



Friendly Fire (Ricochet 2)

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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 2. You must read Locked & Loaded first.

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Chapter 1

Quinn heaved the last cardboard box from her father's attic onto the old farmhouse table in the kitchen. It was a good thing she wasn't allergic to dust or she'd be dying right now. Quinn was glad to be almost finished cleaning out her childhood home.

A month and a half. That's how long it takes to tie up the loose ends of fifty-five years of life. After her mom suddenly died of an aneurysm when Quinn was twelve, her father had no choice but to quit the Marines to care for his daughter. Even though he never said it out loud, Quinn's dad blamed her for making him leave the job he loved. He used her guilt to try and control her, to make her have the future he wanted her to have. Instead, she left for Texas to go to college at eighteen and only saw her father a few more times before he died.

And ended up with Travis. Well done, Quinn.

Wiping her brow with the hem of the tattered old T-shirt she found in one of the rickety dressers, Quinn took a pitcher of sweet tea out of the refrigerator and poured herself a fresh glass over ice. She mindlessly stared out the kitchen window while she drank, watching people on boats zipping around on the lake.

The box sat on the table behind her, nagging at Quinn to complete the job. Clearing out the junk, the clothes, the furniture... that was easy, but the memories? Those were the hardest to deal with and the ones she avoided the longest. Sighing, Quinn put the empty glass in the sink and pulled up a chair. Carefully, she opened the flaps to peek inside, cowering as if it might explode like one of those Mission Impossible messages. This box would be the worst, saved for last for just that reason.

Spying her baby book, Quinn shook her head. “Forget it,” she whispered under her breath, choking back a sob.

Quinn shoved the flaps down, closing the door on Annette Quinn Wallace’s childhood. Picking the box up with a grunt, she stomped out the garage door and unceremoniously dropped it into the bed of Mack’s old pickup truck. Avoiding it a little longer wouldn’t kill anyone. She would deal with the box of photo albums when she got back to the city. Right now, it was time to deal with the other loose ends in her life, namely Travis and Rick.

After a quick shower to rid herself of the cobwebs and grime, Quinn threw the rest of her belongings onto the passenger seat. She was only keeping a few things from the house, photos, her dad’s military medals, her mom’s jewelry, and a few pieces of her grandmother’s beloved china. Everything else had been taken away by an estate company and sold, except for the furniture the real estate agent said to leave behind to stage the house. It would go on the market next week after a thorough scrubbing and a paint job.

Dread hung heavy inside Quinn as she turned the truck onto the highway, going south. The closer she got to Atlanta, the worse the thick, aching feeling in her stomach got. She had left Rick asleep in her bed without saying a word six weeks ago, no note, no reason for leaving, nothing. She’d up and disappeared in the middle of the night after the best sex she’d ever experienced, not that she had much to compare it to.

It was a terrible thing to do to Rick, for sure, but Quinn had known she needed to leave before she made some big declaration that she, and he, wasn’t ready for. She had to get her life in order before she could give that trust to him, before she could ask for that gift from him.

Quinn wondered how Rick would react when she returned to Sanctum MMA on

Monday. Would he be pissed off? Would he ignore her? Mack said he would keep her receptionist job for her while she took care of some personal business. He also promised he wouldn't tell Rick where she was while she was gone. Mack understood her need for privacy. She was almost positive Mack knew that her real name was Annie and he never said a word to anyone. Without a phone or a paper trail, there was no way Rick could find her unless he dug deep. Somehow, Quinn suspected he was too proud to dig deep.

Armed with brand new cell phone, Quinn made her very first call on it to tell Mack expect her at work in two days. Mack conveniently didn't tell her what she should expect when she arrived.

"Goddamn it, Rick! You passed all your psych evals so I sent you back out in the field. Was that a mistake?"

Mack's furious expression let Rick know that he was not amused with how his last operation went down. Honestly, Rick thought Mack's head might actually explode from anger.

"You almost fucking died on my watch, Rick! I won't have that shit on my conscious. If you aren't field ready then it's your responsibility to fucking tell me."

Rick sat anxiously in Mack's office, the stack of paperwork on the older man's desk threatening to tip sideways and scatter onto the floor every time he slammed his fist down.

"I'm fine, Chief. I don't know what happened out there."

"Bullshit! You didn't follow protocol and it almost got you killed. If you're intent on suicide, then do it on your own time! Got it? I'm not calling your family to tell them you died in some bullshit fake plane crash or overseas "car accident" because you

screwed up on a mission!”

Mack’s face was beet red by the time he was done chewing out Rick’s ass. Rick bolted to his feet, knowing he was being dismissed without being told.

“Yes sir.”

He turned to go when Mack spoke again, the majority of the anger gone from his voice. “Quinn will be back at work on Monday. Just thought you should know.”

Rick’s entire body stiffened, his hand hovering over the doorknob. Saying nothing, he opened the door and walked out.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Quinn was coming back as if nothing happened? As if they hadn’t crossed some sort of line? As if he didn’t see in her eyes the same terrifying but unwelcome feelings he had in his, the falling, the pull, the connection beyond the physical?

Then... she left. Vanished in the night like he dreamed her up and she never really existed. Or maybe she didn’t feel anything for him at all.

What the fuck am I supposed to do with that?

Rick stormed into the locker room and jerked off his clothes, quickly changing into his fight shorts. Sitting on the bench, he methodically wound the hand wraps around each knuckle, over and down his wrist, using the familiar routine to clear his mind.

Quinn, coming back. Christ! And right on the heels of that clusterfuck of a mission.

Always so cool and collected, meticulously approaching every situation with a calm

and rational mind. That was Rick, what he was known for. Quinn managed to fuck all of that up in the span of w

eeeks, turning him into a fucking headcase. Rick knew he had been a mental disaster when she left. There was no other way to describe his unstable emotional state over the last month and a half. His brain constantly wandered off on tangents of why and where when it came to that night with Quinn. Not exactly productive behavior for a hired mercenary, or an MMA trainer, both being professions that required extreme amounts of focus.

