



Extraction Point (Ricochet 3)

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Category: Romance, Suspense, War

Description: Rick "Ricochet" Brennan served eight years as an elite Marine special ops Force Recon soldier. After an injury, and the terrible memories from that night, he retires and goes to work for his former Command Officer, Howard "Mack" McEvoy, at his training center in Atlanta.

Sanctum MMA appears on the surface to be a normal gym, training elite fighters to be the best. Except each trainer, hand-picked by Mack, possesses a special background that allows Mack to run one of the best-kept secrets in the country.

When twenty-three year old Quinn Wallace finally escapes her abusive husband, she turns to her father's old Marine Corps buddy, Mack, for help. Broken and skittish, Quinn finds herself surrounded by large, intimidating men— men who could easily overpower her. She avoids them the best she can, but when Rick turns out to be more than just a rough fighter with bruised knuckles, she finds herself wondering if she can allow herself to trust again.

Ricochet is a full-length novel released as three parts. This is part 3. You must read *Locked & Loaded* and *Friendly Fire* first.

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Chapter 1

Quinn struggled to open her eyes, a thick, blurry haze making them too heavy to manage more than a slight crack in her crusty eyelids. Once she did, it was too dark to see much of anything.

When Quinn stirred, her head throbbed to a staccato beat, pulsing painfully with the rhythm of her heart. Swallowing down the nausea that played with the edges of her vision, she adjusted to the dim lighting in the room. Quinn caught a glimpse of shadowy pale yellow walls, the outline of a whitewashed dresser opposite where she lay on a full-sized bed. Her eyes shifted, taking in the small window with the faded lace curtains.

My bedroom. I'm in my bedroom.

Quinn was so disoriented and confused she didn't know what to think. Her frame of reference was skewed in a way that reality and dreams seemed to become one. She had no idea what was going on except for the tremendous pain she felt in every part of her body.

The sound of footsteps downstairs let Quinn know that she wasn't alone in the familiar house.

How old am I?

"Daddy?" Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

Oblivious to her presence, the heavy booted feet trudged through the tiny house, stopping in the kitchen below her bedroom. Those are daddy's footsteps. She'd recognize them anywhere. Even though he left the Marines, he still wore combat boots every single day.

Quinn cleared her raw throat and called out louder this time.

"Daddy, are you home?"

This time, she heard the footsteps stop and redirect, heading towards the staircase. The wooden slats creaked under the boots as they ascended to the top of the landing.

"Daddy, thank god you're here. My head hurts."

Quinn tried to sit up, shifting on top of the ruffled white and yellow comforter. When she went to brace herself on one hand to push upright, something was wrong. Woozy, Quinn fell back onto the pillows, the room spinning in the low light.

The door to her room swung inward, a dark figure outlined in the brightly lit opening.

"Daddy, my... my hands are tied together. I don't understand. My head, it hurts so badly. What's going on?"

The bedroom light clicked on, the brightness so intense Quinn had to squeeze her eyes shut and swallow down another wave of nausea. Carefully, she opened her eyes and took in her childhood bedroom. The fog began to clear and the horrific realization of what was happening came together, jolting through her like a bolt of lightning.

That can't be daddy, he died years ago.

Panic flooded her veins with adrenaline, her heart speeding up so fast she thought it might fly right out of her chest. Quinn could barely keep her eyes open the pain in her head was so sharp.

“You can certainly call me daddy if you want to, bitch.”

She shook at the sound of that voice— a voice belonging to a man that haunted her dreams every night for years. Fear prickled across her skin as she froze in place. Without moving an inch, her eyes found the figure standing in her doorway. She would recognize him anywhere.

Travis.

I’m already dead, Quinn thought as her vision wavered, his disfigured face was the last thing she saw before everything went black.

The parking lot at Sanctum MMA was crowded for a late Sunday afternoon. Every single available operative was present and accounted for, all of them waiting on Ricochet Brennan, who was pacing in the hall until he could calm down enough to speak without flying into a frenzy.

Rick leaned against the wall, pressing the heels of his hands against his forehead. Ex-fucking husband. A sheriff. Who used to beat Quinn regularly according to Mara, who said she heard about it directly from Quinn. The urge to kill the man was so strong, Rick wanted to punch the wall just to let out the homicidal rage that was building inside him, begging to be set free.

Get your shit together, Rick. You can’t help Quinn if you’re imaging all the different ways to destroy that piece of shit motherfucker instead of focusing on finding her.

Inhaling deeply, he flung door to the conference room open, the frame rattling as it

banged against the wall. Rick stormed past the table, headed for the far end, which was nearest to the large whiteboard mounted behind the table.

Agitated, Rick slammed a manila file folder down onto the table, taking out a stack of papers and shoving them at Clint, who was on his immediate left. “Everyone take one and get a good look at the bastard who kidnapped Quinn. You should also have the same photo on your handheld device or phone.” He knew he was being a dick, but could give a fuck less. Quinn was missing, taken by a sadistic, abusive asshole, and there was no way he was going to worry about pleasantries at a time like this.

Jesus fucking Christ, I need a fucking drink to deal with this shit.

Rick’s lip curled up when he glanced at the picture of Travis Hardy, a name he hadn’t even heard of until a few hours ago. A man Rick never knew existed until a few hours ago when Mara Paxton filled him in on all of Quinn’s secrets. The secrets Quinn didn’t want him to know, that she wasn’t comfortable enough to confide in him. The paper in his hand crumpled in his tight fist for his failure to keep her safe.

I’m going to catch that bastard and skin that sick fuck alive!

“Rick, calm down. Getting angry won’t help Quinn.” Clint’s composed voice did little to assuage Rick or h

is murderous thoughts.

Rick twitched with a fury he could no longer contain. “Calm down! That fucking abusive, piece of shit has her, Clint! He could be doing—” Rick couldn’t finish his sentence, nearly doubling over from the invisible punch to the gut. It was too painful to think about what horrors Quinn could have already faced at the hand of her husband. He braced himself by placing his palms flat on the conference room table, hanging his head down as he took deep breaths.

I should have told her I love her... taken the chance. Maybe she wouldn't have left this morning if I had.

“Rick! Let's start the briefing.” Mack's voice rang loud and clear from the back of the room by the door. His commanding tone snapped Rick out of his destructive thoughts but the anger remained, simmering under the surface of his poorly masked emotions.

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Nodding stiffly at Mack, reining in his emotions, Rick uncapped a marker and began to write on the board. He exhaled deeply before speaking. “Okay. We know that Quinn most likely arrived at the Law Offices of Wheeler, Bryant, and Townsend between ten-fifteen and ten-twenty this morning. Tucker is checking nearby traffic cams to find Mack’s truck to verify the exact time.”

He scribbled the information on the board, the red marker squeaking as it slid across the slick surface.

“Our most likely suspect is Travis Garrett Hardy, deputy sheriff in Bexar County, Texas, which contains the city of San Antonio.” Rick’s face twisted into a scowl as he spit out the man’s name. “You all have his DMV picture on your sheet. We also know this piece of shit owns a home in the next county over, in...” he checked the file even though he knew all of the words on it from memory, “Bandera County. Sparsely populated, out in the middle of nowhere. It’s the perfect place to keep someone under your thumb without anyone knowing about it.” The marker continued squeaking across the white board. “However, they couldn’t have gotten back to Texas yet if that’s where he’s headed, so we’ve pulled a favor from a local guy Mack knows—former Green Beret. He’s sitting on the house to see if they show up.”

Rick scanned the room to see each of his coworkers studying the driver’s license photo in front of them, memorizing the handsome face that hid a monster. His chest suddenly burned with a rush of emotions he felt for his teammates. Every man here was not only willing to put their lives on the line for him whenever they went in the field, they were also willing to do it for Quinn without a moment’s hesitation. They truly were a family in every sense of the word, and they accepted Quinn as theirs, no questions asked. As it was, Mara Paxton was at home, inconsolable, feeling guilty for

not urging Quinn to discuss her ex with Rick.

The door to the conference room opened before Rick could continue the briefing.

“Rick!”

Tucker rushed in, his clothes a mess and his Bluetooth hanging from his ear. His eyes lit up excitedly behind his glasses as he waited for Rick to respond.

“Tell me you got something, big guy. We need good news.” Rick clutched the marker in his hand, waiting for Tucker reveal what he found.

The small, sinewy man ran a hand through his tousled brown hair as he spoke. “I got a make, model, and license plate number.” He turned to address the entire room. “The bank across the street had a couple of cameras. I was able to get shots of a silver sedan pulling out of the law firm’s parking garage at ten-thirty three a.m. It took me a while to clean up the image enough—”

“Tucker! Can you just skip the technical bullshit and get to the fucking point?” Rick growled impatiently at their computer expert and bent over the conference table, his upper body braced on his locked arms. He knew he looked like a man coming unraveled, piece-by-fucking piece. Every muscle in his body seemed to twitch independently.

Tucker froze, his mouth twisted into a grimace. “I’m cutting you some slack for that comment because I know you’re stressed out. But fucking snap at me again and I’ll take your goddamn head off, Ricochet.” Tucker’s light eyes narrowed, his body tensed up and his expression hostile. Even beneath his geeky glasses and hipster clothing it was obvious that Tucker could be very dangerous when the situation called for it.

Rick hung his head in shame, sighing before looking back up at his friend, ignoring the concerned stares of his colleagues as they bounced back and forth between the two men. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Tucker. Good work. Is that all?”

“I traced the plate to a rental agency near the airport. It’s listed to a Travis G. Hardy. I’m going to scan the area’s DOT cameras to see if we can pinpoint which direction they went in. The man in the car, Rick... it’s definitely Hardy even though facial recognition software algorithm detected a dissimilarity on part of his face. Quinn isn’t visible, but she could be on the back seat or in the trunk—”

“Great, Tucker.” Mack interrupted, probably hoping to stop what he could see was going to be another meltdown by Rick if Tucker began to describe Quinn sitting in a madman’s trunk. Social niceties weren’t Tucker’s strong point. Mack slapped Tucker’s back approvingly as Rick ground his teeth together. “We’ll finish up here and I’ll let you know the plan.”

Tucker nodded and left the room without another word as Rick paced like a madman in front of the whiteboard, his agitation nearly suffocating him. He pulled at the collar of his T-shirt as if it were a rope around his neck.

“So we need to figure out where he brought her.” Dane said. “Should we assume he has a hotel room somewhere?”

Mack nodded. “That’s a good start. Xav, why don’t you join Tucker in Mission Control and search all area hotels from North Atlanta down to the airport. Start nearest to the rental car agency.”

“Will do boss man.” Xavier turned to Rick. “We’ll get her back, Ricochet.”

“I know, Xav, but she’s already been gone six hours.” Rick’s voice nearly broke from the sheer amount of pain that was constricting his chest.

Rick knew every man in the room was thinking the same thing he was. What was Travis doing to Quinn while they were wasting time tracking him down? What condition would she be in when they found her and would it be something she could survive? Something she would want to survive?

Quinn woke to the shock of freezing cold water hitting her directly in the face. She gasped, inhaling water and choking on it. The sudden movement and the coughing spasm sent agony through her bruised ribs where Travis had repeatedly kicked her.

She tried to sit up, but her body was too weak and her hands were still tied together in front of her.

“Time to get up!”

An icy chill spread over her skin, making every hair stand on end. Quinn wanted to blame it on the cold water, but she knew it was that voice. Travis. A shiver wracked her sore body.

“Ouch!” A bolt of pain shot across her scalp when Travis gripped her hair and yanked her head up. Brutally, he pulled her off of the bed, dragging her by her tangled brown ponytail as she kicked out her legs, trying desperately to get her feet under her.

“Owww!”

Quinn’s protest was short-lived when Travis kneed her in the gut to shut her up. Her breath left in a whoosh, making her lungs burn from lack of oxygen. The sharp pain caused her to stumble and fall as he continued wrenching her down the hallway.

Tears of pain and humiliation started flowing down Quinn’s cheeks. As much as she was hurting, she was furious for looking weak in front of her ex-husband, hated that he could literally bring her to her knees.

“How dare you try to divorce me, Annie! You think you’re gonna leave me?” Travis scoffed. Tired of waiting on her limping steps, he bent down and slung her over his shoulder, carrying her down the wooden staircase. Quinn bit her lip at the excruciating pain she felt from being bounced down the stairs so carelessly. At the bottom, Travis dropped her like a bag of garbage onto the sofa in the family room.

Matted and dirty, her hair hung over her face, keeping a dark curtain between her and the man she hated more than anything else in the world. Using her bound hands, Quinn rubbed at sore eyes, s

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till gasping to catch her breath.

“You think you’re so fucking smart, huh? Leavin’ me, changin’ to your middle name and droppin’ mine? Not usin’ any banks or computers or nothin’?”

She could see him pacing in front of the couch. Those damn cowboy boots of his going back and forth, his Texas drawl getting more and more pronounced the more agitated he became. Quinn stifled a snuffle, hoping Travis didn’t hear it. He always used to get off on her cries for help. Every muffled sound he drew from her would make him more excited, would cause him to hit her harder or for longer. Sometimes he’d even choke her until she passed out.

“Answer me, Annie!” Travis boomed, grabbing her face and wrenching her head up until she looked at him. Nauseated, she squeezed her eyes shut tight, not wanting to ever see him again or give him the satisfaction of meeting his cold, evil gaze.

A hand whistled through the air, making contact with her cheek. White-hot pain exploded in Quinn’s face, snapping her head sideways. Without the use of her hands, she couldn’t stop her body from tipping over on the couch, landing on her bruised ribs.

Not completely broken yet, Eyes still closed, Quinn grit her teeth, the metallic tang of blood filling her mouth. “Don’t. Call. Me. Annie.”

I’m not broken yet, you asshole. You may have me, but you don’t own me.

“Look at me, bitch! I’ll call you whatever I want!”

Defiantly, Quinn opened her eyes. Without letting out a single cry of pain, she struggled back into a sitting position. Once there, she met Travis' hostile, maniacal stare— and spit a mouthful of blood all over his face.

“Fuck you, Travis!” she hissed.

Travis backhanded her cheek again, this time, so hard that Quinn's ears were ringing and her vision went fuzzy.

He snarled in frustration, using the hem of his denim shirt to wipe off his face. Quinn stared up at him, her eyelids drooping, and a trickle of blood running down her chin. She took a good look at what she had done over a year ago to his previously handsome appearance and smirked.

“Looking good, Trav.” Giddy and nearly delirious from exhaustion and endorphins, Quinn giggled.

He roared with rage. The last thing she saw before blacking out was his hands spreading open to clench around her throat.

Chapter 2

“Come on, Clint! It's been hours already!” Rick barked from his seat in Mission Control, Tucker on one side, Clint on the other. Sweat had soaked through another one of Rick's shirts, a physical reminder of the extreme anxiety he was experiencing. Fuck, he would have to go to the locker room to change again.

Clint swiveled his chair to face his friend. “Rick, keep it together, man. There's dozens of hotels around the airport, hundreds if you count the entire metro Atlanta area. We're all working on it.” The big man eyed his distressed friend cautiously before returning to his computer screen. Rick's fuse was so short he was wired to

blow at any moment.

“Jesus Christ. Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Rick roared, yanking off his Bluetooth headset and hurling it across the room. “That sick asshole has probably already—” he forced down a sob. The thought of Quinn at the mercy of a man so horribly cruel that she left without money or a means of support made him physically ill. How anyone could harm such a gentle, tiny thing like Quinn? Rick ground his teeth against the nausea. “We’re never going to find her like this!”

He was just about to leave to get sick in the restroom— again— when Tucker’s excited shout made him jump.

“I got something!”

Rick scrambled over to Tucker’s workstation, grabbing the back of the man’s chair. “What? What do you have?” Hope shot through him, his heart clenching in his chest.

“Here,” he pointed at one of the computer screens, “the sedan getting on Georgia 400 at Lenox Road.” Tucker twisted his head around to face Rick. “Headed north.”

“North?” Clint asked, his brow furrowed. “So not towards the airport. We’ve been looking in the wrong direction? All this fucking time!” Clint’s voice began to rise in anger.

Rick rubbed his eyes, the brief moment of hope shattered. Fear bled its way back in, coating every surface of his body, inside and out. Hardy could be headed anywhere—fuck—he could be in North Carolina or Tennessee by now.

“So what next?” he asked Tucker.

“Now, we check every camera we can find going north on 400 to see where he got

off.” Tucker’s fingers flew over his keypad. The images on various screens flicking by at warp speed.

Rick pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. “Are there anymore traffic cameras up that way?”

“Not until the junction with 285,” Tucker said unemotionally. Then he grinned, his wide, mischievous, I’m going to break the law now grin. “Not publically accessible cameras, that is.”

Clint smiled, thumping Tucker on the back proudly. He turned to Rick. “We’re gonna get her, Ricochet. Just have faith.”

“Yeah,” Rick scowled, “faith.” That wasn’t something Rick had a lot of. Today, he needed to find some, and fast.

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Quinn dozed on and off for a while— minutes, hours, days? It was light outside, but she had no idea if it was still Sunday or if it was Monday morning. All sense of time had stopped for her. Once in a while she heard Travis stomping around her father's house and she feigned sleep every time he came into the family room. She knew damn well that physical pain wasn't the worst thing Travis could inflict on her. Pretending to be unconscious was the best way to avoid his explosive anger. Travis only enjoyed raping her when she was frightened or fighting back. It excited him, got him off, the sick, twisted, bastard. She was honestly surprised he hadn't done it yet.

Travis' footsteps were somewhere in the kitchen so she used the opportunity to think about his appearance Quinn hadn't seen him since the day she left, thank god. She always wondered how badly she'd injured him, but not even in her best fantasies had she done so much damage to his handsome face. Now he looked like the monster he was, hideous inside and out.

Quinn lay on the couch, her entire body sore and aching, and remembered the events leading up to that day as if they had happened yesterday.

One and a half years ago

Travis rolled off of Quinn's battered, abused body. Standing over her, he zipped up his fly. "Get up!" He nudged her leg with the pointed toe of his cowboy boot. "Move bitch!"

Sniffing, Quinn moved to sit, the tinkling of glass beneath her. She moaned at the sharp pain from dozens of tiny cuts on her back. The red, white, and blue material of a flag shifted as she moved. Her hand was dripping blood from a gash across her

palm.

He broke my daddy's flag case.

Disrespectful bastard!

Quinn glanced around at the remnants of the display case for her father's American flag, everything blurry through her tears. Bits of splintered wood were scattered around the broken pane of glass. Travis had raped her right on top of the shattered pieces and on top of the flag. The shards had sliced right through the heavy material and dug into her back and legs as he relentlessly drove into her.

Holding in a sob, Quinn realized she was still exposed from the waist down and Travis was towering over her, waiting for her to get up.

She yanked her dress down. "I—I'll get the dustpan and broom."

Quinn stood up on shaky legs, gathering her father's torn flag in her hands. When she turned to leave, Travis grabbed her arm, wrenching it behind her back. She gasped at the pain that shot through her shoulder, but managed to bite back a cry.

