when I've gotten on their last nerve. Better shut my trap and wait it out. Doesn't help I gotta take a piss on top of everything else. Didn't at the hospital because it's such a pain in the ass, so thought I could hold it. Had no clue we'd be taking the long-ass way back to Onyx's house. Shouldn't complain, I didn't have many offers to take my fucked-up ass in. Only other option was going home to Montana, and nope, not happenin'. Not getting dragged back in because once you do, you won't be able to leave. Dad will have me mucking horse stalls or go on cattle drives. Love them both, but that's not the life I ever wanted. Nice to visit but not to live the rest of my life. Not to mention the wheelchair—their house and the ranch—none of that would ever work. I'd be at their mercy.

Feeling eyes on me, I look over to see I'm getting a glare from Onyx. Now, what the fuck did I do? Before I can ask, she turns her head away from me and huffs. Man, I hope she isn't on the rag because she can be a total bitch and with my current mood swings, that house just ain't big enough.

Looking out the window, I see the exit ahead and thank God quietly. Knowing my kid sister like I do; she has the need for speed so we should be home a lot quicker on these side streets. I lean back and close my eyes just to rest for a minute, it's the last thing I remember. Feeling the car stop, I realize I must have fallen asleep.

Damn, I needed a quick power nap to take the edge off, I feel calmer already. I turn just in time to see Onyx shut the engine off and release her seat belt. She looks exhausted. Need to get my crap together because I know she's been doing a lot of shit for me. Not to mention I'm sitting in her car, in her garage, waiting to go into her house. I'm a total asshole for being such a dick to her. Reaching over I grab her hand, startling her.

"Hey, Onyx, thanks so much and I really mean it, Half-Pint. Don't know what I'd do without ya, sis. Gonna get my shit together, promise. I'm back on the pills and scheduled the next two weeks of therapy already. And that's all my therapies body, mind, and soul. So, get ready to be my chauffeur 'cause you're driving Mr. Ollie around. And yeah, I'm gonna be a total pain in your ass, get used to it."

That brings a smile to her face and she squeezes my hand. It'll be okay. Just need some time, but I'll figure out what's next for me. Got no other choice but to keep moving forward.

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Onyx

Sitting on my deck, drinking my morning coffee, my mind is running in all directions. I'm torn in half because I'm so fucking worried about my big brother. It's been two weeks since his release and he seems to be getting worse. Yeah, he's going to his physical and occupational therapy on schedule. Shit, he's even making his shrink appointments, but damn, those days really suck for both of us. His attitude sucks before, and then after I can't wait to get him home because he's so cranky and moody. I tried to ask him if he needed a different therapist, maybe one who could better relate to him, and that just turned into a heated discussion. My brother informed me that unless someone has walked in his shoes, how would they be able to understand. I turned and walked away muttering asshole under my breath.

I think sometimes Ollie seems to forget that I too served in the Navy. Maybe not as elite as he did, but fuck, I did my time, saw some massive shit, and rolled with it. And this hurts because out of our entire family, it's me who's busting my ass to help him without putting any restrictions on him. Our parents are awesome, but they are of the mindset that they know what's best, even for their grown-ass adult kids. Probably why both Ollie and I joined the Navy. Gave us a way out of Montana but at the same time appeased the parents with our choice for leaving home. The whole serve your country mentality.

Not sure what to do for him, I reached out to our sister, Brenna, for someone else's opinion on how to help him. As usual, it's a riot talking to my badass sister, who's actually part of a women's MC. She's an officer, as well, she runs their IT, whatever the hell that means. One thing I do know is she is smarter than smart. A true brainiac and computer nerd. Once we got over our usual sister bullshit, I point-blank asked for

any suggestions on how to get our brother back on track. Took a while but I tried to explain how the ‘mission in Bahrain’ fucked up Ollie’s head without breaking his confidence. Brenna caught on pretty quickly and shared she actually knew more than our family because she’d been nosing around on some government sites to see what was being said. That sent a shiver down my spine, which I told her, and she just laughed.

“Sis, some of the shit I do would make your hair turn white. Our powers that be in high places within the government have no idea what I’ve been up to, so no worries. But saying that, didn’t you go to college with that hard-ass chick who ended up some secret undercover CIA agent, and she married some dude that’s part of Cole Security Forces? Shit, between us, Onyx, I’ve tried to look into that security company and whoever is their top geek over there has some serious mad skills. I got my ass kicked out immediately. Why not give your friend a call and see if she can get a hookup for Ollie so he’s still playing soldier without all the hassle? I mean, is he physically able to do that kind of work still? I know that Cole’s does all kinds of security work around the world, so maybe someone somewhere could use our brother’s elite skills.”

After we talked for another hour or so, because Brenna loves to gossip and had to fill me in on all our family drama, I hang up and sit back. My kid sister is on to something. Yeah, I haven’t spoken to Charlie in a while but we’ve been friends for some time, and she always tells me if I need anything to just reach out. Damn, don’t want to break Ollie’s trust and confidence, but I don’t seem to be getting through to him at all. Each day that passes he’s falling deeper into his head and own personal hell, and nothing I do is pulling him back. I know that Cole Security has a couple of offices around the United States. Maybe they could use a stiff in one of them. Just being around all the guys and gals from the different branches who’ve been active might help Ollie start to heal. Knowing he’s taking a nap after his PT today, I grab myself something to drink and head toward my bedroom, which is on the other side of the house. If I’m going to reach out to my friend, I don’t want Ollie to know until there’s even something to share.

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Shit, that was easier than I thought. Well, I should have known Charlie, she hasn't changed at all. Both direct and blunt, she gave me some major bullshit for not calling her immediately when that 'incident' went down and Ollie was hurt. She asked quite a few questions about when, where, how, but not why. Told me she was gonna talk to Mark and get back to me. I know that her hubby, Mark, and most of the guys in Virginia are mainly Navy SEALs so probably can get a line on what really went down. Also, she told me that the dude who owns the company and his wife are out in California so if something comes of this, Ollie can go talk to Jackson first. Feeling like at least I'm making some effort, even though I don't have any answers yet, I decide that I've done enough so far today and need a nap. So that's what my plan is until I hear a loud crash on the other side of the house. Instantly, I'm off the bed running toward the noise.

Ollie's door is closed but the noises coming from behind it scare the ever-lovin' shit out of me. Opening the door, the sight before my eyes knocks the breath clear from my chest. The room is in shambles with my brother standing dead center, sweat running down his face, with crazy shining from his eyes. Slowly I enter the room, never taking my eyes from his.

"Olls, it's me Onyx. Come on, big brother, calm down, it's okay. You're here with just me, that's it. You aren't supposed to be up on your feet just yet. Don't want to mess up all the progress you've made. Take a minute and breathe. Remember what you've been told. Breathe and count each breath. Come on, I'll do it with you. Deep breath, that's one, another that's two."

As I take another really deep breath, Ollie looks at me then shakes his head, sweat flipping all over. I can feel the fear coming from him in spades, so I'm guessing his PTSD is all over the place. Not the first nightmare he's had since released from the hospital. His days of captivity have really fucked him up and he refuses to talk about

it. This is his way of dealing with it. I watch as his mind catches up with his body while he takes in another deep breath, and in a near whisper says, “Five.” Okay, we got this. For now, fingers crossed, Charlie gets back to me real soon, because after this I realize I need some major help with my brother. I don’t want to lose him because the military obviously is done with him. He’s no longer of any use to them so they dumped him out on his ass all alone. Hoping he can be useful to Cole Security Forces in some manner that will feed his soul.

Watching Ollie struggle to sit in his wheelchair before he comes towards me. I tense up just for a minute or two then my body relaxes right before he reaches out and pulls me down to him. His big frame is shaking, and I can hear the anguish in his voice.

“Damn it. Fuck, Onyx, I’m so sorry. Shit, one minute I was out, sleeping really good, next thing I know was beating the fuck out of the furniture. Tried to stop but couldn’t. Really, sis, I’ll get you new stuff, promise. You want me to leave? I’ll go to a motel, or something, I don’t want to take a chance and maybe hurt you, Half-Pint. Son of a bitch, why can’t I get a break, for Christ’s sake? Just give me the word and I’m out, promise.”

Shaking my head, I give him a gentle squeeze and look up.

“Yo, you big jerk, not kicking you out but, Ollie, you need to let people in. Now don’t get defensive, just listen. Please. No one knows what you’ve been through, including losing almost all your team. You refuse to talk about it, and that right there is going to keep messing you up. Please, I’m begging you to trust me. Have I ever judged you? I’m here just because you’re loved, brother, so let’s go out sit our asses on that soft as fuck sectional and get comfortable so you can tell me what is screwing up your head.”

At first, I don’t think he’ll give my request a second thought but after a couple of minutes he pulls back, looks down, and nods.

“Let me try to clean up ‘Tornado Ollie’ in here and then we’ll talk okay, Half-Pint?”

Nodding because he won’t want my help, I glance around before I head to the kitchen. Gonna get some coffee started, I’m figuring it might be a long talk.

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Ollie

Sitting next to Onyx in her SUV, my mind is blown away. How am I on my way to meet up with the Jackson Cole? Fuck, he started Cole Security Forces up when he had left the service. Why I'm even gonna be in the same room with this man I have no idea. Somehow and for some reason Onyx set this all up and I'm just going for the ride, I'm guessing.

Looking to my left at my sister, she looks like the road has her full concentration, which I know is total bullshit. We've been fighting since she told me that 'we' had this appointment but wouldn't give me a damn idea why. Oh yeah, I've heard of the company and owner, but it still doesn't explain why in God's name I would have any reason to be in the same room with that guy. Can't wrap my head around it. The whole company he formed is from the top elite—best of the best—in every branch of the military. The word through the grapevine is he handpicks who he wants, and no one ever says no. I mean, why would they: you get to do what you love and get paid for it. And from what I hear very generously paid. Not to mention the rules I'm sure are much different than when in military service.

“What, are you going to glare at me the whole rest of the way? Jesus, get over it, Ollie, you didn't leave me any choice. When's the last time you took your meds for the anxiety and depression? You promised and somehow being a dumbass, you seem to forget I'm a fucking nurse who can tell when you're not taking your meds. I'm so pissed at you right now. What the hell was last night, huh? Did you get any sleep or just wear out my floors wheeling back and forth in that fucking wheelchair for Christ's sake? Only reason I didn't come out there is because I'm so sick of fighting with you, brother. It was this or call the parents, which I knew you would definitely

hate. So, suck it up, brother, and be the badass Navy SEAL y'all talk about."

The longer she keeps talking, the more pissed off I'm getting. Who the ever-lovin-fuck does Half-Pint think she is? Why is she busting my balls? Yeah, during one of our fights she informed me the other night that she also was in the Navy. I actually laughed and she literally came right up to me and punched me right in the chest. And that shit hurt bad. She refused to talk to me the rest of the night. Yeah, know I'm being a total dick, but I can't help it. The nightmares are back in full force, so I can't sleep, and the meds make me loopy as hell. Why I can't tell her all the details I don't know, but I'm keeping the worst of it close to my chest for some unknown purpose. She's the only person in my life fighting for me because I can't. I've just about given up and the road my mind is traveling lately is truly dark. Turning I look out the side window, cracking my neck.

"Sis, ain't got nothing. Even after we talked and I shared most of the fucked-up mess and I honestly don't mean to be such a bastard, but for my own sanity there is some shit I can't talk about at all. I've buried it deep in my head. Can't share not even with you Onyx. I don't understand it, you know I've been going to therapy and taking the meds, well most of the time, but it's all gotten to be too much. I'll leave, best solution I can try and find somewhere else so that I'm not fucking up your life 'cause I love ya too much, Half-Pint."

Hearing sniffles, my head jerks in time to see Onyx wiping her cheeks. Goddamn, that's all on me. Before anything can come out of my mouth she grabs my hand, squeezing tight.

"Olls, you're stuck with me asshole, so no talk about leaving right now. Didn't want to get too deep into your stuff if you don't want me to, but I can't sit around and watch you just waste your life away. You have way too much to offer. This has to be that 'Y' in your road, brother. Remember Charlie from when I was in college?"

She looks my way again and it takes a minute but then I smile huge.

“You mean that chick you brought to the ranch with you? Damn, she was HOT. And that mouth, son of a bitch, all of us boys were ready to beat each other to death to get her attention. But when she opened her mouth, holy shit, cold as ice.”

“Good to know you can recall her. Just to remind you, her name is Charlie and she’s married to Mark Dixon.”

At that name I know my face shows my shock. Holy motherfucker, Mark Dixon is partners with Jackson Cole, and they own Cole Security Forces together. Now confusion must be all over my face. What would either Mark or Jackson want with me? An ex-Navy SEAL whose last mission ended in total chaos, who lost his team, and is now slowly losing his mind. Well, not the entire team, but it was cut down by more than half dead, and the rest held captive, tortured, and then rescued or killed. I carry each of those deaths and team members close to my heart. And those thoughts right there are what is keeping me up nights.

“Hey, you listening, Olls? So, knowing I don’t have the tools you need, I thought I’d reach out to Charlie. We’ve kept in touch over the years and being that Mark is a former SEAL, I thought maybe if you talked to someone who lived that life and would understand, it could help. I just don’t know how to sit with my head up my own ass watching you slowly go into yourself more than you already have. Please, Ollie, give this a chance. I’m begging you.”

Looking into her eyes, it hits me how much she loves me and is worried. That’s why she’s reached out to her friend. There’s no reason for me to doubt her at all. Onyx has gone against our parents for me every time I did some fool-ass shit as a kid, and then also as an adult. She picked up the slack when I told the parents I was going into the Navy and fought with them to let me go. There’s never been a time my kid sister didn’t have my back, unlike our other siblings. Well, Brenna did up to a point.

Anyway, I never comprehended how much I owe Onyx. Once I left, yeah, we talked and of course have seen each other but when she went in, I wasn't there for support. Now's my time to make it up to her.

“Okay, Half-Pint, I'll give it a chance. Will listen with an open mind and heart, promise. I'm actually a little in awe meeting Jackson. His skills are known throughout all branches of the military, not to mention his missions are ones that are still talked about. Before I forget, thanks for doing this. Even if it goes to shit and all it turns out to be is a conversation, it means a lot that you would go to this extreme to pull my head outta my ass.”

After my little speech, the air is cleared and for the rest of the drive, we just joke and continue to talk. Not about anything specific just a brother and sister enjoying each other's company on an afternoon drive.

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Ollie

Fuck, I haven't been this nervous since I was starting my BUD/S training my God, I haven't thought about that time in ages, but knowing that shortly I'll be in the presence of those two guys is getting my anxiety up. My leg begins shaking as I start to feel itchy. Not to mention I gotta piss and being in this fucking wheelchair I can't get around too good. It's hard enough at Onyx's house to get into that huge-ass bathroom, I can't imagine what it's gonna be like at this office. Should have taken a leak before we left.

As we approach the building it's huge. Just seeing the name of the company on that mammoth wall, which is as long as a couple of city blocks, takes my breath away. Very industrial with kind of a military undertone. Thinking to myself I so don't belong here.

"Okay, as you can see we're here Olls. Let me text Charlie and ask where exactly we have to go. I'll drop you at the door, just wait for me to park, and we can go in together. If you don't want me with you during the meet and greet, I'm sure Charlie and I can catch up. Just let me know, give me some kind of a sign. All I ask is please don't lose it, Ollie. I know you get overwhelmed and shit, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance even to just chat with these guys, as you know.

"I've spent some time and looked them up. Shit, Olls, they're big time, more than I could have imagined. They not only deal with covert shit with countries across the world, I'm assuming that no one knows anything about, but also hostage-rescue missions too. Some of those that are out there, holy mother of God, not only did they save those folks but they caught some really horrible human beings in the process.

Now, I don't know the whole of it, and I guess some of the worst ones don't make it back, and I'm good with that, just sayin'. Take this as a golden opportunity, brother. You have the world at your feet right now, and if something comes from this, run with it. No pun intended. And I'm always here for you to fall back on, okay?"

Before I can even reply, we arrive at the entrance. Two attendants come to the car, one to my door and the other to the trunk waiting, I'm guessing, for it to open. Once Onyx clicks the button, that dude grabs my wheelchair, opens it, and rolls it to the side of the SUV. When I push the door open, both guys come to the open area, each extending an arm for me to grab. Holy fuck, how did they know how hard it is for me to just get out without putting any weight on my leg and hip? Turning, getting both legs out so I'm facing them both, I grab an arm on each side and before I'm ready, they first look at each other, and then place their other hand under my arm and lift me up, placing me into the wheelchair. Without any effort my ass is comfortably sitting on the cushion.

Onyx comes around, telling me she'll be right back and asks the guys if I can wait inside for her. One of the guys says something to her then walks around her Lincoln and gets in as she goes to the passenger side rear door, opens it, and grabs her suitcase or a purse. When she's clear, the SUV drives away as the attendant left starts to wheel me toward the entrance. As we approach, there's a pillar with a handicap button to automatically open the door. Once both doors are unbound, we roll through. I come to a stop off to the left of the doors and the attendant then extends his hand to me.

"Hey, sorry I didn't introduce myself earlier. I'm Moose, sir. Before we head to the rendezvous for your meeting with the bosses, do you need to hit the head?"

Nodding, he gives Onyx a chin lift then gets behind me and pushes me down the hall to the double doors at the end. As we approach, the doors start to open and once he pushes us through, it hits me we're in the bathroom. Holy shit, it is fucking huge,

about the size of a normal apartment. And it's decked out probably more than the ADA requires. Moose pushes me into a huge stall, locking the wheelchair right in front of the toilet. On either side of me are walls with grab bars.

"Sir, you're locked so if you want to hold on to the bars, I'll lift you from behind then give you some privacy. Just tell me when."

Amazed beyond belief, I do as asked. Before I can comprehend, I'm up, my chair is moved back, and the door is closing. I carefully use an arm and unzip, aim, and let loose. Goddamn, that feels so good I literally groan and hear a snicker. Whatever, I don't give a damn, I almost didn't make it. When I'm done and flush, before I can call Moose, he's back with my form of transportation, gently touching the back of my legs. Honestly, I could get use to this kind of treatment.

After washing my hands at a counter, one that is adjusted for wheelchair height, we head back to where my sister is talking to another woman with her back to me. All I see is shiny, straight black hair. As we approach, both of them turn and I'm looking right into Charlie's ice-blue eyes which are checking me out.

"Well, well looky here. Ollie, you've done grown up. Not bad, not bad at all."

She comes toward me, grabbing my hand, shaking it fiercely. Then she leans down and gives me a sweet kiss on my cheek.

"Hey now, leave you alone for a minute, Princess, and you're picking up strangers in the entrance of my own company. Come on, have some finesse."

She turns smiling huge.

"Twilight, honey, you have nothing to worry about and you know it, you cocky asshole. Remember me talking about my college friend, Onyx? This is her and this

handsome man is her brother, Ollie. You and Jackson are meeting with him in about ten minutes or once Jackson is done on that conference call, you jerk.”

My head is spinning. Wait what the fuck, Onyx didn’t tell me I was meeting both of the owners of Cole Security Forces. She never mentioned Mark being here too. When I look her way to give her the stink eye, she looks as shocked as I’m sure I do. Well goddamn, both of the O’Briens are beyond shocked. Onyx’s mouth is wide open, and her eyes are bugging out. Well damn, I don’t feel so bad then. Both of us being Navy, we’ve heard of both Twilight and Muffin. Their reputation precedes them.

Trying to pay attention to what’s going on right in front of me, I don’t catch anyone behind me until I hear Onyx gasp. Oh, fuck, now what is it, the Navy band ready to play “Anchors Aweigh”? Feeling a hand on my shoulder that gives me a squeeze, I turn my head, tilt, and look up right into penetrating blueish-green eyes keenly watching me. I knew who he was before any introduction. The guy has to be at least six one or two, if I’m guessing, which means if I was on my feet, we’d look eye to eye since I’m almost six foot two. We’re both tall for Navy SEALs, so that’s at least something we have in common.

He releases my shoulder and walks around the wheelchair so he’s directly in front of me. Hand raised out to me; he gives me a cocky grin.

“Hi. I’m Jackson Cole, welcome to Cole Security Forces. Seems like you already met our mascot over there. Even without his clown makeup, Twilight, is our greeter and icebreaker.”

Everyone laughs as Mark flips Jackson off. Onyx and Charlie are cackling like two hens. Yeah, what I’ve heard is right. Jackson has a sharp wit and dry sense of humor. He wants to make me feel at home and he’s succeeded, as I do. I’m starting to get excited and am looking forward to this meeting.

Point one to Jackson.

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Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:04 am

Ollie

Someone explain to me how one minute I'm meeting with Jackson and Mark because my meddling sister pulled in some favors, and then next I'm on a private plane heading to Virginia to stay at Jackson and Catherine's beachfront property to 'check out and visit' the facility they have down there. My head is still spinning and I'm not sure how this happened. It all started out so innocently, and I never caught on until halfway through. Onyx and Charlie set me the fuck up. And Half-Pint knows how pissed I am for her getting in my business. We didn't leave on the best of terms when I left her house. Before we could talk, I had to get in a limo that was sent to pick me up for the airport. What the ever-loving-fuck universe am I in?

After the three hours, yeah, a three-hour meeting, at their office Mark took all of us to lunch and we met Jackson's wife, Catherine. What a riot the four of them together are. And Onyx fit right in with those crazy-ass women. All the back-and-forth was hard to follow, especially after about an hour when my head started to ache. It's the most activity with people I've had since I returned Stateside. Jackson must have noticed because he's the one who called an end to our lunch and told me they'll expect me in Virginia in a week, if the doctors clear me. Then he informed me that his people will continue my care if the doctors again give the okay. Shocked beyond belief, I sat there with my mouth open wide until Onyx leaned over telling me to shut it or I'd catch some flies.

Once everyone said their goodbyes, after both men gave me their business cards and I got hugs from their women, Onyx and I made the trip back to her place. I grilled her the entire way because out of everyone out there, there was no way that Cole Security Forces would be looking so far down on the ladder that they would not only find me

but want to offer me a job. For a while, she didn't say a thing until I kept pounding at her until she screamed in her car.

“Enough, Olls, for God's sake. Do you ever just shut up and breathe? I had to do something, and after giving it much thought, I figured this was a better option than calling in the family because you know how that'd go. Our parents and our brothers would've come storming in on horseback, demanding you come back to the ranch so they could take care of you. Brenna would probably bring all her biker bitches from that MC and then there'd be a fight on who would drag you back. And God only knows what the last sibling of ours would do, some voodoo or witch shit, who the fuck knows? She's a crazy one. So, after that, look me straight in the eye and tell me I made the wrong choice? Besides, I don't want all those lunatics at my house at the same time, my neighbors would lose their damn minds. Not to mention all those Stetson hats and biker doo rags out here in Cali, damn, it might bring on some kind of gang war.