Rick stalked out of the locker room and into the training area, determined to punch his frustrations right out of his head. He signaled to Ben, who was working the heavy bag, to head over to the cage. Ben nodded and grabbed his gear. Rick smiled, cracked his neck, and stepped up into the octagon.

It's on.

“Great to have you back, Quinn.”

Quinn gave Tucker a half-hearted smile, her stomach too queasy to manage a more sincere response.

“Thanks, Tucker. Glad to be back.”

Uncomfortable with the small talk, Quinn returned her focus to her computer so she wouldn't have to keep up the cheerful façade. Frankly, it was exhausting. Thankfully, Tucker entered the main facility without attempting any more chitchat.

Quinn spent the first hour of work with a nauseating knot in her belly, afraid that Rick would walk in at any moment, but even more afraid that he wouldn't. Despite repeatedly telling herself not to, her eyes kept drifting over to the front door against

her will, watching — waiting for Rick to show up so she could explain her seemingly irrational behavior.

By lunch, Rick hadn't shown up. Quinn had chewed her nails down to brittle stubs, her hands wouldn't stop shaking, and she kept nervously licking her lips until they were dry and cracked.

“Quinn.”

She jolted upright in her chair at the sound of the deep, gravelly baritone she had dreamed about over and over every night for the past six weeks. The same voice that had whispered in her ear while they made love, saying her name like a litany, shouting it out as he came. Quinn forced herself to look up and her gaze locked on the Caribbean-colored eyes of Ricochet Brennan.

Shocked at what she saw, her hand flew to her mouth in horror. “Holy— what happened to you?”

Swollen, purple to almost black bruises surrounded one of Rick's beautiful turquoise eyes. His full lower lip was split in the middle, a just-healed scab threatening to break open with the slightest movement. Quinn wanted to cry over the damage done to his gorgeous face.

A sarcastic bark erupted from Rick's throat. “Maybe I should ask the same of you.”

Quinn's heart fell into her stomach at the hostility in his voice. She felt her lip quiver and those damn tears pressing against the back of her eyes.

Apparently, I'm not forgiven.

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“I’m so sorry, Rick.”

Another sarcastic laugh. “Yeah, I’m sure you are.”

Quinn’s gaze dropped guiltily to her ragged fingernails. She felt like a complete loser, tongue-tied with no idea what to say to make things right with him. A beeping sound grabbed her attention. By the time she looked up, the door leading into the gym was closing. Rick was gone.

Just like me, gone without saying goodbye.

Blinking back the imminent tears, Quinn tried unsuccessfully to focus on the stack of papers on her desk.

You knew he’d be pissed, Quinn. Don’t act like you didn’t expect the cold shoulder.

Quinn didn’t expect open arms, but she did expect Rick to at least listen to her explanation. He was hurt more by her actions than she had anticipated.

Quinn finished up with her work at five sharp, slipping into the break room for her purse and sneaking out the front door of the gym like a coward. Once in the safety of her tiny apartment, she shut the door and leaned against it, her heart thumping wildly against her ribcage.

Drained, she kicked off her shoes, making her way to her kitchen to grab a drink. After pulling a half-full bottle of vodka out of the freezer and a glass from the dishwasher, Quinn stopped and changed her mind. She put the glass down and

brought the entire bottle into her bedroom. Curled up alone on the bed all night, weeping into her alcohol was Quinn's only plan, and right now it didn't sound like such a bad one.

Rick twitched as he sat on the large grey couch that faced the windows of his Midtown condo. The city looked peaceful from up here, lit up and sprawling into the night in every visible direction. Peaceful was about as far as possible as you could get from how Rick felt inside. Agitated, he got up and tossed his icepack into the sink. He knew better than to have gone into the cage when his head wasn't in the game. It was his own fault that Ben caught him with a mean right hook/upper cut combo the other day, busting up his face.

He had needed to feel grounded to something or someone in that moment or he would have totally gone off the rails and got himself hurt or worse. He went out to all his usual haunts for a hookup, but when a woman would act interested, the thought of being with someone besides Quinn made him sick. He tried to go through the motions, desperately wanting to fuck her from his mind, but he couldn't do it. Instead of making him forget her, all it did was confirm his belief that Quinn was different, that she was better than any of those women, that he actually fucking missed her.

Now I know I'm really fucked up. I figured I'd be the one to hurt Quinn in the end. It turns out she held all of the power and cut me deeper than I ever thought possible.

His nightmares had been getting worse since Quinn left. More than once he had woken up covered in sweat, the dreams so realistic he swore his leg was hot and he could smell burning flesh.

Needing someone to talk to before he lost his mind, Rick snatched up his phone and scrolled through the contacts. Once he found the one he wanted, he hit send before he could change his mind. Rick impatiently tapped his fingers on the dark marble countertop as it rang.

“Ricochet?”

His entire body relaxed at once. Rick hadn’t realized how tense he was until he heard the voice of his former Recon unit teammate.

“Hey Dash.”

“Holy shit. Never thought I’d hear from you again. At least, not until we both turned eighty and met up at some Vet function for used up old Marines or some sentimental crap like that.” Dash chuckled at his own joke.

“Yeah, I guess I haven’t been great at keeping in touch.”

“No,” his former teammate said flatly, “you haven’t. Not that I blame you.”

“How’s it been?”

Rick still felt an overwhelming sense of guilt for what happened in Iraq two years ago. Bixby had been injured by shrapnel and required surgery to repair an artery. He wasn’t able to return to active duty. Rick himself had needed several surgeries and skin grafts taken from the front of his thigh to heal the burns he suffered on the back of his leg. He took an honorable discharge instead of waiting to be kicked out for poor psych evals.

Rick couldn’t get past what happened that night, how he failed his team. He had known he would never pass evals to go back with his unit and even if he did, he wouldn’t have put his team in danger by leading them while unfit for duty. Starting fresh with Mack and a whole new team was what he needed to be able to work in special ops again.

“The new guys are pretty cool. I got promoted to C.O.”

“Hey Dash, that’s awesome, really. Although, I can’t imagine following your sorry ass into enemy territory.” Rick laughed with his friend, a man he’d known since Recon boot camp where they both toughed it out under Mack’s brutal instruction almost ten years ago.