"Go get cleaned up for dinner. You think I'm stupid, bitch? That I'm gonna let you alone with these sharp pieces of glass and wood?" He snarled in her face, his hot breath gusting over her. Quinn had to hold back the urge to vomit.

Travis shoved her towards the hall bathroom where Quinn stumbled and fell, landing on her hands and knees, the flag still balled up in her fist. A sharp stabbing pain shot through the deep cut on her hand.

"That's better. You look good like that, Annie. Now go get cleaned up!"

Quinn staggered to her feet, entering the bathroom and locking the door. Putting the ripped flag on the countertop, she went through the motions of turning on the shower and getting a towel out, avoiding her reflection in the mirror above the sink. Trembling, Quinn went to get an Advil from the medicine cabinet and accidentally caught a glance of her bruised face.

She froze, horrified at the sight in front of her. One eye was swollen shut and purple. There was an angry red welt along her left cheek, along with a dark bruise. Her lip was split, a dried smear of blood across her chin. Below was a deep black and blue slash across her neck where Travis had stepped on her throat. Quinn lifted a trembling hand to her neck, her eyes filling with tears again.

This is my life. He's going to kill me someday.

Quinn frowned, the movement eliciting a hiss when it pulled at a cut on her lip. She carefully pulled her dress over her head, wincing at every sharp stab of pain it caused. Staring at the flag, Quinn reached into the pile of material, retrieving the precious item she had slipped into its folds when she had gathered it up in her arms.

Smiling, she held it up to the bathroom light, turning it side to side, watching the fluorescent light glint off of it at different angles. Quinn grinned at her hard-earned prize. Her smile fell and she put the glass to her wrist. It would be so easy to get out, to end her pain. One quick slice is all it would take. With determination, she stared at the broken face in the mirror, taking in every bruise, every cut, every piece of her soul that Travis carved out and used for his pleasure... and it gave her strength.

N

o! You finally made a mistake, Travis. I'm going to get out of here or die trying.

Quinn buried the jagged shard of glass in a box of tampons under the sink. Travis was

too macho to touch women's things. He would never think to look there.

Soon, she thought. Very, very soon.

“Rick, we spotted him!”

Xavier called out from Mission Control, yelling down the hall to the conference room where Rick was sitting with Clint, drinking coffee to stay awake. Clint had forced him to take a break from the search, telling him he was useless if he was going to be so agitated and easily angered. He was able to calm himself substantially after Clint talked him down from the ledge he was hanging onto by his fingertips, but Rick was still scared as hell they wouldn't reach Quinn in time.

Rick bolted out of his chair at Xav's voice, Clint hot on his heels. “Where?” He focused in on the screen directly in front of Tucker, a grainy still shot from a camera.

“As of eleven hundred hours, he was still on 400 going north. He didn't take the bypass, so that's greatly narrowed down the possibilities.” Tucker continued typing as he spoke. “Here,” he used his chin to point at another screen, this one to Rick's left. “He continued past Sandy Springs, so wherever he's going, it's out of the city.”

Rick stared at the photo on the monitor. The image of the man from the driver's license picture matched the one in front of him. Even with the poor quality Rick could tell it was the same person. The primal instinct to defend what was his roared through his body. One way or another, Rick was going to take Travis Hardy out.

“So, the question is, what's up there?” Xavier asked. He turned to his own computer and began typing. A map of Atlanta and it's surrounding area came up on the large flat screen.

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The four men stood silent, each one considering the various possibilities.

“Well,” Clint said, “there are two large-ish cities, Roswell and Alpharetta, then— not much. Just suburbs then the lake.”

“Lake?” Tucker asked. “Maybe he has a boat?”

“How the fuck would he get a boat here from Texas, Tucker?” Rick snapped. He was itching for a fight, egging the man on so he could get one.

“Hey, fuck you Rick!” Tucker twisted in his seat, pointing angrily at his teammate. “Maybe he fucking rented one! Do you want me to immediately discredit the possibility or do you want me to be thorough?”

“You’re pissing me off, Tucker! Don’t lecture me on being thorough!” Rick took a step towards the other man, who responded by getting out of his chair, tossing his glasses on the desk, and raising his fists in front of him.

“Whoa!” Clint jumped between the two men, Xavier ready to help separate them if needed. “Let’s chill the fuck out, okay?” His gaze flicked back and forth from Rick to Tucker. “It’s tense in here, this whole fucked up situation is tense. But you’re not going to help Quinn if you’re at each other’s throats!”

Rick grumbled under his breath, knowing Clint was right.

“Got it, Rick?” Clint stared at his friend, almost nose to nose in the small room.

Rick exhaled, his shoulders dropping. He hated this feeling of uselessness. “Fine. Check for boats. I’m going to search Quinn’s apartment while you do that. I can’t sit here and do nothing.” The twitchiness and agitation had Rick wanting to scratch his own skin off. He was always slightly restless, but with the stress of the situation, the very real potential for Quinn to die today, plus the fact that he drank way too much caffeine... Rick felt as if he might explode at any second. He was a foreigner trapped in his own body.

Without another word, Rick spun on his heel and stormed out of the room.

It was easy to break into Quinn’s tiny apartment above the gym for the second time that day. Rick frowned, it was too easy. Making a mental note to get a better lock, he closed the door quietly behind him. Rick stood still for a moment. The reality that Quinn was gone finally hit him. It was already well past dinnertime and they still weren’t anywhere close to finding her. It was sinking in that there was a very good chance that she wouldn’t return.

Hang on doll. Just hang on a little longer.

I don’t give up. Almost a decade in the Marines, dozens of covert operations, and I’ve never left a man behind or left a mission incomplete. I will get her back.

Fuck! Easier said than done. He’d never had a mission like this, one in which his own future, his own personal happiness, was dependent on the outcome. His body shook and his knees nearly collapsed beneath him. Rick struggled to hold in the sobs that were causing his chest and eyes to burn like fire.

Man the fuck up, Rick. Quinn is depending on you to keep her alive.

Teetering on the edge of either falling apart or finding his girl, Rick fell into Marine mode, shoving away his grief and getting to work.

Chapter 3

Quinn opened her eyes to a dark room, the only light coming from the thin sliver of moon outside the window. Her head felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds. A constant throbbing was squeezing it like a vice. She couldn't see out of one eye and knew with almost absolute certainty that her left cheekbone was fractured. Quinn ran her tongue over her dry, swollen lips, flinching when she touched the areas that were split open.

With great effort, she pushed herself to a semi-sitting position, shocked to find that she was back upstairs on her childhood bed and her hands were untied. Quinn glanced around the room, ignoring the sharp pain that the action caused in her one good eye. She was surprised to see a glass of water and a damp washcloth on the side table.

Quinn scanned the rest of the room, knowing that Travis must be hiding out nearby, waiting to do something cruel. Why would he leave these things for her? Kindness was not one of her ex-husband's best traits. In fact, it wasn't a trait even remotely in his universe.

Desperate to feel clean, Quinn took the cloth, gently rubbing the blood off of her face and hands the best she could. It hurt so much she could hardly stand the pressure of the soft fabric on her skin.

The loud rumbling of a car starting in the driveway caused Quinn to pull all the way upright much too quickly. A hazy darkness clouded her vision for a moment, the urge to be sick rushing into her head. She stilled, waiting for the nausea to pass. Quinn could hear the car pull out of the driveway, the sound getting farther from the house with each passing second.

Did he actually leave?

Quinn's heart fluttered in her chest. Could she escape? Maybe he thought she'd be unconscious longer than she was and he got careless. Maybe he ran out of food and had no choice but to go get some. Why would he leave her unbound?

She didn't know and she didn't care. She didn't even know if it was midnight or almost morning. Even though the thought of moving made her sore muscles clench painfully in anticipation of the agony that was sure to follow, she took a deep breath to steel herself. Crying out at the fire that ripped through her damaged body, Quinn pushed through the torture and sat up on the bed.

It was too much. Quinn knew she had to hurry, but the effort just from sitting already had her panting heavily, which made her ribs feel like a hot poker was gouging into her side. Gritting her teeth, she went to swing her legs off the side of the bed.

Hope...

That damn traitorous bitch. She got me again.

Quinn should know better by now than to let hope in, but she did, every single time. And once again, hope failed her.

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The rattle and clank of metal should have been enough to tell Quinn what Travis had done, but she needed to see it. Needed proof that her husband was as sadistic of a bastard as she remembered. Twisting around so her one good eye could focus in on her right ankle, Quinn got her proof. There, around her swollen, purple-tinged skin was one end of Travis' handcuffs. The other end locked tight around the heavy metal frame of her antique bed.

There was no point in screaming. The nearest neighbors were nowhere near close enough to hear. Quinn wasn't one to give up, but she couldn't come up

with the strength to scream even if anyone actually could hear.

Over two years with Travis and she plotted her escape every single day, no matter what he did to her or how many dark days bled together. But right now, in this moment, Quinn didn't have any fight left in her. He won. Game over.

When Travis came back he would kill her, of that she had no doubt. Maybe not today or even tomorrow, Travis always did like to draw out his punishments. But she knew... there was no way she would ever make it another two years. Quinn would find a way to push him so he would finish this long before then. Soon it would all be over. She'd rather die than spend her life with her husband.

Sinking into the soft pillows, her tender, bruised flesh throbbing, Quinn cried.

A few hours after midnight on Monday morning, sixteen hours since Quinn went missing, Mack called a meeting in the conference room. The tired soldiers took their seats, a somber look on each man's face.

“Alright, as you know, we’ve determined that Travis Hardy kidnapped Quinn from the parking garage of an Atlanta lawyer’s office. Tucker tracked the car to north of the city.” Mack stopped and frowned, “Where’s Rick?”

“I’m here.” The door opened, revealing a shockingly scruffy-looking Rick Brennan. He took a seat, placing a thick stack of papers in front of him.

“What’s that?” Mack pointed at the pile.

Rick rubbed at his eyes. After staring at computer screens and small print documents for hours on end, his eyes were on fire, burning from being open too long.

“Some stuff I got from Quinn’s apartment. It may not be relevant, but I grabbed what looked important so we could go through it.”

Mack paused, staring at Rick for a brief moment before continuing. He shrugged off the feeling that Mack was seeing right through him. Mack knew that Quinn was more than a friend and coworker to Rick. Hell, he was pretty sure that everyone here knew that just by the way he was acting. It wasn’t as if he told anyone directly, except Clint and Mara, and they only knew because of Mara’s close friendship with Quinn. Everyone else figured it out on their own. They were highly trained in intelligence gathering after all. Reading people was a very big part of that skill.

“Rick, we’ll go through the paperwork after the meeting.” Mack turned his attention to their computer whiz. “Tucker, give me the latest location for Travis Hardy’s rental car.”

The man sat up a little straighter in his seat, ruffling his hand through his shaggy brown hair. “I found visual conformation of them on GA400 North at mile marker 30.8, continuing on the freeway.” Tucker looked around the room, noting that the other mercenaries perked up at this information. “That means he’s past Highway 20,

up by Lake Lanier. I can't confirm how far north he went as there aren't anymore DOT cameras that far out. I'm currently searching private business cameras off of each subsequent exit. The computers are running an algorithm I created as we speak."

Mack stared at Tucker, scratching his thick fingers over the grey stubble that covered his chin. Rick had known Mack a long time. The man was obviously working something out in his head. When he finally came to his conclusion, he floored them.

"Don't bother. I think I know where they are."

Every head in the room spun around to face Mack.

Rick bolted up out of his chair, knocking it over in his haste. "What? Where is she?"

Mack's face softened for a beat, then he scowled at Rick, knowing exactly what Rick was thinking of doing. "We will come up with a plan, together, Ricochet. You will not rush out of here by yourself all half-cocked and sleep deprived. Do you hear me?"

The younger man ground his teeth together. "But—"

"No. I am ordering you to stand down until we have a plan in place. No one here is to go in alone. That is an order. Does everyone understand?" Mack's stare was hard, his eyes shards of flint. C.O. McEvoy was in charge, and after years in the various branches of the military, every man in the room was trained to follow his every order.

"Yes sir." A practiced chorus of shouts went out.

"Rick?" Mack raised an eyebrow at the scowling man who was still standing rigid, his fists clenched at his sides.

Rick couldn't believe Mack was tying his hands like this. His need to get to Quinn

had him halfway out the door already. But his brain knew that it would be dangerous to go in blind, so reluctantly, he acquiesced. “Yes sir.”

“Good. Tucker, get me a map of Dawsonville, specifically the northeast side of the lake and get it up on the big screen. Rick, is there any paperwork in there regarding the sale of Quinn’s house?”

Rick flipped through the stack, handing Mack a document from Quinn’s lawyer about a real estate agent.

Tucker leapt from his seat to pull up the map. Less than two minutes later, the image was on the giant television screen mounted on the wall of the conference room.

Rick was just about ready to jump out of his skin. The urge to scream in frustration was pushing at his chest, itching to burst out like that creature in that movie, Alien.

Mack pushed a button on the phone to speak to Tucker in Mission Control. “Zoom in on the upper third of the map.” The roads and buildings grew larger. “Now on the lower right quadrant.” The screen complied with each directive until Mack pointed at the only house left in the frame. “There, that’s Quinn’s father’s house. Where she grew up. It matches the address on this document.” Mack made eye contact with each one of his agents. “I’ve been to that house before. It’s been a few years, but I remember it well. Now, let’s figure out how we’re going to get this shitbag.”

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Rick exhaled in relief. This was the break he was waiting for.

Crying was a big mistake, Quinn thought as she stared into the blackness that surrounded her. Now, she wasn't just sore all over, but her one good eye was swollen as well and her possibly broken nose was leaking copious amounts of mucus and blood. She used the washcloth to wipe it and gasped. Quinn literally saw stars when she lightly touched the end of her nose.

Yep, probably broken.

It wouldn't be the first time Travis broke her nose. That wasn't what hurt so badly. It was the mental anguish that pained her. Quinn had truly believed she would never have to go through this again. That she was so wrong, about everything, was devastating. Her lip started to quiver at the thought of Travis, about how she was never going to be rid of him. Not until one of them was dead. Unfortunately, it was looking more and more as if she would be the one to go first.

Rick had to have noticed she was missing by now. Even if no one knew where her lawyer's office was, today was Monday, so the employees who parked in the garage were bound to find Mack's abandoned truck and know something had happened to her, maybe called the police.

It had seemed right at the time, but in hindsight Quinn was really regretting not having told Rick about Travis. If she had, he would know who attacked her. Mara Paxton knew about Travis, but by the time everyone put all the pieces together, Quinn would be dead and gone.

She had come to terms with the fact that no one was coming for her. In between restless fits of sleep and her sore body being chained to the bed, Quinn tortured herself with that thought all night. Rehashing it wouldn't make it any less real. She was alone and she was going to die.

Maybe if she had killed Travis the night she left this wouldn't be happening. She could have done it. She should have done it. But in the end, as much as she hated him, Quinn wasn't a killer. She didn't want to be like Travis. Again, she thought about that night, wondering if she could have prevented this nightmare.

One and a half years ago

It had been two weeks since the last time Travis attacked Quinn, busting her father's flag case and raping her on top of the symbol of his service to his country.

Every waking moment was spent plotting her getaway. Quinn waited until her body was healed, needing all of her strength to pull this off. It didn't stop her from thinking about it though. At least once a day, she dug through the bathroom cabinet, pulling out the long shard of glass to stare at it longingly, working up the courage to use it against her husband. Once or twice she considered taking her own life, but in the end, what spurred her on was her desire to get the best of Travis. For him to realize he failed, that she got away.

Her wait was over. Today was the day. She was going to get out of this hell on earth. Quinn had managed to save over seven hundred dollars over the last two years. Not a lot, but sufficient to get far enough away that Travis wouldn't be able to find her. She glanced at the clock on the stove—four p.m. He would be home from work soon.

As quick as possible, Quinn finished getting dinner ready and stuck it in the oven to bake. She didn't want Travis to think anything was out of the ordinary. She needed to lull him into a false sense of security— and more importantly, she needed to be

healthy and uninjured to make her escape. If that meant placating him and catering to his every need, she would.

Twenty minutes later, Quinn was in the family room when she heard the back door open. She listened as Travis did his usual after-work routine. The rattle of keys let her know he had locked his gun and car keys in a box on top of the refrigerator. The fridge opened and she heard the pop and hiss of a can of beer being opened. He yelled for her as those damn cowboy boots clunked across the kitchen floor.

“Annie! Get your ass in here!”

Taking a deep breath, Quinn steeled herself and went to the kitchen.

“Hi honey. Did you have a good day at work?” She put on a smile and began to set the table even though being nice to Travis was about to make her puke.

Travis leaned against the refrigerator, drinking his beer and eyeing Quinn warily.

“Yep. What did you make for dinner?”

Quinn faced Travis as she spoke, keeping her face calm and pleasant. He got angry if her back was to him while she spoke. “Chicken casserole, cornbread, and green beans.”

He grunted in approval. It was his favorite meal and she knew it. The happier he was, the easier today would be, even if it made bile creep up her throat by pretending everything was just hunky-dory when nothing could be further from the truth.

&nbs

p; Dinner came and went without a single negative comment or angry glare from her

husband. She brought him a beer as he settled into his recliner and flipped on the television. Quinn finished washing the dishes, joining Travis in the family room for a few hours. He flicked through the channels mindlessly, never bothering to look her way. It was as if she were invisible.

Perfect.

At nine, Quinn readied herself for bed, pretending to be asleep when Travis joined her an hour later, stinking like beer. She waited, clutching the sheets in her sweaty hands, until his breathing changed to a slow, even rhythm.

It's time.

Silently, Quinn slid out of bed and crept down the hall, into the bathroom. She dug out the box of tampons from the back of the cabinet, pocketing the sizeable roll of cash she had stashed there. Next she removed a pair of Travis' protective leather gloves that she had swiped from the carport. Gently, she ran a finger down the scar on her palm, still angry and red from the cut she suffered two weeks ago. It probably could have used a few stitches, but Travis certainly wasn't going to allow that. Shaking, she pulled one of the thick, too-big gloves onto her right hand. Quinn took the glass shard from the bottom of the box and clutched it tight in her gloved fist.

She crept towards the bedroom, pausing in the doorway. Carefully, Quinn peeked around the corner. Travis was still asleep. Quinn closed her eyes for a moment, saying a quick prayer that she would get out of the house in one piece.

Her heart racing in her chest, she gripped her weapon as she tiptoed to her husband's side of the bed, holding it up high, ready to use if he woke up. With a gloved finger, Quinn gently tugged on the top drawer of his nightstand. It opened without a sound, making her thankful for having the foresight to give the metal slides a good spray down with WD40 last week.

Quinn easily spotted the small key to the safe in the front of the drawer. He didn't bother to hide it, assuming she would never have the guts to try and swipe it while he was in the house.

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Think again, jerk.

She held the key in her left hand, the glass shard still ready to strike out in her right. Once she was safely in the hall, Quinn let out a long, shaky breath, pressing the back of her gloved hand to her thumping chest. At this rate, she'd have a heart attack before she could even get out of the house.