Laughing at her attempt to lighten the mood, I realize she's right. Son of a bitch, if the folks came out that'd be it, I'd be done for sure. They would demand and guilt me into returning home to Montana, where I would slowly die in my old room in the family homestead. No, there's nothing wrong with where my family lives, it's just not something I want to do the rest of my life. The ranch is beyond beautiful, all that 'Big Sky Country' bullshit and all, but no—just no. Onyx is right, only the Lord knows what Brenna would roll into town with. Damn, need to call that girl and find out what the hell kind of bullshit she's gotten herself into. But right now, I have an apology to make, and I need to show some gratitude to my sister, who went the extra step and took the time to try and help when she was worried.

“Onyx, uhm... well yeah, you're right. This all just took me by surprise, honestly. I was just wrapping my mind on the idea of meeting Jackson, then finding out Mark was going to be there too, blew my mind. When the team was out on missions and had some downtime, the stories that flew around about those two guys who ran and

worked at Cole Security Forces was like something out of an action flick. Never in my wildest dreams did I think not only would I meet the two men who own it, but also get the opportunity to—I don't know—visit or tour at where it all started. Didn't mean to take it out on you though. It's just I'm getting itchy 'cause I forgot to bring my meds and I'm way past due. That's all. Gotta say, this is the first time I'm excited about anything in a long, long time so again thanks, Half-Pint."

She leans over and then punches me in the arm. Goddamn, she's got some power behind that. Then she laughs until she snorts, which has me laughing along with her. The rest of our ride home is just the two of us goofing around like kids, like we usually do when we're together.

* * *

After Onyx dropped me off so she could go run some errands and work out, the first thing I do is take my damn meds. Not only am I itchy but my mind is starting to play tricks on me, that's why I came back here instead of going with her. Just the noises on the ride home and the lights, horns, and shit were driving me fucking insane. I wanted to pull my hair out. It's weird how with PTSD you think everything is good then one word or noise can set you off. Ten minutes before Onyx dropped me off, I had a mini meltdown. Out of nowhere, a siren started, and my mind snapped back to Bahrain. I had no idea where I was or with who, except one minute we're joking around and having a great time, and the next thing I know we are in some parking lot with Onyx leaning over me actually holding me in the car. I was pushing her to get out and run. To where? No fucking clue. And I can't run for I'm getting around in a damn wheelchair, for Christ's sake.

It took some time, but eventually I calmed myself down enough for her to tell me she thinks the siren was a trigger to some bullshit stuck up in my mind. I was trying to catch my breath as my heart felt like it was gonna jump out of my chest. Onyx grabbed my face and started to count backward from one hundred. After each number

she would squeeze my face until I could feel it. Then, slowly, I came back to my body and mind, here in her car in Cali. I could feel the sweat running down my face, back, well shit, my whole body. Feeling embarrassed, I tried to pull away when she yanked me back.

“Bro, you’re not the only one with nightmares. Been there, done that, so get your shit together. We ain’t moving ‘til I know you’re good. Don’t give a fuck about anything else, you hear me? Right now, you’re the most important thing.”

Damn, have I been so self-absorbed over the years that I didn’t know my baby sister had her own issues? I never even gave it a thought when she left the service, but thinking on it this minute, she planned to be a lifer too. That’s all she ever talked about besides being a corpsman. Medicine and the service were her lifelong dream. How did I forget that? She must read me because she shakes her head.

“That’s for another time, Olls. Here, drink this water and just chill. We’re good, no worries. Remember when we were kids and we all said it was us against them. Well, back then there was our asshole brothers and sisters, but now it’s us against the world. You with me?”

Feeling like that little kid again, I look deep into her eyes seeing demons I never saw before. She’s right, it’s us against the entire fucking world; so, I give her a small smile and nod. Onyx smiles back and slowly lets my face go finally.

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Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:04 am

Ollie

Hanging up the phone after saying goodbye to Onyx, I sit back in my chair and gaze out at the water. Holy shit, again I must be dreaming because how is this my life? Not even two weeks ago, I was mooching off my kid sister, living in her house, trying to get my life back in order. Not only was I confused, but I was also devastated and pissed about how the last mission ended and my career went down the drain. I was chaotic and disoriented, wandering through hospital after hospital until I was again Stateside. Lying in that bed, my mind was heading to a very dark place with the belief that I had no purpose any longer. Why was I on this earth and how bad would it be if I wasn't? Would anyone even miss me? I don't have a woman in my life or any children, as I made the SEALs my family, so if I suddenly decided that the darkness was a better option no one would even know or care.

That's when Onyx walked in, eyes sparkling and a huge smile on her face. She managed to bring me back from the brink of death. And by death, I mean mine by my own hands. I've never told anyone that, not any of the shrinks, not even my sister. Too close to the actual truth. And after listening to her just now, I realize that yeah, I'm blessed to have her in my life. With dedicating most of my adult years to the military, my friends were my brothers in the SEALs. Relationships weren't on my mind, just the next mission, but we never had a shortage of frog hogs around. Unlike a tag chaser, who is a woman who'll go for any military man: frog hogs only go for the finest, the best of the best. Yeah, that's right a goddamn SEAL.

Now I've had my share of frog hogs, but I knew upfront what it was about just like all the other SEALs. Every time when the team was not on a deployment, if the guys didn't go back home, we just relaxed and hung out just like any other normal Joes.

Shaking my head to clear all the mumble-jumble in it, I look out and gaze at the beach and water that is my backyard. Fucking amazing. This alone has given me more solace than any of the many hours spent jawing with the shrinks back in California. When I'm out here like right now, my mind stops. All that shit trying to come to the surface disappears and I just am. For that, I will never be able to thank Half-Pint because she opened the door for this next journey.

Damn, I can't believe it's only been just a month—if that—I was sitting with the owners of Cole Security Forces and agreeing to come out and see if there was something out here for me. Jackson and Mark, both former SEALs themselves, left out some of the stipulations of my visit, but I'm cool now. When I first got here, I almost turned around and headed right back until I met some of the other guys and heard their stories, which aren't that different from mine. Different locations and teams, same fucked-up missions, and same scenarios with the powers that be not giving a damn about casualties.

So as of right now, I haven't been offered a position, but what I am doing is kind of like part-time consulting. With my knowledge and years spent in Bahrain, if any questions or concerns come up; they come to me for an answer. Well, when I'm not at PT, working out, or talking to the many different shrinks here. That was the part of my visit I found out about when my feet hit the ground. I can't even drive, how the fuck was I gonna get around not knowing this area at all? So at first, I balked but then it kind of made sense seeing all of the folks here are either former military or their families. So, once I agreed, Mark became my mentor and here we are. He scheduled some of the guys to be my daily drivers, or as they jokingly tease me, driving Mister Ollie around, so my days are filled with doctor and PT appointments, not to mention the shrink sessions. I see a one-on-one shrink and then it was suggested I get involved with a group therapy session. Now that one can get scary, especially for me because I've not shared everything that happened on that mission. So, at first my input has been minimal but after getting an earful from the other men and women, it's making me look at the whole picture. Which from what my shrink told me is the first step.

Hearing some noise under the porch, my ears perk up. Not sure what it is and it's got my curiosity up, but after a bit, it stops. Trying to decide what's for dinner, I hear it again but louder. I can't make it out with the waves crashing into the beach though. Still unsure what it could be, but I am too lazy to get off my ass and see, not to mention I'm still not mobile without the wheelchair. Even though the one Mark provided me with is a thousand times better and the house is equipped for someone with disabilities. After about five minutes the sounds coming from beneath me are loud and very distinctive. The noise seems to be some kind of animal, probably baby animals, and from the squeals they're starving. Shit. Being from Montana and coming from such a large family of kids, one or the other of us was always bringing home injured animals. Momma made Daddy section off a part of one barn so we could take our patients there and manage them back to health.

So hesitantly, I pull myself into the chair and roll down the ramp. I look up and down the beach to see if there are any injured animals but don't see a thing. Taking a minute, a thought crosses my mind, so I head toward the front of the house and roll to the street. I look left and then right before about half a block down, I see the lump of fur by the curb. Fuck. I'm in a wheelchair, for Christ's sake, but start wheeling down the sidewalk until I manage to get by the curb and see the injured animal. Leaning forward all I see is blood, so I'm assuming the furball is dead until I hear a slight moan. Shifting myself and turning the chair to the side, I move my hands down and toward the animal. Grasping its head as gently as I can, I look to see what it is. Goddamn, it's a cat in very bad shape. Taking a risk but needing to know, I gently lift one back paw, and yeah, guessing this is the momma of what's under the back porch. My Montana blood kicks in and now I don't want to lose this family of kittens. But I'm at a loss, I don't know anyone around here except the few people I've been in contact with at the complex. They did give me their numbers, so I decide to reach out to Liam since he's been the most approachable.

“Ello”.

“Hey, Liam, it’s Ollie, don’t mean to bother you but I’ve run into a situation. As you know, I’m staying at the beach house and think I have found some kittens under the back deck. Took a chance and looked around and found the momma, seems like someone ran her over and left her for dead. Any idea what I can do, and more importantly, can someone help me get them to a veterinarian or an animal hospital. This injured cat needs medical care immediately, she’s in pretty bad shape.”

“Shit, let me reach out to Sparkles, she’ll know where to go. Try and bundle the family up but keep the momma separate. If she’s on the way out, toxins can already be building up and you will want to give the kittens a running chance. Wait, Ollie, damn you’re still in your wheelchair, right? Damn, sorry brother forgot about that. How the hell did you—oh never mind—if you can find something to put them in, I’ll call you right back and let you know who will be there to help you.”

Barely getting my thanks out, he hangs up. Feeling awful leaving the momma, I quickly wheel my ass back to the house and look around for something to transport the kittens in. Finding a small wicker hamper in one closet I think can work, I gather some towels and put it to the side. Then I keep looking for something to put the injured momma in. Finally, in the spare bedroom I find an empty Rubbermaid, so again I grab some towels and pack them on the bottom.

I snag my wallet and sunglasses, and while I’m changing from flip-flops to some gym shoes, my phone rings.

“Yo.”

“Ollie, Liam again. Well, Natalie is on her way so give her maybe ten minutes, that’s if she’s not driving like a lunatic. She knows someone who I think she said works at an animal hospital slash shelter, so she’ll take you. Gonna have one of the guys there to help you both, not sure who though. Gotta run, later, man.”

Knowing I have time, I manage to take a piss, brush my hair, and pass a toothbrush over my teeth. I am pretty grubby because I didn't do much today since no PT and didn't have to go into the 'office.' They usually have me do some shit on the computer but nothing today, so I got a lazy day off. Wheeling back to the front room to wait, again my mind wanders until I hear not one, but two, car doors slam and can hear voices coming up to the door.

Before they can knock, I pull the door open to see Natalie, or better known as Sparkles, with Ladykiller. They both smile at me, and I move out of their way.

"Hey, thanks for dropping everything and giving me a hand with this. Don't want to be a bigger pain in everyone's ass than I already am, but I couldn't just ignore the bunch. The momma is down about half a block on the right side, curled up against the curb, and the babies are under the back porch toward the middle."

Ladykiller looks down at me, then Natalie.

"Sparkles, you grab the momma but be careful. I'll go crawl and get the young ones. Ollie, did you find shit to put them in?"

I point to the sectional and they both grab the right containers and get down to business. These folks don't fuck around at all. Not knowing what I can do, I stay out of their way.

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Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:04 am

Paisley

Running around like a crazy woman is what I do best. Since I had just sent everyone home a little bit ago, as we finished early and had no late appointments, so I thought I'd give everyone a break. Well, that totally bit me in the ass. Natalie called about five to ten minutes later explaining that a friend had a serious emergency with some stray cats, and one is critically injured. I told her to bring them right in, then started to get the exam room ready for just about anything. I'm assuming that the momma cat probably was run over by a car or something, so discreetly on a tray in the corner is my euthanasia kit, just in case. Being I'm alone, Natalie and her friend are going to have to be my assistants since I can't do it all by myself.

With everything ready, I start to make sure all is clean and prepped for the next day. My staff is awesome though so it's just my OCD kicking in, as usual. It's taken a very long time to get to this place in my life. Lots of personal work, investing, and believing in myself, which hasn't been easy. I quickly head to the restroom because I can't remember the last time I visited this room today. As I take care of my business, my head ticks off everything on my to-do list for today. Seems like with this emergency, grocery shopping and stopping at the pet store is being pushed off, all depending on how long this takes and what time I get out of here. Oh well, it's not the first and won't be the last time my plans are changed. Washing my hands, I glance in the mirror and, holy mother of God, what a mess I am. Pulling the holder out of my long, curly dark brown hair, I gather it up high and place it in a messy bun to keep it out of the way. Bending over, I throw water on my face just to freshen up. I don't bother with makeup; it wouldn't hide the scars anyway. Reaching in the medicine cabinet, I grab a small bottle of mouthwash and give a quick swish. Coffee breath isn't the best, since coffee is the only thing I've managed to put in my mouth all day.

As I head back to the front, I hear the bell, so quickly move my ass. On my way past the main reception desk, I reach down to it and grab my can of Mace. Not that it would help me in a knife or gunfight, that I know for sure. But can never be too careful, don't I know that. All the lights are on so I can see Natalie waving at me through the side glass, so I disarm the system and unlock the three locks to let them in.

Natalie walks in with a wicker basket with loud noises coming out of it, which tells me that the kittens are way past feeding time. Next up is one of the hottest guys I've ever put my eyes on, and that's saying a whole lot, because generally I never even recognize someone's looks because my eyes are always down. Dark buzzed hair and lazy deep blue eyes the color of worn denim jeans. He also has a Rubbermaid bin in his arms and whatever is in it is covered with some towels. Don't see any movement. Guessing it's the momma, so I point for him to follow Natalie in. As I go to shut the door, a third person attempts to come in but he's in some fancy kind of wheelchair. And, whoa, in it is an even hotter guy if that's possible. He looks built from what I can see and is tall, even being in the wheelchair. Short dark hair, unusual brown eyes, and a full groomed beard. Damn, I think to myself, Natalie sure hangs around with some very handsome men. I've seen her husband, who is on the same scale as these two.

"Okay, let's head back. I have a room ready, please follow me."

No one says a word, but I can hear steps and a whooshing sound so guess they're doing as I requested. Once in the room, I look into the wicker basket and yes, definitely see the kittens. As usual, when around little ones my heart squeezes for a second so I reach in, grabbing one to see if I can guess their age. I look at the size of the dark brown kitten in my hand, pry its tiny mouth open to check its teeth, and then go over and weigh the little thing. Not as young as I thought, which is good for the kittens in case momma doesn't make it. I turn to the trio and fill them in on my plan.

“So, it’s just me, so the three of you are going to have to assist. If you’re squeamish, let me know now? Great, so I need one of you on the kittens as they need to be weighed, checked for fleas, fed, and put in that fenced-off area to use the litter box. Well, that’s a hope, we’ll see if they do. If not, will need cleanup duty. Looks to be only four kittens, so who wants this job?”

I glance at each of them and, just as I thought, Natalie steps forward looking around to the one side of my largest exam room. She sees all the supplies in the corner and turns to me. Smiling, I continue.

“I think we can get them to feed from a bottle because I would prefer that to tube feeding. Let me give you a fast lesson, then I can look over the momma. You guys will help me with that?”

Both men just nod after they look at each other with smirks on their faces. Whatever now is not the time to scratch and sniff. Just like military men, no just men in general. Once I have Natalie set up, I move to the table where the box is sitting. Seeing that the guy in the chair is not able to assist, I hit the foot pedal and lower the table a bit so it’s comfortable for all three of us. He seems startled by this.

“All right, before we start, I’m Paisley and this is my clinic and you two are?”

Natalie kind of laughs out loud before talking from the corner.

“Paisley, these military guys usually have two names. First is their given one and then a code name. The guy with the buzz is Quinn, better known as Ladykiller—self-explanatory. And the guy sitting is Ollie, and he doesn’t have a code name yet.”

I glance at both men, but my eyes seem to want to stay on Ollie. I can tell he’s uncomfortable, but he has such a presence about him. There’s more to his story than everyone can see. Shaking my head, I look to Ladykiller.

“Can you gently get the momma out and place her on the table? Ollie, will you be able to grab the Rubbermaid and get it out of the way? I’m gonna bring over this rolling table and we can get started.

As they both follow my instructions, I fetch the table with all kinds of modified tools because I wasn’t sure what we were going to be dealing with. Turning, I reach for the towel to remove it when a huge hand stops and startles me.

“Hey, Doc, just a warning, she’s in bad shape. I couldn’t even tell her primary colors ‘cause there was so much blood. I did check and she was breathing, but that’s all I got.”

Looking down I see it’s Ollie’s hand. I reach over, grab it, and give it a quick squeeze. The electrical current running from my fingers upward just from that touch literally takes my breath away. The expression and heat in his eyes tell me he can feel it too. Immediately I pull back, looking down at the bundle of bloody fur.

“Thanks, Ollie, appreciate that. Let’s get started.”

* * *

Not sure how long we’ve been at this, but after a long day to begin with and then taking in this emergency, I’m exhausted. After watching Ladykiller carefully place the momma kitty in a kennel as I hold the IV bag before hanging it on a hook outside of the cage, he closes the door. Leaning down, I check on our patient, who seems comfortable enough for now. This is going to be a touch and go kind of case for sure.

Turning, I walk out of our ICU and head to the front with Ladykiller behind me. Passing the exam room, I peek in trying to see how much cleanup I still have to do and see that someone has taken care of most of the mess. Table looks clean and the bottle of cleaner/sanitizer is sitting on the corner of it. A garbage bag is off to the

side, I'm assuming all the waste is in there. Thinking how nice that was of them, I make my way to the front where Natalie is sitting on a bench, Ollie next to her in his chair. Ladykiller passes me and sits on the other side of Ollie. They all look up at me, I guess waiting for what's next.

"So as y'all know, the kittens are healthy. All at a good weight for being around seven weeks old. Cute as buttons. They'll get their first shots, and then in a couple more weeks, maybe a month, we can get them neutered and spayed too. Momma cat is another story. Her back leg is broken, so I set it and put a cast on. The lacerations have been stitched and cleaned. But the BBs from the BB gun are a serious problem. Some I've been able to remove but others I can't, they aren't operable. So, for now I would say momma cat is very guarded. She's in ICU on an IV with fluids, antibiotics, and pain meds. The next twenty-four to forty-eight hours will determine her fate. This wasn't just a car accident; some asshole intentionally shot her multiple times on multiple occasions. With them being strays, I'm guessing these critters are probably going to end up at the shelter."

Little do they know I run a small shelter on my land outside of town. So, if that's the case here, they'll eventually come home with me. Not sure but for some reason I don't say a word about it. Not many of my clients know this.

"No, I want them when they're ready to be released."

My head jerks down because it's Ollie who makes the statement in that deep raspy smokey voice of his. Natalie and Ladykiller jerk his way too.

"Um, dude, I'd clear that with Jackson, ya know, that house, not sure if there are any pet rules."

"Thanks, Ladykiller, but I intend to build an outdoor shelter for momma and her family. When do you think they will be ready to go, Doc?"

As we discuss the time frame and what will be needed, my heart swells knowing that this man, who is injured and suffering himself, can't seem to let the furry ones he just found go. That, right there, makes my day. As my mind processes his kindness, I look down at Ollie to see he has a dazed look on his face; like he can't believe he just agreed to take in all these cats. I know that feeling exactly. I give him a shy smile that he returns with a grin of his own.

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Ollie

Seeing that smile on Paisley's face, I can't help but grin back. What in the ever-lovin'-fuck am I thinking spouting out without even thinking that I'll take all these cats? I don't even have my own place. Fuck don't even know if I'm staying here, going back to Cali with Onyx, or what. Talk about not thinking before you talk. Something about that cute vet has me in knots in a good way way. Paisley. She's so petite but fierce and sweet at the same time. And damn, does she have some mad skills to care for animals. You could see it in the way she treated the ones we brought in. Just because they were strays didn't matter. What was bothering me was wondering how she got those scars on her face. One across the very top of her forehead that goes into her hair, and the other on one side from mid-cheek, again that disappeared into her hair. There's a story there I'm guessing.

As I give a quick look around, everyone seems as shocked at my statement. Hearing what Ladykiller just said, he's totally right. But the thought of these cats going into a humane society and hoping to be taken care of —maybe adopted—separated, or worst-case scenario, being put down. Fuck, I just can't handle that thought. Damn, I think King, my shrink, would have a lot to say about that. Paisley clears her throat.

“Ollie, that's a wonderful idea but, and I don't mean to pry, being in a wheelchair, would you be able to take care of this whole family? Because the ultimate goal is to get them all healthy and find them forever homes. If you think that this is something you want and can do, say it now. Or maybe it's your way to save them from a shelter?”

Her raised eyebrows look my way. I give it a minute's thought, and yeah that's part

of it, but not the entire reason why. Being that I found them, as stupid as it sounds, I feel responsible for the group and don't want to let them down by letting them go or splitting up their family. Just thinking that, I figure these feelings have something to do with my PTSD, not to mention my depression too. What doesn't make sense is why the fuck the thought of never seeing them again is tearing me apart. They're stray fucking cats and I haven't even held any of them. Must be losing my mind, for God's sake.

"Here's a thought, Ollie. The shelter I was thinking of bringing them to is mine. I run a little one outside of town on my farm. I have volunteers who help with the day-to-day stuff. So, if you feel a connection here, why don't you let me take them home and you could come out and volunteer to help take care of them. What do you think, sound good?"

Then as an afterthought, she throws out there.

"Oh shit, you don't drive, do you? Well, maybe someone can give you a lift. Sorry about that, didn't mean to be rude."

Her face turns a very cute ruby red color, and her eyes are looking at the floor. I almost forgot that we're not alone when I hear a noise, only to see Ladykiller smirking and Natalie grinning with big eyes, while they both looked my way.

"Well, fuck, dude, ya know one of us can always drop you there after you're PT sessions. We're driving you around anyway. I'm sure Mark won't mind at all. All settled, let's pay this lady and let her get home. I'm sure she's beyond exhausted. And sounds like she's got more to do when she gets there."

Paisley turns to the reception desk and sits behind her computer. As she's working on the bill, I sit up and reach for my wallet to pull my credit card out. Natalie gently touches my shoulder, shaking her head. In her hand is a black AMEX card that she

goes and places on the counter. Oh, hell no, these folks are doing enough for me. Before I can say a thing, Paisley looks up at all of us smiling.

“Now since y’all are a returning client, the momma and kittens are strays, and you’re doing a good deed, the discounts just about handle the bill for today. Let’s call it an even hundred dollars.”

The three of us drop our mouths. I think to myself, is she bat shit crazy? She stayed late, which means after-hours fees, then took us in and examined and treated five cats, including setting a broken bone, stitches, and feeding the kittens. And momma is in ICU. No way in hell.

“Paisley, I appreciate the thought but you’ve gotta eat too. Here, charge what the bill is supposed to be, please? We appreciate your kindness, but we can’t do that.”