“Well, I wouldn’t follow me either,” Dash joked. “Seriously man, what’s going on? You wouldn’t call me just to catch up on Recon shit.”

Rick sighed, scratching the back of his head nervously. “Sometimes, I think you know me too well, staff sergeant. I just... fuck. I don’t know, Dash. You heard I’m working for Mack, right?”

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence before Dash replied. “I may have heard something like that.”

Rick didn’t worry about the gossip. It was a well kept secret

et throughout the elite Special Forces units where the private sector jobs were and who they were with. Mack’s operation was the best in the country at what they did, one the military used often.

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Rick cleared his throat. “Okay, then I won’t explain that part. There’s a girl.”

Laughter poured through the phone, loud and never-ending.

Rick frowned. “Hey asshole, it’s not fucking funny.”

Dash struggled to catch his breath. “The fuck it’s not! Ricochet, are you calling me to discuss your girl problems?”

“You know what Dash, you’re a real fucker. Forget it—”

“Shut up, Rick. I’m just busting your balls. I know exactly why you called me. I’m the married one, the one who had to leave his wife behind every time we were sent out, with her not knowing if I’d ever come back. The other guys were fuck ‘em and leave ‘em, just like you. Am I right?”

“Maybe,” Rick said cautiously. Years of working and living with the man made Dash damn near psychic when it came to figuring out his teammates.

Dash snorted. “Yeah, maybe. Tell me about the girl.”

Rick smiled despite the hurt and anger he felt towards Quinn for running away like she did.

“I don’t know. She works here... has a lot of secrets, Dash. A lot. I can see that shit in her eyes, you know? The eyes of a person who’s been through hell and is clawing her way out.” He wandered back towards the windows, looking down at the cars

passing by on the city streets.

Dash was silent while Rick struggled to explain.

“She uh... she left without a word. Was gone for six weeks. Now she’s back and it’s just fucking weird. I’m not used to this shit.”

“You mean actually feeling something?”

Rick grunted.

“Man, if you don’t let that shit with your family go, you’ll never have a relationship with this girl, or with anyone for that matter.”

“Fuck, what are you now, a goddam head shrink?”

“No, I’m a guy who knows you. I met your dad and your brothers. I know your mom left you all high and dry and your dad and your brothers tainted your view of women. When your dad was told she OD’d, he didn’t even let you mourn her. That’ll fuck you up. I’ve told you more than once to get it out so you can let that shit go, Rick.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

“Maybe? You know I’m right,” Dash chuckled. “I’m always right. You weren’t ready to change back then. Sounds to me like you are now.”

Rick scrubbed a hand down his face and winced, forgetting about his black eye. This conversation was getting uncomfortable. He didn’t want to tell his ex-teammate that his former commander Ricochet Brennan, a hard as nails, ball-busting, special ops Marine and Muay Thai expert, was quite possibly in love with a girl who fucked him and coldly ditched him. “I should go. Thanks Dash.”

“Anytime Ricochet.”

“We’ll catch up later. I want to hear all about the two new guys.”

“You know I can’t tell you anything. Classified and all that.”

Rick smiled. “Yeah, I know. Say hi to Tess for me. Talk to you later.”

He could practically hear his friend grin over the phone. “Later.”

Purge the demons of his past? Get over his fucked up childhood? Easier said than done.

Needing to confirm that his childhood was indeed fucked up, he dialed another number. It was answered almost immediately.

“Rick?”

“Hey Brandon.”

“Baby brother! How’s it going? I never hear from you anymore.”

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Rick swallowed thickly, an unfamiliar anxiety blossoming in his chest. “Good. I’m good. How are you?”

His brother chuckled. “Really good. Actually, I was going to call you next week.”

“Oh?” Rick and his middle brother had been the closest of the three Brennan boys. Their oldest brother, Kyle, was a dick ninety percent of the time growing up just like their dad. “What were you calling me about?”

“I’m getting married.”

Rick froze, listening to his own heavy breathing as he stood with the phone to his ear.

“Rick? Hey man, you still there?”

“Shit.” Rick said in disbelief, rubbing his eyes with his free hand. “You’re getting married? Is this a joke?”

Brandon laughed again. “No bro, it’s not. I want you to come visit and meet Tara. Dude, she’s awesome. You’re gonna love her.”

Rick slowly lowered himself to his couch, in complete shock. The Brennan brothers were raised by a bitter, lonely, misogynistic man. Trained from an early age not to let women get their proverbial claws into them, because all they want is to take their heart... use it, and shred it to pieces.

“But... I don’t understand. You... you never even had a girlfriend?” Rick was

flabbergasted. Yeah Brandon was the most sensitive of the three boys, but he still took their dad's advice to heart, never getting close to anyone he dated.

Brandon made a dismissive noise over the phone. "All bullshit. I faked it around dad... and around you and Kyle. Sorry man, I didn't know where you two stood. Didn't want dad beating on me for being a sensitive pussy." Brandon paused. Rick heard his brother sigh deeply. "I had a steady girlfriend all through college. I was very much in love with her."

Rick's eyes nearly bulged from his head. "What? And you never said anything to me?"

His brother huffed. "Like I said, dad, and Kyle... god Rick, I didn't want to hear their bullshit. I don't feel the same way dad does. Not all women are like mom."

"I just can't believe you never told me." Rick was disappointed, both in his brother for not confiding in him, and himself for not being available for his brother to come to.

"Would you have listened? Honestly?"

Rick paused, thinking it over. "No. I wouldn't. Until recently, that is."

"Oh ho! Another Brennan gets bitten by the bug?" Brandon laughed.

"Funny. And yeah, I guess you could say I've been bitten by something, Bran."

"Well little bro, tell me what's up?"

Rick explained his situation with Quinn, leaving out the hired mercenary part. By the time he was done going through it, his head was pounding and he was even more

confused.

“Well, the question is, do you love her?”

“Bran, I don’t know. Maybe. I think so. How would I even know?”

“What does it feel like if you imagine never seeing her again?”

His brother’s words pierced his heart like a dagger and his breath hitched. Brandon must have heard it, because he didn’t wait for Rick’s response.