Scared that Travis could jump out at any second, Quinn hurried to the kitchen to get the final item needed to make her escape. The lockbox on top of the fridge was heavier than she expected, due to the weight of Travis's firearm. It took three tries for Quinn to hold her hand steady long enough to get the key in the lock.

Once open, she snatched up the keys to Travis's blue Chevy Silverado and went to put the box back. Hesitating, Quinn stared at the handgun, wondering if she should take it. It smelled strong— oily and pungent. Her nose wrinkled up. Sneaking away from her abusive husband was one thing, stealing an officer's sidearm was another. Plus, she had no experience with guns and would probably end up shooting herself. With trembling hands, Quinn left the gun, locked the box and put it back in its place.

“You little bitch.”

Quinn squealed, spinning around to find Travis in the kitchen, only a few feet away. She kept her hand behind her back, clutching the glass in her fist.

I should have taken the gun.

“What do you think you're doing?” His voice was a deep growl that sank into

Quinn's heart, making it falter.

"N-nothing. I-I was just—"

"Shut up you lying slut!"

Travis stepped forward and Quinn raised her hand, done with being his personal punching bag. She brought the glass down fast and even, slicing through soft flesh easily from the end of his brow, down one side of his face to the bottom of his jawline.

Travis roared in pain and disbelief, clutching at his face. He screamed as blood gushed from the wound through his fingers. Quinn almost lost her stomach from the sight of it. He flailed, the blood completely obscuring his vision on the side she cut.

"I'm gonna kill you! You're dead, Annie! You hear me!"

The threat snapped Quinn out of her terrified daze, sending her running for the door. Her feet slipped in the pool of blood, nearly sending her to the ground. Scrabbling to keep her footing, she grabbed onto the doorknob for balance. Quinn took one last look over her shoulder at her husband, blood covering him from scalp to chin, and ran.

Still able to hear Travis's shouts, Quinn hurried to the large garbage bin outside, removing a trash bag she had stashed there filled with some clothes and other essentials. She chucked it into the front seat of the truck and hopped into the driver's seat next to it. The huge truck roared to life when she turned the key in the ignition, drowning out the sounds of Travis' fury that were still coming from the house.

Quinn threw the truck in reverse and peeled out of the dusty driveway. As the house got smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror, her pulse began to calm down and she

smiled. She did it. She left her own private hell and survived. Annie Hardy died that night, and Quinn Wallace was reborn.

Chapter 4

Rick spent the hour drive north running through the details of the operation with his teammates over and over again. Mack and Tucker stayed behind to run things from Mission Control. That left Rick in the Suburban with Clint Paxton, Dane Nolan, Xander Vega, and Ben Price. Price and Paxton came up with the perfect plan, and Rick wanted to make sure everyone knew what to do when, down to the exact second.

By the fifth run through, Dane had finally had enough. “Ricochet, we’re all professionals. We won’t screw this up.”

Rick eyed Dane, shooting him a doubtful scowl. “You can’t make any guarantees, killer.”

Dane’s pained expression let Rick know that he was right, Dane couldn’t promise anything. “I understand, Rick. Just—we’re good at this. We have a plan, the husband doesn’t know we exist—we have the upper hand here. More so than our usual missions, and we have a success rate of nearly one hundred percent against armed combatants. This guy? He’s not even military. We got this.”

Rick blinked, his mouth pressed into a tight line. He nodded, but said nothing. What could he say? That Quinn could die today? That she could very well already be dead? He couldn’t let his mind go there. Not if he wanted to be of any use to the team, besides, they weren’t stupid. They probably had the same thoughts themselves.

“Five minutes out.”

Ben's gruff bark from the front seat broke the tension in the car. He was always the most clinical of the mercenaries. Precise, detached, and able to get the job done like a skilled surgeon. On Ben's five minute warning, the men began to check over their equipment, making sure their weapons and other gear were ready for whatever they might face.

Rick ran his hands over his tac vest, feeling for his Glock under his left arm and a few flash bangs in his left chest pocket. He moved to the right, finding zip ties and smoke bombs in place. Rick moved his hands down to his pants. On his belt holster, he had his other Glock locked and loaded plus tear gas canisters. Each thigh pocket held a collection of extra clips of ammo for each of his 9mm pistols. Across his back, Rick had his M14 tactical rifle plus extra ammo on his belt. Finally, he switched his earpiece on. Satisfied, Rick anxiously waited to arrive at the location.

Xavier tapped his Bluetooth, "Roger, Mission Control. Time to extraction point, two minutes." He tapped it again, disconnecting the call. "When I pull over at the designated spot, Brennan and Nolan, you'll head to your positions. Then I'll drop off Price and Paxton at the second location and let you know when they're in place. Copy?"

The three men replied in sync, "Copy."

Xavier slowed the Suburban to a stop on the side of a tree-lined street, on a stretch without a single house in sight. He twisted to face Rick and Dane in the back seat, "Get into position. Everyone check in when you're ready. I'll be with the Suburban at the rendezvous." Xav grinned, his dark eyes glinting with excitement. "We're going to nail this bast

ard, Rick. And it's going to be very, very satisfying."

Dane quietly opened the back door and the two men disappeared into the thick woods

under the cover of night.

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Focus on the mission. One foot in front of the other.

Rick made the short hike to their position, Dane close behind. They reached a shadowy clearing surrounded by overgrown bushes and began to set up. Its location, on the edge of the backyard of a very regular-looking house, made it the ideal spot for recon and attack.

Dane pressed his Bluetooth. "Alpha, in position."

"Copy." Ben's deep baritone came over the earpiece. "Beta will be in position in three minutes, making it... zero three sixteen."

"Copy." Dane answered quietly.

Neither man said a word, both perfectly still as they watched the Wallace home for signs of Quinn or her abductor. The woods surrounding the house were silent except for the chirping of crickets and cicadas. Dane lowered his night vision scope a few minutes later and whispered. "No sign of anything in the windows."

"Beta in position. Will go in three... two... one... go!"

Rick burst from the cover of the bushes, quickly running in a crouch until he was next to the back door. Dane stayed hidden, his rifle at the ready to cover his teammate if necessary.

"Ready?"

Rick tapped his headset, “Ready.”

“On my signal.” Ben counted down again. “Go!”

Rick spun and with a booted foot, he kicked the door open, splintered wood flying everywhere. In the front of the house, Ben did the same, heading directly upstairs.

Rick flew through the downstairs, gun out and ready to use. Dane followed, and they quickly determined there was no one in any of the rooms. He pressed the button on his headset. “Clear.”

“Clear. Hostage located. Upstairs bedroom, last on right. No sign of target.” Ben’s voice sent Rick’s frantic heart into his throat, the rapid beats thundering in his ears, drowning out the rest of the transmission. He scrambled to the staircase, taking the steps three at a time.

Rick burst into the room and skidded to a halt at the side of the bed. What he saw literally brought him to his knees. He ripped off his tactical helmet, tossing it to the floor with a loud clatter as he stared at the huddled figure in front of him.

“Jesus.”

Logically, Rick knew the girl on the bed was Quinn. It had to be her. But looking at this broken, bloody person, he couldn’t find a single part of her that he recognized. The tiny, curled up figure was so bruised, so swollen, so viciously attacked, that his mind couldn’t reconcile what he was seeing with the beautiful, spirited woman he fell in love with.

When Rick spoke, his voice was rough from holding back the crushing grief and regret that swelled in his chest. “Quinn?” She didn’t flinch or make any movement that made him think he could hear him.

Behind him, Rick vaguely registered that the rest of the team had arrived and someone was calling for an ambulance. When a heavy hand landed on his shoulder, he didn't acknowledge whoever it was. He couldn't. Rick's entire world had collapsed into a constricted, dark tunnel, with him on one end and Quinn out of reach at the other.

"Rick!"

The hand shook him harder, but he was paralyzed, unable to make himself respond. Rick felt as if he were watching this moment from outside his body, like a bad television drama playing out in front of him while he stood on the sidelines.

"Rick!"

This time, two hands gripped his arms and yanked him to his feet. He was able to stand, barely, but still couldn't fully focus on the man yelling in his face.

What's happening to me? Is she going to die? Am I dying?

Rick could feel the back of his thigh beginning to tingle, the slow burn getting stronger. Flames licked up the length of his leg, spreading out, consuming him, burning him alive. It joined the blaze in his gut that was spurring him to take revenge, to get his hands on Travis Hardy and shred him to microscopic pieces. Liquid fire surged through his veins, burning him both inside and out.

If she's dead, take me.

"Rick!"

A large hand squeezed his jaw finally dragging him from his own personal hell. Dane came into focus, his concerned brow pulled down low and his piercing eyes staring

into Rick's. Dane was upset, shouting in his face, but Rick hadn't heard a word he said.

"Huh?" Rick shook his head, blinking rapidly.

"You with me Rick? We have to get our shit off and into the Suburban. We can't let the paramedics come in here and see us in our tac gear with high powered rifles strapped to our backs."

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The anger Rick had for Quinn's husband needed to come out before it ate him from the inside out. Seeing what he did to her, what a sick bastard he was, made him snap. Rick shoved Dane, wanting to lash out, needing to fight someone, craving an outlet for the overwhelming rage.

"Fuck you! I'm not leaving her!"

Before he could pull back his fist, Dane grabbed Rick's wrists, skillfully spinning him around and pinning him in a chokehold. Rick hadn't expected the Jiu Jitsu champ to make a move, so Dane had him subdued before he could fight against the hold. Within seconds Rick began to feel lightheaded from lack of blood to his brain.

Dane murmured evenly in Rick's ear as he put pressure on Rick's carotid artery. "You know that you'll lose consciousness in about ten seconds. Calm down and get your shit together so you can ride with Quinn to the hospital, or pass out and I'll chuck your ass in the car and you can find your own way there."

Knowing that Dane was dead serious in his threat, Rick tapped Dane's forearm. The only thing he needed more than a fight right now was to be with Quinn, even if it meant giving up for the moment. As soon as he tapped, the hold around his neck released, allowing blood to rush back to his head.

Without Dane holding him up, Rick collapsed to the ground, choking and gasping for air on his hands and knees.

"You fucker!" he croaked, rubbing his sore neck.

“Shut up! They’ll be here any second. We have to get this shit packed up. Give me your vest and your guns and empty your pockets.”

Grudgingly, Rick stripped off his gear, handing it over and throwing the smaller items into Dane’s backpack.

Dane hiked the bag onto his shoulder. “I’m going. Me and the other guys will go back to Sanctum, get rid of our weapons, and meet you at the hospital. You found her here like this, alone. Got it?”

Rick nodded, his attention already back on Quinn. He didn’t hear Dane leave the room, but he knew he was finally alone with her. Hesitantly, he raised a hand, gently running it over Quinn’s hair. Listening to her shallow, raspy breathing, seeing her perfect skin covered in dried blood and mottled bruises, caused the dam inside Rick to finally break. His hand shook as he continued to pet her filthy, matted hair, sobs ripping from his throat as he knelt beside the bed.

“I’m so sorry, doll.”

He never registered the dampness on his cheeks as he kept up a string of apologies in between hitched breaths.

“I’m so sorry. I should have been there... I—I should have protected you. I should have told you that I loved you— that I am in love with you. I’m so sorry, doll. Don’t die. Don’t leave me.”

Loud footsteps entered the house. A man yelled out and Rick answered. He listened to them thumping and banging their way up the staircase.

“These guys are going to take care of you. I’ll be with you the whole time, doll.”

Rick stood up, wiping his eyes and backing away so the medics could work on Quinn. As he watched them load her limp, battered body onto the stretcher, he could only think of two things—Quinn and revenge.

Chapter 5

Quinn was tired. So unbelievably freaking tired. Every inch of her body hurt, even her hair.

“Sleep, doll.” Rick’s warm hand slipped into hers, his thumb gently rubbing circles on her palm. “The police are coming by later to talk to you, so you’ll need your rest.”

Her heart grew heavy at the thought of rehashing those horrific twenty-four hours. Especially with Rick in the room listening. When she first regained consciousness, the doctor told her she had been in the hospital for half a day. Time had ceased to exist in her world. The fact that she didn’t know what day it was suddenly upset her more than it should.

“What day is it?”

“Just rest, doll.”

Panic fluttered in her chest. “I need to know, Rick. Tell me!” Her voice was growing agitated. Quinn could hear the heart monitor accelerating. She needed something, anything to ground her to reality. So far, all she was told was that Rick found her father’s address and drove there on a hunch. Travis wasn’t there when he arrived. Not knowing what happened, losing time, had her freaking out.

“Shhhhh.” He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “It’s Tuesday.”

“What time?”

Through her swollen eyelids, Quinn saw Rick's eyes narrow. He didn't understand her need to clutch at the strings that still bound her to earth and hang on tight, or else she'd float away in the tidal wave of sadness threatening to crash over her.

"Two-o'clock. In the afternoon, doll."

"Two. Okay, that's good. Good." She had no idea why it mattered so much, it just did. Knowing the time and day made her feel like she finally climbed out of the nightmare and back into reality. Her heart monitor began slowing down, the rapid beeping fading back into a steady pulse.

"Quinn..." Rick's pained expression had Quinn holding her breath, waiting anxiously to hear what

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came next. “What...what did he do to you? Did he—?” His voice was strangled, nearly choked-off at one point. This man. This big, rugged, macho, fighter, who saved her from being killed by her sadistic husband, was on the verge of a break down, because he cared about her.

When she realized he was asking if Travis had sexually assaulted her, Quinn’s eyes widened as much as they could considering how swollen they were. “No,” she whispered. “Not that. He didn’t, I swear Rick.”

“Jesus... thank god.” He lowered his forehead to their joined hands, then pressed a kiss to the back of hers before sitting up straight again. “I’m so sorry, doll. That he—”

“He’s a sick, twisted man, Rick. Always has been. But even I didn’t expect him to kidnap me. Not in a million years.”

“Why, Quinn? Why didn’t you tell me about him? I could have—”

“That’s why, Rick! That look, right there on your face. Pity. I didn’t want to be seen as some... some weak, pathetic victim!” After holding in her emotions, being too exhausted and hurt to feel anything but pain, Quinn broke down. She pulled her hand out from under Rick’s, using it to cover her face as she cried.

“No doll, no! You’re not weak or pathetic. Mara... she told me what he used to do to you. You’re... you’re one of the strongest people I know. You survived.”

He wrapped his hands around her wrists and gently pried them away from her face.

“Stop crying, doll. It’s killing me. It kills me that I didn’t get to you sooner—that I couldn’t protect you.”

“What? You... you did save me Rick. You found me before he could kill me. And he would have, eventually.”

“Oh god.”

Rick carefully climbed up onto the bed, holding Quinn against his chest. They clung to each other, Quinn sobbing until she was wrung out and exhausted.

“Never again, Quinn,” Rick whispered into her hair. “Never again.”

Feeling safe for the first time in a long time, Quinn huddled against Rick’s strong chest and fell asleep.

Rick stretched out on the mat, attempting to clear his mind before getting into the octagon with Dane. Rick, being a striker, needed to practice his ground game and Dane, being the Jiu-Jitsu expert, was more than happy to teach Rick a thing or two.

It had been three weeks since they had found Quinn handcuffed to a bed in her father’s house. Three weeks that Rick stayed by her side virtually every minute of every day as she healed, both physically and psychologically, from that sick bastard’s torture. Quinn was having terrible nightmares each night, making it nearly impossible for him to sleep. He was so concerned with her fragile mental state, he’d taken to staying up at night, watching Quinn sleep restlessly and attempting to soothe her when the nightmares started. Sometimes his calm petting and soft words helped and she would settle back into a deep sleep. Sometimes, the dreams progressed, and Rick would have to wake Quinn up as she screamed and clawed at the bed, covered in sweat because her fear was so real.

“Ready?”

Dane’s deep voice broke Rick’s concentration. He finished stretching and jumped to his feet, glad for the distraction. “Killer, I’m ready when you are.” Rick was a striker, which meant that he was at his best when he was on his feet, kicking and punching. Dane was a Jiu Jitsu champion, which meant he was a threat on the ground, relying on submissions to win matches.

Dane smiled, climbing the steps up into the cage. Rick followed, eager to burn off some of his stress. They never caught Quinn’s ex, the fucker. He disappeared without a trace. No credit card transactions, no sight of him in Texas, nothing. That pissed him off more than anything. Who knew the asshole would be smart enough to know how to drop off the grid?

“Ground work and holds only today, right? No kicking, no punching.” Dane raised his eyebrows, waiting for Rick to answer.

“Right.” He popped in his mouth guard and walked to the center of the ring. Grinning, Dane did the same. Rick nodded to the burly blonde man, and it was on.

They circled each other like predators, running through each potential takedown in their heads, calculating the different risks, sizing the other man up for weaknesses. Dane moved first. Quick as a snake, he grabbed Rick’s wrist and attempted to spin him around. Rick twisted out of the hold, escaping to the other side of the octagon.

Dane was immediately on him again, bent at the waist and expertly lifting Rick up then slamming to the ground. The urge to punch Dane was so instinctual that Rick had to grind his teeth together in order to stop himself.

“C’mon Ricochet! Can’t get out of a brabo choke?” Clint was laughing at the side of the cage, his fingers threaded through the vinyl-covered chain links. Rick couldn’t see

him, but he had enough air to answer.

“Fuck you, Paxton!”

Using all of his strength, Rick clutched Dane around the waist and rolled them both over until he was on top of the burly blonde man and out of the hold.

“Nice!” Dane said as he squirmed out from beneath Rick.

Both men scrambled back to their feet, circling each other once more. A crowd had gathered around the ring, enjoying the fight. It wasn’t often that two of the more alpha types got in the ring together, so when they did it usually drew attention.

“Get him Ricochet!”

“Take that fucker down!”

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“Finally got someone who can get out of your fucking anaconda arms, huh Dane?”

All of the fighters in the gym, regulars and newbies, had stopped their own training to watch Rick and Dane rolling. Rick knew they were only cheering him on because so far, no one had been able to beat the Dane using submission techniques. The man was lethal on the ground.

Smiling behind his mouth guard, Rick motioned for Dane to come and get him, holding up his hand and curling his fingers back towards himself.

Dane’s eyes lit up with perverse delight at the taunting. He wiped his brow with the back of his arm and edged closer. Rick jumped back, egging his friend on once more with a quick gesture, knowing that Dane would allow himself to be baited into a bad decision. Dane leapt at Rick again, but this time, Rick hopped to the side, swiftly wrapping his arms around the other man’s waist. Using his own weight to aid him, Rick fell to the ground, pulling Dane with him, and was able to slide his legs around Dane’s neck. The big man thrashed, shoving at Rick’s torso. Rick grabbed Dane’s arm and went for the high arm lock.

“Go, go, go!”

“Holy shit, Rick’s got him!”

Dane kept his arm in constant motion so Rick couldn’t grab onto it. He eventually weaseled his way out of the hold, rolling across the mat out of Rick’s reach. Both men immediately jumped to their feet once more, their bare chests heaving.