As we semi argue back and forth, Natalie whistles to get our attention.

“Okay, this is getting us nowhere. Ollie, let me pay the bill with the company card, per Mark—and hold up, big boy—you give a donation either to the clinic or Paisley’s home shelter. That way we accomplished some good today and we can let her close up and get on home. Sound good?”

Everyone nods, so as Paisley takes the black AMEX card for the transaction, I pull my Visa card out and place it on the counter. When the first bill is taken care of Paisley looks my way, an unasked question in her eyes.

“My donation is five hundred dollars, so go ahead and charge it, Paisley. Thanks for staying late tonight for us.”

She hesitates for just a minute then goes ahead to process the charge. I look over my shoulder to see Ladykiller grinning like a clown, while Natalie is looking between

Paisley and myself, a weird expression on her face that I can't read.

“Here you go, Ollie, please sign the bottom. And thanks so much, this will go a long way, promise. I'll give you my address and if you can find a way out, I'd be—oh I mean—we'd be glad to have your help. Don't worry, these guys are in good hands, promise.”

* * *

Sitting in Natalie's car, heading back to the beach house, we are all quiet. Everyone is in their own heads. For me, I'm wondering what the hell is wrong with me. Thank God Paisley stepped up to the plate with the cats. I'll talk to Jackson because I would like to keep them, but we'll see. For some unknown reason the thought of taking care of them brings me a sense of peace, and that's something I've been missing since Bahrain.

“Hey, Ollie, that was really sweet of you to offer to take all the cats. Do you like animals or have you had a cat before?”

Knowing Natalie is curious as she doesn't know much about me, I fill her in.

“Yeah, love animals, grew up on a ranch in Montana. My folks still have it, and my four brothers help them run it. Got three sisters too. One you guys met, Onyx, who's friends with Charlie, and the other two are still in Montana. So, we grew up bringing injured critters home all the time. Momma actually gave us part of one of the barns growing up for our own little orphans' hospital. I had barn cats back then but something about these ones touched me, as stupid as that sounds. Think this has something to do with the damn shit in my head I'm trying to deal with 'cause I've never done anything like this before.”

This starts a conversation in the car that covers everything from pets to places we've

all been, and our dream state forever homes, as Natalie calls it. Starting to feel the exhaustion settle in, I lean back and just listen. Not trying to be anti-social, just enjoying the comfortable back-and-forth, which is very calming to me, like white noise. Before I know it, my eyes are closed and I'm drifting off to sleep. Peacefully.

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Ollie

Fuck, this is harder than anything else I've ever done. How the hell do they expect me to be able to move and do these exercises, for Christ's sake? I've not moved upright much for close to seven or eight weeks outside of PT. My body can't be expected to cooperate on the first couple of attempts. And it doesn't help that I have Attila the Hun as my therapist today. Damn, she's worse than any BUD/S instructor I can remember.

"Ollie, hey come on, we have a couple more exercises to do then you're done for the day. Push it SEAL. Again, please."

I bite my tongue because I wanted to tell her to shove it, but I know that I can't. I'm on some kind of special privilege right now, here and back home, it's a form of probation because of punching that asshole therapist who wouldn't listen when I told him I was in pain. Had the nerve to tell me I didn't know what pain was. So, I made sure the bastard, without a doubt, fucking did feel some pain. That didn't go over well, and if not for Onyx I would have probably been thrown out of that hospital PT for sure. Now, thank God, the facility I'm at is part of the Cole Security Forces, used mainly for military personnel returning home injured who need all kinds of therapy. I've been going to physical therapy, occupational therapy, individual counseling, and group counseling, and I don't know what the other two are called. And each therapist has something to give to me that will help with 'my situation,' whatever the hell that means.

Finishing the last set for A-Hun, I laugh at the call name I'm using in my head, she gives me her closing speech and then releases me. Thank the good Lord, I didn't

think I could handle any more time with her today. Total ballbuster.

I go into the locker room to clean up and grab my bag. Hoping today whoever is driving me can drop me at Paisley's house. Can't wait to see how the kittens are doing and momma cat seems to be hanging on, giving it her all. Paisley told me at the beginning of the week that all signs point to momma pulling through, which totally made my day.

My therapist believes that I'm diving deep into a defense mechanism to compensate for how my last mission went down. She was really firm that the two she is associating with me are displacement and compartmentalization. She sees both in my reaction to the cat family I found, so I'm feeling a responsibility for what happens to them. There's nothing threatening about the cats so that allows me to have strong emotions, which is spot-on. The second one I'm not sure of, but again she said that compartmentalization fits what I've been doing since I found the animals. All I've tried to talk about in our session is the next steps with them. Nothing else, and she has had to practically drag information out and how each thing affects me emotionally. So, I bring the family of cats up as soon as the session begins and keep on that subject, shutting down anything personal or related to Bahrain or the men and women who were with me on that day.

Which seems to make some sense because since finding the cat family my nightmares are coming back actually worse than before, but they're different too. Some are about Bahrain, and some are about me actually seeing the accident with momma cat, but she doesn't live, and then in my dreams I see wildlife going after the kittens. I wake up in a cold sweat and shaking. It's totally fucked when both Bahrain and the cats get twisted together, and I'm watching human and feline bodies being blown up and shot right in front of me. Of course, on these nights it totally sucks to go back to sleep, which is messing with my sleep. Which then makes all my therapies that much harder. I would never tell A-Hun this but kind of mentioned it to my psychiatrist, who was pretty cool and explained why everything is starting to mix together. She said the

brain is a very complex organ and it does that sometimes because it can't handle one incident on its own. I'm truly thankful that she's who I talk to because I'm sure others here would think I'm a lunatic, I'm sure. And sometimes I think that they aren't too far off.

I'm handed a hard-bound journal in which I'm expected to write down my emotions and any kind of emotional breaks I experience. How I feel and what I am doing to manage it and how I deal with any situation that doesn't make me feel good. I know this is helping me deal with stuff, but right now I'm like, whatever, because now that this session is finally over, we are gonna head over to see the kitties. Well, me and whoever is driving. The guys have been great taking me to and from wherever I need to go. I do feel bad when one of them drives me out to Paisley's farm, but I can't seem to stay away. Not to mention my feline family is already there.

Wheeling myself to the reception area, I'm excited because very soon I can kiss this pain in the ass wheelchair goodbye. Some of my most current exercises have been getting me up on my feet and walking even though when up, I need to be in the special brace from hell. My leg is very weak, and I've been warned. Not to mention if I'm standing up, I must have a walker right in front of me, which is a drag, but I'll take it. Without them knowing, of course, I've tried standing at the beach house a couple of times and taking a couple of steps on my own. No pain no gain, as we used to say almost every day during our morning exercise sessions. Most of my attempts to stand and move were okay, except the one time I got tangled up in the wheelchair. That motherfucker hurt, thank God I was able to keep myself standing and not fall on my hip. Probably would have messed up the last months of therapy.

Rolling out of the elevator, I'm surprised as hell to see both Charlie and Natalie waiting on me. Something must be up because I haven't set eyes on Charlie since I first came here. Per my sister Onyx, she finally let it out that she's been following up and talking to Charlie since I arrived. At first, that pissed me off, but I took a minute and it hit me I should be happy my sister cares so much to stay in my life right now.

The support means a lot. But looking at these two women, I hate this guessing game of why they're my drivers but both of them are keeping it tightlipped, so I play along. And let's face it, gotta suck it up.... I need a damn ride out to the shelter.

* * *

The conversation in the car is fun, engaging, and screwed up. These two are something else. Gorgeous, each in their own ways, but for some reason I get no physical reaction to either of them. Yeah, they're both married—not going there—but there's nothing, not even the usual body reaction when a hot chick is present. Actually, maybe there's something wrong with me because since I returned Stateside, I haven't really had any of those 'feelings.' Yeah, I wake up with wood, ain't dead, and what guy my age doesn't, but besides me taking care of that I haven't given a thought to all the females I've been around. Well, whenever I've tried to see the girl of my dreams in my mind's eye, it's not someone who looks like either of these two beautiful women but a woman who is—yes—pretty, but more than that. I remember our momma always saying beauty is skin deep, which I take as if someone has a good heart it shows on the outside. With that in mind, only one woman I've met lately comes to mind. Paisley, one-hundred-percent. Something about her has me going ape shit crazy. She seems so delicate and tiny but also powerful. And dedicated to what she's doing. Got to say my thoughts are going down that road because the last few days I've had some very vivid dreams about Miss Paisley. With my thoughts concentrating on Doc, I miss what Charlie says until she repeats it much louder at me.

“Hey, Ollie, I know we are dropping you off at Paisley's but what if we lend a hand at her farm too? Neither of us has anything going on until later so we can drop you off, or do you have other plans and don't want to go out there?”

Knowing I have nothing to do today, that sounds great. I cleaned the beach house yesterday and did some laundry. I got a ride the other day to pick up some groceries, so I'm set. Then I hear both women giggling, so I realize they set me up. Well, I can

play along too.

“Hey, that sounds great. Got nothing else on the books for today. If you guys want to stick around and see the kittens, that’s cool too. Momma is still a bit on the shy side but not the four furballs. Everyone is pressing me to give them all names, but I haven’t come up with anything yet. Well, haven’t given it much thought really. Natalie, they are growing like weeds, you won’t believe how they’re changing. Probably being fed regularly is helping too.”

Natalie turns around and smiles at me.

“Don’t worry, we won’t tell anyone how much you really are into all the cats, Ollie. Try and remember who we’re married to. Both Liam and Mark try to act like badasses all the time but put a baby, little kid, or any baby animal in front of them—and before you know it—they are either holding the babies or the kids are using them as a jungle gym. You SEALs are so softhearted under your hard exterior walls. Don’t hide it, Ollie, that’s one of the best qualities you have, even if you don’t realize the effect it has on us women.”

They both chuckle and once again the conversation is laid back and friendly as we head to Paisley’s farm. I can’t tell if the excitement I’m feeling is for the cats or because I’m about to see the cute little doc.

Paisley

Finally, I have a much-needed day off from the clinic. Trying to find the right help there has been a pain in my ass, but I feel comfortable enough now that I can spend the day here and get some necessary work done. After talking with Joe, he made me see we need some more hands to run this place. When I had this awesome idea about saving some animals that were either discarded or in really bad shape, I didn't think it out thoroughly. I didn't give enough consideration that there are so many reasons for pets and stray animals to be abandoned. But right now, that is neither here nor there because I've got a jam-packed day filled, not only with my chores but I also need to catch up on some vet work around this place. Gotta get my butt moving.

So, when Natalie called to say that she and Charlie were stopping by today unexpectedly, my antennas went instantly up. Yeah, I know Natalie more like an acquaintance, wouldn't say we're close friends. We don't hang out. I can't even remember her coming out here. Well yeah, there was that one time when I first reopened this place and had that adoption thing. She was in the clinic dropping off some donations and heard about it. I was surprised when she brought out all those hunky military men who in the end were very helpful—not afraid to get their hands dirty.

Today she told me they wanted to stop by for a few and catch up. What?? Again, the hair on my neck stood up, which I never ignore, so I kind of put two and two together and came up with three. They are showing up with Ollie, without telling me. I figure that's what they are up to, bringing the SEAL on wheels out here to mess around with his pussies. I laugh out loud at that thought. Wow, oh crap, that sounded so bad. Thank God no one was here, and I didn't say it out loud. The shit that goes through

my head sometimes.

Running back to my room, I look in the mirror just because I didn't know I was going to have company and since I am the owner of this place, I need to look presentable. What a crock of shit, I think to myself as I see the mess that is me. But damn, what can you expect on my day off, people. Not to mention I was up until all hours of the night making bread for this weekend. Damn, my hair is all over in a haphazard messy bun, with tendrils falling all over my face and neck. No makeup, well shit, I can't remember the last time I even wore more than a bit of blush and mascara. And today it's not going to happen either. Looking down between my threadbare T-shirt and ripped flannel, I'm the epitome of 'a little woman keeping her man's home' as he used to say. No, can't let my mind go there. Got to project my thoughts elsewhere, or that's what my counselor told me. Once again, my mind wanders between my full day and Ollie. Which is so much better than any thoughts of him. And the last thought, which is of Ollie, is so much more intriguing than the first one on my mind—my beyond busy day of farm and shelter chores and vet duties.

As my mind drifts, I go back to when I first saw the SEAL on wheels. Just by looking at Ollie that night I wasn't sure if he was in the wheelchair permanently or not. One thing I did know was he was in shape, for sure. My mouth waters as I strip both shirts off then grab a clean sweatshirt and pull it over my plain sports bra. Yeah, no Victoria's Secret lacy jobby here, way too much money to spend for a bra. Going into the bathroom, I throw some water on my face again, brush my teeth, take my hair down, brush it, and put it back in a messy bun then head downstairs. I need more coffee to start my day. Coffee is my drug of choice. Without it I'm useless, and there is no way with all I have on my plate today to do I can do without. I need to fuel up. Filling my large mug and just as I'm putting the creamer away, I hear the crunch of tires, so I head to the front of the house, coffee in hand.

Stepping out on the wraparound porch, I take a sip of my joe as I watch the SUV stop short of the front of my house. Seeing the two heads in the front and one in the back

lets me know I guessed right. Natalie waves as Charlie gets out and walks to the open rear hatch, grabbing—I'm guessing—Ollie's fancy wheelchair. The back door opens, and I see a huge hand reach up and grab the top of the car, pulling himself out. Yeah, definitely Ollie with all those tattoos.

Dang, immediately I get a warm butterfly feeling in my tummy and before I can stop ogling him, his eyes find me. Damn, he's one gorgeous man and so tall. I'm sure he has plenty of lookie-loos following him around for sure, wheelchair or not. He says something to Charlie who laughs and nods. As he gets situated in his chair, she goes back to the hatch pulling out a big box. Oh crap, please no more animals; I'm at full capacity. Smiling, I know myself so I'm pretty sure if it's something alive I'll take it because I can't ever say no.

“Morning! How's everyone doing today? Beautiful day, isn't it?”

Damn, I realize I'm ranting when I see the glance between Natalie and Charlie. Ollie is concentrating on wheeling himself to my ADA walkway, managing quite nicely on his own. Well, of course, dummy, look at his massive arms, they look like tree trunks, for God's sake.

“Come on up, just put on a pot of coffee. I'll bring it out with the fixings. Be right back, make yourselves at home.”

Turning, I make it to the kitchen before it hits me, I didn't even allow any of them to get a word in at all. That's me as usual acting like a Nervous Nellie, I can't just shut up, take a breath, and have a normal conversation. Damn, I gotta calm down, he's just a guy, nothing special. Well, he is but whatever. Grabbing my tray, I stack some mugs on it and add the carafe after filling it with coffee and my cute cream and sugar holders. Then turning I go to grab one of the freshly baked loaves of fruit bread I made last night. Before I even turn fully, I hit something behind me and feel myself falling and can't find a damn thing to grab on to. Hearing an 'oh shit' in a familiar

deep growly voice, I panic for a split second before strong arms grab my waist and pull me back and straight down onto something as hard as concrete.

“Paisley, sorry, thought you heard the chair coming up behind you. Are you okay, Doc?”

It takes a minute for the shock to wear off before it hits me, I’m sitting on Ollie’s lap with my hands grasping his outer thighs for dear life. How the hell did this just happen? What a klutz I am, and he must think I’m a ditzzy idiot. But taking a minute, I squeeze my hands and, wow, he’s solid. Before I can get a word out, his chest moves and again, holy crap.

“No, I don’t think you’re anything, Paisley. Accidents happen, look at me. You good though? I didn’t grab and jerk ya too hard with these bear paws? Just didn’t want you to bang your head on the way down. Came in to see if I can help but guess I screwed that up, again I’m sorry. Damn wheelchair.”

Again, before I even get a word out, he’s gently trying to push me from his lap when I feel something. OH, I think to myself, are you glad to see me or is that a flashlight in your pocket? That’s how big it felt. Getting my head out of the gutter, I realize he is trying to maneuver his chair out of the kitchen. My house is more of an open floor plan, even though it has a few walls. The openings are really wide so being in a wheelchair doesn’t really matter. I can tell and see he’s embarrassed, but damn, he doesn’t give me a minute to catch my breath and get my thoughts together so I can reply.

“Damn it, Ollie, hold up. Your way too quick on the rapid questions, then don’t even give me a second to answer. So, take a breath, please, and yes, you’re right. I’m okay actually. Thanks for the save, as I didn’t hear you come in, but that’s okay. Now since you’re here, I need some help, can’t decide and make a decision if my life depends on it. Need you to pick which bread to bring out. I have orange glaze cranberry, banana

nut, or lemon blueberry. So, any one jump out and make your mouth water?"

His mouth drops wide open, and he stares at me for a minute or two. Then slowly he smiles one of the hottest smiles I've ever seen in person. His eyes seem to sparkle as they gaze deeply into mine. Suddenly, there's a charge in the room as we both stay focused on each other so deeply that we are both startled when we hear Natalie ask from behind Ollie, "Are you all good, or do you need any help?" Immediately shaking my head to clear whatever is happening, I drop my eyes to the floor hoping I didn't just make a fool out of myself, which I'm sure I did, acting like a schoolgirl with her first crush. Then I hear clear as day.

"Don't know about those two, but I vote for the lemon blueberry. Thanks, Pixie."

My head abruptly turns at that. Did he just give me a nickname? No one has ever done that. As I look to Natalie, she's grinning, wide eyes big, looking in my direction. My cheeks are feeling warm, so I assume they are turning pink. Not sure if I'm blushing because I'm embarrassed or because I love what Ollie just called me.

Ollie

Holy shit, I didn't have a clue how fuckin' big this operation was that Pixie's running here on the property. Why I gave her that name I don't know, but it sure fits her. She has just about every animal that would visit a vet and more. Dogs and cats in one house. Hamsters, ferrets, and rabbits in a small cabin off to the side from her main house. Another cabin with birds, and finally a couple of paddocks that have horses, donkeys, and even a momma cow and her calf. A barn is off behind the fields, I'm guessing to house down the big animals in the evenings. On the other side of her house are runs for dogs and a shaded area for them to be outside and play. As I wheel around on the paths, I greet some folks who appear to be working, cleaning, and feeding the menagerie on the land. It runs like a fine-tuned machine.

As I head toward the smaller barn like house that has a homemade sign, canine/feline habitat, my excitement seems to build. Why I'm so fascinated with these cats is crazy as shit, but I'm also feeling 'normal' for the first time in a long time. According to my therapist, I'm the type of person who needs to be needed and that I want to care for others. I tend to take it to the extreme, so she's not surprised that an injured animal and babies would grab my attention. She said right now, in the shape I'm in, they're probably the only things I could care for and feel useful doing, from what I've told her. Also, as long as I don't go off track and continue with all my therapies, she thinks being around animals can be a form of healing and a good thing. Helps with some kind of balance or shit, I don't remember; she was rambling about all kinds of stuff in my last session.

Approaching the entrance, I'm kind of shocked to see a handicap button to push so the door opens automatically. This whole place is accessible for anyone, which means

Paisley—no, I like calling her Pixie—really planned ahead following code for those with a disability so they would be able to get to all the different buildings. And I like calling her that because then it feels like there's something between only us—but damn—Pixie has not only put a lot of thought into this but also money. Nothing has been left to chance. On entering, I'm in some sort of waiting area as a bell sounds. I move toward the desk waiting. From the left side, I see a door and then someone walks by with a garbage can in their hands. I can hear all kinds of hustle and bustle from the rear and sit back in my chair, expecting to wait a while. It gives me time to go over what happened with Pixie in the house. I didn't mean to startle her, but damn, when she landed on my lap it felt great, though I was shocked. Thank God my hip is just about healed, even though she weighs next to nothing, I don't want to chance anything going wrong right now. Thinking that, I didn't want to let her go. Not to mention she landed just right and immediately I felt a rumble in the jungle below, so to speak. Something that's been a long time coming, no pun intended. Since getting injured in Bahrain, that's not been on my mind. Occasionally I get the urge, I'm human. But let's face it, when I was living in my sister's house and not being able to drive around, I'd been taking things in hand so to speak. I smile at that thought, damn, I'm pretty sharp today.

Shaking my head, trying to get it out of my ass, it did shock me that I threw out that cute nickname for Paisley. I don't even know her well, actually, we're just acquaintances. Fuck, I've seen her what—once, no twice—but damn the name fits her to a T. Hopefully, she won't mind but I like calling her that. Just then the door opens and out walks some older man, rag in hand. He looks down and smiles at me, wiping his hand on his jeans first then extending it to me.

“Howdy there, fellow. You military?”

As I nod his hand tightens for a minute then let's go.

“Thank you for your service, young man. Seems like you got a story to tell. How long

you been Stateside?”

Realizing he talks like a soldier I ask, and he grins.

“Yep, 5th Infantry Division better known as the ‘Red Devils,’ Vietnam. It was a mess and not something I’m going to put out there because to this day some people don’t appreciate the service we men put in over there. If they only knew what we saw and did, they might change their closed-ass minds, but that’s a story for another day. How ‘bout you? I’m guessing Middle East. Oh, sorry, buddy I’m Joseph but go by Joe, by the way. And you, boy?”

Almost choking at him calling me boy, since no one has called me that since my dad back home, I give him my name and a much shorter version of our botched-up mission and what happened. When I finish, he’s shaking his head, dirty hand running through his graying hair.

“Well, I’ll be, nothing changed, has it? Just like the powers that be to leave the grunts on the ground to take the blows, while they sit in their fancy offices spouting out orders with no regard to us soldiers in the line of fire. Sorry to hear all that shit but glad you came back in one piece, or close to it. What can I do for ya today? Looking to adopt your next best friend ‘cause we have all types here?”

I explain about the momma kitty and her babies, which brings a grin to his face.

“Ah, you mean the queen and her court. Miss Paisley gave them the huge cat enclosure, so they have room and left the kittens with their momma. Been taking care of them since they got here. Momma is on the mend and the little ones are growing by leaps and bounds in such a short time. That’s what food will do. Come on, I’ll take ya back to them. Just give your hands a wash when we get in at the utility sink. We try to keep it as clean as possible. Have you been to see the little creatures and the horses, foals, and colts? That’s a sight to see. Miss Paisley puts everything she has

into this place, and it shows.”

I nod as he smiles while we both wash our hands and dry them. I follow him through a long hallway. Someone must have renovated the inside of the building because I doubt it had this wide long hallway in it originally. As Joe continues to give me the lowdown on everything cats, my mind continues to be overwhelmed. How the hell did Pixie get all this off the ground? Just the work involved in getting this up and running would be overwhelming. Not to mention all the regulations that need to be followed. I’m sure she knows them, being a veterinarian. Surely, she wouldn’t take a chance to have anything mess up her business. Why, is another one of my questions. What made a vet, who I’m guessing is a single lady, want to take on all this extra work? Natalie said her clinic was the one to go to because it was established and had an awesome reputation. So why take on all this? Doesn’t make sense, but who am I to ask? Maybe she’s just a really huge animal lover. Why it even matters I can’t figure out. But it does.