“That’s your answer, Rick. Do what you have to do to be happy. Fuck dad and fuck Kyle. If they can’t be happy for me or for you, then you and I don’t need them in my life. Go get your girl. You’ll regret it if you don’t.”

“Yeah,” Rick rasped. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

“I’ll call you next week and we’ll figure out a time to meet up. Hang in there little bro.”

“Thanks Bran. And congratulations. I’m sure Tara is a great girl.”

“She is. Bye.”

“Bye.”

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The world must be spinning off its axis— I'm in love, Quinn is gone, and my brother is getting married. Holy fuck.

Rick tossed the phone on the couch next to him, his surreal conversation with his brother replaying in his head. He knew what he wanted to do, he just didn't know how to do it or if Quinn would even be interested in seeing him. Or maybe he was stupid to think about being with her and he should salvage his tattered ego by walking away. Once more, a pain stabbed him in the chest when he thought about never being with Quinn again. He absently put his hand up to rub the spot over his heart.

This was going to take sacrifice on his part, and a whole lot of patience that Rick wasn't sure if he had... emotions and shit he didn't know anything about.

Fuck, was this even worth it?

As Rick said the words to himself, he already knew the answer to his question. Yes, Quinn was most definitely worth it, but she had already burned him once. Could he withstand going through it again?

Can't get any worse, right? What have I got to lose? Besides my mind.

Chapter 2

Quinn didn't see much of Rick the first week she was back, just that one time at the front desk, and in passing when she cut through the gym. She didn't avoid him, but she didn't engage him in conversation either. It was horrifically awkward with Quinn spending most of her time ducking her eyes or burning from humiliation.

I'm a total wuss. He hates me.

The couple of times they made actual eye contact, it seemed as if Rick had something he wanted to say, but he never made a move to approach her or try to talk to her. Quinn felt beyond stupid. She knew she screwed it up royally. But in all honestly, she really did need to fix her own life before attempting any kind of relationship. Hell, she still hadn't filed divorce papers to rid herself of Travis, the human cancer. She couldn't be who she wanted to be with Rick. And who even said he wanted anything with her anyway? Maybe it was presumptuous to assume he thought of her as anything but a fun night? Maybe he was glad she left and just nursing a bruised ego?

"Quinn?"

She glanced up from her computer to find Mara Paxton standing in front of her desk.

"Hey Mara." Quinn attempted a smile, but the best she could do was weak and unconvincing.

Mara's perfect red lips turned down. Quinn was a little hurt when her friend gave her a harsh glare. "What the hell happened to you? Everyone was so worried. Rick was a complete mess. What on earth did you do to that man?"

Oh.

"Mara," Quinn hissed under her breath, "could we discuss this somewhere else?"

Mara looked around the empty lobby, puzzled. "There's no one here, Qu

inn."

"I know, but..." her eyes darted towards the inner door, "anyone could come out at

any time.” Quinn didn’t want to tell Mara that she was afraid Rick would come into the lobby and be furious that she was discussing their hookup.

“Fine, but we’re getting together this weekend, and you’re telling me what’s going on with you.” Mara put her hands on her hips and attempted to give Quinn a stern look, but a smile broke through.

Quinn couldn’t help it. Despite feeling like a class-A jerk, she laughed. “Fine, fine. I have to meet with my lawyer Saturday, but I can meet you for lunch on Sunday.”

“Okay, and you’re also going to tell me why you have a lawyer.”

“Oh, I forgot. Here.” Quinn scribbled something down and pushed a piece of paper across her desk. “I finally have a cell phone. This is my number.”

“Wow. Joining the twenty-first century, are we? How forward of you.”

“I know. I figured it was time.”

Quinn didn’t bother explaining to Mara that Travis had never allowed her to have a phone, or that she had no money to get one until she claimed her father’s estate. She curled up her fingers to run them over the jagged ridge from the scar on her right palm, a silent reminder that she did have it in her to be strong.

“I’ll call you tomorrow to set something up,” Mara said just as Clint emerged from the back, sliding his arm around Mara’s waist. He dwarfed his fairly tall wife, making her look waifish in comparison to his enormous body.

“Ready to go, babe?”

Mara looked up at her husband lovingly. “Yep. Let’s go.” She turned to Quinn, “I’ll

call you.”

“See you Monday, Quinn,” Clint called out as the couple left the building.

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Quinn waved and sat back heavily in her chair. Mara and Clint were so happy together, in a healthy, normal marriage. Was it too much to ask for the same? Not every relationship out there was the abusive nightmare she had with Travis.

She just needed to convince herself that she deserved better than Travis— that she was good enough for someone to love. Until then, she was better off alone, no matter what her heart was saying.

The cab dropped Quinn off in front of a five-story brick office building in the heart of Atlanta's Midtown. She hurried inside after realizing she would be late for her meeting with the lawyer managing her father's estate. Fifteen minutes later, Quinn was being ushered into an upscale office. The polished wood bookcases that lined the walls were overflowing with large legal books of all shapes and sizes and smelled like the inside of a library.

The man behind the desk came around to meet her next to a sizeable conference table near the door. It was littered with stacks of files, though all were neatly arranged.

"Mrs. Hardy, good to finally meet you in person."

Quinn flinched at the lawyer's use of Travis's last name.

"It's Miss Wallace now. Good to see you too, Mr. Wheeler."

"Call me John, please." The forty-something year old man with dark eyes and lightly greying hair smiled at Quinn, gesturing for her to take a seat at the large conference table.

“Then call me Quinn. Thank you, John.”

He pulled a manila file from the top of one of the stacks and opened it. She couldn't see much, but she did catch a glimpse of her father's address listed at the top of the first page.

“Well, let's get down to business, Quinn, since the trust is paying a considerable hourly fee for us to meet on a Saturday. Shall we?” John winked, unbuttoning the jacket of his very expensive looking suit.

Quinn nodded in agreement.

“Good. Good. So, you went through the contents of your father's residence, correct?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Great. The realtor will have it on the market by next Friday at the latest. That gives the painters and maintenance workers a few days to spruce the place up.”