“Awwww, damn! Thought Ricochet had you, Nolan!”

Rick was about to attack Dane again when he heard Xavier speaking in the background. “Quinn, you sure you’re okay to be here?”

Concerned, his eyes immediately sought out Quinn. That brief moment of lost focus gave Dane the opening he needed. Before Rick knew it, he was on the ground in a reverse arm lock, his shoulder and elbow joints screaming in protest. Knowing he wasn’t getting out of the hold anytime soon, and suddenly desperate to make sure Quinn was okay, Rick tapped Dane’s wrist in defeat.

Boos and grunts of displeasure carried across the gym. The disappointed onlookers dispersed when they realized the show was over.

“You stupid fucker,” Rick gasped after spitting out his mouth guard. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

Dane smiled, tapping the side of his head. “That’s the point, Ricochet. Never lose focus.”

“I hate you.”

The big blonde man grinned and left the ring. Getting to his feet slowly, Rick followed with a grimace, shaking out the arm that had been pinned. He crossed over to where Quinn stood with an indecipherable look on her face.

Shit, what’s going on?

Quinn had been recuperating in her apartment, not leaving it in the two weeks since she was discharged fr

om her weeklong hospital stay. Most of her injuries had been superficial, but a concussion and fractured cheekbone had kept her from coming home right away. Rick hated leaving her alone, but he had to continue working. Mack promised not to send him on any missions until she was fully healed, which, from the looks of things, could be any day now.

“Hey,” he said calmly. “Why aren’t you resting?” Rick put his hands on her shoulders, gently massaging her arms.

Quinn’s eyes grew large and went to his gloved hands.

Fuck, she hates fighting. Now I know why she looks freaked out.

Rick yanked his hands away and took a step back. “I didn’t mean for you to see me fight, Quinn. I’m sorry.”

To his surprise, Quinn stepped forward, closing the distance Rick had put between them. He watched as she hesitantly lifted her arms, placing her hands on his sweat-slicked chest. Her eyes met his and his breath left in a sharp huff. The fear he had expected to see wasn’t there. No... Quinn’s eyes were dark and glistening with lust.

“I didn’t know that watching you fight would be so comforting. It makes me feel safe, and... turned on,” she murmured. Rick shivered as her hands ran down his torso, moving over each defined muscle until they were resting on either side of his waist.

“Turned on?” Rick swallowed, barely able to speak with Quinn touching him like that. She was only just about healed from the attack. He figured it would be months, if not longer before she’d be interested in pursuing anything physical.

“Yes, turned on.” Quinn’s fingers dug into Rick’s waist, her thumbs making small circles on the ‘v’ shaped ridges of his lower abs. Scorching waves of pleasure rippled

down his spine, instantly making his cock come to life.

“Jesus,” he muttered softly. Using every last bit of willpower he had, Rick captured Quinn’s wrists, removing her hands from his body. “Not here, doll.” He glanced around, but none of the other fighters were looking their way. Still, he’d kill them if they saw the lust in Quinn’s eyes. That was for him, and him alone.

Quinn pouted, crossing her arms and glaring like a kid denied her favorite candy.

He couldn’t help himself. The sight of this tiny thing trying to look intimidating was funny. Rick laughed. “You’re too much, doll.” The corner of her mouth twitched up—it was just a hint of a smile, but it made Rick’s day. Quinn hadn’t smiled once since his team rescued her. Seeing some of her personality coming back flooded him with emotion. “Let’s go. Unless... did you come down here for something?”

“No. I was just bored.” Her eyes darted around the large room, taking in the different fighters training. “I wanted to...”

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Rick waited for her to finish her thought, but she didn't. "Quinn?" He reached over and nudged her chin with his gloved hands, bringing her face up so he could see it.

Her cheeks flushed red. "I wanted to keep training with Xavier. I thought... I mean, I know I wasn't able to get away from Travis, but maybe... forget it. It's stupid."

"No. It's not stupid. It's a great idea." He kept his eyes steady on hers. "When you're fully healed. Okay?" How Quinn thought she was going to train when her body was still healing from being so broken, he didn't know. But he would help her feel confident in defending herself, even if it took a lifetime for her to get to that point.

Quinn nodded that she understood. Rick let go of her chin, quickly shed his gear, and threw on a shirt. "I'm done for today. Let's go."

He slung an arm around her shoulders, hugging her to his side. Rick loved how perfectly she fit under his arm. She was small enough to tuck right up against him. When she wrapped her arm around his waist to help keep her balance as they walked, he smiled like an idiot, ignoring the 'you're so whipped' smirks his teammates were throwing his way.

Once they were in her apartment, Rick caught Quinn staring at him again with that look. The one that made his body react instantly, as if she lit a match and tossed it into a can of gasoline. She leaned into him, pressing her breasts against him, grinding her lower body into his groin. Man, when she wanted something, he had a hell of a time denying her. How could he when she rubbed her hot body all over his?

A bolt of lust zinged through Rick from the heady contact. He hissed, the air leaving

his lungs sharply. “No doll. You’re not well enough yet.” Rick tried to pry Quinn off of him, but she held on tight and he felt his willpower crumbling. Most of her bruising was gone, only a few tender spots remained, but he still felt like he was taking advantage.

“I need you, Rick. Please?” She nuzzled the sensitive spot where his neck met his shoulder, her hot breath caressing his skin. When he felt her small tongue swipe at the corded tendons, then her teeth nibble on them, his resolve weakened further.

“Don’t do this to me, doll. It’s not right. You need to heal.” Rick was damn near panting now, straining from the effort it took to hold back. The urge to thrust his pelvis forward to get more of that friction on his cock was overwhelming.

When her hand snaked down to palm his erection through his thin nylon shorts, he was done. Game over. Rick dropped his head to capture Quinn’s mouth, groaning when she opened to him. She wound her arms around his neck, threading her fingers in the too-long hair that curled at the ends over his neck and ears. Quinn tugged on it, sending a series of sparks straight to his dick.

Rick tore his mouth away, his breath quick and heavy. “Are you sure?”

She pulled his head down for another long kiss. “Yes.”

He grabbed her hand and spun around, towing her towards the bedroom. Quinn tried to slow down as they neared the bed but Rick kept going, pulling her along. He didn’t stop until they were in the bathroom where let go of her hand only to reach into the glass enclosure to start the shower.

Rick quickly shed his fight shorts and shirt. Next, he turned to pull Quinn’s loose T-shirt up over her head. He winced when he caught sight of a faded bruise that remained along her ribcage, fury boiling inside him, clawing to be let out to extract

his pound of flesh from Travis Hardy. Knowing she was still somewhat sore, Rick helped Quinn remove her shorts and panties, lowering them down her legs as she stepped out of them.

After checking the temperature of the water, he let Quinn get in the shower first, following behind and shutting the glass door.

“Mmmmm, feels so good.” Quinn was standing under the hot spray, letting the water run over her head and down her body.

“Turn around.” Rick poured a handful of shampoo and gently washed Quinn’s hair, giving her a thorough scalp massage before rinsing out the foam.

She faced him, a blissed out look in her eyes. “Your turn.”

Instead of turning away, Rick bent over at the waist so Quinn could reach his head without stretching her tender muscles. He groaned at the feel of her nails scratching his scalp. His already hard cock got impossibly harder watching her breasts bounce at eye level while she lathered his hair.

“Jesus.”

“What Rick?”

“Nothing. Just... you. You’re amazing.”

Quinn pulled her hands back, washing them under the spray. “Rinse.”

They switched places, Rick letting the foam run down his body and into the drain. Quinn was watching the soap stream over his slick skin, her face and neck flushing with desire. His dick was so hard he thought he might pass out if he didn’t do

something about it. When Quinn's roving gaze landed on his stiff cock and she licked her lips, he knew he'd do whatever she asked.

Quinn was mesmerized by Rick's gorgeous body. Every muscle, every roped tendon, every inch of wet skin was perfect... masculine... addictive.

Yes—her body still ached from Travis' hands. Yes—she still woke up each night sweating and scared. But Quinn refused to let Travis ruin this for her too, ruin her amazing physical relationship with Rick. She desired him, and didn't want Rick to treat her as fragile and untouchable forever.

Quinn gripped Rick's blushing cock, sliding her tight fist up and down the smooth shaft. She felt Rick shudder as his head fell back, his hips thrusting into her hand as she jacked him. Without warning, Rick pounced, his mouth landing on hers, his hands slapping against the tile wall on either side of her head, startling her. Rick nipped at her lips, biting and licking and teasing her. Then he grabbed her face with both hands and devoured her mouth, fucking her with his hot tongue as she worked his cock faster and faster.

"God... don't stop." Rick's breath hitched as he hissed against her lips. "Ahhhh. Fuck. Yes!" Quinn felt Rick's hips thrust hard and his release coated her hands and stomach, splashing her before it was whisked away by the shower spray.

Quinn giggled at Rick's dazed look. "You can hardly stay on your feet," she laughed when he swayed like a drunkard.

He gave her one of his perfect, white smiles. "It's your fault, doll. If you weren't so intoxicating, I wouldn't be so affected."

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She gasped when he recovered and focused his piercing aqua-colored eyes on her. Gently, he pushed her back until she was flat against the tiles. “Wha—”

Quinn didn’t get a chance to finish her question. Rick dropped to his knees, parted her thighs with his large hands, and thrust his tongue between her legs.

“Holy—oh my god.” She threw her head back and moaned.

Pleasure radiated from every nerve in her body. When her muscles tensed up, Quinn felt a distant twinge of pain, but the ecstasy overrode everything else.

“Fuck you taste so good.” Rick growled and continued with his wicked tongue-lashing.

Her hands found the top of his head, holding on tight for support or else she’d fall to the floor. The hot water rained on them, streams running down their skin. Quinn tried to keep her eyes open, but couldn’t, it was too much.

A shudder rippled over her, her entire body stiffening. Rick must have felt it because he murmured against her hot flesh. “Come for me, doll.”

The ache in her still-healing body multiplied as the orgasm tore through her, causing Quinn to make a strangled sound at the pain/pleasure sensation.

“Fuck! You’re hurting, aren

’t you?” Rick immediately stood up, clutching her still trembling figure to his chest.

“Damn it. I knew it was too soon. I shouldn’t have—”

“Shhhhh.” Quinn didn’t want to hear Rick’s apologies. “I’m fine, Rick. Really. Just a little sore, that’s all. I feel fantastic, in fact. Better than I have in a while.”

She felt the pressure from his fingers increase on her back and knew he was stifling the urge to vocalize how upset he was.

Good, because he’ll kill my post-orgasm buzz if he starts giving himself or me a guilt trip.

Rick reached over to turn off the water. Quietly, he handed Quinn a towel, wrapping it around her shoulders. He silently grabbed his own and stepped out of the enclosure, storming off to the bedroom to dress.

Great. My buzz has officially been killed.

Hurrying, Quinn threw on a pair of panties and a tank top before following Rick into the bedroom. He was sitting on the edge of her bed wearing only a pair of briefs, elbows on his knees with his head hanging down.

As long as he’s already overemotional, Quinn figured she could finally have a discussion she’d been putting off, afraid of his reaction. She curled up behind him on the bed, laying her cheek on his strong, broad back. Her hand roved over the corded muscles, lower and lower until she found what she was looking for. Quinn circled her fingertip over the puckered pink scar on Rick’s lower back.

“Why don’t you tell me how this really happened?”

Rick’s head snapped up, twisting around to make eye contact. “I told you.”

“Yeah, fell on a free weight. I know.” Her hand drifted around to the front of Rick’s body, finding the same scar on his abdomen. “My dad was in the Marines, remember?”

She felt his muscles twitch. “Yes. I remember.”

“I know what this is, Rick.” Quinn slid off the bed and sat straddling his lap, face to face. Her palms caressed over his chest and she looked into his eyes. “My dad had several just like it. Desert Storm. I guess they don’t always ricochet, huh?” Her laugh was as weak as her joke.

Quinn watched as Rick screwed his eyes shut, as if he were in pain at the thought of her knowing the truth. “I’m sorry I lied to you.” He sighed, resigned to the fact that his lie fell apart.

“You don’t have to be sorry. I’m just... it scares me that someone shot you, Rick. Why?” Even my superhero isn’t invincible.

“I can’t tell you. Not without talking to Mack first.”

“Mack? Mack didn’t shoot you...” Horror crept over her skin. “Did he?”

“What? No! Mack didn’t shoot me.” Rick laughed, but it sounded slightly off, probably from the stress of everything that had happened in the last few months.

“Oh.” Now Quinn felt stupid for suggesting it. Of course Mack didn’t shoot Rick. “I have so many questions, Rick.”

He wrapped his arms around her back, hugging her closely, but gently to his body. She never felt as safe as she did in Rick’s arms. Her fears melted into the background until she could almost feel normal.

Normal. What's that?

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Rick tensed up, waiting for Quinn to ask her questions. Questions he couldn't answer. He wouldn't reveal Mack's secret— the business hidden behind the façade of a training facility. Not without Mack's blessing first.

“How did you find me at my dad's?”

That's an easy one. And one I already answered.

“I told you in the hospital, doll.”

“Mack told you my dad had a house on the lake, so you went to check it out on a hunch. Just... where was Travis? Did you see him?”

Rick's heart plunged into his stomach. He really didn't want to have this conversation. His body tensed when he heard that bastard's name.

“No, I didn't see him. Doll, I told you all this already. Don't you remember our conversation?”

“I know you did. I had a head injury so my memory is fuzzy. It ... it feels like I don't know everything that happened. Can you humor me, please?” Quinn bit her lip, obviously struggling with her next question.

“Just ask, Quinn. What do you want to know?”

Her small frame began to shake on his lap. Rick could feel the tremors as he held her. “Where is he now?” she whispered.

“I don’t know.” Rick admitted. Defeated, he began rubbing his hands up and down Quinn’s back as he tried to give her reassurance. “He wasn’t there and he didn’t show up.” Tucker had tried finding the man, but he had disappeared into thin air.

All I know is that he’s not back in Texas, which means he’s either coming back to try again or he knows he’s being watched. My bet is that the idiot isn’t leaving Georgia without Quinn.

“What if he comes for me?”

That was the million-dollar question.

“He won’t get near you, Quinn. I won’t allow it.”

She snuggled in closer, making herself even smaller as if that were possible. Rick wanted to kill that motherfucker for what he did to Quinn. If Travis were to come anywhere near the gym or his girl, Rick had no problem putting a bullet right between his eyes.

“But—”

“No. It’s not healthy for you to stress out thinking about that asshole. I’ve got it covered. He. Will. Not. Get. You. Not without going through me.”

Rick pulled back so Quinn could see that he was serious.

Another shudder wracked her body, but she nodded dutifully, putting her faith in Rick and his ability to protect her.

I won’t fail you, doll. If I have to kill him with my bare hands, I will.

He rocked her back and forth, knowing that as safe as he could make her feel, he still couldn't erase the memories of what she already suffered. And that was the most frustrating part of this whole fucked up scenario.

Rick entered Sanctum the next day, clasping Quinn's hand in his. He didn't want her left alone, and she seemed somewhat better when they were together, so it worked out perfectly. Except for days like today, when he had a meeting with Mack.

"I don't need a babysitter, Rick."

They had been over this again and again. "Quinn, please, not today, doll. Humor me and stay nearby."

He took her silence as a grudging consent, so he left it at that.

Rick dug in his pocket, removing his key card, giving her a sharp look that dared her to argue with him. They passed the empty front desk to enter the main area of the gym. He swiped his card and held the door open for her to pass through first.

"Rick! Quinn! Good to see you."

Clint stood next to one of the treadmills. He was wiping his face and chest with a towel before he shrugged on a threadbare T-shirt.

"Hi Clint." Quinn gave him a peck on the cheek.

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“Hey stud.” Rick shook hands with his friend, who rolled his eyes at Rick’s ridiculous nickname.

Clint looked back and forth between Rick and Quinn. “You here for the meeting with Mack?” he asked Rick.

“Yes. Quinn is going to hang out in here until we’re done.” He heard her huff of annoyance and ignored it. She would just have to get used to him watching out for her. Rick spotted Xavier on the far end of the room, covering his fingers and wrists with bright yellow hand wraps. “Xav!” Rick left Quinn with Clint to jog over to where Xavier was sitting.

“What’s up, Ricochet?” He didn’t stop wrapping as he spoke.

“I have a meeting with Clint and Mack about that asshole ex of Quinn’s. She’s going to sit in here or hang in the break room. Is that okay?”

Xav looked up at him. “Yeah man. My new trainee, Devin should be here soon. We’re supposed to spar.”

Rick frowned. Quinn wouldn’t want to watch the men fight but he had no choice. “Don’t mind her then. She’s been real jumpy since... you know... so don’t make any sudden movements or act weird.”

Xavier stood and punched Rick’s shoulder—hard. “Shut the fuck up, Rick. I’ve been training the girl for months. I know how to act around her.” Rick could see the

insult on Xavier's face.

"Alright, fine. Just keep an eye out, that's all. She doesn't want to be here, but it makes me feel better."

"You got it."

Rick turned and walked back to where Clint and Quinn were discussing something about Mara, a new cocktail she invented, and the aftermath the next day. Quinn was laughing, a wide smile on her face. It took Rick's breath away to see her happy again. After what she suffered through, he didn't think it would happen again for a long time.

"Okay doll. Clint and I have to go meet with Mack. We'll be in the conference room. You're good here, right?"

"Yes. I'm fine. Go. Work. You've missed too much as it is." She tried to physically push Rick towards the hall, but he was too big for her to maneuver.

Rick snickered at her attempt to manhandle him. "You're adorable." He bent over and stole a quick kiss. Then another. "See you in a little while." He lingered, not wanting to leave her side after spending nearly every minute together for three straight weeks.

"Go!" Quinn said, exasperated at his stalling.

"Stay here," he said one last time. She rolled her eyes, making him grin.

"C'mon lover boy." Clint grabbed Rick's arm and yanked him down the hall. "See you later Quinn!" he called out over his shoulder.

“Bye Clint!”

Rick tugged his arm out of Clint’s grasp. “I can walk, stud.”

“Uh-huh. Maybe in between making lovey-eyes with Quinn.”

Faking annoyance, Rick shoved Clint through the conference room door. Clint hit the table, nearly upending it with his massive height and weight. Taking up the challenge, he lunged for Rick, who ducked out of the way just in time.

“Are you two done?”

Both men turned towards their boss, huge grins on their faces. Rick couldn’t believe how good it felt to act normal again, laughing and joking around. Then he noticed the file on the table in front of Mack, with a photo of Travis Hardy on top, and his good mood evaporated instantly.

“Yeah chief. I’m ready.”

Rick dropped into the chair next to Mack. Clint took the seat opposite, on Mack’s other side.

“What’s the plan, Mack?” Clint took his copy of the file, opening it up and riffling through the pages.

“That’s what we’re here for,” Mack said, making eye contact with Rick, “to make a plan.”