Joe goes through a small doorway and right in front of me is a huge room with a half door and glass or something on top so you can look inside. I take a quick glance and my heart stops. It’s momma and her babies. All cuddled up and taking their afternoon snooze, I’m guessing. So friggin’ cute. Turning before I can ask the question, Joe motions and points to the wooden bottom of the door. He reaches over and opens it as momma raises her head briefly then puts it right back down, closing her eyes which are different colors. Didn’t notice that before.

“So go on in and be careful. Don’t wake them up, give them some time to focus or they’ll scratch the shit out of ya. Just give me a holler if you need anything. I’ll be right down the hall in the other part of the building, it’s the dogs turn, and I got runs to clean and need to feed the hounds. Nice to chew the shit with you, Ollie.”

He turns and walks out and now I’m alone. As I move closer, two of the kittens stretch and start to wake up. Momma again looks my way as I get as close to her as

possible, shifting my arm toward her so she can scent me. Not sure that's even a thing but I just want to show her I mean no harm. Her ears go back a bit but as she noses me, I slowly scratch her ears and then the purring starts. This cat is not feral, but someone's throwaway. Assholes. Their loss, I think to myself.

Sitting close to the edge of my chair, balancing on my good foot, I lean even farther and very carefully start to pet her. She leans into my hand and that's it, we're good. Both of us are injured but still willing to reach out with trust for others and show affection. Deep feelings inside me start to loosen my mind, and I hear one of the therapists explain how sometimes you don't know why but something small and off track could be the right thing to begin your healing process. She also said that healing doesn't take away what happened, it just allows me to put shit in perspective. And right now, I'm feeling that, as those dark memories are pushed back just a little bit, clearing up the fog inside of me to enjoy being in this moment. To be grateful I'm alive, and right now this is helping me more than all the therapy and talking has so far. I feel this thinking about Pixie, her farm, and all of these unwanted animals she's taking care of. For some reason, this is somehow clearing my mind. Allowing me a brief moment of peace, allowing me a quiet minute so I can enjoy life.

Paisley

Letting the chores fill my head allows me time to work through the past hours. After the mishap in my kitchen, we all sat on the porch eating some of my lemon blueberry bread. Ollie ate three slices, telling me how good it was and he hadn't had anything that tasted like it since he was back home at the family ranch in Montana. I learned quite a bit about him. Like he isn't permanently in the wheelchair, just until he's recovered from his injury, along with the many surgeries he's had. He didn't share, but something really bad happened overseas and he lost not only some of his team but was injured as well. From how he talked, I guess he wanted to be in the military for life. Something about how much work it takes to become a Navy SEAL, I don't understand it all. Natalie and Charlie added some info as he struggled to talk about stuff. Guess it's still too raw. I could tell he's struggling to find his place now in the world, and man, can I empathize with him. Been there and I could write a book or ten.

When everyone is done, both ladies offer to help, along with Ollie. I never turn down help so I had to try and figure out what each of them could do. I had a list of chores that needed to be done today so I assigned them their jobs. Ollie, of course, wants the feline house, mainly to see his kitties. Natalie gets the small animal house and Charlie is going to help muck out the stalls in the barn with two of my volunteers. Damn, this is awesome having extra hands around the place. This upcoming weekend is another open house/adoption event here at the farm, so with the three of them lending a hand, I'm going to take advantage of my good luck. I explain to them what's needed. The three of them sit here giving me their full attention. When I am done the trio heads off to take care of their chores as I clean up the mess and load the dishwasher. Grabbing my list, I check off what Natalie, Charlie, and Ollie are doing, which really takes

quite a bit off my list. Looking it over, I decide to clean out the reception and the adoption areas so it will be ready for our adoption event. Taking extra time in these three outside arenas so that potential adopters will be able to meet their future forever fur baby. Shit, even though we try to keep everything clean it takes me a good hour or so, and I'm sweaty by the time I'm finally finished. Seeing Joe coming my way I wipe my face on my T-shirt.

“Hey, boss, I showed Ollie where his cats are and left him to it. All the pens are clean as a whistle and most of the dogs are in the runs or large pens getting some fresh air and exercise. Left the three recovering from injuries in their pens but gave them each a dental bone 'cause they couldn't go outside. What else needs to be tended to today? I still can give you a few hours. Merty is at her treatment with our youngest daughter, so would rather be here than worrying my frigging head off 'til she comes home.”

Knowing his wife has cancer, I totally understand it. Again, been there, done that. But didn't have the support team Merty does. Touching my chest for a brief minute I push those thoughts back where they belong, in the past.

“Okay, thanks, Joe. How about the back barn? Sorry, I know most hate that job, but do you mind? There's only a couple back there but probably needs some attention. I'll be there as soon as I finish this last pen. Okay?”

Joe just smirks my way and heads off to the pigpen, literally. It's where we keep any pigs, goats, or anything else that comes along. Right now, we have I think three goats and two baby piglets. Smiling to myself, I think does it ever get mighty dirty and smelly back there. Yuck, not my favorite barn to work on and clean. But it needs to get done. Getting back to my own cleaning again, my mind shifts to Ollie and how he makes me feel when I'm around him. So much is running around in my head: Joe and his wife Merty, cancer, my history, my secrets, and finally Ollie. Needless to say, lots going on up there, thank God I got plenty of room.

I'm so deep in thought when I hear a noise behind me. I shriek, turning around, hands to my chest. Natalie and Charlie are standing together at the gate. They take in my reaction, shocked. As I try to catch my breath, Charlie examines me closely as Natalie smiles softly.

"Hey, Paisley, didn't mean to startle you. Just wanted to let you know we're done and are going to take off as we have to run, got some stuff to do. And no worries, one of the new guys will be available to pick Ollie up when he's done. Just tell him to call the office and ask for Noodles."

I walk toward them trying to get myself back in control.

"Oh, thanks so much, you two. Natalie, I'll let him know when I see him. I think Joe said he's in the feline house. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your help today. Means a lot, truly. Even with the volunteers, the shelter keeps growing and our name is getting out there. As usual, more animals come in compared to those getting adopted. Hoping this weekend's adoption event finds some forever homes for some of these fur babies."

Finally, Charlie stops studying me and glances at Natalie, who smiles and nods.

"Hey, Paisley, we were talking. How about we come over on Saturday morning with our men? We can all help out for a bit. I'll talk to Mark to see if there are any of the new guys who he can persuade—no, really I mean order—to spare some time here. They have quite a few guys who are either new or in the process of coming on board. Natalie and I were thinking maybe, somehow, we can get them out here regularly to give you a hand. Both Mark and Jackson are really into community service so can't guarantee anything, but we'll do our best. Thanks, this was fun. I haven't been around horses for a while and didn't realize how much I missed their company."

When it hits me what these wonderful ladies are offering, it brings tears to my eyes as

I get emotional. They not only gave me some of their day today but maybe opening a new concept for volunteers. They are acting like we're friends, why else would they donate their time today and this upcoming weekend. And throw in additional hands volunteering their hobbies.

"You two are awesome and I'll take as many extra hands as possible. This weekend all my volunteers will be here. Even with all of them, I could use additional help. Again, thanks so much. I'm speechless at your generosity."

Natalie comes forward first, giving me a hug, then Charlie gives me a half hug with a squeeze. As I watch them walk away toward their car, I'm truly grateful because I'm extremely exhausted and there's no way in hell I would have gotten everything done that they did. Maybe now I might be able to get some time to try and relax. Well, until it hits me that Ollie is still here and will be until he's done and can catch a ride home. That thought gets my pulse pounding as I head over to the canine/feline building to see what he's up to.

Entering the side of the house, not seeing anyone, I head straight to the larger area in the back because I'm assuming Ollie will be there since that's where the new addition of cats he found are being housed. As I look around, all the cages are cleaned. Even the playroom is straightened up. Only thing not taken care of are the top cages, which gives me an idea of who's been busy.

Finally arriving to the new cat area, I see the gleam of Ollie's wheelchair before I see him because he's leaning over at the edge petting the momma cat. All the kittens are up and moving all around his chair. The look on his face is simply breathtaking to me. Knowing how trauma can affect a person, my heart hurts for him. What I went through was hard, but I can't imagine what he's been through. The ladies filled me in a bit but didn't want to break confidence or whatever they told me when I asked them some questions.

Quietly I stand inside watching him. The muscles tense in his back as his one arm continually strokes momma, while I can hear him murmuring to her. Occasionally, if a kitten gets close enough, he gives them some loving with his other hand, though the little ones are more interested in the new climbing thing right in front of them. As I watch, one of them claws their way up Ollie's leg. He leans back laughing as the kitten makes it to his lap, turning around again and again until it gets comfortable and starts to fade to sleep. As I giggle, Ollie hears me and looks my way. The look, oh my God, as he takes me in, first going up then down my body. His eyes make my body feel like it's burning up. Knowing I'm grubby from today's work, I can feel my face turning red as I shift from one foot to the other. Suddenly I'm nervous as hell, which is so silly. Not like he can chase me down, this SEAL with wheels.

With that thought, my giggles turn into an all-out laugh. Shit, I crack myself up when I'm exhausted. He just raises an eyebrow, never saying a word. At that I can't control it, I snort before breaking out in uncontrollable laughter.

Ollie

Watching the fuzzball get comfortable and hearing the soft giggle, I turn to see Pixie standing behind me. She seems more at ease but looks totally exhausted. So glad I tried to clean up back here and what I could of the cat cages. Her laughter is contagious, and I grin as she snorts then breaks out in a carefree laughter.

“Okay, what’s so funny, Pixie Paisley? Clue me in so I can join in on the fun.”

“Sorry, Ollie, it’s just seeing a badass military soldier melt at the sight of a kitten in his lap. Your face was priceless. Oh, by the way, guess I owe you thanks for all the stuff that’s been done. Appreciate it, know Joe had to take off because Merty needs him home after her treatment is over. He likes to be there when she gets home.”

Knowing she’s rambling because she’s nervous, I think it’s so adorable. Can’t remember the last time a woman was skittish around me. Especially since I’ve been in this goddamn chair. Kind of builds my confidence up a bit. But something she said caught my attention.

“Joe’s wife is getting treatment for what? He didn’t say anything when we were talking. Is she okay?”

Shaking and dropping her head, I watch as Pixie tries to get herself together. Fuck, from laughing to almost crying in the time it took me to open my trap and put my foot in it.

“No, Ollie, I’m sure he didn’t. It’s hard for him to talk about. Merty has cancer, Stage

3. She's in her second round of chemotherapy, and fingers crossed, this time it helps. Though this second time is very rough on her, their youngest daughter is taking her because Merty doesn't want Joe to see her like that. Even all the meds they give her for nausea and queasiness don't help. But she does want him with her at home. What a love story that one is. Did he tell you they met when he came back from Vietnam and she was one of the anti-war hippies? That's what she called herself, but somehow, they met, fell in love, and the rest is history. Even with Joe spending most of the morning and early afternoon here before heading back home to be with Merty, I was shorthanded today with the event coming up, so you guys pitching in helped me with everything I needed to do on the to-do list before I make cookies for the adoption event this weekend.

"Damn, I didn't know. I feel bad for Joe, he's a good old guy. We talked for quite a bit, but I get it, he doesn't know me from anyone. I hope Merty is one of the lucky ones for his sake. So, what else can I do then? I'm pretty handy, just so ya know."

She kind of points to my legs bashfully.

"Oh shit, I have a message for you. Charlie said when you're ready to go call the office and ask for Noodles and he'll come get you."

Fuck, that changes my mood instantly, I don't want to call Noodles for a ride. We're finally alone. I'm sure my face shows my emotions, but I try to get it under control after a quick second. I continue to focus on her for a few minutes, well, until she starts to look uncomfortable.

"Okay, Pixie, let me know what you want done, don't want to be in your way. I can make that call now or stay for a bit longer and help you finish the rest of this shit. Just tell me what I can do within my limits, and I'll give ya a hand with whatever if you want me to before I leave."

I wait for her answer because I really want to stay, but it's totally up to her and I won't push myself on her. Not yet anyway. "How about this, Ollie. I'd love your help and once we're done, I'll make some dinner and then can drive you home."

Sitting up a bit straighter, I consider her offer. Feeling hopeful, a slow smile appears on my face, and I hope she didn't just get the wrong impression. Before I give it any thought; I give my answer.

"It's a deal, Pixie. Let's get those top cages cleaned first, I couldn't reach them. Then we'll finish whatever else needs to be done. Dinner sounds great 'cause all I've eaten today was your kick-ass delicious bread when we got here and lots of coffee. Appreciate the offer, I'm sick of cooking for myself. Would love the company."

Now that we've come to an agreement, I very carefully place the kitten by momma, who is cleaning the rest of them. She's been doing that, Joe said, even though they are old enough not to. While she has their attention, I wheel away, heading toward the exit. As Pixie opens the door to let me through, I grab her hand and squeeze before wheeling past her. Oh God, please don't let her have the wrong idea. I'm not looking for a quick roll in the hay or piece of ass. Though that last thought wakes my body up as my cock starts to get hard. As I shift to get more comfortable and hide the bulge in my pants, I head toward the room filled with dirty cat cages.

* * *

I lean back rubbing my belly.

"Damn, Pixie, I'm full. That stew was probably the best I've ever eaten. Holy shit, what kind of meat was that? And all those vegetables with those homemade biscuits. I'm in Heaven over here."

"It's venison that one of my volunteers shared with me. Mike and his boys take down

a deer each, so they always have extra. It has a different taste, right? That's why the assortment of veggies I added to try and add some more flavor. Yes, the biscuits are homemade, my grandma's recipe. Glad you enjoyed it, Ollie. And I agree with you, it's so nice to share a meal with someone. Nice to have the company too."

Before I can say a word, her two pit bulls come in from the back room looking for scraps, I think. Goddamn are they huge. Both are male and very protective of Paisley. When we first came in, they almost knocked me out of my chair. Their growls alone almost had me shit my pants, for Christ's sake. Didn't know she had dogs and she said they were in the outside run when we first got here this morning. She released them in the house before she started her daily chores, she told me. But once she properly introduced us, they were fine. I did notice they were trained dogs not just pets. Wonder why, but I don't figure now is the time to ask, even though my curiosity is there. Not sure what to expect next, I just sit and wait.

"Ollie, let me clean this mess up and I can get you home. You must be exhausted. First PT then all afternoon here cleaning up animal crap literally."

I laugh at that. Fuck, she's not stopped since we got here. Something she said comes to mind. It might get me more time with her. Feeling really comfortable with her, I don't want to leave.

"Hey, Pixie, didn't you say something about making cookies? Are you seriously thinking I'm gonna leave before sampling them? You're crazy then, hon. And don't tell anyone, but I'm pretty good at baking. My mom didn't feel like the kitchen was just for girls, so all of us learned the basics at an early age."

After her initial shock, she looks excited at my offer, so I let out my breath. Might as well go for the gusto and get this out of the way, find out upfront.

"Hey, Pixie, I've really enjoyed being around here today, especially being around ya.

You must have noticed that I like you a lot, just wanted to get that out there 'cause we've been avoiding the subject. And I don't want to."

Every emotion possible runs across her face before she just looks at me and stares.

That's not promising at all. Well, I opened my trap, might as well follow through and take my chances. I wheel around the table, get up as close as possible, leaning toward her and watching, making sure she has a chance to tell me no. Instead, she leans toward me, grabbing me around the neck and pulling me to her. As our lips touch, the electrical current I feel shocks the hell out of me. I pull back for a minute to look at her beautiful face, with her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open, and then I go back in, crushing my lips to hers.

Paisley

Holy moly can this man kiss! With just his hands gently holding my face and his mouth on mine, I'm a goner. Something about Ollie just seems so right. Yeah, I have some nerves, of course I do with my history, but damn the attraction between us is overwhelming for sure.

Feeling treasured by his kiss and knowing he's trying to take it slow and easy; I tempt the waters. Hesitantly, my tongue touches the crease in his lips, and damn, that's all it takes. Ollie's mouth opens and his tongue seeks entrance into mine with fierce determination. He devours me like a man starved. I like the way he takes control without manhandling me. His hands have moved to one around my head, holding me still and close, the other caressing up and down my back. I feel safe in his arms.

The moan coming from my lips startles me. Usually, I'm very quiet when intimate, but I can't seem to control myself and feel wild and free. As my hands feel the mass of muscles up and down his back and sides, I can also feel the restraint he is using. Not sure if it's because of the chair—his injury—or just being careful with me. I believe it's a bit of all three. As he reluctantly pulls back, his hand comes around my head to caress my cheek gently. Both of our breaths are heavy, and we take a moment just gazing into each other's eyes.

“Couldn't resist, Pixie, you're so goddamn gorgeous. Now that I've tasted those lips, not sure I'll be able to resist them. Come here, I want another taste before we start our cookie baking mission.”

Then we proceed to make out in my kitchen like teenagers. Kissing and feeling each

other up. Nothing more and our hands stay above the waist, so very innocent. Well, Ollie has a lot to touch with all his muscles. The hills and valleys all over his body. His arms are enormous and when around me, I feel like nothing can ever hurt me. He goes from kissing me to nibbling on my lower lip to moving down my jawline to my ear, whispering sexy little words and sounds. From there he goes to my neck, around my jaw—nipping and kissing—until he’s back at my mouth. His lips take ownership and plunge deep, tasting me like no one ever has. I finally pull away because if I don’t, we’ll end up not baking in the kitchen but heating things up in the house before we burn down the bed. I smirk at that and see Ollie’s eyebrow go up at me. Taking some much-needed breaths, I watch as Ollie tries to adjust himself in his chair. Good, I think to myself, at least I’m not the only one affected by all this smooching.

Seeing me watch him, his face starts to turn pinkish as a blush starts to show on his face. But he never loses eye contact with me, and we say so much without a single word coming from our lips. How is this happening to me? And why now with a guy who doesn’t even live here? As these thoughts go through my mind Ollie’s huge hand covers mine and squeezes. And all my questions and concerns just fluff away.

“Pixie, so can I stay? Let me help you, hon.”

Knowing there is so much to that question, I really look at him but all I get is his honest face watching me watch him. Nothing hiding or lurking around the corner. Just a gorgeous guy wanting to be around me. Whoa, wait a minute, why does this gorgeous guy want to be here?

“Why do you want to stay, Ollie? Do you have an expectation on how the night will end? If so, better spit it out now to make sure we’re on the same page of that story, soldier.”

Shaking his head, he grabs my hands and just sits there for a second or two. I can swear a small smile is on his lips, which is starting to get my blood boiling because I

don't find anything remotely funny. Before a word spews from my mouth Ollie gives me a look, shaking his head slightly so I wait.

“Pixie, not expecting anything. I'm liking getting to know you, and for some reason, this little farm of misfits brings me a peaceful feeling I've not felt since I was shipped Stateside. I'm in the moment and my mind isn't all over the place. Better than after any of my therapy sessions, that's for damn sure.”

“Damn, Pixie, you might be on to something here. Have you ever given it any thought to offering some kind of program for the military folks coming back home? Maybe tie it into some form of therapy, not sure about all that shit, but I know people you could talk to if you're interested. If spending a day here has me feeling like this, can you imagine incorporating this into a returning soldier's recovery program? Kind of gives hope when you don't think anything is left for you out in the world. I feel a form of kinship to these orphan animals. Yeah, I have family back in Montana, but I'm here. These four-legged creatures, probably most of them, would not be breathing if not for this farm. You're saving lives, Pixie, by taking them in. Damn, that's gotta be an awesome feeling for you. I feel it myself just from the little I did today. I swear they can tell we don't want to harm them at all. They are grateful to be saved. Let me know if you want, I can have either Mark or Liam give you a call and see if there's anything to my idea. So, since we can't kiss and make cookies at the same time, how about we start the cookies, kiss when they're baking, and go from there? Sound like a plan, Pixie girl?”

I know I look stunned and I am because, as I'm learning, Ollie goes in the exact opposite direction than where I think he's heading. I can openly see how affected he is by our make-out session, but he's not pushing it further at all. Damn, I'm confused because one part of me finds it so cool he's a gentleman, while the other side of me wants him to rip my clothes off like in those romance novels I'm reading and hooked on. I know for damn sure he fits the description of each hero in those books, no doubt. But here's where Ollie differs from storybook heroes; he is a true hero not

only for our country but for those who served with him. And he's shown me he's a good guy who's not out for a one-time wham-bam, thank you, ma'am thing. Not sure what we could have, but I like the idea of anything with him. So, seeing him waiting patiently for me to give him an answer, I smile back at him.

“Okay, Ollie, let's get the cookie baking mission started. I would like to make a few different kinds so you might be here a while, if that's okay.”

Now he smiles at me hugely as he wheels away from me, so I can get up.

“Pixie, I'll stay as long as you need me to.”

With that, together we clear the table and I start to get everything we need to make a massive amount of cookies.

Paisley

I'm a mess, as usual. Whenever I have these types of events here at the farm, part of me knows it's going to be a success but the other part of me is scared to death because all kinds of people are going to be where my home is. And that brings up so many memories in my head.

Trying to calm myself, I think about Ollie and all that happened that night. He's almost too good to be true, as though he's a figment of my imagination, because it's like he came out of one of my romance books; he fits my 'dream man' almost exactly. But also, because I know he has demons, though he hasn't shared, like I've not shared my own demons. But besides that, we've shared nearly everything else about ourselves up to now. I know he's from Timber-Ghost, Montana and has a huge family with what did he say, four brothers and three sisters. And that the ranch his family runs is a pretty big operation. I told him that I only have a brother and sister and we aren't really close but stay in touch here and there. He stayed after our make-out session, and he helped me make around thirteen dozen cookies so fingers crossed that will be enough, along with my berry breads I baked from the other day.

All the volunteers are here, even Joe and Merty. She's going to be running the little kid sticker table so she can relax and enjoy the day. I told Joe if she gets tired then she can go into the house and lie down. He could come find me and I'll unlock the house. But since Joe is one of the very few who knows where I hide the extra key, I told him he could use that one also. Both of them know my story in great detail so they understand why I'm so cautious, especially around strangers.

The adoption open house starts at noon, so I'm going around making sure everyone

knows their job and how to get ahold of me. When on the farm, I have a cell phone dedicated to just here. That's the number everyone has, I don't give out my personal cell, well, except to Joe and Merty. So, when my personal cell goes off, I'm kind of shocked. Unless something is going down at the clinic, but I have one of the new vets handling calls for the weekend. Grabbing it, I look down and feel the smile on my face.

"Hey, where are you? Everything okay?"

Hearing a lot of background noise, I'm wondering where he's at.

"Pixie, hello, morning. Yeah, everything is fine, we're loading up and on our way. Just checking in to see if you need or forgot anything and want us to pick it up? Natalie's screaming shit off, hang on for a second."

I hear 'WHAT' and start to giggle because it was an irritated tone. Waiting, I walk toward the horse pastures and see Taos brushing out the mares, so I just lean against the fence watching and taking a moment to just be.