“Okay.”

John shuffled through a few papers, pulling a small pile out. “The trust is available for you to access immediately, which I see you already did.” He flipped through the pages, skimming them briefly as he spoke.

“I needed a phone. And money for gas.” Quinn felt her neck grow hot. It was humiliating to have to justify purchases made with her own money. It made her feel like she did when Travis controlled everything... weak and helpless.

What Travis hadn't known, however, was that she made out the check to the grocery store ten dollars above the transaction amount every week, allowing her to save a

significant amount of money over the two years they were married. He checked everything to keep her trapped, dotted every i and crossed every t, but he never thought to check her weekly grocery receipt.

Quinn made a fist with her right hand and shoved it under the table, her fingertips digging into her scar.

John reached over and patted her upper arm comfortingly. “Don’t worry about how you spent it, Quinn. It’s your money. Your father put no stipulations on the trust. It belongs to you.”

She exhaled in relief that he wasn’t judging or chastising her. “Thank you, John. This is just so... strange for me. To have money, I mean.”

The lawyer smiled. “I do this all the time, so if you have any questions please ask.”

“Okay.” Quinn shoved her other hand under the table as it began to shake. “I—I do have a question.”

John looked at Quinn intently, waiting for her to continue.

“I have a husband. An ex, actually. We’re... separated. I don’t want him to get any of my father’s money and I don’t want him to know about it. Is—is that legal?”

The lawyer kept his expression neutral, but Quinn saw a flash of pity in his dark eyes. “Perfectly legal, Quinn. Spouses have no claims on inheritances unless you put the money into a joint account. I take it you won’t be doing that?”

“No. And I want it to stay in my maiden name. I’ll be taking my name back legally and dropping my first name in favor of my middle. Also, I want to file for divorce. Do you do that?”

Quinn shoved her hands underneath her thighs to stop the trembling after letting everything spill out of her mouth at once. She didn't want John to see how weak and unnerved she was to discuss Travis, but damn it felt good to say it all out loud.

"I don't handle divorces, but my colleague, Linda, does. I can give you her card and have her call you." John's dark gaze caught Quinn and she swore he could see right through her, that he knew what Travis had been doing to her while they were married. She didn't know how, but he knew. John winked again, lightening the mood. "She's very good. Linda's been compared to a bulldog in high heels."

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Quinn smiled. “Thank you.”

John leaned close, his smirk conspiratorial. “He doesn’t need to know any of this, okay?”

“Okay,” Quinn whispered. She breathed out, the tight muscles in her neck and shoulders relaxing. She was relieved that John seemed to know to tread lightly in regards to her failed marriage.

She didn’t want to talk about Travis. Not today, not ever.

“Does it have to be me, chief?” Rick stood in Mack’s office, his hands twitching at his sides as he stared down his boss. All he wanted to do was get in the ring and train, to punch out his frustrations and drown his emotions in sweat and blood. Mack, unfortunately, had other ideas.

“Yes. And believe me, I wish it didn’t have to be you. Hell, you barely passed your last psych eval. You probably shouldn’t be going back in the field for another month. But this op is delicate, you’ve been cleared, and you’re the only one who knows the terrain and the players.”

“Fuuuck!” Rick laced his hands behind his head and focused on the ceiling so he wouldn’t lose his shit. Sighing, he pulled a hand down his face, raking it over the three-day old stubble he had grown in simply because he was too damn tired to bother shaving. “Fine. Give me the info.”

Mack tossed a red file across his desk. “That’s everything. Talk to Tucker. You and

Nolan 1

eave at eighteen-hundred hours.”

Rick’s head snapped up. “That’s in six hours! Are you fucking kidding me?” Quinn just got back this week and Mack wanted to send him thousands of miles away? That meant he wouldn’t get to talk to her before he left. Not that he did much talking when he actually saw her, no— he ducked and ran, avoiding her like the plague. Afraid of being rejected again by a tiny, fragile girl.

Mack frowned, his eyes boring holes into Rick. “You’ve left with less time to prepare before. Plus, you have an eight-hour flight and a transfer to the ship to fine-tune the op. Now,” Mack stood from his chair, glaring at his employee, “get your ass to Mission Control and talk to Tucker. Nolan is on his way in. Expect to be ready to brief him.”

Rick pressed his lips together into a tight line. He snatched the folder up and stormed out of Mack’s office to talk to Tucker and wait for Dane.

This has fucking disaster written all over it.

Rick sat in the back of the UH-1Y Venom military helicopter, strapped to one of the jump seats. He was strapped, painted, and ready to go.

“You ready?” Dane yelled from across the aisle.

“Yeah, I’m ready, killer!” The loud rotors nearly drowned out their words.

The two men had crammed every last bit of intel for this op into their brains during the six-hour flight to Panama. Then again on the two-hour helicopter transport to the amphibious assault ship stationed in the Pacific Ocean fifty miles off of the coast of

Ecuador. Once there, they reviewed the operation one last time with Mission Control in Atlanta from the bridge of the giant Marine Corps battleship. Rick and Dane were courteously afforded the use of the facilities of the U.S. government, but were not allowed to divulge information or ask for assistance from any of the crew. Officially speaking, the U.S. government had no knowledge of their operation.

A member of the crew wearing a black, non-descript flight suit entered the cargo hold of the military helicopter. “Alright boys, we’re two minutes from the drop zone. Make sure your GPS is on and functional, you have eyes and ears, and your gear is strapped.”

Dane and Rick unbuckled from their seats, moving to stand next to the door. The crewman tethered his own harness to a large metal loop welded to the wall and slid open the side door, letting the loud wind roar in. The humid air swirled through the helicopter in a deafening tornado.

“Ready!”

Dane got into position, crouching over the open space.

“Go!”

He disappeared into the night sky somewhere over Venezuela.

Rick pulled down his night vision goggles, lined up with the edge of the door, and waited for his signal. He used the last few seconds to think about Quinn, knowing once he jumped, he would have to focus one hundred percent on the mission. He remembered her full lips, her thick hair, the way her large amber eyes looked up at him as he sank his cock into her. The loud thump thump thump of the rotors beat in the background, almost lulling him into a state of total peace.