The three men exchanged glances.

Clint spoke first. “Let’s nail this fucker.”

“I’ll show it to you again, alright?”

Quinn watched intently as Xavier grabbed the other fighter’s arm, pretended to knee him in the stomach, and shoved him to the ground in one smooth move.

He stopped and focused his dark eyes on Quinn. She shivered at the sheer power of the tall, muscular man. “Think you got it?”

The other fighter, a guy named Devin that showed up a few minutes ago for a session with Xavier, stood up and smiled.

“I think so.” Quinn nodded.

“Here, come try.” She felt her pulse begin to flutter rapidly, unable to control the anxiety that raced through her when confronted with her worst fears. Facing down a large, dangerous man. Quinn licked her lips nervously, but forced her feet to move forward.

Gently, Xavier coaxed her over to stand in front of the other fighter. “Right here, okay?” He maneuvered Quinn so she was standing just inches from Devin. His presence was intimidating, but he was smaller than Xavier and Rick, and he was smiling kindly at her. It was hard to be afraid when he seemed so nice.

Quinn swallowed loudly, sure that both men could hear it.

“Devin is going to pretend to grab you. You do the moves. Don’t worry about hurting him, he’s tougher than he acts even though he’s just a big softie.”

That actually made Quinn laugh, because Devin seemed pretty tough. The young fighter smirked, looking away as his cheeks turned red.

He's blushing? Wow. He really is a big softie.

The fact that this big, scary looking guy could be embarrassed gave her the confidence she needed. Quinn stood up tall, her muscles tense and ready for the attack.

Xavier backed up a few steps. "Go!"

Devin pretended to grab at Quinn. She reacted, pulling his arm down so his abdomen met with her uplifted knee. Then she imitated kicking him in the balls and shoving the heel of her hand in his face.

"Great!" Xavier was clapping, his grin wide and radiant.

"That was awesome." Devin smiled down at her, clearly impressed that such a tiny woman could attempt to fight him.

"Thanks. I had a good teacher." She glanced over at Xavier as he beamed like a proud parent.

"Nah, she's a fast learner. You just need to keep up your skills so you don't lose them. We can set up regular times again once you're feeling better."

Quinn frowned. She didn't want to think about what had happened with Travis. The reminders, especially the way Rick hovered over her, were sometimes overwhelming.

"We're going to spar in the cage now. Will you be okay?"

She woke from her daydream to find both men staring at her. “Yeah, I’m fine.” Suddenly, she felt suffocated. There were too many eyes on her all the time, reminding her of the horrors she suffered through. Every pity filled look, whether they realized it or not, brought her back to her father’s house, back under Travis’ cruel fists.

“I’m just going to grab a book from my apartment. I’ll be right back.” She said it quietly, so they wouldn’t stop her. Quinn had to get out of here before a full-out panic attack started. A bead of sweat was forming between her shoulder blades and her breath was becoming too fast. Quinn glanced over at the two men, who were busy getting ready for the ring, not paying her any attention.

As she ducked out, she heard Xavier telling Devin, “We’ll start with some kicks, okay?”

Freaking out, she sprinted out the door, through the lobby, and burst out into the warm sunshine. Quinn took several deep breaths, trying to clear her head of her demons.

Will I ever be able to forget? Or not panic from my thoughts?

At this point, she didn’t think she would.

“Well, it’s not much of a plan,” Rick said, leaning back in his chair.

“What do you expect, Rick? We have no idea where the man is.” Clint glared at the photo in his hand as he spoke. “Bastard fell off the face of the earth.”

Rick smiled, a wicked sense of satisfaction building in his mind. “What’s the chance that he went and offed himself, saving us the effort?”

Mack grunted. “None. Men like him don’t commit suicide. Not unless they’re taking out the one they blame their misery on at the same time.”

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A chill swept up Rick's spine, making the fine hairs on his neck stand up. "You mean a murder/suicide? And Quinn, right?"

Neither man said a word as Rick flicked his gaze back and forth between them. "You think he'll come back to kill her. That's what you're saying?" Distressed, Rick balled up a piece of paper from his file, squeezing it in his hand.

"It's the most likely scenario, and you know it, Rick," Clint said. "She escaped from his abuse, then slipped out of his grasp again. He wants revenge, and it's clear who he blames for his unhappiness."

"He blames Quinn for his unhappiness!" Rick shoved his chair back, shouting in disbelief. "The man kept her prisoner in her own home for two years! She was raped and beaten on a regular basis—by her husband! And he fucking blames her?"

"Calm down, Rick." Mack's sharp tone made Rick snap his head in his boss's direction.

Rick slapped his hands on the table top, glaring at his boss—more than a boss. Mack was a friend, and a good one. "I'll fucking calm down when he's dead and buried, preferably by my hand."

"Maybe you'll get your chance, Ricochet," Clint said as he stood to leave the room. "We can only hope."

Rick watched the big man exit and turned back to Mack, who was scratching the grey stubble on his chin thoughtfully. "I want to speak to Tucker about what he's found so

far. Is he in Mission Control today?"

"No. We don't have any active ops right now, so he's working remotely only as needed." Mack continued to rub his beard. Rick got the impression that the man was doing some hard thinking.

"In that case, I'm going to head in there and do a few searches. That alright with you, chief?" Rick was eager to get into Mission Control without Tucker hanging over his shoulder.

Mack didn't respond.

"Chief?"

Finally, the older man dismissed Rick with a wave of his hand, never looking his way. "Go ahead." Rick's brow wrinkled up at Mack's inattention.

"Alright then," he whispered to himself as he punched in the code to open up the secure door.

Rick settled himself down in Tucker's big comfy chair, logging into the system with his password. He began his virtual hunt for Travis Hardy, his fingers tapping on the keyboard. "Where are you, you sick mother fucker?"

As he typed, he imagined putting a bullet between the man's eyes and smiled.

Quinn put the empty glass of water in her sink and braced her hands on the countertop, gently rolling her head back and forth. Her neck cracked loudly. The constant tension in her muscles was beginning to give her a pounding headache.

She spied the bottle of painkillers the doctor gave her when she left the hospital, but

decided she could go without for now. Pain pills weren't the answer. What she needed was to know that Travis was behind bars. Until then, Quinn was positive that she wouldn't ever be able to fully relax.

It took another minute for Quinn to grab a paperback off of her nightstand and hurry back to the door. She didn't want to show up without it after using it as her excuse to leave the gym.

Can't let them know I came up here to freak out.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped out.

Bright sunshine made Quinn squint as sh

e made her way down the stairs to the parking lot of Sanctum. It was still early in the morning, but already very warm out. She sighed, another boiling hot day in Atlanta.

Traffic was thick on the main road in front of the gym, morning rush hour in full swing. Already perspiring along her hairline, Quinn wasn't sure if she was sweating from the heat or from her constant case of nerves. Double-timing it, she hurried around the building towards the front, already craving sitting in the air-conditioned break room with her book.

She paid no attention to the car that pulled into the lot until it stopped right in front of her, blocking her path to the front of the gym. The driver's side door flew open and a man jumped out, reaching for her.

It happened fast, yet each image that flashed by seemed to make time slow down. Quinn wasn't sure if she was imagining the scene or if it was real life. What she was sure of was that the man lunging for her, a murderous look in his eyes so chilling that she felt it to her bones, was her husband.

As his hands gripped her waist, he snarled in anger. Reacting without thinking, Quinn grabbed his shoulders and yanked down, raising her knee at the same time. The impact knocked the wind out of him with a loud whoosh of air from his lungs. Before he could recover, she landed a sharp kick to his groin.

A strangled sound came from Travis' throat. He managed to gather just enough strength to swing his arm, knocking her feet out from under her. Quinn hit the pavement hard and began to scramble to her feet, desperate to reach the safety of the gym... and Rick.

As she lifted herself to a standing position, a hand clamped around her ankle and began dragging her towards the car, pulling her back to the ground.

She screamed, scratching and clawing at the asphalt, her nails and fingers becoming scraped and bloody.

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He won't give up. He'll never stop.

Quinn wondered if Rick would survive if she disappeared again.

Chapter 6

Nothing. There was absolutely no activity by Travis Hardy since he rented the car to abduct Quinn. No bank transactions, no debit cards used... the man fucking vanished.

Tapping into government facial recognition programs, Rick began the very slow process of checking various cameras near the gym for a match. Unfortunately, they didn't have a recent photo of Travis to scan. Only his old DMV photo, one without the alterations Quinn had made to his face.

Rick pulled up the grainy photo Tucker had isolated from a security camera near where Hardy took Quinn. It wasn't good enough to use in the facial recognition program, but it was good enough to make Rick smile. It was obvious, even with the poor quality of the image, that something was wrong with his face. He wasn't sure what, and wasn't about to ask Quinn no matter how badly he wanted to know. Upsetting her for information was the last thing he would do at this point.

In his peripheral vision, Rick spotted movement on one of the screens. He jumped to his feet, staring incredulously at the security camera live feed.

"Fuck!"

Rick thrust his hand under the desk, pulling a nine-millimeter Glock out of a holster

mounted beneath the solid surface, knowing a round was already chambered.

Goddamn it! I should be carrying my own weapons at all times!

He cursed himself for his poor planning, and for leaving Quinn alone. Fucking Xavier!

Rick raced through the gym, barreling out the front door. Sprinting across the parking lot towards the woman he loved, he saw Travis trying to drag a kicking and screaming Quinn into his car. As much as he wanted to drop to one knee and shoot the fucker between the eyes, he couldn't. Not with Quinn thrashing in his line of sight.

“Rick!”

He caught the fear in her wide eyes. Her desperate plea had him running as fast as he could, praying he would get the chance to kill that sick fuck. As he just about reached them, Travis looked up and their eyes met. The man's disfigured face surprised him, but it was his eyes that caught his attention. Rick had seen that look before, the look of someone who was completely unhinged... desperate, vicious, and completely without remorse.

Travis must have known he didn't have time to get Quinn in the car, so he let go of his hold and jumped into the driver's seat. He slammed the door shut, speeding out of the lot as Quinn flung herself into Rick's arms, preventing him from getting a shot off.

“Goddamn it!” Rick lowered his weapon, the car already merging in with traffic. He couldn't fire his weapon at a car in the middle of downtown rush hour. “Fuuuuck!”

Rick wanted to pull his own hair out for missing what could have been his only

chance to get Travis. Though the thought was short-lived, his attention redirected as Quinn clung to him, her body heaving as she sobbed into his shirt. He tucked the Glock into the back of his waistband and scooped her up into his arms. The fury radiating through him was palpable as he carried her into the building. He didn't stop as he walked through the gym and Xavier yelled to him, or when he passed Mack's office and heard his boss ask what happened. Rick didn't stop until he reached the conference room, where he sat on one of the large leather chairs with Quinn cradled in his lap.

"Shhhhh, baby. You're okay doll. I'm sorry, so sorry." He spoke softly into her ear as he held her, his shirt balled up in her torn and ragged fingers. He felt like a monumental failure.

I'm a fucking trained Force Recon Marine with an army of paid mercenaries and I can't stop one fuckwit sheriff's deputy from assaulting my girl.

Rick continued to pet Quinn's hair as she wept, his heart breaking a little more with each quiet sob. By the time she cried herself out, the conference room had filled up with the men of Sanctum, each looking angry, determined, and fully dressed in their combat gear.

Mack entered the room last, taking the seat at the head of the table.

They're going to have a meeting now? With Quinn here?

"Mack." Rick gestured with his chin to Quinn, who was still curled up on his lap, her face buried into his chest.

"Rick, I could give a shit less if she knows. At this point, she needs to know that we have her covered and it will be easier if she understands the full extent of what we do here." Mack's unwavering scowl met the eyes of each man in the room.

“What’s going on?” Quinn lifted her head and startled when she noticed the roomful of irate, heavily armed men.

Rick watched Quinn carefully as she scanned the room, her eyes wide and her mouth open in shock. She burrowed a little closer to Rick, whispering softly. “What’s going on? I don’t understand.”

“You’re okay. I think Mack is going to explain everything, doll.” Rick kissed the top of her head, keeping his protective arms around her, shielding her from anything and anyone who dared to upset her.

Mack stood up and spoke, his voice commanding and firm. Rick was brought back to the Marines, in boot camp, when Mack ruled his every thought and action.

“Quinn, this isn’t how I intended for you to find out what we do here, but this is an unusual situation.” Mack paused, his expression softening when his steely gaze found Quinn. “We aren’t just an ordinary training facility.”

“You’re not?”

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Rick was surprised Quinn was able to find her voice. With the trauma that just occurred in the parking lot and the table full of armed, angry and powerful men.

“Am I late?” Tucker burst through the door, wearing jeans and a T-shirt and looking generally disheveled, as usual. He ran a hand through his messy brown hair before throwing his bag onto an empty chair.

“No, we just started,” Clint said.

“Great. I’ll go into Mission Control and listen in on the Bluetooth so I can get logged in.” Tucker scooped up his things and disappeared back out the door.

Quinn rubbed her forehead, looking dazed. Rick noticed her hands were still raw and bleeding. “Dane—” He nodded his chin towards her fingers.

“I gotcha, Ricochet.” Dane leapt to his feet and hurried out, returning less than a minute later with a first aid kit.

He sat next to Rick and began gently cleaning Quinn up while Mack continued the meeting.

“So, as I was saying, the gym is a front for our real business, Quinn.”

She hissed as Dane rubbed something over her fingers, wincing in pain.

“You asshole!” Rick barked, feeling so territorial and agitated that he wanted to punch Dane right in the head for hurting her.

“Rick, I’m okay. He has to clean me up.”

Dane stared at Rick, waiting for permission to resume the first aid.

“Fine,” Rick snarled.

“Are you done, Rick? Can we get this show on the road before we lose the asshole?”
Xavier snapped from across the table.

“Fuck you, Xav. You were supposed to be looking out for her!” If Quinn hadn’t been sitting on his lap, Rick would have flown across the table and bashed his friend’s face in.

“Fuck off, Ricochet! You think I don’t feel bad?” Xavier began to rise from his chair, his fists balled in fury. Ben Price put his hand on Xav’s shoulder, keeping him from getting up.

“Stop! Look what you’re doing to her!” Clint was yelling from his spot next to Mack.

Six pairs of eyes swung towards Quinn. Rick could feel her shaking, her face burrowed back into his chest again as Dane held onto one of her filthy hands.

Fuck, I have got to calm down.

“Enough!” Mack yelled, staring down each one of his men. The room immediately became silent. He lowered his voice to speak calmly. “Quinn, look at me please.”

It seemed even Quinn couldn’t resist obeying Mack’s orders. The man was a born leader. Slowly, she raised her head until her tear-streaked face was tilted towards the older man.

“We’re covert operatives, Quinn. Hired mercenaries. We mostly do work for the U.S. government. Do you know what that means?”

Quinn’s mouth opened and closed several times before she spoke. “Yes, I think so.”

“Good. Every man at this table is a highly trained, combat soldier. Now that you know, you can rest assured that we will protect you from your ex-husband, at all costs. Do you understand?” Mack’s leaned over the table, his weathered face looking weary but determined.

“Soldiers? So, you’re not fighters?”

Ben laughed. “We are, Quinn. We happen to be excellent fighters, but Mack recruited us for our military skills.”

“Oh.” Rick felt Quinn slump back onto his lap, most likely too dazed to ask any more questions. Dane put the first aid kit away, done wrapping her fingers up in soft gauze. “That explains the bullet wound,” she whispered.

“Now, we need a plan.” Mack sat back down. “Quinn, with you aware of the full extent of our capabilities, we don’t have to sneak around behind your back. What I’m saying is, we can without a doubt, stop your ex from ever getting near you again.”

Quinn couldn’t believe what was happening.

I’m going to wake up, and this will all have been a dream. Travis didn’t find me, Rick didn’t come out of the gym with a loaded gun, and my father’s oldest friend doesn’t run a secret mercenary for hire operation.

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She ran her eyes over every man in Sanctum's conference room. Ben Price, the kind, unassuming man, was dressed from head to toe in black, looking like some kind of lethal ninja. Clint, her best friend's husband, was agitated and angry, the tight white T-shirt he had on overshadowed by the leather double shoulder holster strapped around him. The shiny black and chrome grips of two very large handguns were clearly visible under his bulky biceps.

As she continued around the table, she noticed every man in similar gear—armed, ready, and most definitely willing to do battle for her. She felt like the only human standing on the top of Mount Olympus, surrounded by gods with innumerable powers.

"I'm..." she rubbed her head, feeling dizzy. "I—I..." Quinn jumped to her feet. "I need a minute." She dashed out of the room and across the hall. Grabbing a bottle of water out of the break room fridge, Quinn chugged half of it while standing in front of the open refrigerator.

This is too much. A man I've known my whole life... Clint, Rick... they kill people for a living.

Quinn's heart sped up and panic flooded her body. The reality of everything hit her. Her husband wants to kill her, her boyfriend wants to kill her husband, her dad's oldest friend runs illegal covert operations... what next? She bent over, putting her hands on her knees and letting her head hang as she caught her breath.

Someone entered the room, closing the door. She felt him come up alongside her, knowing it was Rick just by listening to the way he moved and catching a whiff of his

masculine scent.

“Quinn...” He leaned on the counter next to her, gently rubbing her back.

“I can’t, Rick. I can’t sit in there right now. I need time to think.”

“I understand.” He took her arm and pulled her upright, hugging her to his broad chest. She felt calmer instantly, safe in his familiar hold. Rick’s heartbeat was steady and strong in her ear. His presence may be intimidating to others, and he may have killed a lot of people, but for Quinn he was a balm for her shredded psyche.

“I’ll take you upstairs and get caught up with the guys later. Wait here and let me tell Mack.” She nodded. “I won’t let him get you again, doll. You did great out there, fighting him off.” He leaned down and gave her a soft kiss, his hands coming up to cup her face. “I’ll kill him before he ever gets his hands on you again.” Rick’s eyes flashed with fury right before he pressed one more kiss to her lips, turned, and left the room.

Quinn thought about what Rick said. “I’ll kill him before he ever gets his hands on you again.” She shivered, knowing he was dead serious, and maybe that scared her just as much as Travis did.

Rick lay next to Quinn on her bed, staring at the ceiling fan as it slowly rotated.

“No.”

He twisted his head to watch Quinn as she spoke in her sleep. He was used to her nightmares, some of which came with talking— or even screaming— throughout the night. He was no stranger to them himself, having woken up dozens of times in a pool of his own sweat.

Lying on her side, facing Rick, Quinn's soft features scrunched up as if in pain.

"No!"

Her breathing became erratic, huffing out between her full lips. Just like every night for the last three weeks, Rick tried to soothe her while she slept. He couldn't stop the nightmares, or erase what horrors this innocent girl had faced, but he could try to ease her out of them when they occurred.

Rick skimmed his fingers over her hair, gently stroking the silky strands, hoping his touch would relax her.

"Stop! Stop!"

The agitation was becoming worse. Quinn fisted the sheets, clawing at them frantically.