"Sorry about that, Natalie wants to know if you need any water, sunscreen, paper plates or napkins, first aid kit, or ice."

As Ollie is listing things off the only two that come to mind are the last two. I have a pretty small first aid kit.

"Ollie, yeah, I could use some ice and another first aid kit or just some extra bandages. That's it. Thanks for checking, honey."

I can feel his reaction through the phone, without a word from him, even though I wait. When he has it together again, I hear him scream to Noodles to go back inside and get the black first aid kit in the front closet.

“All right, Pixie, we’ll get some bags of ice, I’m bringing my first aid kit, which should be enough. If you think of anything else just text me, okay? See ya shortly.”

He hangs up before I get a word in—before I can tell him how awesome he is. Just knowing he’s on the way makes my heart beat a little bit faster and it’s a damn good feeling. With these thoughts I go to the small animal house to check how things are going in here. My volunteering brother and sister team are working this one today, Sheila and Kenny. They greet me when I first enter, then we do a quick walkthrough and as always with these two, I’m impressed. They took a section of the dead area in back and have turned it into a kind of private area for someone considering adoption to get to know the animal they’re interested in. What shocked the crap out of me is they did all this in the last two hours. I was here early this morning feeding everyone, and it wasn’t like this then. Both of these kids are in high school, and they both love animals.

We chat for a bit, and I make my way around doing a quick walkthrough to ensure we are ready. During our last adoption open house, we had folks waiting to come in so I want to be ready. When I finally hit the canine/feline building, I quickly enter hoping all is good here, so I can then make my way back to the house and get situated at the front by the adoption runs. As I look around, everything looks awesome. Taking a quick minute, I head back to Ollie’s kitties. Looking through the window I see the kittens playing around while momma watches over them. They all look so good. Even momma is coming along, though on a slower recovery pace.

As I return to my house to get everything on my table at the entrance, I’m excited about today. We’re ready and I pray that many of these animals are able to find their forever homes today too. Not because I don’t want them here but because they deserve to know that feeling of unconditional love between a fur baby and its human momma and daddy.

* * *

I'm sitting at my table, organizing everything, putting the brochures in the wooden stand beside the table that Joe made for exactly this purpose. In front of the table, off to one side, is a huge cooler that is filled with bottles of plain water. We have similar coolers throughout the farm, so water is readily available. My adoption applications are in my folder on the cart beside me. I have giveaways too. Little hand sanitizers with pictures of the current animals here on the farm. Pencils for the kids with little pads of paper with a picture of the farm in the background. And the large bowl at the end is filled with fruit. My baked goods are under the tent right next to me with other items some of the volunteers baked and brought to me this morning. I was so touched because I didn't ask any one of them to do that because they do so much already for the farm. Hearing horns blowing, I look up to see a literal caravan coming down the drive toward the house. What the hell, there's like four or so huge SUVs stopping off to the side of the parking area. As the doors start to open, I get it. The military folks have landed.

Knowing it was going to be a hot day, I'm in jean shorts and a greenish thin summer blouse that shows my shoulders, with Chucks on my feet. Right now, my hair is down but a scrunchy is on my wrist. Today isn't for fashion, it's for comfort. As I watch Natalie and Charlie walk my way, I see they had the same thoughts. Both are in shorts with a cute top and gym shoes or in Charlie's case, combat boots. Their hands are filled with Tupperware containers, not sure why. As they get closer, I hear Charlie ask where to put shit for the bakery sale. No way. Oh my God, did they bake too? Feeling slightly overwhelmed, I just stare at them like an idiot.

Natalie takes one look at me then the table next to me and heads there, placing her load on the end and motioning Charlie to do the same as she comes back my way. Once she's beside me, she pulls me into her arms. I grasp on—feeling I don't even know what—as I watch guy after guy follow Ollie, and I think, Liam, Natalie's husband, to us. Before they reach us, Natalie leans over and whispers.

“Honey, this was all Ollie. He organized it all. Asked all the guys to come out here.

Begged Charlie and me to bake some stuff and even have Mark and Liam here, which if there ain't beer somewhere around on the weekend then those two are usually elsewhere. So, you going to share what has that SEAL on Wheels, as you call him, going to these extremes for you means? What happened after we left the other day?"

Before I can utter a word, I see Ollie wheeling toward me, a smirk on his face.

"Pixie, this enough help? If not, I can get a second shift here later, just say the word."

His eyes are shining and just seeing that makes me happy. Smiling back at him, my heart beating hard, I give it right back.

"No, my SEAL on Wheels, this should do. Let's get everything organized so we can have the guys out there helping with the animals."

Hearing laughter, I look around, not sure what is so funny. Both Charlie and Natalie are kind of smiling and laughing too. I don't get it.

"UM, Pixie, SEAL on Wheels?"

Looking into his face with that damn eyebrow raised, now I get it, and immediately join in with my own laughter.

Ollie

Man, between the heat, all the people and the ton of kids running around, not to mention the noise, I need to find a quiet place to just chill. Looking around, I see Joe taking his wife into Pixie's house, so I wheel my way up to the house but ring the bell. I don't want to just go right in. Joe comes to the door hesitantly until he sees me, then he throws the door wide open.

"Come on in, boy. It gettin' to be too much for ya? It's a lot, got to say that, and folks just keep coming. Gonna be a good turnout for Doc, for sure. Let's get you comfortable—head to the room off the kitchen—I got Merty situated back there 'cause it's quieter. Like to introduce ya to my wife."

I wheel down the hall and enter the room, stopping. Merty is lying on the couch with a cool cloth on her forehead. Turning to Joe to tell him I don't want to disturb her, he walks around me, lifting her legs and sitting down, before bringing her legs to rest on his thighs. His hands start on massaging her one foot and I hear the moan.

"Momma, you okay to open your eyes for a minute. Someone here I want ya to meet."

Merty slowly removes the towel, eyes opening even slower. She's looking at her husband until he does a chin lift in my direction. As Merty turns her head, eyes the blue color of a Montana sky are looking directly at me. She tries to give me a smile, but I can tell something is bothering her.

"Hello, ma'am. Nice to meet you. Didn't mean to disturb ya both. Joe let me know

and I'll find another room, just needed a break from all that out there."

She smiles then and gives me the universal sign to enter. Knowing what I know, Merty looks pretty good at the moment. She is wearing some kind of very colorful scarf around her head and she's on the thin side, but damn, I hope all works out for her. She kind of reminds me of my momma, not sure why, they don't look alike at all.

"So, son, what's your name? And before I forget, thank you for your service."

Before I can get a word out Joe yells out, "Well dang, Momma, I told ya wanted to introduce you to this young fella, so letta me do it proper like. Ollie, this lovely young lady is my wife, Merty. And, Momma, this here is Ollie."

After we exchange the pleasantries Merty sits up, putting the wet washcloth on the coaster on the end table. She stares at me for so long I get a shiver up my spine. Right when I go to say something, Joe goes first.

"Ollie, don't ya worry, my woman is a sage, some may call it an empath. She can read folks like no other. Thinkin' that's what she's about right now. Just sit back and relax. Doc's got the air on and the hounds locked up, so all is good."

I do exactly what he recommends, even though Merty is still eyeballing me. Nothing I can do about that, so my head goes back, and I close my eyes and just breathe. I'm chilling, minding my own business when I feel 'it.' And I don't even know what 'it' is. Something so powerful it has me sitting straight in the chair, eyes alert, trying to figure out what the ever-lovin' fuck is going on. Then my eyes land on Merty and I get it. Merty is the 'it' I'm feeling.

"Son, you've been to hell and back, I can see it. Thank the good Lord you're on the way back. Don't fight it, Ollie, do whatever they say to do; they do know best. And that lil' girl you got your eyes on, make sure you know what you want because she

ain't ours by birth but she's ours anyhow, and we protect what's ours. In the very near future something's going to hit you hard, and you'll have to make a once-in-a-lifetime decision. Include Paisley is all I'm asking. And yes, you're right, she is the one though neither of you are there just yet. But life won't wait so just make sure not to let go of the best thing you could ever put your hands on. Ollie, really look at me. What do you see? I know what I'm talking about, son, and this man next to me knows it too."

I'm stunned because I haven't said anything and she's giving me advice or I don't know, is she seeing into the future? Who the fuck knows? But listening to her that feeling is getting bigger and bigger inside of me. Something is sprouting and taking root. Wow, I mean I've known Pixie for what—two weeks or so—since we brought the cats to her clinic? What is gonna happen that I have to include her in it too?

"Ollie, I know it's hard to believe, since the two of you are so new, but please take my words to heart, that's all I ask. You will see what I'm talking about real soon, son. Real soon."

* * *

After my weird as shit interaction with Merty, and once I felt better, I make my way outside again. This time I head to baked goods for sale because I need a sugar high. As I wheel around to get a better look, a little boy looks up at me, mouth wide open, staring between me and the wheelchair. Fuck, here we go again.

"Hey, little buddy, how's it going? Enjoying the farm with all the animals? Pretty cool, huh?"

He moves a bit closer to me, still with a serious face.

"Yeah, it's awesome, all the animals are so much fun. Mom and Dad are gonna let

Sissy and me find our forever friend. They're with Miss Paisley filling out some stuff, so I snuck over here to look at the cookies and stuff."

Damn, he can't be more than, I don't know, five or six. Maybe a little older, who knows, but cute as a button. Glancing up, I see two folks scrunched down at Pixie's table working on a form. They don't even seem to realize that their boy walked away, but then I see another child in a kid's wheelchair looking our way. Just looking at her, I can tell she wants to be over here.

"Is your sister in a chair like me?"

He nods intently, still looking at the cookie assortment. I don't think anything I say right now would capture his attention. So, looking at Natalie, who seems to be manning this table, I point to the individually wrapped cookies.

"Can I get two of each, please? And one of Pixie's double chocolate chips with nuts."

She grabs my first order, separating them into two bags. Smart woman. Then she wraps mine in a napkin and gives me my total. Reaching for my wallet, I go to pay her when the little kid shakes his head to reach into his own pocket, pulling out a five-dollar bill.

"Lady, is this enough? His too?"

Natalie looks at the bill then at me. We exchange words without anything being said. She takes the bill, puts it in her money box, and returns with four singles and four quarters. As she hands them back, praying he doesn't know the value of money yet which, apparently, he doesn't. Then Natalie gives us our treats.

"Thanks, bud, appreciate it. Are the other cookies for your sissy? If so you're a nice brother."

“Yeah, there for Sissy. I owe her ’cause it’s my fault she’s stuck in that funny chair.”

With that he turns and walks away. I’m left feeling like I’ve been hit by a bolt of lightning. Hearing a snuffle, I look that way and see Natalie staring after the boy, tears rolling down her cheeks.

What the fuck does that even mean and why is a little boy so young blaming himself? I follow him toward his family with one thing on my mind. Find out why he’s taking all the blame on himself.

Paisley

Listening to both parents as they quietly tell me their story, my heart is breaking in two. Yeah, we all think we've had it the worst until you hear somebody else's story. This family has been through the wringer and are no way clear of it at all. Looking at the young girl in the wheelchair, I feel so bad for her, but she's got a lot to be thankful for. Easier for me to say because I can walk, but she's alive with her family who loves her. Like she can feel me looking her way, she turns and just stares for a bit. Then very slowly she smiles at me and turns away. Her parents don't need to worry, she's okay. They must not be seeing what I just saw.

Before I can even bring the subject up, I hear a growl—yes, a growl—right before my table shakes. Trying to figure out what is going on, I see Ollie's wheelchair directly behind a little boy who stopped next to the couple I've been talking to. Even from the small distance, I see the girl wheel closer to the boy. Oh, no something is about to happen right in front of me. Then it does in spades as Ollie begins to talk in the quietest of voices.

“Excuse, sir, may I have a moment of your time? It won't take long, just need a word with you.”

Mr. Kelley turns around confused.

“Do I know you? What's this about?”

I see Ollie fighting for control as Natalie comes to stand next to me, taking my hand. She leans into me saying softly, “The guys are on the way.” What? Why are the guys

on the way? I'm so lost.

As Ollie and Mr. Kelley walk off a bit, Mrs. Kelley's head is going from them to her son, I'm guessing, to them?

"Honey, what's going on? Why is that man wanting to talk to your dad, did you do something?"

Before the boy even tries to speak the girl in the wheelchair jumps in.

"Mom, knock it off. You always assume Tommy did something wrong. Maybe it's not even about him for God's sake. You can't blame him for all the mistakes that happen in this family, even though you try to all the time."

I hear the gasp but ignore it because right at that moment Mr. Kelley is starting to get red in the face, pointing a finger in Ollie's face, which isn't going over too well. Not sure which one of these discussions is going to be the first to blow, I've no idea which one I should try to put the fire out for first. Joe and Merty come around to my other side. Merty sits down while Joe stands behind her.

Then in a blink of an eye, the whole front area of my house is filled with military men. It feels so weird because one minute no one is here then everyone, even Charlie. I see Mark and Liam go over to Ollie and Mr. Kelley, while Charlie and a few of the other guys come to where Mrs. Kelley and the kids are. Somehow everything stays calm as they escort them to the back end of my house. Before I can even ask, Natalie gives me the okay to go, she'll stay here.

I jog around to see that Mr. and Mrs. Kelley are standing next to each other with both of the kids some distance from them. Ollie is on the sidewalk path, just rolling back and forth with his arms pushing the movement. Mark and Liam are talking between themselves. Not sure what the hell is going on, I approach the calmest of the bunches

which are Mark and Liam.

“Sorry to interrupt, but what the hell is going on? I’m trying to run an open house, not a battle royale. Why is he doing this?”

I assume they know that he is Ollie because I’m so mad I can’t even say his name out loud. After a minute or two, both men shift their gazes to me. Liam literally puts his hand out like ‘dude, this one’s yours,’ which I can’t even explain or put into words how much that pisses me off.

“Paisley seems like the boy said some things to Ollie and Natalie that had them concerned. Now our brother probably could have handled the situation a little better, but his heart is in the right place. As you can tell, shit happened in that family that hasn’t been dealt with yet. We’re just trying to find a solution so everyone can go about and enjoy the rest of their day. Know what I mean?”

Mark gives me a grin which I don’t return. How dare Ollie assume he knows about these folks’ pain. Liam jumps into my mind at that moment.

“Paisley, our boy in that chair, he’s been specially trained to scope out people who lie, steal, kill, and everything in between. Might be nothing but from what I got, something ain’t right here, and Ollie means to get to the bottom of it. We’re sorry it took place right out front, but it’s over and we’ll handle it from here. Go ahead, hon, go back up front. You’ve got enough going on.”

“Is Ollie gonna be okay, Mark? I’m worried something else is going on, isn’t it? I can actually feel it like a fizzing or something in the air.”

He really scrutinizes me for a bit then gives me one of those smiles Charlie has been talking about. Yeah, I can see it affecting her lady bits because he’s that good.

“No worries, Paisley, our boy is gonna be just fine. I can guarantee it. You just keep looking that way at him and I have no doubt Ollie will suffer through whatever, just for one of your looks. Especially that one right there.”

I give him my best stink eye then turn and head to the front, hearing his laughter following me all the way back.

* * *

He's never left my side since whatever happened... happened. The Kelleys did come back to adopt two kittens for the kids. The process is that they complete the paperwork, we do a check, then have them come back out with any other animals in the family. If everything checks out, then their new animal is released. But seeing those kids with the kittens in their arms I did something I rarely do. Broke my own rules. So as the Kelley's whole family, along with two kittens head home, I let out a breath. Damn, what a long-ass day. Not too much drama, most of it is sitting right next to me. What the hell he was thinking I have no idea, but something about that boy hit Ollie hard. Yet I could also see something different about that family when they came back to my table. They seemed closer, more connected. Mom was pushing her daughter's wheelchair and every once in a while, would run her hand down her hair or squeeze her shoulder. And every time the girl leaned into each touch. Glad in the end it worked out. But I am still a little pissed at my SEAL on Wheels.

I can't let one incident ruin the day because without even going over the numbers and files of adoption requests, I already know we had a phenomenal day. I think one of the best ever. All the baked goods are gone. Well, what wasn't gone before all the military guys came around reaching in their pockets, dropping twenties for a cookie or two. Natalie was laughing so hard, hands filled with cash.

Charlie is on the other side of me, and I think she's there to protect Ollie. Not sure why I think that, but that's the feeling I'm getting. He did tell me that he's known

Charlie a very long time as she's friends with his sister, Onyx. Maybe she feels obligated to protect him, who knows. She has no worries right now, I have too much to do now that the open house is over. As everyone gathers around, I go into the house, returning with a huge tray of sandwiches. Next round I bring out a vegetable tray and finally a huge fruit salad. I encourage all to grab some food and get off their feet for a bit. Then I turn and go into my house for a bit of quiet I so desperately need.

Well, that is until I hear the faint noise of wheels on my floors heading toward the screen porch. Damn it, can't he give me five minutes before we dive right into it?

Ollie

I know how pissed off Pixie is at me because I feel the same way about myself. Usually, I'm so calm and collected, what the fuck happened today? For some reason, my radars got crossed and I assumed and went way down the wrong road. No, the parents weren't abusing or blaming the little guy for anything. He was doing it to himself. Turns out mom was driving him to a school event with his sister in the car. He asked a question, mom turned to give him an answer, blew through a stop sign, and bam... they were hit by a truck. Sister got the worst of it but still no diagnosis yet of permanent paralysis.

I took a moment when the parents cooled down enough to talk to the kids. I gave them a very vanilla story about my injuries and explained how the wheelchair was allowing me to heal and I wouldn't be in it forever. As we talked, I could see the boy getting a better understanding. The girl was pretty spot-on and had been trying to tell her brother it wasn't his fault. She was actually blaming her mom for taking her eyes off the road. It was just a ton of back-and-forth blame.

When I was done, and they were going back to pick out their kittens, the girl wheeled up to me thanking me for helping with her brother. As she wheeled away, she shouted to me, "Good thing you're not stuck in the wheelchair, you're too hot for an old guy to be, Ollie Ol."

She giggled as she wheeled away as everyone around us broke into laughter at my expense. And for the rest of the day, I became old Ollie. Fuckers. Well, everyone but Pixie. She's been shooting flames at me since I approached the parents. Well, now I gotta fix it because I don't want this between us. So here I am in her house, probably

going to have to go on bended knee—not literally of course—and beg for forgiveness. This totally sucks.

“What do you want, Ollie? I have nothing to say to you right now so please, can I have a damn minute to myself?”

Just the tone of her voice sends ice down my back. Nothing like my Pixie, more like someone I don’t know. Nope, not backing down.

“Sorry, Pixie, can’t do it. I know you’re pissed and don’t like it. If what I did made you upset and mad, I’m sorry, really. But I had to follow my gut and something wasn’t right there. I didn’t mean to mess up your open house though, it just happened.”

She spins around so fast she loses her balance and when Pixie tries to counterbalance before I can do a damn thing, she lands hard on her butt. But she is down there but a minute and bounces back up to get right into my face, finger pointing.

“Nothing just happens, Ollie. You’re an adult so you have choices in life. You didn’t even think about the consequences when you just rolled over there to confront two people you didn’t know from Jack. And not to be a bitch, but what exactly were you going to do from that wheelchair? If Mr. Kelley got pissed or something, he could have really hurt you. Didn’t you even think of that? I don’t give a shit that there was a scene during the open house, didn’t hurt us at all. I’m pissed and hurt at you, Ollie. Maybe I shouldn’t put my trust in you, I thought you were a good guy. But then again, my judgment of ‘good guys’ is never right. I should’ve learned from the last time.”

She plops her head in her hands, her curly hair forming a curtain around her face. What the hell just happened? We went from me causing a scene to me getting my ass kicked, which is such a crock of shit, to something about her bad choices in men.

Really, how do I even reply? Thinking on it, I don't have to. I can turn and catch a ride with one of the guys. If I do that, not only am I running away but then she'll be right about the type of guy I am. This, whatever is building, will be over before it starts. And I, for one, don't want that at all. I need to know what she meant though by good guys and shit.

“Okay, Pixie, I'll give you all you said. Except two things, there was no way in hell that guy could have kicked my ass just because I'm in a wheelchair. First, if it came to that, I still have my arms and, if I had to, my legs. Second, if it got that bad, do you think any of my brothers would stand by and let me get my ass beat? Now, I need you to explain the good guy-bad guy and your last comment of 'learned the last time.' I will say it again, I'm a good guy. Never would I hurt you intentionally, but I'm also a man, so I'm gonna piss you off, obviously. What's going on here, Paisley? I'm confused as hell. I mean, I understand you getting riffled with me not thinking, but the rest, where's that bullshit coming from?”

Watching her, I can see the deep breaths she takes before raising her head, gathering her hair, and with the scrunchy from her wrist I watch her put it up in that messy bun shit. I do like that look with all that hair of hers because some little pieces always fall down. She leans back into the sofa, grabbing a pillow onto her lap, hugging it tight. I can see dampness on her cheeks. With her eyes filled with tears she locks them with mine but says not one word. She seems to be searching for whatever it is she needs so I give her time. I totally understand that, sometimes shit that's in your head either doesn't want to come out or you can't find the words for it. Well, that's what my therapist explained to me.

“Ollie, I'm sorry. Yeah, I'm pissed about that shit show out there but I shouldn't have thrown my bullshit on your lap. You're right and I'm wrong, because you are—from what I've seen—a good guy. But there's so much to be done and this conversation is going to take some time, so can we please hold off? Please, Ollie, I need to tell you my story and share my demons with you, as you do with me, but right now my

responsibilities are waiting on me. We have to help those people out there who are only here to help us, um no, I mean me. Later on, we can get comfortable and share everything. But right now, please know I'm sorry, it was a long day and I wish I could say I'm hormonal, but I can't even use that excuse."

Hearing that, I kind of laugh. She shyly smiles at me while she stands and walks toward me. Her hands on my shoulders, she gives me a hug which I think she needs more than me. Then after I turn, she holds on to my shoulder as she walks, and I wheel back outside to close down the farm and get everything ready for the next day. Together.

Paisley

Damn it, I almost ruined everything yesterday. I can't keep comparing Ollie to him not sure why because they're nothing alike. Not to mention one is breathing free while the other, not so much. Sitting in my kitchen drinking a cup of coffee, I try to figure out my day. Well, since I arranged for the clinic coverage, I'm free. Joe is already here; I saw him when I first got up and looked around. Doesn't look too out of order either. Damn, Natalie and Charlie, I owe them a lot, they did it all.

By the time Ollie and I go back outside, everyone is on the move as Charlie barks out orders to his men and Mark stands by grinning. Liam and Natalie are dropping the tables that were up front and all the food is gone. And I mean gone, not a sandwich or piece of fruit or vegetable. Well, Ollie's shit out of luck. When Natalie sees us, she smiles softly elbowing Liam in the side. He looks up at her, sees where she's looking, and turns our way.