“Go!”

He pushed off of the doorway and let the free fall wipe his mind clean.

Chapter 3

“Quinn! Over here!”

Quinn no sooner stepped inside Twist, a trendy tapas bar near the gym, than she heard Mara Paxton calling her name. She quickly crossed the restaurant to meet her very excited friend.

“Hey! You look great!” Mara grinned and gave Quinn a quick hug, making her smile for the first time in a week.

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“You do too, Mar. How’s Clint?”

Mara’s cat-like green eyes twinkled with mischief. “Oh, you know. He’s great.”

Quinn laughed at Mara’s lust filled expression. “You can’t talk about your husband without your mind going straight to his crotch, can you Mara?”

Mara pursed her lips, pretending to think about it for a minute. “Nope. It’s pretty spectacular.” She lifted her glass and took a big sip of her drink.

“That looks good, I need one.” Quinn gestured towards Mara’s glass.

Mara flagged down the waiter and ordered a margarita for Quinn. Once Quinn’s drink was delivered, Mara raised an eyebrow at her friend.

“So, what’s up girl? What happened between you and Rick? Obviously something went down, because the boy has been messed up ever since you up and pulled a Houdini.” Mara leaned across the table, her eyes fixed on Quinn.

“Well,” Quinn shifted uncomfortably, “first he uh... he kind of spied on me while I went on that date with the bartender, Chase.”

Mara frowned. “What do you mean he spied on you?” Her indignation would have been hilarious had Quinn actually been on speaking terms with Rick.

Quinn huffed loudly. “I mean, he was sitting in his car, watching Chase drop me off after our date. Then he knocked on my door right after Chase left and insisted he

wasn't going to let me go out with other men without letting me know he was interested."

Mara's mouth dropped open in shock. "Rick did that? Our Rick? From Sanctum? He made this big declaration and demanded that you give him a chance?"

"Yes."

"Holy shit." She fell back in her chair. "That's just about the most romantic thing I've ever heard." Mara's face went all gooey and starry-eyed.

Quinn couldn't help but melt a little at the memory. "Yeah, I know, it was. So then he kissed me and—"

"He what?" Mara squealed, bouncing up and down. "And you...?" Quinn squirmed under her intense scrutiny, wincing when Mara pointed and screamed. "Holy crap, you did it with him!"

"Shhhhh," Quinn admonished her loud friend, glancing around to be sure no one heard her outburst. "Yes... I did." Mara's eyes practically bugged out of her head. "But then I sort of had a major freak out in the middle of the night and left him lying there alone in my bed with no explanation... for six weeks." Quinn shrank as she confessed to her midnight escape.

Mara blinked rapidly, finally sitting still, stunned. Then she leaned forward and threw up her hand as if to say stop. "Wait. Rick made this romantic declaration, which by the way, he never does, you have what I assume was unbelievable, mind-blowing sex..." Quinn nodded when Mara paused for her to answer. "He spent the night at your place, which he also never does, and the result is that you skipped out of town on him with no word for six weeks?"

Quinn could feel her face heating up with the shame of having her actions replayed for her. She dropped her gaze to the table. “Yes.”

To Quinn’s surprise, Mara started laughing. Snorty, teary, ugly, cackling-type laughing. Quinn’s brow wrinkled as she stared at her friend open-mouthed until Mara could get a hold of herself.

“Mara! It’s not funny!” Quinn felt like kicking her under the table.

“No, it really is Quinn,” Mara said, gasping for breath and trying to wipe the tears from her eyes with her napkin. “I mean, it’s not, but it sooo is. If you knew how many times Rick has done that to women. Hell, that’s why he’s called Ricochet. Fuck, it’s just too ironic. The karma of it all.” Mara took a big sip of her drink, tears still running down her face from her hysterics.

Quinn felt herself gearing up to defend Rick. “No, Mara! It’s not! I left because I’m fucked up! Broken! My ex-husband screwed me up so badly that I don’t trust men. I threw Rick away because I’m a coward!”

“Ex-husband? You were married?” Mara practically fell off of her chair.

Quinn couldn’t meet Mara’s probing stare. “Technically, I’m still married— that’s what the lawyer is for,” she mumbled.

“Quinn!”

She threw up her hands. “I know, Mara! I know! Okay? I’m a liar and a terrible person! But, if you knew what he did to me—” her words caught in her throat, “how he treated me, you’d understand.” She held in a sob as her voice cracked.

Mara slid her hand across the table to cover Quinn’s. “So make me understand.”

Quinn told Mara everything. Things she never confided in anyone except for the therapists at the various women's shelters— how she left home to get away from her father who was angry at his early retirement, how she met Travis her sophomore year at Texas A&M when he was a campus security guard, how he encouraged her to drop out to marry him and immediately turned into an abusive jerk, moved her to the middle of nowhere and isolated her from everyone and everything she knew. All of it poured out of Quinn as if she were unburdening her soul in confession.

“Jesus, Quinn. I can't believe you lived like that for as long as you did.” Mara's brows pulled together, her normally happy mouth turned down in the corners.

Quinn's shoulders slumped, her head hanging, “I'm so embarrassed, Mar. I'm a reasonably intelligent person, I should have seen it, should have known Travis was like that before I married him.”

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Mara's hand slammed down on the table, rattling the glasses and causing Quinn to startle. "Don't talk like that! Abusers are very skilled at hiding their true colors, Quinn. My dad was like that, strung my mother along for twenty fucking years before she finally left. He could be very charming when he had to be. Shit, most people in our town would never have believed he was the asshole we knew behind closed doors."

Quinn sniffed quietly, trying to hold in the strong emotions and empathy she felt coursing through her. "Thank you, Mara." She gulped down her drink, letting the liquid courage loosen her enough to ask a question, even though she wasn't so sure she wanted the answer. "So, while I was gone... Rick, did he?" She paused, fingering her glass, "Did he go out at all? You know, with women?"