"It's okay, doll," Rick whispered, his heart breaking for the beautiful, damaged girl he loved. "Shhhhh." His hand moved lower, caressing her arm.

"Rick."

His attention went back to her face, certain that she must have woken up to address him, but he found her eyes were still closed.

"Rick, no! Don't!"

What?

"Quinn." Rick spoke louder, hoping to ease her from the dream gradually.

“Don’t kill him. Rick, no!”

Fuck, she’s dreaming that her bastard ex killed me.

“Quinn! Doll, wake up!”

Rick was starting to lose it. It was bad enough that Quinn was abused and kidnapped by a complete psycho. She didn’t need nightmares of him being killed by the asshole on top of everything else she was suffering through.

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“No! No! Rick... don’t shoot!”

With his heart racing and his palms beginning to sweat, Rick sat up and grabbed both of Quinn’s shoulders. “Quinn, you’re dreaming, doll. Wake up!”

Startling him, Quinn’s eyes flew open and she gasped loudly, clutching at her chest. Rick waited a minute for her to get her bearings. She looked scared as shit and completely confused.

“Oh my god,” she whispered, tears shining in her eyes.

“Are you okay?”

He was hesitant to touch her. Worried he might send her over the edge if Travis was attacking her in her dream.

Quinn blinked, then threw her arms around Rick, holding back a sob. Grateful she came to him, he held on tight, quietly whispering in her ear and stroking her back.

“It’s okay. Just a dream, doll.”

She sniffed, sitting back on her heels to wipe her cheeks. “No, it was awful. I’m so confused.”

“Okay. Do you want to tell me?” Rick sat on the bed facing her. Quinn didn’t usually want to discuss the nightmares. She said it was like reliving them over again and again.

“I—I don’t know.”

It upset him that she wouldn’t meet his gaze. “You said my name.”

Her lip trembled, making him feel like shit for pushing.

“Forget it. You don’t have to tell me, Quinn.” As much as he wanted to know what happened, the last thing he wanted to do was put more stress on her.

“No, it’s just... it was so confusing. You... you were about to kill Travis. Shoot him.”

“And that confused you?”

Hell, I thought she was dreaming about that douchebag killing me, not the other way around.

“I—I don’t want you to kill Travis.”

“What?”

No. No way. There’s no way she would ask for mercy for that asshole.

Rick leapt from the bed and began pacing the room, dressed only in a pair of black briefs.

“You can’t be serious.”

He turned towards the window, his shoulders rigid as he stared out at the faint early morning light, trying to hide his anger. A muffled cry caught his attention. Spinning back to face the bed he saw Quinn with her head buried in her hands, her shoulders

shaking.

Fuck!

“Doll, no. Don’t cry. You don’t mean it. Think about it. Don’t you want that monster gone for good?”

As much as he wanted to comfort her, Rick couldn’t get past the intense, primal need to make Travis Hardy pay for what he did to Quinn.

“I d-d-don’t t-t-think so,” she wailed. “C-can’

t he j-just go to jail?”

Rick masked his fury, trying to sound calm and levelheaded when what he wanted to do was to start screaming. “Jail isn’t a guarantee, doll. There’s always a loophole for criminals to skate through. And him? Being a sheriff’s deputy? It’s likely he would get a much lighter sentence, if he were sentenced at all. There’s no documented evidence of any of your abuse. You’re the only eyewitness to your kidnapping. A jury wouldn’t convict without proof.”

“Please, Rick.” Quinn’s red-ringed eyes begged him to understand. But he didn’t. Not even close.

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“I can’t, doll. I need to do this.” Anger so deep it actually surprised him with its intensity, boiled up from somewhere deep inside his core. “You’re asking the impossible. I—” Shit, was he really going to do this now? “I didn’t want to say it like this. Damn.” He rubbed a hand down his face. “I love you, Quinn. I can’t let him hurt you again.”

Quinn flung herself off the bed and at Rick, wrapping her arms around his neck, hanging on for dear life.

“I’m begging you, Rick. I love you too. So much. Don’t become like him. I don’t know if I can stand it if you murder him.”

Exasperated, Rick unwound her arms. “It’s not murder, Quinn! He’s a fucking animal and needs to be taken out!” The significance of the declarations they just exchanged was being swept away in a ridiculous argument.

She shook her head back and forth, her eyes closed. “No. No. I can’t, Rick. I can’t be with a murderer.” Her breath was stilted, going in and out unevenly.

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Rage and resentment boiled up in his gut. This time, he couldn’t contain himself.

“I have news for you, doll... I am a murderer! I’ve killed so many people, I’ve lost count! One more piece of shit won’t change that!”

“It might not change you, Rick. But it will change me.” Quinn took a step back, looking at Rick like her heart was breaking. Unconsciously, she swiped at a tear that

ran down her cheek. “Your work isn’t the same. This is personal, not an order, not a government operation... it’s born of hate and revenge. It’s murder and you know it. I won’t look at you the same, not ever again. All I’ll see is how you took your vengeance and became the judge, jury, and executioner. I can’t love someone like that. That was Travis, using anger as his motivation to do unspeakable things, and I won’t make that mistake again.” Her words came out as a sob at the end.

An icy fear slid down Rick’s spine, spreading goose bumps all over his skin. Quinn was serious. She would leave him over this, even if she loved him. If he took revenge on that bastard, he’d lose the only woman he’d ever loved. It was unbelievably fucking unfair.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to me. I want to protect you.”

“So protect me.” More tears ran down her face as she waited for his decision. Did he lose her or lose his chance at Travis?

He huffed in incredulity, raking a hand through his hair. She had him by the balls and he despised how it felt, but no matter what he thought he couldn’t bring himself to hurt her any further. “Fine. But I’m telling you I don’t like it. It goes against everything I am.”

“No, Rick. You’re a good man. An honest man. Not a twisted psycho like Travis.” She must have caught on to the doubt he felt at her words because she reached for his hands, clasping them in hers. “Promise me, Rick. Promise you won’t kill him.”

“Christ, Quinn. I said I wouldn’t do it, alright?” He was thoroughly exasperated by this conversation.

“Promise,” she whispered, releasing his hands to lift hers up to his face, softly scraping her fingers over his day-old beard.

Ignoring every impulse, every natural instinct in his body to hunt down Travis and tear him to pieces, Rick reluctantly agreed, nearly growling out his response. “I promise.”

“Thank you.” Her hands tugged, urging him down to meet her lips. The salty tears that were trailing down her face ended up between them, the taste mingling with Quinn’s on his tongue.

He pulled back to rest his forehead on hers. “Anything for you, doll. Anything.”

Even if it means sacrificing every bit of myself to be with you.

“For the hundredth time, I don’t know where he is!”

After being interrogated about her ex by the men of Sanctum for over two hours, all Quinn wanted to do was scream and run out into the street. Five large men, minus Mack who was in his office and Tucker who was in Mission Control, were barking out question after question from their seats around the conference room table.

“Christ, he couldn’t have fucking disappeared. He’s got a house and a fucking job!” Clint’s face was bright red with anger, the veins on his neck protruding from the skin.

“Okay, let’s go back to his family and friends.”

Quinn turned to Dane, not bothering to mask her complete and utter frustration at him asking her the same question... again.

“That’s it.” She threw up her hands and shoved her chair back from the table. “I’m done. This is stupid.” Ignoring their shouts of protest, she stormed out the door, knowing that Rick would be hot on her heels.

Rick nearly knocked her over when she abruptly spun around to face him. “What? Are you going to repeat yourself over and over when you know damn well if I had any answers, I would give them to you?”

His hands flew up, palms out, to calm her down. “No. I understand you’re frustrated. I’m frustrated. Hell, everyone’s frustrated.” She watched as the tall, stunning man began scraping both hands through his dark hair, messing it up until it looked as if he just rolled out of bed.

Quinn felt the resentment leave her in a rush, having been replaced with a wave of lust for Rick’s gorgeous body. She needed an escape from this nightmare, and he provided the perfect one. Slowly, she crept forward. Rick was so consumed with his irritation that he didn’t notice her until she pressed up against him and ground her hips sensually.

“Huh? Oh.” His eyes flew up to focus on hers. Quinn watched as his pupils dilated, the black nearly eclipsing the shocking turquoise of his irises when he caught on to her advances.

“Let’s go upstairs. I need a break.” Quinn punctuated her point by sliding a hand down over Rick’s ass and giving it a squeeze.

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“Jesus...” He hissed, thrusting his hips forward to rub against Quinn’s abdomen. Abruptly, it seemed as if he came out of his lust-induced trance. Rick shook his head, blinking a few times to clear his head. “No, doll.” He took a step back. “We need to find him before he tries something else.”

Quinn put on her best pout, still holding out hope that she could lure him away for a few hours.

He threw his head back and laughed. “Oh doll. You’re so fucking adorable.” Rick gave her a quick kiss, causing her to huff when he kept it short.

“Fine. What next? Because I’m not going back in there for another round of torture.” She gestured towards the conference room, where they could hear the men arguing about different ways to track Travis down.

Rick turned towards the one room in the building that Quinn had never seen. He swiped his badge and pressed several numbers on a light up keypad next to the lock. The lock disengaged with a quiet hiss. Pulling on the heavy slab of metal, his large biceps flexing, Rick opened the door for her and smirked. “After you.”

Intrigued but nervous, Quinn glanced up at Rick to be sure he was serious before walking through the open doorway.

Holy crap, I’m in the Twilight Zone.

“Ooof!” This time, Rick actually did smash into her when she stopped short. His hands held her shoulders to keep her on her feet. “Sorry, doll. You okay?”

Quinn couldn't speak. She was overwhelmed and practically orgasming. Slowly, she spun in a circle, greedily taking in everything in the room, grinning like a kid in a candy store.

A third voice punctuated the space. "You like?"

She completed her visual exploration of the room and found Tucker, smirking at her

know

ingly from a seat in front of a wall of hi-definition screens. "I never would have pegged you for a geek, Quinn."

Her mouth gaped. "I never would have thought a place like this existed. Wow."

Tucker shrugged. "Have a seat."

"Really?" Quinn's heart started beating wildly in her chest. This was her dream, to have access to computers that had the power to tap into any network, anytime, anywhere in the world.

"Sure."

Dazed, she slid into the seat next to Tucker. He leaned over her and tapped his fingers on the keyboard in front of her.

"There, you're logged in."

"What?" She felt her eyes bugging out of her head.

"Go for it. I gave you access to our servers."

“But that’s—”

“It’s fine, Quinn. Just don’t launch any nukes or anything.”

She gaped and made a choking noise.

Tucker smirked. “Just kidding. We can’t launch nukes from here. Well... I don’t think we could, I’ve never tried.” He shrugged again and kept working.

Unsure, Quinn glanced over at Rick to see him smiling down at her. Well, okay then. Dramatically cracking her knuckles, she took full advantage of what was being served up on a silver platter.

“Jesus, doll. If I’d known that computers would get you this hot, I’d have brought you into Mission Control a long time ago.”

Rick lay on Quinn’s bed, staring at her beautiful features as he attempted to catch his breath after a smoking hot round of amazing sex. The only response he got was a small, exhausted sounding giggle. He rolled to his side and situated them both, until he was spooned around Quinn’s warm body, nudging her neck with his nose.

“You know how fucking sexy it is to watch you sit in front of all of those screens while you hack your way through layers of government firewalls? Do you?”

“I’m pretty sure you just showed me how sexy you think it is.”

Her eyes were closed, drained from all of the recent events; her psycho ex, the constant questioning by Mack’s team, the stress of having to be vigilant at all times... Frankly, Rick was shocked that she hadn’t fallen to pieces yet.

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When Quinn's breathing evened out, he gently stroked down her side and over her hip.

"You're so strong, doll. We'll get through this. I promise."

For once, Rick allowed exhaustion to overtake him, falling into a deep, dreamless sleep— no Travis, no worries, no fear of losing Quinn— tomorrow, reality would rear it's ugly head, but it could wait. Nothing would ruin this quiet, comforting time spent wrapped around the woman he loved.

"I don't fucking know what to do, Dane!"

Rick punched at the heavy bag, fresh off a training session with a fighter who needed some help with his striking.

"Jesus, Rick. That asshole could be anywhere. He could fucking be right next door and we wouldn't know it." Dane stood behind the bag as Rick pounded on it, holding it in place for him.

Spurred on by Dane's words, Rick hit the bag harder and faster until exhaustion took over. Sweat dripped into his eyes, down his chest, making a mess on the floor. Rick snatched up his towel to clean everything off.

"Let me shower and I'll meet you in Mission Control."

Even with the stress of the situation, Dane grinned. "Quinn really loves hanging out in there with Tucker. Just the two of them. Alone." He waggled his eyebrows

teasingly.

Rick shot a glare his way, his water bottle hovering an inch from his mouth. “Please, are you suggesting Quinn is interested in the big guy?” He scoffed at the thought.

“Why not?” Dane shrugged. “He’s a nerd, she’s a closet nerd... they can make little nerdy babies and live happily ever after.”

Halfway through taking a long drink, Rick sputtered and coughed, choking on his water. Dane threw his head back and laughed as his friend struggled to breathe.

“You fucking dick!” Rick punched Dane in the arm, knocking the large man sideways.

“Go shower, Ricochet. You stink.” Dane headed for the hallway. “I’ll be working with Tucker and your girl.”

Rick hurried through his shower, more determined than ever to find Quinn’s ex-husband and get him out of her life for good. He frowned, remembering that he promised Quinn he wouldn’t kill the asshat. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t permanently maim him, right? Smiling at his clever way to get around his promise, Rick threw on his clothes and left the locker room.

When Rick entered Mission Control, all hell was breaking loose. Dane was yelling into his cellphone, barking out orders to whoever was on the other end of the line. Tucker had his Bluetooth on, his hands flying over the keypad while he spoke to someone and monitored four different screens, all at the same time.

“What the—”

Rick froze when he found Quinn, standing in the back corner, her face pale and

drawn. This woman, who in such a short time had somehow become the most important thing in Rick's world, was finally falling to pieces. He quickly closed the small gap between them, pulling Quinn into the safety of his arms.

"What's happening?" When she didn't answer, he crouched down so he was level with her pale face. "Quinn?"

Wide, glistening eyes met Rick's. "They found him."

Rick immediately ushered a stunned Quinn out of the room, gently lowering her into a chair in the break room. "Wait here. I'll find out more and be right back."

Fucking son of a bitch!

Pure hatred flowed through his veins, the violent man in him bursting to be set free. Rick had to concentrate to keep his face neutral in Quinn's presence, but as soon as he left the break room... well, it was game-fucking-on.

As he turned to leave, Quinn's small hand shot out, curling around his wrist. "Remember, you promised." Her voice was soft, but firm.

His mouth pressed into a tight line, his muscles already tense and ready for action. "I remember." Rick waited for Quinn to let go before hurrying back to Mission Control.

"Where is that fucker?" He demanded the second he stalked through the door. Rick dropped into the seat next to Tucker and hooked a Bluetooth over his ear.

"He finally caved and used an ATM just outside of Atlanta," Tucker replied, never breaking his concentration as he continued scanning through images on the bank of screens spread out in front of them. "Then I got a hit with the facial recognition software. I had to alter the algorithm to find him. For some reason it couldn't pick

him out using his DMV photo.”

Dane hung up on whomever he was speaking to and acknowledged Rick. “Seems like the asshole is still local.” He gestured towards the screens Tucker had up with Travis’ grainy image frozen on them— one from an ATM camera and one from some sort of security camera. Dane pointed at the security camera photo. “That’s from outside a parking garage off Peachtree and 16th street.”

“That’s right near here! No way. He can’t be that stupid. He must know that Quinn filed a police report for kidnapping and assaulting her. Stupid motherfucker.” Rick shook his head, pissed off that Quinn tied his hands. This guy was damned determined to get to her, regardless of what it would cost him personally. Wanting a better look at the images, Rick moved closer. “Something’s not right with his face. I noticed it when he tried to snatch her from the parking lot. A big ass scar from here to here.” He made a slashing motion from his eye to his chin.

With a shrug, Dane swiveled his chair back and forth like a big kid. “Something’s not right with him, period. Mack and the others are on their way in to decide on a course of action.”

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Tucker shot him a nasty glare. “I could have used that information sooner, Rick. Then I would have known to change the algorithm before now.”

“Fuck. I didn’t think. I was too busy being worried about Quinn.” Rick stood and paced the room furiously, alternating between rubbing the back of his neck and swearing under his breath. Being this emotionally involved was causing him to make mistakes. But he couldn’t change the fact that he loved Quinn and wanted to protect her.

He wanted to end this man’s life so badly his body was actually humming with need. Rick was really regretting his promise to Quinn— more than he thought he would. He was contemplating killing the man anyway, devising of ways to keep Quinn from finding out.

The three men spun around when Mack poked his head in from the hallway. “I’ve got everyone out here. Why don’t you join us and tell us what you’ve found.”

“I’ll take Quinn upstairs. She shouldn’t hear any of this. She saw the images but doesn’t know where they were taken. I don’t want her to know he’s still nearby. Wait for me to get back before starting.”

Mack nodded and left the room.

It took some prodding and gentle words, but Rick finally got Quinn to let him take her to her apartment and put her in bed, where she was so exhausted, she fell asleep almost immediately. Rick brushed a strand of her long dark hair back from her face, admiring her strength but hating the toll it was taking. Where there was once a

radiant, healthy woman, was a pale, gaunt looking girl. The circles under her eyes were almost purple, tiny lines framed them where the skin used to be smooth. Rick clenched his fists, more determined than ever to have his revenge.

By the time he got back to the gym, his coworkers were gathered in the training area, arguing over what their next move should be.

Rick noticed Mack standing off to the side, alone, appearing to be deep in thought. He'd been doing that a lot lately.

"Hey chief. What's going on in that head of yours?"

The older man rubbed at the grey stubble on his chin, looking thoughtfully around the room. "Everyone here would kill for her, you know."

Rick paused, uncertain where Mack was going with this. "Yes," he said slowly. "I know that."

"Good," Mack said. He strode over to the group of men and whistled loudly for their attention. "Gear up! We're going to canvass the four-block area around the ATM and parking garage. I expect to each of you to report your status to Tucker every fifteen minutes. It's daylight, so keep the weapons light people. No need to frighten innocent citizens. L

et's move!" His rough, commanding bark made the former soldiers move quickly.

Rick stood in the gym as his teammates filed out, unsure what to do. He promised Quinn he wouldn't kill Travis. If he went out there with his team, he couldn't make any guarantees. He didn't know what he would do when it came down to it. If he could restrain from doing whatever he had to do, even if it cost him her love.

“Ricochet.”

Mack put his large hand on Rick’s shoulder as he said his name. “She’s like a daughter to me, Rick. Trust me when I say I’ll do what it takes to get that piece of shit ex of hers.” Rick looked Mack in the eyes. They were steady and unwavering, his scarred face as serious as he’d ever seen it. “I’ll stay here with Tucker and watch her, you go with the guys.”