"It's about damn time, you two. We were about to pick straws to see who'd go in and get ya. As you can see, shit's getting done so, Paisley, can you tell Natalie what else we need to get in order? And you, killer, let's make sure the pasture and barn are in good order."

I watch the two men go toward the barn as Natalie walks up to me, placing her hand on my shoulder.

"Everything okay, Paisley? I know he really upset you, but I don't think he intended to. Something clicked in Ollie the way the boy said it was his fault. I watched him try to control his reaction, but I know you know he's also dealing with a ton of his own

stuff. They don't tell us much, but I work with those two and have access to their files. And I'm a bit nosy, so yeah, let's just say Ollie's been through the wringer in many ways. When he got here a few months ago, he was a total mess. Mark and Liam were worried they wouldn't be able to get through to him. But these SEALs never give up and never leave one to go it alone. So, as you can see, he is on the mend and since you've come into his life, he has some purpose. And hey now, no pressure, you have to do what's right for you. I'm just saying that life sometimes sneaks up on us and puts us in the right place at the right time, that's all.

“Enough of my soapbox, let's get this done so we can see how many babies found forever homes and how much in donations you received today. By the way, great job, sweetie. We're lucky to have you and this little farm around. Mark told Liam they want to talk to you to see if when some of the soldiers come back and are trying to reenter civilian life, if they could volunteer here. As Ollie told them, and what they saw today with some of the men who were at the event, being around animals open people up in a good way. I think, might be wrong, that three of the guys put in adoption forms and they're all single, so good for you. Easier sometimes to love a fur baby than a person. Oh, and before I forget, I'll wait, here she comes. Charlie, shake a leg, sistah.”

Smiling at the two of them, we watch her make a statement by shaking her hips and walking like she's on a runway. If Mark was around all those looks would end with black eyes, I'm sure.

“Okay, now that Charlie has arrived, we wanted to give this to you from our two families. Oh, sorry, Jackson and Catherine too. I'm so exhausted but had the best time helping. I don't know how you run that clinic and this place so maybe this can help, we sure hope so.”

She pulls something out of her jeans and hands it to me. Oh shit, it's a check folded in half. Why did they go and do this? Do I take it? Refuse and give it back? I have no

idea. Before I even open it, Charlie puts her two cents in.

“Paisley, just take the damn check. All of us can afford it and if we didn’t want to, we wouldn’t, okay? Don’t make a big deal out of nothing. This is what friends do for friends for Christ’s sake. Now, what else needs to be done?”

Without looking at it I put it in my shorts pocket and we work together to get everything put away, then head into the cool house to check out the adoption paperwork and donations. I feel like today was a win-win for the farm and the animals so I’m smiling as we enter my house.

* * *

Everyone has left and I’m sitting in my bedroom just trying to take it all in. I can’t believe it, but more than half of the dogs and cats are requested for adoption. A farmer put in an offer for the momma cow and calf. And he’s a dairy farmer, so that made my day. They will live a long life there. Even some of the really small animals and exotics have been requested. I’m blown away by the way the community came together. Well, I think Natalie and Charlie, along with the guys, had a big part in it. But I don’t really care at this point because the end result justifies the means. Finding forever homes with good people is my goal.

Donations blew me away. There were more twenties than anything and those I know were from the guys for every water they drank and cookie they ate. Big hearts, every last one of them. Including Ollie. I feel so bad for going off on him, it just got to be so much. If I’d had a few minutes to get my head straight it wouldn’t have happened, but it did and we dealt with it. I’m going to have to get all that cash to the bank and that’s when it hits me, I still have a check in my pocket. Reaching in, I grab it and unfold it. When I look at it, my eyes have to be playing games with me. No way in hell, that can’t be. No, just no. There are way too many zeros.

Shaking my head, my hands trembling, I take a minute then look again. Mother of God, it's right, I'm seeing it right. I try to remember what all Charlie said. Something about them having the money so don't argue, and then that Jackson and Catherine matched their donation. So, Charlie and Natalie each donated five thousand dollars and the owner of Cole Security Forces and his wife, who I've never met, matched it in the amount of ten thousand dollars. The check is cut from the company and in the comments is a smiley face and written in red 'just take it.' I start to laugh but end up crying. I've never in my entire life had people take my back like these folks have.

I reach over, grab my phone, and dial Ollie.

"Lo, Pixie, everything good?"

Trying to control my tears, I sniffle and immediately hear him moving.

"Pixie, what's wrong? Baby, tell me what's going on? Fuck don't have a car; I'll call someone and be there as soon as I can. Hang on, okay?"

"No, Ollie, hold up for a minute. Nothing's wrong, these are happy tears."

"What? What are happy tears, for Christ's sake? Think I just had a goddamn heart attack."

Laughing a little at his words, it takes me a minute to pull it together.

As I tell him what his bosses and their wives did, he says not a word. I start to worry when I finally get what's bothering him.

"Ollie, you give me more than any check could ever give. Just believing in me and being a 'good guy' means so much more. Really, honey. I don't need money from you, I just need you."

I hear him sigh then quiet. So, I wait, since I'm learning that's his way.

He needs to process and doesn't just spout out the first thing that comes to his mind.

"I'm so pissed right now. I'm here, you're there, and after what you just said—under normal circumstances—my ass would be in my car driving like Mario

Andretti to you. Instead, all I got is the phone, so talk to me, Pixie. About anything, just let's stay on the phone for a while. You just gave me one of the biggest gifts in my life. I need to keep you close however I can."

Aww, damn it, I think before I'm sobbing in the phone again.

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Ollie

I need to get to Pixie. Already left a message for someone to pick me up and I'm just about ready to get in the car in the garage and drive my motherfucking self. Being this close to getting out of this goddamn chair, I don't want to mess anything up, but after last night, I need my Pixie in my arms and my bed. Well, guess her bed if I'm rushing to her house. We've been going slow and steady, but that's over. I've been hard since she told me all she needed was me. Even with the bit of nasty talk we did on the phone, it ain't enough. Need to feel her surround me, taste her sweetness, and make her scream my name. Again and again.

Daydreaming, I don't hear the vehicle outside until someone is knocking on the door. Wheeling as quickly as I can, I reach up, unlock, and open the door to see Mark's smirking face.

"Driving Mr. Ollie, at your service. May I ask where to this early in the morning, sir?"

Wanting to spit nails at him, I turn, reaching for my duffel sitting on the couch. He eyeballs that and the smirk gets wider.

"May I take that for you, sir?"

I can't handle him anymore.

"Look, asshole, just get me to Paisley's, will ya, please? And no smart-ass remarks, I've had about enough from you already and you just got here. What was your name

again, Twinkle Toes, right?”

Grinning like an idiot, he grabs my bag and does some kind of fucked-up dance down to the black SUV. I can't help it, he's such a goofy asshole I can't hold in my laughter.

“Well there, Mr. Ollie, that does sound much better. And my name, sir, is Twilight. Try not to mess that up again, old timer.”

As we get settled in, he reaches to the console and hands me a large coffee.

“Probably shouldn't give that to you with all that snark coming out of ya. Damn, we need to work on a call name for you, Ollie, a good one too. Got to talk to Dreamboat and Ladykiller.”

“Yeah, with all your names, I don't have my hopes set too high. What, did a few teenagers pick them? Could be a teenagers' show Twilight, Ladykiller, and Dreamboat. What the ever-loving-fuck, dude?”

As we go back and forth giving each other shit, my day is starting to look really good. Mark's a good guy and has gone the distance for me, practically a stranger. Not sure I'll get a better time.

“Hey, seriously, Mark, just wanted to say thanks for all you guys have done for me. Have to say the therapies down here have helped the most but being around all of you day in, day out has helped clear the cobwebs out of the old noggin. Also seeing there are options helps me so much. Again, you have my gratitude.”

He seems to take my words at face value and as we drive to Pixie's farm, I'm feeling that brotherhood again. Damn, have I missed it. As he turns down the entrance of the farm, I'm amazed at how one day this place is packed to the gills with folks and today

is back to the day-to-day shit. Oh, that reminds me.

“Hey, what you guys did for Pixie was awesome. She was not expecting that, and she actually didn’t know if she should keep it. I told her no one would have done it if you didn’t want to, but you guys are totally the shit.”

“Ollie, we take care of our own and she’s a keeper. All kidding aside, you better be on your best behavior ’cause there are guys waiting to see if you make the cut. Not sure having all those single guys around yesterday to see how awesome that lil’ vet is was a good thing. And you’re right, but we wanted to do it. She works her ass off, maybe it will give her a bit of comfort to know she has some, as Charlie calls it, ‘rainy day funds.’”

He stops in front of the main house and gets my wheelchair out along with the duffel bag. I think it may not be such a good idea showing up without calling. Before I can say a word, the door opens wide and a flash of something comes right at me. Before I realize it, Pixie is on my lap with her two maniac dogs around the chair going ape shit crazy. She’s smiling and gives me a hot and heavy kiss. She realizes I’m not alone when we hear Mark snicker from behind us.

“Hey, Doc, how’s it hanging? Or should I say sitting?”

His laughter surely lets us know where his mind is, crazy bastard. But she just smiles and shifts a bit on my lap. Turning, she winks at me first.

“Morning, Mark, and it’s hanging just right, filled to the brim, ready to percolate.”

My mouth drops as laughter starts bubbling out. The look on Mark’s face has the two of us in hysterics. Before he can put his foot in his big mouth again; he drops the duffel beside the chair, giving Pixie a gentle smile, and pats me on the shoulder.

“You kids have fun. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t and make sure to keep things under wraps, if ya get my meaning.”

Then he’s gone, leaving us finally alone.

Knowing there’s no way in hell I can keep Pixie on my lap and wheel up to the house, I hold her tight for a second then gently place her on her feet, facing the house.

“All right, woman of the house, take me in and have your way with me.”

Giggling, she grabs my duffel, swinging it around herself, and we head inside together.

* * *

After some making out and a fresh cup of coffee, we are lounging in the sunroom, watching the pits run around the yard like the lunatics they are.

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“Ollie, I owe you an explanation about yesterday. Again, I’m so sorry for that. Sometimes I get flashbacks but first, let me explain.”

Then she goes about telling me about her last relationship and how she refused to use a name, kept saying she wouldn’t make it personal. The story was hard to hear though I had to, to better understand her. So are the many types of abuse out there and this slip of a woman seemed to suffer through most of them. Explaining that she had gone through a really rough period when her gynecologist told her she had located some pre-cancerous cells in her uterine wall. After a D&C and a rotation of radiation, her doctor told her that there was no way to know for sure if she would be able to get pregnant or carry full term. The doctor did say all the tests looked good, showing that she should be able to have a family, but nothing was guaranteed. You know wait and see game. Pixie explained she was engaged to be married to the man who was abusing her and when, heartbroken by the diagnosis, she told him, he lost his mind. He told her he wanted kids to keep his family name alive and if she couldn’t have them for him, what goddamn use was she. He had been calling her his broodmare but then he got nasty.

One particular rainy day, Pixie came home after a really hard treatment, and he was there drunk as a skunk. One thing led to another, and not only did he crack her head open with the bottle of whiskey, but he pushed her down their staircase, leaving her to die. He drove away but never came back. He hit a semi and died instantly, and when the sheriff deputies came to inform Paisley, they found her unconscious in her own blood. She was in a coma for five days and fought tooth and nail to regain everything she lost to him.

I can’t take my eyes from her as she finishes and drops her head.

“Pixie, come here. Please, Paisley, come here now.”

Slowly she stands up and walks toward me. When within my reach, I pull her down to my lap, wrapping her up in my arms. I don't feel it at first, but then the subtle shaking and crying that turns to sobbing and ends in a loud keening. All I can do is hold her, so I do and give her time. I can feel when she is spent and everything is out because I feel her wiping her face on her shirt before lifting her head to look up at me.

“Damn it, Ollie all I ever do is cry around you, I'm sorry.”

Before another word comes out to thank me for listening, I lift her head slowly, so she knows my intention, lean down my lips on a direct path to hers. Gently at first, until I have her with me, then it becomes more about passion than comfort. She is the one to open her lips and draw me in farther. I can feel my cock lengthen and get hard right before Pixie shifts and moans right into my mouth. Oh my God, I need to slow this down before it ends before we really even start.

“Goddamn, girl, you're killing me. But gotta get this out there. You aren't at fault for his mistakes. Don't take that on because it will drown you. Learn from that mistake and move forward. I don't know what this is between us, Pixie, but I enjoy being around and with you.”

Watching every word I say, she waits then gets off my lap and starts to walk down the hallway, looking over her shoulder. Well, hot damn, I think to myself before I follow her to what I'm thinking and hoping is her bedroom. The thought of Thank God the hallway is wide enough whizzes through my brain as I watch Paisley enter a room and go right to a large bed, sitting on the edge. Now, this is gonna be the hard part because I'll need to transfer. I do it at the beach home all the time, but this is different, I don't want to appear weak. Wheeling directly to her, she leans in and locks my chair, raising the footrests out of the way. Then she stands off to the side of

me and waits until I manage to stand on my one foot first, then the other, using both arms to stabilize myself. I turn, still hanging on, until my back is right at the edge of the bed. That's when Pixie unlocks the chair, moves it closer, and holding on to it I gently and carefully lower my ass to the bed. Damn, I made it. Pixie wheels the chair out of the way, and I pull myself up on my elbows the rest of the way up. By the time I hit her pillows, I'm fucking exhausted and thinking about a nap. Well, that is until my little Pixie kneels on the bed and crawls up beside me, a sultry smile on her face. Life comes immediately back into my body, especially one area that is on its way to getting hard.

Ollie

How is it even possible that we fit perfectly together? I mean, I'm almost a full head taller than Paisley but she's lying on me right now, and damn, does it feel not only, great but so right. This is the furthest we've taken it, both of us are shirtless and just seeing and feeling her skin has my mouth watering. She's so goddamn beautiful. My hands have been everywhere, and she feels better than she does in my dreams. Having her on top also feels so good, I think to myself right before her mouth closes around one of my nipples and sucks hard. Holy mother of God, I can't even think between the weight of her tiny body, the swell of her breasts on me, and those tight little nipples poking me in the chest. Her little gasps are making me harder than I've ever been. As her remaining clothes start to come off, I reach up my hands on either side of Pixie's head and pull her toward me. When our lips meet, it starts soft until it's not. Her tiny firm tongue is everywhere, and her taste is something I never want to be without. We kiss, lick, nip, and bite, getting to know each other intimately as my hands travel down this perfect tiny package. Her curly hair is covering us like a fluffy blanket. Her skin is softer than anything I've ever felt. I start to run my hands down her shoulders following her sides, my fingers graze the outside of her small pert breasts. She moans and tries to move into my hands. My hands follow the curve of her tummy until I feel a small strip of hair.

Taking my index finger, I gently shift to her clit and start to tap it softly then harder, then soft again. Her body is pushing toward my fingers, trying to pump and find her release. Not yet, Pixie. I move down and push one finger into her, oh shit, extremely tight pussy and she takes a huge breath as her hand grabs mine.

“Oh, Ollie, wait a minute. Damn, change of plans, don't wait. As good as that feels it

also hurts too. Wow, you have big fingers, oh my God. Why does it feel so tight?”

I immediately stop so I can watch her as she wiggles this way then that way. I can't tell if she's trying to get away or push closer. Her face is flushed as is her chest. I don't want to hurt her, but I'm not sure how much longer I'm gonna be able to hold on. My cock is weeping and I can feel that tingle low in my back. Fuck, and all I've done is touch her. I'm worried about how tight she is and how or if she's going to be able to take me in. If she thinks my finger is big, damn, she's in for a huge surprise, no pun intended. As she calms down a little, she lets my hand go, never looking away. She gives me a shy smile.

“Guess it's been longer than I thought.”

Knowing that she's back with me, my finger starts moving in and out, trying to stretch her as her walls seem to quiver. She begins to moan and cry out in a good way, so I increase my speed again, adding a different motion each time, making sure she's enjoying it and not in any pain.

“Ooooooooooh damn, oh my God!! I can feel it all the way to my toes. Olllllie, please go faster. Harder, harder, Ollie. Yes, oh yes, give it to me, you big beast, just like that. Yes, yes, right there. YES!!!!!!”

Smiling up at her, I'm guessing she enjoyed it but I'm beyond my limit. She's as limp as a noodle lying on top of me, breathing deeply, eyes closed, with a satisfied grin on her face. She looks like a goddamn angel. I take a moment to enjoy her and place both hands on her tiny full ass and squeeze. She takes a few minutes but seems to come back to me slowly. She literally stretches on me like a cat and it's almost like she is purring. When she opens her eyes and sees me watching her, she grins, which is sexy as hell. She leans down, placing a kiss on my lips. Then her little hands go directly to my workout pants, reaching in and grasping my cock. The warmth of her hand there feels like an electrical current flowing through me. Slowly she drags up

my length then quickly back down. She finds a rhythm and seems to be getting into it as her hips start moving, matching her fisting. Knowing I'm not gonna last, I grab her hand, stopping her. Shocked she looks at me, then smiles. She moves down me, grabbing my sweats, gently pulling them off. Now no one except the medical professionals have seen my lower side and leg since I got back Stateside. Well, Onyx too, but she's not only a nurse but my family. Before I can warn her about the brace and bandages, she gets them below my hips and mid-thigh when she stops and stares.

"Oh, Ollie, damn it, I forgot about you know. Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry, honey. I had no idea that was what happened to you."

Each word affects my dick, and I go from rock-hard to flaccid quickly. She sees it and immediately puts her hands there. Instantly it again starts to harden, and we are at a standstill, so to speak. She lets me go and removes my sweats and briefs, along with my shoes and sock. Then she crawls up me, trying to sit on my pelvis without putting too much of her weight on my injured side. I've been told I'm healed or else they wouldn't have been doing all that PT with all the stretches, standing, and walking.

Grabbing her hips, I pull her down on me, getting a surprised yelp.

"Pixie, I don't have anything else left. Please grab my bag, gotta get some condoms, my cock is ready to explode. I need to be deep in you when that happens, baby."

Not listening, she grabs my cock lifts up, and slowly starts putting me in her. Holy mother of God, son of a bitch, no I can't, no.

"Paisley, no, baby, gotta get a condom. I don't go unwrapped. Please, Pais, oh my God, you're burning my cock, holy shit it's surrounding me so fucking tight oh...oh...oh."

She looks down at me smiling.

“Ollie, I’m clean and not even sure if I can get pregnant but I do have an implant. I’ll get the condom but I’m good. You’re going in like, you know, natural. I want to feel just you. I just want it to be special. Between just the two of us, nothing else.”

Her head falls down, hair following, covering her face. Lifting it up I gaze into her eyes, knowing we need to get this moving.

“Pixie, it already is special ’cause it’s you. Yeah, let’s keep going, just take it slow. No, not because of my injuries, just the feel of you and I’m so ready to blow, so give me some time, please. I want to enjoy the feel of you surrounding me, making me burn with need.”

Her face brightens and she smiles as she puts the tip in her and starts to move down, taking a little bit then going back up. The concentration on her face is cute as hell. She’s so fucking wet, I probably could just push into her until she’s full, but I give her the reins. Once my cock is buried deep inside her, Pixie sits on me and starts squirming, but doesn’t lift up. Not sure why, but I get it after she squeezes her internal walls. Holy fuck, with just that I could come. Between shifting and doing all kinds of things on top of me while tightening her walls, never does she lift herself off my cock. First forward then backward or making circles with her hips. I’m panting with sweat on my forehead, but damn, the view I have, I’m trying to take everything in: Pixie concentrating, her bottom lip being held by her upper teeth, body flush, hair all around her. The sounds, oh God, that she’s making is what’s gonna make me lose it. I reach up and find her nub between two of my fingers and on her way rubbing back, I give her clit a squeeze and she goes off like fireworks. Now she’s all over, pulling up and slamming down while squeezing me tight. My fingers grab bedsheets as the heat travels down my back and my ass muscles clench, while my balls pull up.

“Yeah. Just like that, baby. Oh yeahh PIXIE!”

One—two and on the third time she pushes down on my cock, my body can’t hold

back any longer. Pixie drops down on me as I grab her hips, moving her up and down on me until, with a yell, my cock explodes and explodes, and damn, keeps going.

When I've finally finished, we're tangled together, breathing like we ran a marathon, both wet with sweat. The room smells of sex and a smell that is only Paisley's. I squeeze her, taking a minute to catch my breath. Pixie gently lifts off and we both let out a moan. I watch her little bubble of an ass sway one way then another. Damn, she's something and I feel my chest tighten.

Looking up, she's coming back toward the bed with a wet cloth and starts cleaning me up. It feels so good, but she has always made me feel special and cared for. I can't remember a woman ever taking care of me afterward. When she's done, she reaches and brings my briefs back to me as I shift my hips to get them on. Then she goes back to the bathroom. Hearing water, I relax. What a way to start our day. I could do this every day with my lil' Pixie. And that thought makes me smile hugely.

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Paisley

I can't believe how much stamina Ollie has. We not only had sex four times, but he also blew my mind as he growled at me while he ate me out too. Never thought I'd say this, but damn am I sore in my 'downstairs girlie' area. He's a big man with such a huge...heart. I smile to myself at my thoughts.

Today has been great. We've kept it light but now my mind is running all over. Ollie's family lives in Montana and I have no idea where he plans on living. My clinic and the farm are here in Virginia. I do have a couple of other vets who I recently took on as partners with me at the clinic. The farm I actually bought off of Joe and Merty when she got sick. They still work here because they didn't even want to sell it but needed money for some of Merty's unconventional treatments their insurance wouldn't cover. Never did I think I'd buy a farm, shelter, or home. But I had built such a strong relationship with both Joe and Merty when they started taking in some of the animals dumped or no one wanted at the clinic. I couldn't just take them to The Humane Society, knowing that if they were lucky, they would be given a week before their dead day. So, I got to know their family and had to do whatever I could to help when Merty got sick. Neither of their kids had the type of money needed, so yeah, this place in itself was going to need plenty of work and that's where Joe comes in. He's like my general manager because he knows all that we've built together like the back of his hand. From the tiny kind of shelter to what we are today. Their kids also help out and even Merty still tries to be here when she can because she misses it so much. Well, I think she misses all the stray fur babies mostly.

I bring my attention back to the omelet I'm making for Ollie as I hear the water turn off. He insisted he can wash himself up, so I left him to it after our last time, when I

finally was able to move. I could barely walk to the kitchen. I smile to myself and do a little hip dance thinking, I still got it as the commercial says you've come a long way baby. Guess everyone's right, it's like riding a bike. You never forget, it comes back to you quickly. I giggle at my words and flip the omelet just as the toaster pops. I move to pull the toast out and butter it when something catches my eye. Turning, I see Ollie in the doorway watching me with a grin on his face. Oh shit, how long has he been there? I was acting like a fool; I pray he didn't see that.

"Um, Pixie, can I ask what that hip shaking thing was about? Not to mention that devilish little giggle coming from your lips. Wanna share with me?"