Mara's eyes saddened for her friend, and that was all the confirmation Quinn needed. Tears built up behind her eyes as she stared at the table, burning almost as much as the hot pain that stabbed directly into her heart. "I—I should have assumed. I mean... I deserve it. It's not like we were dating or anything."

She felt the warmth of her friend's hand on top of hers, and with a sob, a single tear escaped, rolling down her cheek. Quinn wiped at it angrily with the back of her free hand.

Mara squeezed her hand, letting her gather herself together

. "I only know that he went out with Dane, not what happened. If you feel anything for him Quinn, you need to do something about it. Don't let your ex taint your future. He already took so much from you. Trust me, I know what that does to a person.

Whether it's with or without Rick, just do what makes you happy... for yourself. You left that asshole husband of yours, now take your life back."

Quinn managed a shaky smile, but still felt as if she let something potentially great slip through her fingers and she wasn't sure if she would ever be able to get it back.

Quinn went to work Monday with a new attitude. She was going to put all of her baggage behind her— Travis, her dad, her fears, and start over as a new person. First order of business, repair her friendship with Rick. She smiled as she entered the break room at Sanctum, grabbing a cup of coffee before heading for her desk.

"Hey Xander!" Quinn waved to the beautiful Latino man as he went into the conference room.

"Quinn," he nodded without making eye contact and went through the door without another word or a smile.

Quinn frowned at his icy reception, an uneasy feeling churning in her empty stomach. Usually Xander was very friendly and talkative, so his strange behavior rang in her head like an alarm bell.

Quinn peered into the conference room before the door clicked shut, getting a glimpse of every single one of Mack's trainers seated around the table with haggard, sleep-deprived expressions on their normally tough exteriors. She didn't get a good look, but Quinn was almost positive she didn't see Rick in there. Something about the moment sent a shiver down her spine.

Shrugging off the strange sense of dread, she went to the lobby to boot up her computer and start her day.

By the five o'clock, Quinn still hadn't caught sight of Rick, and the other employees

of Sanctum had a decidedly pissy attitude. Quinn actually leapt out of Dane's way when she saw him storming down the hall with a downright hostile look on his face.

Dejected and tired, Quinn climbed the stairs to her apartment, drained from an entire day spent worrying about what she would say to Rick when she saw him. It never occurred to Quinn that there was a possibility that she wouldn't see him at work. The anxiety she felt from having an emotional confrontation hanging over her head was a thousand times worse than just getting it over with.

Rick didn't show up on Tuesday, or Wednesday, or even Thursday. By Friday, Quinn was practically crawling out of her skin from a deep-seated anxiety. She spent most of the day at her desk, absently shredding post-it notes into micro-sized pieces while staring at the door.

"Quinn."

Quinn scrambled, her arms flailing as she nearly fell out of her chair.

"God, Mack." She grabbed her chest, hoping to calm her racing heart. "You scared me to death."

"Sorry kid. You can go home, we're closing up early today."

Quinn studied Mack's face. The man looked older, the age lines crossing his scarred skin seemed deeper somehow.

"Mack? Is everything okay? I've noticed that it's been quiet here this week and... and everyone is kind of off." She wasn't brave enough to ask specifically about Rick.

He caught her with his sharp gaze, his dark eyes shining with concern. "Everything's fine, Quinn. Go on home. I'll see you Monday." Mack gave her an unconvincing

smile before heading back into the gym.

This week has been so strange.

Quinn quietly packed up her things and vowed to speak to Rick on Monday.

Monday came and went and still no sign of Rick. When Tuesday afternoon rolled around, Quinn had stressed herself out to the point of near-crippling nausea. Knowing she screwed up everything with Rick— that she bailed on him without an explanation— occupied her every waking thought. Not being able to clear the air with him had eaten away at Quinn until she had literally made herself sick.

By the end of the day, Quinn could hardly sit still. The anxiety was taking over her entire body, leaving her fidgeting and twitching in her chair. Drained from sitting around freaking out for ten days straight, she decided it was time to take action.

If he won't come to me...

Quinn typed quickly, hacking into the employee files on her computer after only fifteen minutes. It should have been easier, but Quinn was surprised at the level of security on Sanctum's computer system. One quick click later, a single piece of paper shot out of the printer. She snatched it up, thrust it into her purse, and hurried out to the parking lot.

Quinn started up Mack's old pickup, the loud rattling of the engine a welcome distraction to the rattling in her brain. She carefully turned the big tank of a truck out onto the main road before she lost her nerve and crawled into bed for the entire weekend. Mack said she could borrow his truck until she bought her own car, something Quinn didn't want to do until her name change went through. Travis could easily find her through DMV records.

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She laughed, wondering if Mack would have lent her his truck if he knew she didn't have a driver's license.

Traffic was heavy as she maneuvered the big old truck down Peachtree Road towards Midtown. The air-conditioning in it was iffy and a fifteen-minute drive ended up taking over forty-five agonizing minutes. By the time Quinn turned into a public parking garage on 10th Street, she was so sweaty and frustrated that she wanted to beat her fist on the steering wheel and scream at the top of her lungs.

Breathing deep and focusing on her task, Quinn walked half a block in the late afternoon heat until she was standing in front of a gleaming glass high-rise. She swallowed back the lump in her throat and went inside, silently losing her shit the entire ride up the elevator, trying to convince herself that she was doing what needed to be done.

When she stepped up to the door to Rick's condo, Quinn almost bailed out. Tired of avoiding confrontation, of avoiding feeling anything, of sitting in the passenger seat as her life went by, Quinn lifted her hand and knocked.

Chapter 4

A gentle knocking woke Rick from his erratic, often restless sleep. He bolted upright without thinking, wincing when a streak of pain lanced through his side like a white-hot poker. The door opened and a booming voice brought him fully awake.

"Ricochet! Looking good, man!"

Rick did his best to level an angry glare at the big man coming through the door without cracking a smile. “Don’t patronize me, Paxton. I’ll kick your ass sideways once I’m all healed up. I know I look like shit now, but you know I’m good for it.”

A loud laugh erupted from Clint, momentarily brightening the depressing, sterile hospital room. “I’m all for a good fight once you’re back on your feet. Hell, I’m all for a good fight whenever.” Clint ran his fingers through his strawberry blonde hair, leaving it slightly messy in the back.