“But Quinn—”

“Go.” Mack patted his shoulder, pushing him gently in the direction of the locker room. “You need to do this for you. You’ll never forgive yourself if you don’t.”

“Yeah. Yeah. You’re right. Thanks, Mack.”

“Just get that motherfucker, Rick. The world will be a better place without him.”

Before Rick could answer, Mack turned and headed for his office.

I hope I don’t regret this... Who the fuck am I kidding? I can’t wait to get my hands on that piece of shit.

Rick pushed open the door to the locker room, gearing up with his teammates. They were in the SUV pulling out of the parking lot so quickly, he didn’t have time for any doubts. All he could think of was his hands around Travis’ neck.

“I can’t believe this,” Quinn muttered as she walked around her apartment, chewing her thumbnail down to a stub.

“Quinn, you need to relax. I told you, most likely, if they find him they’ll turn him in to the authorities.”

She twisted her head around to glare at Mara. After calling her best friend in a moment of sheer panic, Mara had dropped everything to come over immediately. Right now, Mara was sitting on Quinn's couch, acting as if she didn't have a care in the world. It didn't seem to matter to her that Rick was breaking his promise or that his men—including her husband—were about to commit murder.

“How can I relax?” Quinn walked into the kitchen to grab something to eat. She opened the refrigerator and without looking at the contents, slammed it shut in disgust. “Don't you care that they're hunting down a man in a populated city in the middle of the day?”

“Come here, sit next to me.” Mara patted the couch cushion.

She pouted, but did as her friend said, dropping dramatically onto the seat.

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“It’s no different from what the police do, Quinn. They’re following leads to find a criminal. That’s all.”

“It’s vigilantism and you know it.”

“Only if they harm him.” Mara shifted to face her. “Honestly, I’m surprised you feel this way, Quinn.” Mara covered Quinn’s hand with hers. “I would think you’d want him gone for good. I’ve known my husband a long time, known what he does for almost as long... these guys, they don’t take the job lightly and they aren’t bad men. They do only what has to be done— no more, no less.”

Her heart ached from the opposing feelings inside her. One side wanted him dead and buried six feet under so he could never hurt her again. The other side couldn’t imagine hunting a person down and killing him like an animal. “To want that would make me no better than Travis, Mara. That’s not me. I can’t explain it. I hate him— so much.” She swiped at a single tear that escaped from her tired eyes. “But I couldn’t live with myself, with the guilt, of killing someone or knowing I was turning the other way while someone is murdered.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “If there’s one thing I learned while I was with Travis, it’s that I’ll never make that mistake again. I won’t be with a man who will hurt others or kill in cold blood.”

“Quinn,” Mara said in a kind voice, “you know what Rick does. You know what they do here. Clint, Dane, Ben—”

She shook her head. “I had this same conversation with Rick. Flying into a war zone, taking out an enemy or rescuing hostages... it’s not the same and you know it.”

Mara sighed, releasing her hand so he could sit back on the couch. “I can understand that. Let me assure you that Rick is not a bad man. He is not Travis. No matter what happens today, you’re the only person I’ve ever seen him care about. Don’t let this...” she gestured frantically with her hands, “this thing ruin what you have with him.”

Quinn copied her friend’s posture, leaning back into the cushions. She closed her eyes, desperate to put all of this behind her.

Am I wrong? Should I want Travis dead?

The thing was, as guilty as it made her feel, part of her did want Travis dead. Just not by Rick’s hand. Not murder. Maybe Travis would drive off the road and his car would burst into flames. That would make this entire thing go away painlessly. Well, for her anyway, not Travis.

Smiling, Quinn wished for exactly that.

Chapter 7

Hours later, after Mara had gone home, Quinn was curled up on a chair in Mack’s office, reading a book while Mack sat in front of his laptop. She had started to doze off when Tucker poked his head in.

“Mack—”

He stopped short when he noticed Quinn. “Oh, hi Quinn.”

“It’s okay Tucker, go ahead.” Mack gestured for him to keep speaking.

Quinn put her book down and straightened up, her eyes darting back and forth

between the two men. Unintentionally, she put a hand up to her chest, a sad attempt to calm her racing heart.

This is it.

“They’re on their way back. He— uh, he got away.”

Mack nodded and Tucker disappeared without another word. Quinn didn’t know what to think. She swallowed down the thick lump that had formed in her throat. How could she be both disappointed that Travis was still alive, yet thoroughly relieved that he wasn’t killed? It made no sense and these warring feelings were turning her into a wreck.

“Can I go home now?” she asked, her stomach churning nervously.

“Why don’t you wait for everyone to—”

Mack was cut off by a loud crashing noise in the gym, followed by shouting. Without thinking, she raced down the hall, recognizing Rick’s voice.

“Fuck! Fuuuuck!” Rick was standing in front of the heavy bag, hitting it over and over again, letting out a constant stream of obscenities as his fists flew violently.

Quinn came to an abrupt halt at the edge of the padded mats. Ben was righting a weight rack that she could only assume Rick had knocked over in a fit of rage. For the first time ever, she was honestly afraid to approach Rick. His fury was so palpable Quinn could feel it all the way down to her bones. It was so potent— it literally sent chills across her skin. She was at a total loss as to what to do.

Thankfully, Clint walked over to Rick, unafraid to get within striking distance of a very hostile former Recon Marine. She couldn’t hear what Clint murmured in Rick’s

ear, but whatever it was, it didn't help. Rick lashed out, shoving the large man out of his way and yelling in his face. "Fuck off!" He thundered past Quinn without glancing her way and disappeared into the locker room, leaving everyone stunned.

Quinn winced at the loud banging of metal on metal that came from behind the closed door, looking to Clint for help. He shrugged and averted his eyes. "It didn't go down well, Quinn."

That much was obvious, but it didn't explain Rick's behavior. Or why he wouldn't so much as look at her. Less than a minute later, Rick stormed back out of the locker room, once again passing Quinn without acknowledging her presence.

"Rick!" Quinn couldn't let him leave like this. Not without an explanation as to why he was so angry and why it felt like that anger was directed at her specifically. She took a few steps with the intention of following him.

Without warning, Rick whirled around. Quinn flinched when she caught sight of the hostile expression he wore. "Don't!" He stabbed a finger in her

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direction, warning her not to speak. “I can’t—” Rick was beyond agitated. She watched, helpless, as he tore at his own hair, his jaw clenched in frustration. Rick shook his head. “I can’t do this.” Before she could take another breath, he was gone.

Stunned and humiliated, Quinn could feel everyone’s eyes on her as she stood in the middle of the gym. She caught a glimpse of Mack, standing by himself doing that deep thinking thing he’d been doing a lot of lately. Clint must have sensed her impending breakdown, because he took her elbow and quickly escorted her back to her apartment. Once there, instead of losing it, Quinn was completely numb, unable to process the rapid-fire events of the last ten minutes.

“Here.” She felt a glass of water being pressed into her hand as Clint led her to the couch. He dropped into the ratty old armchair opposite where she sat and leaned over the coffee table to talk. “Rick is angry.”

A slightly hysterical giggle bubbled up from Quinn’s throat. “You think?” She gaped, struggling to explain how she felt. “I don’t get it? Is he gone? Why is he angry with me? What—”

“He is angry, but it’s—” he sighed. “It’s misdirected at you.”

“I don’t understand.”

Clint’s mouth twisted up, clearly uncomfortable having to be the one to tell Quinn what had Rick acting so out of character.

“He had Travis in his sights... could have taken him out. But—”

Oh.

“But he didn’t because I made him promise not to.” When it clicked into place, she suddenly felt suffocated, as if the room were closing in on her.

Clint took her hand and awkwardly patted it. “He’ll come around. He just needs some time. Rick isn’t used to failure. And he isn’t used to caring.”

Quinn vaguely remembered nodding as Clint said something about having Mara check on her later and the guys watching her apartment on the security cameras. She heard the quiet click of her front door and she was alone.

Still numb, she kept her emotions locked up tight, too afraid to let them out because they might send her down a hole she couldn’t climb out of. Shutting off her mind, Quinn went through the motions, showering and climbing into bed. As she stared at the ceiling fan, watching it go round and round in slow circles, she wondered if Rick would ever forgive her.

It was nearly a week after the failed mission and Quinn still hadn’t heard from Rick. Not a phone call, not a text, he hadn’t even shown up for work. Frankly, Quinn was beginning to feel more pissed off at his selfishness than she did worried.

“Hey. You want to learn this or not?”

Quinn was startled from her thoughts. “Sorry, Tucker. Yeah, I do want to learn.”

“Cool.” Tucker continued explaining how to use the different components of Sanctum’s sophisticated computer system, oblivious to Quinn’s anxiety.

After finding her moping around the gym, waiting for Rick to magically appear, Tucker pulled her into Mission Control and began to show her exactly what Sanctum

was capable of. Now, five days later, Quinn was hacking into files all over the world, collecting intelligence for clients (aka the US Government), and gathering info for Mack's operations.

She was grateful for the distraction, but honestly, Quinn really wanted to talk to Rick and make sure he was okay. Even though she was madder than hell that he blamed her for his failure to catch Travis, she couldn't deny that she loved him. Before she met Rick, Quinn couldn't have imagined trusting anyone enough to fall in love, let alone have feelings so strong that she literally felt ill at the thought of not being with him again.

They continued gathering intel for an operation Tucker said was to take place the following week. Dane stopped by several times throughout the week to see what they had compiled, since he was going to be the team leader when the operation hit the ground.

"So..." Dane tried to be casual as he scrolled through the files they had downloaded to his laptop.

Quinn glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "So what?"

"Just wondering if you'd heard from Rick."

She pressed her lips into a tight line, her nerves worn thin. "No, Dane. I haven't. Just like the last four times you asked."

"Okay, okay." He held his hands up in defeat. "I'll stop bugging you."

"Thanks," she snapped, irritated that not only was Dane constantly asking about Rick, but that Rick was still gone. Quinn turned to Tucker who was speaking to someone on his ever-present Bluetooth. "Should we bring this stuff to Mack?"

Tucker held up one finger for Quinn to wait. He finished his call and threw his earpiece onto the desk. “Mack’s not in. That was him on the phone. He’s been working remote since Tuesday.”

“Oh. I hadn’t even noticed.” Great, now she felt bad that she’d been so wrapped up in her own problems she had no clue Mack hadn’t been at work the last few days. The man took her in, treated her like his own, did everything in his power to get Travis, and she couldn’t be bothered to stop by his office long enough to notice he was missing.

Tucker shrugged. “He’ll be back tomorrow.”

Mack would be back tomorrow, but would Rick? Not knowing hurt like hell. “I think I’ve had enough for today.” Quinn pushed away from the desk, not meeting Tucker or Dane’s curious stares.

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“You can sit in while I brief Mack and the team tomorrow morning at ten. See what it involves,” Tucker called out as Quinn left the room.

“I’ll be there.” She waved good-bye over her head and crossed the gym. Quinn caught Xavier’s attention and waited patiently by the door while he ran to the locker room before joining her in the lobby. Even though this was the third day in a row that one of the guys escorted her upstairs, seeing a large, loaded firearm in their hand reminded her that she was still in very real danger.

“Let’s go, Quinn.” Xavier went first, scanning the area carefully like the professional warrior he was trained to be. Nodding, she trailed on his heels as they scaled the stairs to her small apartment. Once there, Quinn unlocked the door for Xavier, waiting for his signal that it was okay to follow him inside.

“It’s clear. See you tomorrow morning, Quinn. Is nine okay?” Xav’s dark eyes and kind expression made her feel more relaxed, but did nothing to heal the gaping hole left by her wayward soldier.

“Yes. Nine.” She was exhausted, mentally and physically. All she wanted was to see Rick, to clear the air between them. Selfishly, Quinn needed him and he wasn’t here for her. More importantly, he wouldn’t let her be there for him. She understood that he was angry, that he felt confined when she forced his hand with Travis. If he would just call or show up they could discuss it like adults.

Quinn stripped and climbed into bed and just like every night over the last three days, she didn’t cry before going falling to sleep, the blissful numbness still helping to keep her emotions shuttered up tight.

Rick flicked through the different keys on his keychain, struggling to find the correct one. With no moon to brighten the night sky, it was nearly pitch black outside the door, making his task near impossible.

Cursing, it took him three tries to finally get the correct key into the lock. Rick needed to speak to Quinn, he knew it. He reacted badly the other day— okay, so he was an asshole. Who's perfect? At least the five days he spent with his brother gave him time to think about everything. After seeing what a normal, healthy relationship was, it led Rick to come to the conclusion that above all else, he had to be with Quinn. No matter the cost.

As Rick unlocked the bolt and pushed open the door, entering the dark foyer, he knew that getting some distance, leaving town, had helped him prioritize his life. Unfortunately, priority number one was currently aiming a very large handgun at his head.

“Whoa! Doll, it's me. Please put the gun down.”

Rick stood motionless in Quinn's apartment, cautiously eyeing the gun that dwarfed her small hand. His heart nearly stopped at the impossible image in front of him. Tiny Quinn, amber eyes wide and frightened, her arms trembling as she held up the dull, black pistol.

“Rick?” The relief in her voice nearly brought him to his knees.

“Yes, doll. Please... lower the gun.”

A sob hitched in her chest as her shaking hands came down. She dropped the gun onto the couch and collapsed into his arms.

“God I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have left you like that. I had the guys watching over

you but... you must have been terrified.” Rick pulled her close, closing his eyes to enjoy the feel of Quinn’s body against him. Such a fucking shithead, leaving Quinn to deal not only with a psychotic ex-husband stalking her, but his chilling outburst followed by days of silence.

“You’re here now.” Quinn clutched at his clothing, pressing herself so tightly against Rick that it felt as if she were trying to climb inside him.

“I am here. I’ll never leave you again, doll.”

“But you did leave me,” she whispered, releasing his shirt and taking a hesitant step back. “Where were you?”

The anguish on her beautiful face cut into him like a knife, slicing his heart into tattered ribbons.

“I—I needed time away. I was so angry, Quinn.” Rick didn’t know how to explain why he had gone without upsetting her further. He already knew it was a douche move. No need to make it any worse.

Naturally, Quinn wouldn’t accept his pathetic explanation.

“Angry with me, you mean.” Her full lips turned into a frown.

This was not going well. Taking her hand, Rick guided her over to the couch, pulling her down to sit next to him. Starved for contact, he kept their hands intertwined, gently rubbing his thumb over the back of her hand as he tried to clarify why he was a total jackass.

“Not angry with you—” he winced, “well, kind of, but not.” Her frown got deeper, small furrows lining her forehead. “I’m not saying it right. I was pissed that I didn’t

get my hands on Travis. In the moment, yes... I was angry th

at I couldn't shoot him, take him out like the piece of shit he is. But—" Rick squeezed her hand, bringing it up to his lips to press a small kiss on her knuckles. He heard the sharp intake of breath pass through her lips and smiled against her hand. "But after taking the time to think... really think about what you said, I decided you were right.

"So yes. Originally I was angry at you for stopping me from killing your ex." Quinn's face twisted into one of anguish and it killed him to see her in such pain. Rick tugged her closer, their lips only inches away. "But I'm so glad you did, doll. You shouldn't be okay with waking up next to a murderer. You're way too good for that. And I want to wake up to you, Quinn. Every fucking day."

"I'm not better than you, Rick," Quinn murmured, squirming on the couch as Rick continued kissing her knuckles, turning over her hand to brush his mouth across her palm, down to her wrist.

"Still, gunning down a man in the back, no matter how I justify it, isn't right. You deserve someone better than that." Rick moved closer to Quinn, their knees bumping together gently. He let go of her hand so he could sweep back a stray piece of hair that had fallen over her face. Rick let his hand linger, tracing his finger down the shell of her ear, over the soft skin of her cheek until he used it to nudge her chin up towards him.

"You're more than I deserve, Rick. More than I ever thought I could have."

He dropped his gaze to her mouth, those full red lips begging to be kissed. Hearing a small moan escape from her throat, Rick knew she was just as affected. He lowered his mouth to hers, and his entire world burned red from the heat.

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Quinn was so happy she wanted to scream. She went from completely alone and depressed, to having Rick in her apartment kissing her senseless. His large, warm body pressed her down onto the couch cushions as their tongues twisted and tangled together. The scent of his skin surrounded her, made her feel safe in his embrace.

Home.

That's what it felt like. She was finally home after being adrift since her father died. Quinn found someone worth being with, worth making a life with, and she wasn't going to let him go. She was tired of worrying, tired of running, just goddamn sick and tired of not being happy. That's what Rick did for her—he made her happy.

She groaned as his hips thrust against hers, his hard ridge pressing between her legs. "I need you so much," he whispered, his warm breath caressing her ear.

Quinn threw her head back as he trailed his mouth down the sensitive skin of her neck, biting and licking as she writhed with pleasure.

"Never gonna let you go, doll." Rick's words were making her beyond hot. The unrelenting, rhythmic grinding combined with his talented mouth on her skin had hormones exploding inside her within minutes.

"Rick—"

"I know, doll. I know. I'm going to do all sorts of filthy things to your body tonight. Gonna make you feel so good." His hips thrust against her harder, making his voice hitch. "Shit... I want it to last. Want to be inside you all night long." Rick's wet nips

and kisses brushed over every responsive spot on her throat.

Kiss. Thrust. Bite. Thrust.

Quinn thought her eyes were going to roll back in head the sensations were so overwhelming. “Please.” She hated begging, but at this point, she’d do anything to have Rick inside her. Her skin was electrified, like a live wire humming with energy.

Rick stood up, leaving Quinn cold without his weight on top of her. “Bedroom,” he whispered, holding out a hand.

She wanted to grab it and yank him towards the bedroom as fast as possible. Instead, Quinn somehow managed to control the impulse and let Rick lead the way.

Once they reached the bed, they attacked each other’s clothing, unbuttoning and pulling off articles until they came together, skin on skin.

“Fuck, you feel so good.” His mouth crashed over hers again, his insistent tongue driving inside. Quinn had never been kissed like this, not by anyone. It was sweet but rough, kind but possessive— she never wanted it to end.

Screw breathing, it’s entirely overrated.

A floaty, lightheaded sensation overtook her mind. By the time they separated, both gasping for breath, she would have agreed to do anything Rick asked. Anything.

Gently, he crowded Quinn until she fell back on the bed, spread out wantonly on the sheets.

“God, you’re so gorgeous. I can’t decide what to do to you first.” Rick ran his calloused hands up and down her legs, licking his lips as if Quinn were a buffet,

waiting to be tasted.

“Do anything... something... I don’t care.”

Rick climbed onto the bed, kneeling between her legs. His hands moved up to caress the sides of her torso, lightly brushing over her breasts. Quinn moaned shamelessly, arching her back up into his touch.

“Anything?”

Quinn met Rick’s gaze and her breath caught. Yes, he was stunningly beautiful— his tan skin smooth, rippling over his hard muscles. His lips were swollen and damp and his thick dark hair thoroughly mussed. But it was those eyes— those expressive turquoise eyes, the color of the Caribbean Sea, that captivated her. Quinn could see so much in his eyes— love, lust, desire, strength, protection— she saw a partner that would always be there for her, no matter what the cost.