"Nope, not at all. Grab your toast, will ya? Butter is on the table. Throw a couple in for me, please."

We work as a team and before I know it, we're sitting at the table with omelets, toast, fresh fruit, and warmed-up muffins in front of us. Watching Ollie looking my way, I shrug my shoulders at him with a grin.

"Pixie, you can't eat like this every day. You weigh nothing, for Christ's sake. Man, those muffins are the shit, baby. I can't put them in my mouth fast enough. Pixie, if we keep going like we are, I'm gonna weigh five hundred pounds quick."

Ollie saying that stops me in my tracks. "If we keep going like we are."

What the hell does he even mean? All my concerns come front and center because maybe this is just a fling for him while he's recovering. I never even asked if he has someone special, did I? Well, he sure as hell didn't mention anyone. Knowing I'm losing my shit, I need some time alone to get my head together. If I'm around him I can't think straight, and now that we've 'battered each other's biscuits' I can't get any of it out of my mind. That thought almost brings a smile to my face until a familiar picture continues to roll of us in many positions in my bed and that's not

helping at all. I throw back my chair, grabbing my mug, acting like I need more coffee because him saying that has me thinking: what in the hell are we doing? With my head up my own ass, I don't hear him wheel behind me until I land on his lap before I know what's happening. "Pixie, what's wrong? You look pissed and since it's the two of us and your dogs, I'm guessing it's me who's got ya all angry and shit. Why? Thought everything was going great. Catch me up, baby, please?"

Pushing his hands off me, I stand and move to the table, sitting down. Head in my hands, I'm trying to relieve the pressure that feels like it's going to blow my head off my shoulders. He wheels by and sits across from me, reaching over, grabbing my forearm so he can hold my hand. I stare at the man who's wiggled his way into my life and heart. I have feelings for him and don't want what we have to be casual. It takes a lot to piss me off but once I'm there, I generally need some time to let it blow off. Sitting at the table with him holding my hand is just making it worse.

Pulling my hand away, I stand chugging down my coffee.

"Ollie, what are we doing here? Really. I know you're here to check out Cole Security Forces, but I've never heard anything about what you want. All you've told me is that you're originally from Montana, you joined the Navy, and were a SEAL. Also, that one of your sisters knows Charlie and she lives in California. I don't even know if you have someone special in your life. Am I a filler for you while you're here in Virginia? What we just did the last twenty hours has blown my mind, and it means a lot to me, it really does. But, Ollie, I'm not a wham-bam, thank you, ma'am. Honey, go ahead and eat your breakfast. I need some time to think and get stuff in my head in order. I'm not mad, Ollie, this is just me protecting myself. That's all. I'll be back, just going to take a quick walk around and see how things are going today."

As I walk past him again, he grabs my hand and I look at his handsome face, which at the moment is showing confusion and pain.

“Pixie, we do need to talk, you’re right. Go on take your walk, I’ll be here when you get back, baby.”

As I head toward the front door grabbing a hoodie, my main thought is do I want to go down that road again? Of building something with someone who I think I know, and then, wham they’re someone else totally. My emotions are all over the place. I need to check the calendar, maybe I’m getting close to my monthly ‘moody self’ showing up. Great, just what I need, something else to mess with my mind.

* * *

Watching the horses being put through their paces in the largest paddock, I’m feeling lost. Sitting on the top rung of the fence, I’m just taking up space not thinking about all the heavy crap running around up there.

“Hey, missy, whatcha doing down here with that big soldier up at the house? Everything okay?”

I shift, looking over my shoulder to see Joe standing, glancing up at me. Damn, this man has always been here for me since I bought the farm. Even when I wasn’t sure I’d make it another month, Joe was my silent strength who never let me give up. Before I can stop it, tears are flowing down my cheeks onto my hoodie. Crawling back down, Joe is there, arms out, and I take him up on his offer.

“Alright, girly, let it out. Nothin’ is that bad, probably all the left over emotions from the open house. You worked your tush off and now it’s back to the everyday crap.”

“Joe, I’m so selfish with all that’s going on with Merty. I’m so sorry, it just seems like life keeps kicking me and I’ve had enough. And when I try to bring good things into my life, it never works.”

He pats my shoulders and lets me just be. After a few minutes I'm able to pull myself together and step back.

"How's Merty doing? She looked really good yesterday and her energy seemed pretty high too. Joe, I'm not sure how you guys ran this like a little shelter, there's so much work I always feel like I'm drowning and behind. What am I doing wrong?"

"Paisley girl, you're doing a great job. But you need to quit taking on extra things and building this place bigger. Sometimes bigger isn't better. Yeah, we're helping the horses and other large farm animals, but this farm isn't set up for that, so yeah that adds extra work. Honey, you don't know how to just enjoy life. As soon as everything is running smoothly, you go out and find something else to fix or save. Merty and I started this for stray dogs and cats. Maybe some wildlife creatures so they could recover, and we would then release them back into nature. And, missy, we're so grateful to you for being there when we needed to let this place go. You gave me and my Merty a chance to fight the crap that's in her. The extra years have been amazing, but we don't want you to be buried under this farm. Not to mention the clinic too. You need to figure out what you truly want. Ollie seems to be a good boy, but that's your decision. Pick what works for you in your work, your home, and your heart, and just go with it. Nothin' is ever perfect, Paisley girl. Nothin'."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:05 am

Ollie

Sitting at the table, I'm confused as hell. Paisley is smarter and sexier than anyone I've ever known. Everything seemed to be going fucking great last night, damn what a night. And yeah, the sex was great, nope out of this world but it felt like we were really connecting on another level. Well, at least it was, it seems. This morning right in this kitchen we seemed to mesh well, working together on breakfast. She was even doing some dancing and was happy. What happened between then and after we sat down?

Taking a minute, I try to remember what we were even talking about. I was teasing her about the size of the breakfast, saying some shit about if we keep going, I'll weigh. Wow, wait a goddamn minute. Talk about opening my mouth and putting my own foot into it. With her past, I'm sure my words made her feel like this is a quick and easy fuck with no long-term connection. Fuck, not my intention at all. Actually, my mind has been full of the events of this past week and finally coming out of this wheelchair soon. Between range of motion in therapy, doing aqua therapy and all the PT, learning how to walk and putting my weight on my bad leg, I'm praying this goes as it should.

And Pixie is right, we need to talk. I already know that Virginia is not gonna be my forever home. As much as I love Cole Security Forces and all the guys, I'm not feeling it. I need more space and it's not here. I've got some ideas but have been running them through my mind to see if they would even work. And as much as Onyx and I kid about home, I'm missing those big blue skies over Montana. I actually have some time scheduled in front of Mark this week about an idea I want to run past him. But I need to find my little Pixie and set her straight.

Hearing the screen door opening, I shift my chair to see Pixie walking my way, head hanging low, shoulders hunched. She stops directly in front of me but says nothing. Well, we can't have this. I grab her hands and pull her forward, so she's almost straddling me but is still standing, her knees on the outside of my legs, which brings us very close together. I hear her gasp but ignore it. Pulling her close, I look into her eyes filled with so many emotions. I lean toward her and put little kisses all over her face, while my hands hold her tight to me. Finally, hearing her sigh lets me know she's letting go. I'm not using her sexuality against her, but I'm learning Pixie gets trapped in her head just like I do. Pulling her back to me, my kiss changes as I touch my tongue to her lips. Immediately she opens, and wow, again the feelings I get shock the shit outta of me. As we hold tight and kiss, and my tongue tangles with hers, I pray that we can find some middle ground because I don't want to let this precious woman go anytime soon. Or at all.

* * *

After our make-up session, we clean up our uneaten breakfast together. Pixie grabs us some fresh coffee and new muffins and we land in her three-season room. She quietly sits and spins her coffee, not really even looking at me. I know she's hurt but so am I. Yet someone has to start, so guess it's me.

"Pixie, come on, like you said, we need to talk. I know you're worried because this, whatever it is, is happening so fast between us, but let me make it perfectly clear, baby, this ain't no vacation romp or my Virginia hookup. I'm trying to get my life back together so then we can see where we go next. I didn't even get to tell you that this upcoming week this piece of shit wheelchair is going bye-bye. I'm finally getting released to walk, well with a walker or cane, and maybe even driving, but I think with that one is pushing it. Also, I have an idea so I want to talk to Mark first to see if it would even be an interest to them before I fill you in. So, what's running through that beautiful head that has you spinning in circles and running out of your own house, baby? Let's just get it out on the table and deal with it. 'Cause, Paisley, my Pixie, I'm

not going away anytime soon. We'll figure it out, promise. For Christ's sake, I just found you."

When I look, her eyes are shining again with tears but there is a guarded smile on her face at least. I said my piece, now leaning back in my chair I wait for her to put her concerns out in the open. I don't have to wait too long.

"Ollie, it just hit me this morning when you said something about 'if we keep going' how fast I'm falling for you. And you told me that you're here to check out that company and get yourself back to the best you can be, that's why all the different therapies. What hasn't been said is if they even offered you a position or if you even want one. Where you plan on dropping your hat or calling home? I know your family is up in Montana but I'm not sure if you're feeling like heading back there because sometimes it sounds like you hated it, while other times you seem to really love and miss it. With all that's happened to me, Ollie, I tend to be way over the top and OCD. With you, nothing is planned, and I have no idea what's next. Didn't mean to get all 'crazy' on you. Just like Joe told me, it's all the emotions of the open house, the clinic, my new partners, the farm/shelter, and its day-to-day responsibilities. Things are piling up on my shoulders and they're caving from the pressures and weight. But those aren't your problems, so I'm sorry. I didn't get a chance to tell you how much I really enjoyed last night, Ollie."

I roll to the couch she's sitting on and reach for her, after locking the chair so I can half stand-half swing myself onto it. Then pull her to me so she's almost on top of me. Smiling into her beautiful face, I take a breath.

"All right, darlin', gonna give it to you straight. You, Pixie, have brightened my life—lightened my heart—and I totally want that to continue. Yeah, I like it here but it's not home for me, not feeling it, and I'm sorry, don't think it ever will be. I need more than sitting in an office working in front of a computer. And I'm not thinking that Mark is gonna let me run any missions anytime soon. I've got this idea that does

take me back home to Timber-Ghost, Montana, but wow, wait, give me a second to explain. I'm not against having two home bases, Pixie. So, let's put our heads together, well, that can wait. Right now, another head needs to connect with a part of you in a much deeper way, don't you think?"

Crushing her to me, my lips take hers, so she knows how she affects me. My tongue battles with that little one of hers as my hands reach down to remove her hoodie. She helps by grabbing her T-shirt, pulling it off, leaving her in a pale green sports bra. Seeing her hard little nipples poking out, my fingers grab them, pinching and pulling. Pixie moans and immediately reaches for my pants. As we try to remove clothing it dawns on me: we are in her unlocked home while there are volunteers working, who might need to come in looking for her for any number of reasons.

"Pixie, the front door, did ya lock it? Baby, I don't want to be deep in ya and have someone gettin' a show 'cause that's for my eyes only."

She hops off the couch and, in her bra and pants, runs to the door, apparently to lock it. When she rushes back in, she stops directly in front of me, dropping to her knees. Oh Christ, not sure I can handle the thought of her mouth wrapped around my cock. But that's where she's going, so I lie back, giving up my control to her for now.

Once she's pulled me out and her tiny hands are jerking me off, I watch her as she studies my cock intently. On a downward push of her hand, her mouth opens just enough for the head to fit. She puts it in her mouth then her lips lock on to it as she sucks on the sensitive part of my cock, the mushroom head. A roar comes from my lips as my head literally jumps off her couch and pounds back into it. She's watching me with that cute devilish look back in her eyes. When her hands come back up, she immediately lets go of the tight grip and she widens her lips, taking as much of me as she can in her tight, wet hot little mouth. Holy fuckin' shit. I'm trying to hold it together. While glancing down at her, I see she's watching me closely. As I watch her, she smiles and then starts to bob up and down with a suction that is driving me

insane. I'm way too big for her to take it all, but between her mouth and hands she sets a rhythm I can't keep up with. She pays attention to my glans and the vein on the underside. Feeling a warmth in my spine, I fight it because this feels way too good for it to end so quick. When she takes a bit more on her down swing and I hit her throat, I can't control the low guttural grunts coming out of me. She stops for just a second, eyes on me, as she swallows and my body jerks from the intense feeling. After that I don't remember much as her tiny little body works miracles between her mouth and hands. The noises coming from my mouth aren't even human any longer, while the rush to finish is getting harder and harder to fight. When she lightly grabs my sack, squeezing, that's it. I try to remove her, but she won't let go.

"Pixie, last chance. Baby, I'm gonna blow so if you don't want that, come up here and give me that mouth. Pixie, baby, I gotta—oh God, girl—it's coming. Holy fuck, that's it. Squeeze them harder, yeah, just like that, yeah, Pixie, yeah."

Before I know it, I'm shooting my load into the back of her throat and she's taking all I give her. The muscles in my legs are so tight that when I finally finish and they release, her mouth still on me is too much. I reach down and with my hands under her arms, I pull her up me. She's watching me and I can't catch my breath, so I bring her close, wrapping my arms around her tenderly, hugging her tightly. When I've finally caught some air, I gently lift her head, then kiss her swollen lips, feeling an emotion I've never felt before. This tiny little Pixie is stealing my heart. And that thought brings a smile to my face, which she can feel and smiles back

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:05 am

Ollie

Sitting in Mark's office waiting on him for this impromptu meeting I requested, Natalie comes back in with some coffee and what looks like homemade brownies. Damn, I'm a lucky man.

"Damn, Sparkles, between you and Pixie, gonna have to up my workouts. Never had it so good."

She gives me a look, then smiles, taking a seat across from me at the corner conference table I'm sitting at. Again, another look, this one longer and very inquiring.

"So, I take it you're done with the wheelchair, Ollie? How's that walker working for you? Don't rush it, honey, take it slow. I know you've been working hard but don't mess up all that hard work because you're bullheaded. You hear me?"

Grinning, I nod my head.

"No plans to fuck this up, Natalie. Especially after all the hard work of these doctors ya have here. Best of the best. And the walker isn't too bad, but I can't wait to go to the cane 'cause that's one step closer to walking on my own. And no pun intended, ya know."

She laughs lightly, sipping on some coffee, so I grab a brownie off the end cut and dive in. Damn, so rich and creamy, but the edges are nice and crunchy. Perfection in my mouth. Daydreaming on brownies I miss the first part of her question, so I raise

an eyebrow.

“Just like a man, put something sweet in front of you and your mind is blown. I said, since you’re having a meeting with Mark, am I to assume the consultant job is not something you will be considering? And if that’s a yes to my question, what does that mean for you and Paisley? Before you say it, Ollie, I hear it enough from Liam and Mark, yes, I’m nosy, deal with it, SEAL boy.”

I know I don’t have to tell her anything, but I truly like Natalie, she’s becoming a good friend. She’s been around a long time working for this company, married to not only Dreamboat, but was also married at one time to Papa Smurf—well, Aaron—before all that shit that went down. Taking a breath to get my thoughts together, I share.

“Yeah, sorry, Natalie, as much as I am coming to love it here in Virginia and especially everyone I’ve met, this just doesn’t feel like home. Been giving it a lot of thought and I could probably go back to Cali and stay with Onyx until I find a place. Maybe see if Muffin needs me for something out there. But again, not home. Since Bahrain and the shit that went down there, I’ve been giving much time and thought to my life, family, and home. I’m honestly starting fresh, so might as well try and do what I want, where I want, with whom I want, right? And you’re right, as much as I love being a Navy SEAL and hanging with the best of the best here, including yourself, I don’t see myself sitting behind a desk for the rest of my life. And as far as missions go, not so sure I’ll ever be a hundred percent again. And I don’t want to be the reason someone doesn’t make it back, get me? So, I want to talk to Mark about a possible opportunity that maybe Cole Security Forces can partner up with, for some of the soldiers who come back and ain’t as good a fit for this type of work but need to get their emotions and heads back into the game.”

As I explain my idea, as it is in the beginning stages, her excitement calms my nerves. If I can get the same kind of response from Mark, maybe then I can reach out

to the parents and see if what I'm thinking is even an option with them. Then I need to go to my Pixie, explain my idea in extreme detail, and see what her take is on it too. So many moving parts but one step at a time. Natalie leans over, giving me a hug, just as Mark opens the door. Always the smart-ass he starts as soon as he closes the door.

"Sparkles, you're breaking my heart. Damn, thought I only had to put up and share you with Dreamboat, but now I see it's old Ollie too? Not good, woman, not good at all. And you, brother, sneak attack when I'm not looking, you water dog."

As we all laugh, he puts his case down and takes a seat at the table, immediately grabbing a brownie.

"And you're giving this big asshole my brownies too? I'm not having a good feeling about this at all. That's just so wrong."

I watch the interaction between the two of them and pray to God I'm not making a huge mistake not taking some time to see if this right here could work.

"Twilight, honey, I've told you time and time again you don't have what I need. Dreamboat just pushes all my buttons. He gets my sails up."

Mark groans and before he can say a word, there's a knock at the door and Dreamboat and Ladykiller walk in. Seeing all of us sitting around, Liam raises an eyebrow as Quinn immediately walks to the table, grabbing two brownies, moving to the sofa. Natalie stands, looks around, and shakes her head.

"I'll be back with some more coffee and brownies. Ollie, nice talking with you. Keep in touch, honey, no matter what. You're always welcome here."

As she walks out, I feel three pairs of eyes on me. Well, that was a good prelude into

my talk, I guess. Again, before a word comes from my lips, I hear Quinn run his mouth.

“Why is it every time I walk into what looks like an interesting conversation, it ends, and I still don’t have a fuckin’ clue what’s going on? What happened to us from battles and orgies to talks now? We’re getting old, motherfuckers. Now it’s wives, kids, and soccer games. Gotta live up to our names and reputations, men. And you, Ollie, we haven’t even given you a name. Something we need to work on.”

As he carries on, Natalie returns with coffee and brownies. We continue to shoot the shit, listening to all the ridiculous names Ladykiller comes up with for me. No, I don’t want to be called Shorty, Munchkin, or Tinkerbell. What is that bastard even thinking? If they give me a name, I want a cool one like they all have. Mark clears his throat and Natalie grabs Liam by the hand and Quinn looks from them to us and back again.

“All right, all right you just aren’t any goddamn fun anymore. Come on Dreamboat and Sparkles, let’s leave these two workaholics to it.”

When they’re gone, Mark looks my way with a look on his face.

“So, from what I got from Natalie’s comment you’re not planning on staying around, am I right Ollie? Shit, man, it’s great to see you up and about on your own sea legs. See, all that fucking therapy does pay off, you whiny bastard. So come on, let’s talk this out and see what’s on your mind.”

I start to explain until Mark tells me to hang on and he walks to his desk, motioning for me to take one of the chairs there. He picks up his phone, putting a call through. I hear him tell someone he wants them in on a conversation then he puts it on speaker.

“All right, Jackson, you got Ollie and me. Ollie was starting to tell me about an idea

he's got that could involve us and him, just not in Virginia or Cali. Thought it would be easier to have your ears hear the same thing I do 'cause ya know I'd fuck it up trying to relay it after. Got some time?"

Once Jackson assures us he's got time, I start again and break it down for both of them. Question after question comes my way, and I do my best to answer them or write them down to follow up on. We go over logistics, get into some early plans, working around different scenarios. By the third hour, my head feels like it's in a vise. When I try to explain what my two next moves would be, they continue to fire questions at me. So, I'm honest with my responses. First, I need to have a conversation with Paisley—which they throw their two cents in about—and some really good suggestions and ideas. If that works out, then put a call out to the parents. So, what I thought would be a quick one-on-one conversation with Mark turns into a few hours with Mark and Jackson, the owners of Cole Security Forces. In the end, I couldn't be more surprised or happier at the way we ended the call. Now gotta get with my Pixie, get her two cents.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 6:05 am

Paisley

So much for well laid out plans, mine just went to shit. Dr. Greene couldn't make it in, so I had to fill in for her. She's got a bug and has been pushing it the last couple of days, but today she couldn't even get out of bed. So, all my plans for the farm were put on the back burner and I've been here all day. Ollie texted me a couple of times when he got there for his meeting with Mark, and when he finished, just said it went better than he thought.

Now just when I'm about to leave, I get a call on the emergency line. Again, Dr. Greene was on call tonight, so here I am waiting for a pregnant pit bull/bulldog mix to come in, probably needing a cesarean section. We told the owners that most bullies require a C-section because it's too hard on the female, but no, they know better being this is their very first litter. Asshole know-it-alls, they piss me off to no end, I swear.

So, I send Ollie a text, telling him I'm stuck here and either he can go to the farm, and I'll be there when I'm done, or we can catch up later. I'm so exhausted. We've been bombarded all day long and it feels like Groundhog Day. I hate thinking this, but it was like the same kind of shit each time I entered a treatment room. Exam and vaccinations or spay/neuters needed or fights between family pets. Thank God for the vet technicians who handle the majority of it.

Hearing a knock on the door, I move that way seeing the younger woman with her mother. I hate this thought as it goes through my head, but some folks shouldn't breed dogs, especially the difficult ones. Opening the door, they kick-push the box with the pregnant mother in it. Already they're pissing me off as my vet tech, Tiffany,

comes up from behind me, giving them a scoff, and gently lifting the box and carrying it to the back. As I wait, the two women turn like they are going to go. Whoa, wait a frigging minute, are they doing a drop and dump with a pregnant dog?

“Excuse me, ladies, where’re you going? This is probably going to take a while I understand, but before you leave there’s some paperwork and a deposit that needs to be left for us to treat your dog.”

They look at each other then back at me. In that look I can read every vile thought they’re thinking. My stomach turns as the older woman looks me dead in the eyes.

“Give her back then, no big deal. We’ll drop her somewhere else.”

Knowing what I’m about to do is gonna cost not only the clinic but me, I take a minute and hear Dr. Georges behind me.

“Just leave if that’s your intention, but no way in hell are we giving you that dog back for you to just drive down the block and dump her. What’s wrong with you both? Well, either pay or get lost, we got pups that are coming fast.”

We both watch as, without a single care, they turn and walk-waddle their asses to their van. And damn, God forgive me for this nasty thought but I have to say it. Good riddance bitches.

“Thanks, Dr. Georges, I’ll take care of the bill and pay Tiffany out of my pocket. The clinic shouldn’t have to keep swallowing these charity cases of mine. Even if I say the female is from the farm it’s still a freebie.”

Running my fingers through my hair, I reach into my vet coat, pulling a hair scrunchy out and throwing my hair up in a messy bun, as I know this is going to be a late one. Then the man in front of me shocks me out of my shoes.

“Paisley don’t worry about it. I knew when I bought in what type of clinic this was, that’s why I was interested in the first place. Remember, as veterinarians we aren’t in it for the money, obviously. I’m sure Dr. Greene would agree, so put her on the books we’ll all take care of it. All I ask is to get at least one of the first picks of the litter. Do you need me to stay and give a hand?”