“Make love to me,” she whispered, reaching up to thread her fingers into the soft hairs at the nape of his neck. Quinn pulled herself up so she could taste his golden skin, licking a line up his throat to his mouth. The perfect salty-sweet flavor of Rick exploded on her tongue.

“Yes,” he hissed against her mouth. Rick moved forward as Quinn fell back onto the bed, their lips still fused together as one.

This was where Quinn felt calm, where she could lay to rest all of her fears, all of her worries. With Rick’s hard, heavy body on top of hers, she could let go and just feel. When his hot length slid inside her, Quinn nearly bucked off of the bed. The only thing keeping her from fracturing to pieces immediately, was the slow, torturous strokes Rick made, moving until he was almost all the way out before sliding back in until their hips met.

“Faster, more...” Quinn loved the drawn out friction, loved the intimacy of Rick staring into her eyes as they made love. But her body was practically vibrating with need. She was so tantalizingly close, yet that blissful peak was staying at arms length.

“I love you, doll.” Rick devoured her mouth as his hips sped up. His tongue plunged in and out of her mouth, mimicking the fast strokes of his cock.

“God, yes!” Her cries were muffled by another deep kiss. Rick swallowed her moans until his own pleasure became too much.

“Fuck... oh my god, Quinn... I can’t.” His head dropped to her shoulder. His hot, fast breaths gusting over the sensitive skin of her neck and ear. The fast pace was quickly driving Quinn to the edge.

“Rick! Yes, oh god, oh god...”

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Rick braced himself up on his arms and thrust wildly, his strokes uneven and deeper than Quinn thought possible.

“Quinn...” Rick warned, letting her know he was close.

Right as his gorgeous face drew tight with ecstasy, his head thrown back as he came with a roar. The sight sent Quinn over the edge. She shattered into a million pieces and convulsed around Rick’s cock, drawing a strangled sound from his throat as he collapsed on top of her.

In that moment, life was perfect. And maybe it would be from here on out. Quinn couldn’t worry about it right now. Now, she was truly loved and cared for, and nothing else mattered.

It was three weeks since the Travis debacle, and no one had seen or heard a peep from the man. He was completely off the grid. Even though she didn’t think he was still in the area, Quinn wasn’t about to relax and let her guard down, not that the men of Sanctum would allow that to happen. When she came to Atlanta, Quinn had expected to find her father’s old buddy, that’s it. What she found instead was a family— a father figure, five over-protective big brothers, a sister in Mara, and a lover that made her happier than she ever imagi

ned possible.

The door clicked open behind her, but Quinn didn’t need to turn around to know who it was. Not only did her body have some sort of ability to sense when Rick was nearby, but the closed circuit camera in the hallway let her know who was entering

Mission Control.

“Hey babe,” she said over her shoulder, not looking away from the wall of screens in front of her.

“Hi doll. You almost done?” Rick leaned in close, brushing the hair away from her ear to whisper. “You have no idea how fucking hot you look when you’re working.”

Quinn smiled, a shiver running through her from Rick’s husky, sexed-out voice. “I never would have pegged you as someone with a geek-fetish.” Her fingers stopped typing so she could melt into Rick’s lips as they skimmed along her neck.

“Not a geek-fetish, doll. A you fetish.” He fake growled and bit her ear playfully.

“Stop!” Quinn giggled and weakly shoved Rick away, not actually wanting him to stop at all.

“You need to stop turning me on if you don’t want me all over you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Everything turns you on.”

“Just you, doll. Just you.”

Before Quinn could respond, the door clicked and Tucker walked in. “Hey Rick. Quinn,” he crossed the room and dropped into his chair. “This just came for you.” He handed her a large, cream-colored envelope.

The wide grin fell off her face the instant Quinn got a look at the return address. Her stomach flipped inside out and her heart flew up into her throat. For a minute, Quinn thought she might pass out. She must have looked as bad as she felt, because Rick was in front of her, speaking frantically.

“Hey... Quinn! Doll. You okay?”

The warm, comforting strength of Rick’s arms came around her, pulling her out of her chair and into his embrace.

“What is it?” His voice was steady, but Quinn could hear the concern behind the words.

“It’s... it’s from a law office. In San Antonio.”

Rick’s forehead wrinkled as he tried to figure out the importance of that city. She knew the moment he made the connection because his brilliant eyes turned hard and cold.

“Travis,” he said, his mouth in a tight line.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe he signed the divorce papers.” Rick and Quinn turned simultaneously to stare at Tucker as if the man had two heads. Not normally good with reading social cues, Tucker had no problem figuring out that he wasn’t needed in this particular conversation. “Uhhh, I forgot... ummmm, I have something to do.” The man bolted for the door and was gone, leaving Rick and Quinn alone with the letter.

“He’s right, doll. It could be the divorce.”

Rick’s steady hands smoothed up and down Quinn’s back, grounding her, keeping her from freaking out.

“Yeah.”

“Sit,” Rick instructed, leading her back to her chair. He took Tucker’s recently vacated seat and waited for Quinn to open the letter.

“I’m afraid,” she whispered.

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He reached over and took her hand. “I’m here. You never have to be afraid again.”

Quinn managed a weak smile, then ripped open the envelope. As she scanned the pages, her heart went into overtime, hammering against her chest with enough force that Quinn thought it might break free. She read them again. Then one more time. Numb, she lowered the papers in disbelief.

“What? What is it?” When Rick snatched the papers out of her hand, Quinn didn’t react. She couldn’t react. She didn’t know how to react. It was the best news and the worst news all rolled into one fancy, expensive, watermarked letter.

A loud laugh broke Quinn from her daze.

“He’s dead! This is great.” Rick’s brilliant smile did nothing to assuage Quinn’s dread. “You’re done. We’re done. It’s all over, doll. Don’t you see?”

Quinn watched as Rick’s levity faded with her lack of response.

“Why aren’t you happy? Isn’t this the best possible outcome? Quinn?”

Mechanically, she spoke, her tone flat and unemotional.

Keep it together, Quinn. You don’t know who did it yet. It may not be what you think.

“I need to be alone for a while.”

Rick jumped up from his chair, ready to protest.

“Rick! Please. I’m asking you for half an hour to let this sink in.” She turned her best doe eyed look on her lover, knowing he wouldn’t say no when she did that.

“Fuck,” he whispered, running a hand across the back of his neck. “Twenty minutes. Then we’re talking.” Rick dropped the letter on the desk and stalked out of the room.

She knew he was confused by her reaction, but he’d get over it. Right now, Quinn needed to prove to herself that she was wrong about Travis’ death.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled up a search engine on her computer. Typing quickly and referencing the date and city on the letter, Quinn quickly found several articles of interest. She clicked the first one, reading it multiple times. Blinking back tears, Quinn clicked another article, then another... she clicked and read until moisture blurred her vision.

“No... he wouldn’t. He promised.”

Realizing how ridiculous she sounded talking to herself, she wiped the tears away with her sleeve. Quinn printed the original article and laid it on Tucker’s desk, then deleted her search history. She couldn’t ignore the fact that Travis was killed during the time that Rick had gone missing. Time he hadn’t explained to her or anyone else. Ten minutes until he came back into the room, and Rick was nothing if not punctual— early even.

No, no, no, no, no!

She should have known Rick wouldn’t let it go. Not after what Travis did, leaving Rick to pick up her broken pieces and put her back together. Six minutes.

Quinn was torn. Half of her was so relieved that Travis was dead that it didn't matter how it happened. The other half of her was horrified and pretty pissed off that Rick would go behind her back against her wishes. Two minutes.

Just as she thought, the door burst open with time to spare, a very agitated former Recon Marine storming towards her with a grimace on his face.

“So... what? What's going on here, Quinn?”

She flinched at his harsh tone, trying not to take it to heart. It was concern and fear making him prickly, not anger. He wasn't like Travis and never would be. He would never hurt her... not intentionally.

“I— I...” The words died on the tip of her tongue. Tears spilled over and down her cheeks. She had to decide whether or not Rick was worth it. Could she overlook what he did? Right now, she didn't have the answer. “I need more time.” With that, she jumped up, snatched the printed article off the desk, and bolted from the room. Quinn heard Rick calling out for her, but she kept going until she was safe behind her locked door of her apartment.

Thankfully, for once, Rick didn't follow.

A few hours later, curled up on her couch, freshly showered and drinking a cup of herbal tea, Quinn reread the article over and over until she had it all but memorized. The chime of yet another text message from Rick interrupted her churning thoughts.

He was wearing down her resolve. She knew it, so why keep the charade going? Quinn knew without a doubt she was going to forgive Rick even if the crime itself was unforgivable. One last time, she read the article detailing the death of a John Doe just outside of Oklahoma City, dated three weeks ago.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN FOUND SHOT AND KILLED

Norman, OK — Police responded to a 911 call late yesterday morning after an employee at the Motel 6 on Whitten St. reported finding a dead body in one of the rooms.

Officers discovered the victim, a Caucasian male, thought to be in his mid to late twenties. According to a source, the man appeared to have died from a single gunshot wound to the head. Forensics later confirmed that the bullet most likely came from a long-range, sniper-style rifle. The lethal accuracy, with the nearest possible shooting position almost 1000 meters away, along with a small hole in the window of the motel room, leads police to believe that the gunman has a military background, most likely as a sniper or Special Forces operative.

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Charles Dooley, the detective assigned to the case, states that for now the victim is being treated as a John Doe. There was no identification found on the body or anywhere in the room. The fact that there was no trace of drugs or other criminal activity at the scene, suggests that the murder was most likely personal in nature.

Chief medical examiner Greg Foley said pending toxicology results, the manner of death is most likely the gunshot wound to the head. Police plan to release a sketch of the man as soon as possible to help with identification. If anyone you know fitting the victim's description has gone missing, please contact the Oklahoma City Police Department, Homicide, at ...

Quinn closed her eyes, letting out a breath with a shudder. Now she had a letter from Travis's lawyer saying that since they were still legally married, she inherited all of his possessions, including that horrible house in Bandera County. She was about to go to bed, her head and heart hurting from the day's events, when she received another text from Rick.

Quinn stared at the text, not blinking until her eyes dried up. Then, it hit her. She snorted when she realized she was having a moment, like the ones in movies—a bolt of lightning right from the sky jolting her to reality. It spoke to her, plainly. Clearly.

It doesn't matter.

She didn't need or want to know if Rick found Travis and killed him with a sniper rifle while her ex sat on a bed in a crummy motel. Rick loved her and she loved him, everything else she would just have to take on faith. Something she never had much use for until now.

If Rick said he didn't kill Travis, well, that would have to be enough for her because if she couldn't trust h

im to tell her the truth, she couldn't trust him with her life and her heart. And she did. She had already given Rick both her life and her heart to keep safe and he took the job very, very seriously.

If she doesn't answer in the next three minutes, I swear I'm going to lose my mind.

Rick was just about to say 'fuck it' and head up to Quinn's apartment, demanding that she discuss this when his phone chimed.

Well thank fuck for that.

He let out a huge breath, finally relaxing after being all tensed up since Quinn fled Mission Control. Rick wasn't sure if Quinn would have appreciated him busting her door down. He had to make her believe him. He had had no idea Travis was dead, let alone killed the man. Yeah, he could see how she would think that, the way her ex died. But that piece of shit wasn't worth losing Quinn over. No way.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Rick was knocking on Quinn's door less than a minute after receiving her text. When it opened, Quinn surprised the hell out of him by leaping into his arms.

"I don't care. It doesn't matter, Rick. I love you. Nothing will change that." Her voice hitched. "I was wrong. I'll love you no matter what."

Rick clutched on to her, her words hitting him right in his previously cold, unfeeling heart. "I love you too, doll. So much. But—"

"Shhhhh." Quinn pulled back, just far enough to see his face. "That's all I need to

know.”

He nodded, not willing to ruin the moment by speaking.

She smiled. That gorgeous, warm smile of hers that sent sparks down his spine every time he saw it.

“I’m hungry, let’s get pizza.”

Rick laughed. “Whatever you want, doll. Anything. I’d do anything for you.”

Her smile faded, becoming serious. “I know you would. That’s why I love you so much.”

He would too. He’d walk to the ends of the earth to make her happy. His brother was right. All it took was a tiny girl with big amber eyes to make him see that everything he knew was a lie. Love was real. Quinn was real. And hopefully, he’d never find out what it was like to lose her. That cold unfeeling heart was now beating warmth and love through his veins. Until it happened, he never would have thought it possible, Ricochet finally hit a target.

Six months later

“Tucker, I’ve got this. You can go home you know.”

Quinn glanced over at her coworker, who looked absolutely exhausted after staying up for the past thirty-six hours straight.

“The mission is done, Ben and Dane are on their way home, so there’s no reason for you to be here.”

Tucker threw his Bluetooth on his desk and stood, raking a hand through his ever-messy brown hair. “I guess you’re right.” He stretched, letting out a huge yawn.

“I usually am.”

The normally reserved man grinned. “Yeah, you are.” He patted her shoulder as he made his way to the door. “Thanks, Quinn. I’ll see you tomorrow at the debriefing.”

“Bye Tucker.”

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The door to Mission Control closed with a soft click. Quinn sighed, letting her head rest on the back of her chair. She closed her eyes, her thoughts wandering, as they always tended to do, to Rick.

Her Rick. Ricochet was gone, replaced by a caring man who loved Quinn and showed it to her each and every day. At Rick's insistence, she had moved out of the tiny apartment above the gym into his condo. They spent every night together anyway, so he didn't have to push his argument very hard to convince her.

Yes, she worried when he was away on missions, but that was his job. When he got wind of her computer skills, Mack promoted her to work in Mission Control. Being a part of the operations helped to ease some of her anxiety, even though Tucker still ran the ground ops while she was relegated to intel. Quinn had no clue how Mara could stand it, watching her husband leave with no idea where he went or if he was coming back.

Unfortunately, part of her job still included doing invoicing and mindless computer work, and she was way behind. Tapping, she pulled up the spreadsheets and started entering figures. Half an hour later, Quinn froze, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. All of the blood left her face, rushing to her toes, sending a body-wracking shiver through her. Her heart stuttered, struggling to keep her mind functioning after such a shock to the system.

No. It can't be. It can't. No way.

Quickly, she pulled up another file, scanning it quickly. Then another. She finally had the proof she had insisted she didn't need.

I don't believe it.

Quinn couldn't help but whisper to herself. "Holy shit."

Intending to get some answers, Quinn left the room, walking down the hall in a haze of disbelief. She stopped at Mack's office, knocking quietly before entering.

"Hey Quinn. Tucker said the mission was a success and that the guys should be home by twenty-three hundred hours."

Nodding, she took a good look at Mack, the man her father knew for over twenty years. He was gazing at Quinn fondly, his dark eyes alight with something akin to love.

Suddenly, the confrontation she had planned out in her head didn't seem right. "You— you and my dad were really close, weren't you." It was a statement, not a question. There was no question of Mack's loyalty to her father.

Mack looked a little surprised at her question, but he smiled kindly. "He was like a brother to me. Being in the marines wasn't much different than it is here at Sanctum, Quinn. Everyone takes care of everyone else... like family."

She swallowed loudly, her gaze dropping to the floor.

"Quinn—"

Reluctantly, she raised her eyes to meet Mack's. This man who took her in when she had no one, who cared when no one else did... he loved her like his own.

"I would do anything for family, Quinn. Anything."

Staring at each other, they exchanged a sort of silent agreement. Each one of them understanding what the other wasn't saying.

"I'm almost done with invoicing. It's taking a while since I'm a few months behind. When I'm finished, I think I'm going to head home."

Mack leaned back in his chair, his lips curved up in the corners. "No problem. Go home with your soldier." He winked at her before turning back to his paperwork.

"Thanks Mack. For— for everything."

Quinn left Mack's office, returning to her seat in front of the bank of powerful computers. Slowly, methodically, Quinn brought up each invoice from six months ago.

She clicked on the receipt for a round trip plane ticket from Atlanta to Oklahoma City in Mack's name and moved it to the trash bin.

Next, a document detailing the special luggage Mack checked on the flight, and the legal paperwork to own the specialized weapon followed.

Then she did the same for a receipt for a rental car in his name from a Hertz near the Oklahoma City airport.

Click. Click. Click.

Quinn continued until all of the evidence was gone. Had he meant for her to find it? She didn't know. Mack knew she did the receipts, so she could only assume he either did it on purpose or he didn't think about it. Mack was not a stupid man.

Done clearing out the files, she left the room, heading out into the gym to locate Rick.

She found him showing a young fighter how to protect his head from different punches, helping him arrange his fists the proper way. Grinning, she watched as he worked, how his strong muscles flexed and contracted. When the men stopped for a quick drink, Rick spotted Quinn watching him and smiled, his entire face lighting up. He said something to the young man and trotted over to see her.

“Hey, doll.”

“Hey. I’m done. What are your plans?”

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“I was going to do a quick round in the cage with Joey, then I’m good to go. Is that okay?”

Fighting didn’t bother Quinn anymore. These were good men who used their skills to help people, not hurt them. She was finally able to see the beauty in their movem

ents as they hit the bags or circled each other in the cage. Quinn threw her arms around Rick’s neck, pulling him down for a quick kiss.

“I’ll wait as long as you promise to shower with me at home.”

The sexy smirk she got in return made everything worth it. Every day she endured with Travis, every new women’s shelter she had to stay in, everything she did in order to survive each day— it all led her here, to this perfect man. A man who made her happier than she could ever remember being.

“I think I can agree to those terms,” he growled in her ear.

A voice from across the gym called out, interrupting their moment. “Ricochet! Come on man. Are we doing this?”

Rick ducked his head and kissed her again, whispering against her lips. “Oh yeah, we’re definitely doing this.” His lust-filled eyes bore into hers before he released her, jogging back to his student.

“Yes, yes we are doing this,” Quinn said to herself. She sat and watched proudly as her man stepped up into the octagon, gorgeous and agile and completely sure of

himself. As Rick bounced around the cage, taunting the younger fighter and the other guys crowded around to shout out encouragements, Quinn knew what home felt like. It was love and friendship and security— even if it smelled like old socks and sweaty men, it was the most comforting place she'd known and she was glad for every single minute she spent there. Quinn closed her eyes, silently wishing her father could be with her.

Thank you daddy, for guiding me here and giving me a second chance at having a real family.

Then Quinn stood up, walked over to the cage, and cheered on her man.

And... I'm Done!

Whew! Ricochet was a tough book to write. I'm glad I did it and I love my characters, but it was difficult to stay on track. On the positive side I found out a few things about myself....

I DO NOT like writing 3rd person. I need to feel as if I AM the character to get the most of their emotions.

I am able to write Military and/or MMA. It's outside my usual comfort zone of celebrity romance, and I liked the challenge.

As much as I loathe cliffhangers, I have to admit, I really, really enjoyed putting them in each section of the book. That probably makes me evil, but, there it is.