We walk toward the exam room to get a look at what’s going on and I’m so proud of my clinic and who I decided to partner with. Both Dr. Georges and Dr. Greene fit in perfectly here. What I’m thinking of doing now makes sense because I have two of the best folks as my partners in this business.

* * *

Tiffany grabs the next fat male puppy, putting him down in the sterile area. That makes what... nine or ten. How many more are in there? We thought on the exam it was seven. I have full trust that by now my vet tech has already removed the clamp and has sutured the double knot in its place. I see her rubbing him down the entire length of his body, so she also suctioned his mouth and throat. She has the most patience with this. Because of the C-section, it takes more time to revive them due to the drugs. As I go to the next lump the amniotic fluid looks cloudy, so I carefully cut it open and pull the puppy out. It’s gray and lifeless so I remove the sac, put a metal clamp on, and hand it off to Dr. Georges, who starts the process, which sadly I don’t think is going to help that little female. Finally, I’m at the last one. After pulling it out, another female but her color is good, and when I hand off to Tiffany, she shakes her head at me which tells me the boy probably isn’t reviving. But Dr. Georges is one of the best at bringing them back. He once rubbed a pup for twelve minutes and he got it to come back, so fingers crossed. If I counted right, there are eleven or twelve puppies. Holy shit, momma’s gonna get a workout. I work on removing the placenta, flushing everything, and checking the female’s organs. I decide at that moment to spay her, so I finish the procedure and start to close her up when I hear pounding from the front. Well, whoever is there will have to wait. We literally have our hands

full.

Hearing Tiffany calling her daughter from the break room, she tells her not to open the door but see who's there. As we finish with momma and place her in a warming/birthing box, which is a large box with a heating pad and some towels, I tell Tiffany to start giving me the puppies. As she hands them to me, I place them on a nipple on momma in the box so they can get the all-important mother's milk. When I've counted eleven, I turn to see Dr. Georges with the pup against his chest still rubbing. Got to say he's dedicated, and with that thought I hear a very small whine. Well holy shit, I'll be, he pulled the puppy through.

Not waiting to see him continue working on the girl, I remove my gloves and head to the front where Tiffany's girl said a really tall, handsome man was standing at the door but waved her off, motioning her not to open it. I know instantly who it is, so I head toward the door and see Ollie leaning on the window, arms crossed at his chest. I unlock the three locks and push, getting his attention.

"Hey, Pixie, damn ya look exhausted. Can I come in, need some help?"

As I open the door wider, he walks in with the walker straight toward the back. Damn, I just got an instant déjà vu. Except this time Ollie is walking instead of in that fancy wheelchair. Watching his back as he makes it to the rear something figuratively hits me upside the head, and I realize at that moment how much Ollie has come to mean to me in such a short time. Scary as the thought is, I would give or do anything to keep this growing between us. Anything.

Ollie

Damn, I'm past fucking exhausted and on my way to being dead on my damn numb feet. We've finally left Pixie's clinic and are on the way back to the farm. I was hoping to spend some time with the cats, but fuck it, there's always tomorrow. And I know that the volunteers spend a ton of time with them so they're not lonely.

Pixie is who I'm worried about. She's gotta be ready to pass over and out at the same goddamn time. What a sight I got when I walked into the back. Looking around, shit was everywhere, like a hurricane went through there. Then it made perfect sense when I looked through the window of the surgical room. Puppies seemed to be everywhere and there was one in Pixie's partner's hand, and he was doing something with it. Not sure if I could go in, you know germs and all that shit, so I turned around, trying to straighten up the back room and after that I started going through the exam rooms, seeing if anything needed to be done.

After grabbing a bag of garbage, I collect mainly from the back room, turning I almost plow right into Paisley.

"Damn, Pixie, you scared the ever-lovin' shit outta me. Talk about sneaking up on someone. Whatcha need? I'll do my best, let me know or tell me how and it'll get done. Just checking rooms and then I'll throw this bag out. Hopefully things will calm down back there, and I'll work on cleaning the surgical room; it's fucking bloody as hell. Definitely not for those who have weak stomachs. I'm afraid to ask."

Before I know it, she's in my arms, holding on tight. Well, I can get used to this shit for sure. Whatever she needs from me, it's my mission to make sure she gets it. I pull

her tighter and, after a bit, manage barely to make it to one of the chairs, sitting with her curled on my lap. Can't lie, my hip is tight, but damn it feels too good to be able to give back again. Running my hands up and down her back, I wait because I know, eventually, she'll tell me what's going on. And I'm right.

“Ollie, sorry, just everything hit me. Between Dr. Greene being out sick and all the shit going through my head not knowing why you wanted to speak to Mark. Yeah, I know you told me you didn't want to get into it until you had his take on it, but I worry. That's what I do about anyone, human or animal I care about, it gets in my head and wham, I'm done. And then these two biotches came in with that momma dog and were ready to go dump her on the side of the road as she tried to give birth to twelve puppies. It just hurts my heart, Ollie, how heartless and cruel people can be. I don't get it and these folks who stayed to help did it because they also have a heart. Oh shit.”

Then I watch as she starts crying. Yeah, been there done that. The stress and emotional buildup need to be released. Thank God Pixie decided on tears and not punching or screaming. Don't think I could take seeing her like that. So again, I lean back with her wrapped in my arms while she just lets it all out.

* * *

Sitting against the headboard of the bed, I hear the shower go off. Since Pixie wanted to take care of her dogs when we got home, I jumped in for a quick shower and now I'm lying down with my boxer briefs on since I don't own any 'sleep pants' and sweats are way to fucking hot for me. As my mind drifts in and out, I hear the door squeak open and can feel the steam roll into the room. Pixie loves her hot as shit showers. Looking down, she's at the bottom of the bed, coming up alongside of me with her long curly hair wet around her shoulders and a bath towel wrapped around her tiny body. Hummm, what's this about?

“Pixie, everything okay? Want me to get ya something to eat or are you gonna crash?”

She lies right next to me, her hands moving over my chest, stopping at the band of my shorts, looking up at me with those huge eyes of hers but not saying a word.

“Whatcha need, Paisley? I’m here, all you got a do is tell me.”

“Ollie, I just need you to make me feel good. All the pressure and work responsibilities are starting to weigh me down, and I just want to feel. I’m worried about forgetting something that will either end up hurting someone or letting them down. God, please, only you can help me, Ollie, make love to me. Touch me, kiss me, hold me, please. I need my sense of normal readjusted after today.”

Then she reaches up, literally crawling up my chest, and lays a heavy one on my lips. Her tiny hands hold my head still as she tries to take control of the kiss, as more tears fall from her onto my face. Gently I caress her cheeks then run my fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp. Her little moans let me know I’m on the right road. As my hands land on her tight shoulders, I rub them until they relax and continue my way down. Knowing what my woman needs, I dance a dance known for centuries to men as my coarse hands touch and memorize every inch of her compact, perfect to me body. Bringing my hands back up, I grip her head, giving it a small shake to get her attention. Her face is flushed, lips swollen from my kisses, and her eyes are shining with desire.

“Pixie, need you to climb up my body and sit on my face. Yeah, you can, come on, beautiful. I know what you need so let me give it to you. That’s it, bring that tight pussy, put it right over my lips. I want to have your taste on my tongue and beard. Come on, my mouth is watering already.”

When she’s close, I grab her hips and pull her down over my head, making sure her

core is right above my mouth. I can smell her sweet essence already, telling me she's beyond excited. Taking my hands from her hips, I open her up so my mouth has full access. Immediately I give her tight swollen bundle of nerves a quick lick, which has her almost jumping off both me and the bed. I chuckle. Yeah, this is gonna be fun. I concentrate fully on her clit, rubbing up against it and licking, circling around the nub then nibbling on it, and at one point biting down just enough so she feels it. That's when Pixie starts screaming, begging me to stop and that she can't take any more. One finger goes into her tight wet channel as I continue my attack on her clit. As I add another finger, her walls start to cling to them as I pull them out then push back in. She is all over, not able to stay above me on her own, so I use my free hand to hang on to her. As soon as my fingers bend and find that secret place inside of Pixie, she keens at first, then wails, and finally screams as her body lets loose, flooding my face. I keep at her until her body starts to quiver. So, I gently slow my tongue and fingers until she collapses onto my face and doesn't move.

Needing to breathe, I grab her by the hips, moving her down my body so she's lying on top of me. She's beyond done, her body is so limp and she's gasping for air, and when I look down her eyes are closed and there is no stress whatsoever on her face, just a small, satisfied smile. Yes, mission accomplished.

* * *

Damn, what is that feeling. Whatever it is it's fucking awesome. My body is on something soft, and my dick is being enveloped in something warm and wet, while something—maybe fingers—are gently squeezing my balls then releasing. As my mind clears the fog, it comes to me that Pixie's mouth is on me. The thought makes me even harder as she struggles to move on the length of my cock, pulling back, and then going back down as far as she can. I feel the head hit the back of her throat and I give up all power to her. My hands don't touch her; they are at my sides, clawing her bedsheets as I keep my hips still, letting her have control. As she keeps moving, licking, and sucking her confidence grows, having the ability to control what

happens. As her little tongue runs over the vein on the side that hot feeling starts at the base of my neck making its way down to my lower back. My ass clenches trying to hang on to whatever I can to make this feeling last. Pixie feels it as her mouth and hands start to bob up and down on my cock. Even the slight feel of her teeth occasionally brings a whimper from my lips followed by a growl.

“Pixie, I’m close, get up here. If you don’t move, baby, can’t control what happens ’cause it’s barreling down. Oh shit, Pixie, please, goddamn. Fuck that feels so good. Gonna lose it, yeah like that, oh yeah!”

Right before I blow, she goes deep and that’s it. My body twitches with my release and Pixie never lets go. Once I’m drained, she cleans every inch of me before she slithers up my body, a smile showing on her swollen lips. Before I can say a word, she kisses my neck, holding on to my shoulders, dropping her head to my chest. Within seconds she’s out. After maybe a minute, I follow her down, my mind filled with dreams of that mouth of hers.

Paisley

Slowly, the feelings surrounding me remind me of a soft fluffy blanket causing me to snuggle deeper into whatever is making me feel so warm and snug. As I push my butt back, it comes into contact with something hard and warm, no hot. Wow, very hard. Then hands around my middle pull me into sensations a plenty. From the heat all up and down my back to the breath on my neck and shoulders. The hands are spanning out, caressing my tummy, and slowly making their way downward, which is eager for their touch. I stretch out and a tree trunk leg crosses over mine, trapping me. At the intensity of everything, I open my eyes and look over my shoulder, right into Ollie's eyes. How can this man wake up and be so frigging drop-dead gorgeous? Those lazy deep brown eyes draw you in. They pay such close attention to everything in a good way. Like he cares enough to make sure I'm okay. Ollie is always thoughtful in that way. My eyes roam over his face, seeing the dark stubble on his cheeks as his lips form into a sexy as shit smile, eyes twinkling my way. I feel that all the way down to my clit, which tingles with the look in those shining unusual brown eyes that are looking at me so intensely.

Feeling one of his hands moving down and reaching for the waistband of my jammies, I shift as he pushes them down enough for me to shimmy out of them. Immediately his one leg moves between the two of mine, bringing the top one slightly back and over his hips. Feeling him get close, his fingers barely whisper over me before he's steadily pushing his rigid heavy cock into me without saying a word. Only his eyes communicate as they continue to watch me. Feeling the stretch, my eyes start to close but Ollie shakes his head and stops.

Looking at him, I swear to God, he told me not to close my eyes, but his mouth never

moved. As soon as my eyes are wide open, with one final thrust his cock plunges into me until it hits my very center. We both gasp but neither of us move. Yet. His hands come up to cup my head for a brief second then he raises my hands to the headboard. With my hands wrapped around the frame and my eyes never leaving his, I feel the slow slide of him as his body pulls back and out. As I try to catch my breath, out of nowhere Ollie rams into me and the dance begins.

Holding my hips, the constant pull and push of his body into mine causes every nerve ending to rise. The hair on his legs brushing on my body, him nibbling on my ear, then moving to my neck sucking hard. Oh, that's going to leave a mark, I think to myself as my mind goes blank at the powerful thrusts as Ollie drives into my body.

Nothing matters but the feelings he's causing inside me. It's building and I know it's going to be huge. Bigger than ever before. When one of his hands moves from my hips to between my legs, I actually wiggle to make room for his fingers. As he pinches my sweet spot, I feel like I'm ready to take off. He shifts behind me and hits me just right as his fingers press down hard and I fly. My body releases and I flood his hand and cock, but I can't stop. Not a word comes from my lips, making this so much more intense.

As Ollie races for his finish, my eyes are locked on to his. I watch as beads of sweat roll down his face as that longer hair on top flips over his forehead. He has his lower lip clutched by his upper teeth as his breaths become short and ragged as he starts to pant. His hips are moving with such speed and intention, a fleeting thought crosses my mind that his repaired hip is beyond healed and is doing just fine. That brings a tiny giggle to my lips at the precise moment Ollie lets out a beast of a moan, grinding into me and staying planted as far as he can go; all the time his eyes never moving from mine.

I've never had such an intimate moment with anyone, with no words, and I feel as close to a human being as I can be with another. When Ollie's body softens to the

point he's just about out, he pulls away from me for just a minute then I'm in his arms, held tight to his side. This is the last thing I remember before my eyes close.

* * *

Noise. That's what it is, I'm thinking. But what? I can't make it out because it's coming from somewhere but getting closer. As I attempt to fully wake up, my hands rubbing my eyes, it hits me. My body feels used. Yeah, used but in an excellent way. Stretching, I pull myself up to the headboard so I can sit up. Just as I pull the covers back over me, the bedroom door opens and Ollie is in the doorway. Holding one of my trays in his one hand and in the other a cane of some sort, so he's concentrating on getting in and then settling. When his head leans back and he sees me watching him, an eyebrow goes up immediately.

"Okay, Pixie, not sure anyone ever told ya but when a man is making love to you, that's not the time to giggle. Not even if I'm hitting your most ticklish spot. So, what was so hilarious that with my cock pounding away, it brought a giggle to those gorgeous lips of yours?"

Grinning at him impishly, knowing he's being funny, I let it go.

"I had the thought that your hip is definitely healed and if you need a note for your doctor, I can write one for you giving you an all thumbs-up."

For just a brief second his eyes go wide and then a hearty, boisterous burst of laughter comes from his lips. He places the tray on my long dresser, coming my way, reaching out. Once he's sitting with me almost in his lap, I'm hauled up to him. He crushes his lips to mine at first, but then becomes so gentle his kisses feel like wisps of nothingness as he eventually pulls away.

"Pixie, you hungry? I'm not as good as you but wanted to bring you breakfast, well,

brunch in bed. So, get yourself situated and let me serve you as they say, 'breakfast in bed my lady.'”

As I sit up, a tray appears right in front of me. Holy shit, there's eggs, bacon, toast, and a fruit salad I know wasn't there last night, so he put that together too. He walks around the bed, gently getting into bed, kind of sitting yet lying on his side, picking at the fruit.

“Oh my God, Ollie, no one has ever gone and done this for me. Thank you honey, it makes me feel so special. You're such a good guy.”

His head falls down before he looks back up and smiles. Then we take our time eating and feeding each other breakfast. And afterward, once the tray is placed on the floor, I take some time to show my appreciation to Ollie for being such a sweetie.

Ollie

Sitting on the couch watching Paisley play with her two pits, I've never been so relaxed before in my life. Well, it could be the multiple orgasms. Damn, Pixie is truly something else. We fit together like we were meant to be and fingers crossed, that's how this goes.

"Hey, Pixie, got a second? Maybe we can have that talk now."

Her head comes up, immediately looking my way. Not sure what she sees but she unhurriedly walks and sits next to me. I grab her hands and give her a comforting squeeze. I think this is all good news but again she has more to lose, so here goes.

"I know we're brand new still, trying to get to know each other. Saying that, this feels like we've always been together, and it feels natural. Pixie, I've never been so at ease with any other woman or given thought to the future. You asked me if I would stay here in Virginia and start a new career at Cole Security Forces. I gave it so much thought but the only thing worth sticking around for is you. Hey, don't get your hackles up, give me time to explain. Watching you here at the farm and also at the clinic, an idea popped into my head. It happened after your open house and how all the guys and gals reacted here at the farm.

"Every one of them was former military either vetted or being vetted for the firm. Jackson and Mark handpick candidates personally. What they don't realize is some of us don't want to spend the majority of our work career in a building behind a desk. Yeah, they have missions: search and rescue or recover and some covert missions, but those are, from what I'm getting, fewer and far between. And those missions go

to the elite only, the best of the best. I even talked to Noodles and a couple of others, and they actually feel like I do. So, I brought something to the table and actually talked to both Mark and Jackson. Now please know there's no pressure behind this 'cause I know you have so much to lose if you were to even consider leaving Virginia. But, Pixie, my heart isn't here, it's at home in Montana. Took me coming here and meeting you to realize it. There's nothing stopping me but my own fear. Or that's what one of those goddamn therapists told me.

“Anyway, I was thinking that maybe we could start up a facility back at home for recovering military, either injured physically or mentally. And by facility, I mean something that combines a medical facility with one like you have here for unwanted animals or fur babies that have been left behind. Some form of training camp for both. Because if we do it right, the animals that will be there will end up going to military families. Be it a service animal or for a new start for a soldier and their family. Don't have it all figured out, but when I talked to the guys, they came up with some suggestions. It wouldn't be part of the Cole Security Forces but if they run across some ex-military who could benefit from what we are offering and working at, they would refer them to us and our facility.

“Now this is only in the beginning stages, but this is what I have so far. Onyx, my sister out in Cali, is in—which shocks the ever-lovin'-shit out of me. That she even would consider going back home, I'm surprised, but she knows I went to her because of her background as a Navy corpsman and also being a nurse. She's had it with the veterans' hospital and how they refuse to move with the times. It's killing her to see injured soldiers not getting the care they need.

“Now her only stipulation is that no one is turned away. That can get difficult, according to Mark, but that's all she's asking to move back to Montana and help me. Next, I phoned our parents. They always said as we were growing up, the ranch would be divided between all of us kids to keep us close. And my brothers have taken them up on it. How many acres do you have here on the farm, Pixie?”

Watching her think, I know this is a lot to throw at someone and I feel for her.

“I’m not sure of the total acreage as Joe and Merty still have a few acres with their home, but if I remember right, it’s around thirtyish acres. With the farm being a shelter and when I started taking in big farm animals, I was told that it was a regulation that you have to have so many acres per each of those big farm animals. And even before I came around, Joe was letting neighbors and farmers use the pastures and stuff like that for their cows and horses. I don’t think we use more than ten or fifteen of them right now with all the buildings and stuff. Joe would know all that stuff anyway.”

That struck me funny, so I asked her.

“Why would Joe know more than you do?”

She glances my way then puts her head down, taking a deep breath.

“Ollie, I bought this place a few years ago because Joe and Merty were desperate and needed money for some of her treatments that their insurance wouldn’t cover. I knew them through my clinic and volunteering here. They were already taking in my overflow from the clinic. It crushed their family to think about putting this place up for sale, and those two are like secondary parents to me. So, I talked it over with them and it took time because I had to find some vets who were interested in buying into my business. That’s how Dr. Greene and Dr. Georges came into the picture.”

Damn, I’m shocked. Can’t think of a soul who would do what she did for folks that weren’t family. But now it makes sense with Joe always around and even their kids and grandkids working here. It’s home. Fuck, not sure if this is good or going to make things more complicated. Leave it to Pixie to straighten everything out.

“Ollie, I’ve been doing some really intense thinking myself. I knew your heart was in Montana and this was never going to be your home. Even spoke to Joe about it,

which started another conversation between us. Also, like you said, we're really new, but I like where we're going and hope you're on that same page. I've never felt like this before and don't want to take a chance and lose it. So, what did you come up with because I know you're not done yet with your story?"

"No, Pixie, I'm not. As I said, I called 'the parents' and Dad said that they gifted acreage to each brother and all three sisters can have theirs when they want. Though at the moment, he refused to give the land to my sister, Breanna, because he said something crazy about how he didn't want any shit going on with that 'club' she's in. She can have her land only if it doesn't involve the Devil Handmaiden's MC. Onyx already told me if I need it, she'll take her land right next to mine as long as she has some room for herself, a home and her menagerie of animals. Dad and Mom told me that each boy received a parcel of approximately forty so if I decide to, as Dad put it, to 'follow my dreams,' that they would start me off with that amount of land but were open to letting us buy more as needed. Dad is also interested in being involved so might be a way to build back my relationship with him, since me leaving for the service hurt him bad. Mark said he can call in some folks he knows who can give me some direction on how to start a non-profit organization. That's all I got at this point, Pixie girl."

"So how do I figure in all your plans then, Ollie? You haven't said anything, are you wanting me to be a consultant or are you thinking we do a long-distance relationship or a monthly booty call? Because I'm going to be honest, I don't want any of those."

Smiling, I lean over, pulling her on my lap. All that sass is making me hard again. Seeing it register when her ass comes in contact with the length of my hard cock, she gasps then literally punches me in the chest. Then total shock as she covers her face with her hands.

"Pixie, calm the fuck down. No, I don't want a goddamn booty call or to work with you as a bullshit consultant. What's wrong with you? Yeah, we're new but I know what I'm feeling and hope you feel at least a little bit of the same. Look at me, Pix.

Come on.”

She lifts her head, eyes brimming with tears.

“Baby, I think I’m falling in love with you. And I only say that ’cause I don’t have a clue what it’s supposed to feel like. I’ve never been here before. Do know that I’m at my best when we’re together. You make me want to be a better man, which says a lot for you, Pixie. And you build me up and give me back some of the confidence I lost. That’s what I’m feeling around you.”

She throws her arms around my neck, kissing my face all over. As I reach for her, she pushes back, face all serious as shit.

“Ollie, I’m sorry for being so nasty before. I’m scared of these feelings and I’m not good with change. Well, I hate it to be perfectly honest. But your ideas are really good. When I was talking to Joe about you, he mentioned his son, Doug, and his wife were talking about the farm and how they wish there was a way they could buy it. Now, not sure if I want to sell all of it, but maybe we can figure out a way to keep some of this, along with my share of the clinic, and work together to build something new in Montana. Never been there but from what I hear from someone who grew up there, it’s beautiful.”

“Damn, Pixie, you’ve never been to Big Sky Country? I’m looking forward to showing you all around.”

As I grind up into her, she pushes back down. This strong pixie of a woman has flipped my life upside down and ain’t nothing I’m more grateful for.

“Oh, Ollie, if we do this my dogs have to come with. And I kind of put my hand in the basket to take two of the puppies. Not to mention your family of five cats. Looks like we’re on the right road with all these fur babies of ours.”

She giggles until I lift up and my lips meet hers. Then her giggles turn to sexy whimpers. And those little sounds lead to me making her moan and scream my name. Again and again.