“What are you carrying?” Rick asked, straining to see the package in Clint’s hands. Again, he tried to sit up, this time gasping in pain before lying back down.

Clint rushed to his bedside. “Don’t be stupid! You’ll tear the damn stitches.” He snatched up the remote control for the bed, elevating the top so Rick could rest comfortably in a sitting position.

“Fucking stitches. They itch.” Rick emphasized his point by scratching at the large white bandage on his lower abdomen.

“This isn’t your first rodeo, Ricochet. Suck it up and deal.” Clint handed Rick a bright pink, reusable cloth grocery bag. “Mara put together this care package for you. She insisted I bring it down here since you said she couldn’t visit.”

Rick rolled his eyes, but a hint of a smile twisted one corner of his mouth. “Thanks.” He opened the bag, chuckled, and immediately handed it back to Clint, wincing in pain. “Pax, you gotta put this over there.” Rick grimaced, motioning to the long bench under the window. “I can’t look at this right now. That tiger of yours is a fucking riot, man, and if I laugh, my side hurts like a son of a bitch. I already saw the copies of Combat Tactics and Guns & Ammo she put in there. You know damn well there’s more shit in that bag

that will crack me up and I'm way too sore to laugh right now."

Clint grinned, putting the bag by the window. "She's definitely got a sense of humor a mile wide."

"Yeah, she does." Rick said, his face falling.

So does Quinn. She's funny, and gorgeous, and charming... and she left your ass, stupid.

The large man grabbed a nearby chair, its blue fake leather peeling off the seat, and dragged it over to the bed. He flopped down onto it, the wood frame creaking in protest. "Rick, I'm not a fucking touchy-feely guy. Neither are you. Fuck, none of us at the gym are, right?" Rick nodded, his expression cautious. "I know you can't tell Quinn what happened in the field, but man... she's looking pretty torn up about you being missing from work."

Rick stiffened on the bed, suddenly defensive. "What's your point, Pax?" He really did not feel like discussing Quinn with anyone, let alone a coworker and husband of Quinn's best friend.

Clint huffed, his impatience with his deliberately obtuse friend showing. "My point is... Mara and Quinn have become close. She's been to the house a few times. I've seen her every day at work. She's a fucking wreck, dude. Maybe you should let Mara bring her down here—"

"No. Absolutely not." Rick shook his head in protest. "Anyway, they're releasing me tomorrow so there's no point."

Clint made a dismissive sound and stood up to leave. "There's always a point, Ricochet. Maybe this one will hit its mark, stick this time. You won't have to keep

skipping from girl to girl. Ever think about that?”

Rick didn't answer his friend. Instead he stared out at the trees in the courtyard outside his window. He spent every day and night thinking about Quinn, he certainly didn't want to discuss her with Clint. Besides, Quinn's actions spoke loud and clear— she wasn't interested.

“My wife's a stubborn woman, Rick. You'd do well to remember that.” Clint opened the door. “I'll see you later.”

“Later.” Rick said to an empty room.

His head dropped into his hands. Raking them down his scratchy, unshaven face, Rick exhaled deeply enough to feel a twinge in his side. He'd been shot before, but never gut-shot. Well, more like “hip-shot” actually, since the bullet skated in just below his body armor at the waist. It probably hurt more than almost every other injury he'd ever sustained simply because of its central location in his abdominal core. Every movement he made flexed the wound, sending fire ripping through his side.

After getting shot, Dane had somehow managed to haul Rick's limping ass the remaining half-mile to the helo. He was flown back to the amphibious battleship for emergency surgery, and then to the U.S. once he was deemed stable forty-eight hours later.

Sitting in a hospital room in Atlanta, with nothing but his own thoughts for the last three days, had just about tipped Rick's patience over the edge. He felt decent. Not great, better than he should but he was twitchy as fuck. The bullet didn't pierce anything vital and only nicked his small intestine, which was easily fixed. It was the entry and exit wound in the front and back that needed to heal, plus the doctors were monitoring for infection from the surgery.

Being stuck in bed was the worst kind of torture he could imagine. Rick used it to replay his time with Quinn over and over until his heart and head ached nearly as much as his wound. Maybe when Mack cleared him to come back to work he would talk to Quinn, try and get a better explanation for her behavior, because damn that fucker, Clint was right.

Rick wanted this one to stick.

“Three weeks, Mara! Three! It’s like he just... disappeared!” Quinn shouted across the pub table to her friend, the loud Friday night crowd making conversation near impossible. “I even drove to his condo. He’s not there, he’s not at work, he’s gone!”

Mara’s eyes narrowed, focusing in on Quinn with an air of seriousness. One brow arched up in accusation as she tapped a perfectly manicured nail on the edge of her glass.

Quinn felt the heat spread up her neck when she realized what a hypocrite she was being. “Okay, fine. So I left Rick hanging for six weeks. You’re right. Is that what he’s doing? Tit for tat? Out getting laid left and right while I suffer with not knowing? You know why I had to leave, Mar. I had things to get done and loose ends to take care of.” Quinn’s hands flew through the air rapidly to emphasize her point.

“I know that, Quinn. Rick doesn’t.” Mara’s beautiful features softened towards her distressed friend.

“And he won’t know if he won’t talk to me!” Needing something to occupy her nervous energy, Quinn twisted her unused straw around in her hands until it resembled a pretzel.

“He’s a man, Quinn. That means he’s stubborn and has an ego as big as this city, with an equal amount of pride. You hurt him.” She shook her head. “I can hardly believe it, but somehow you got through that tough as nails exterior of his and hurt him.”

“I’m trying to fix things, Mara. He needs to meet me halfway.” Quinn glanced around the room before landing back on Mara. Nervousness flooded her system as she realized she might have screwed up everything with Rick beyond repair. “We—we shouldn’t be together, I messed it up, but we can still be friends. If only I could see him.”

Mara sighed, as if resigned to do something she didn’t want to do. She bent down, reaching by her legs for her purse. “You didn’t get this from me, understand?” She tapped on her phone for a moment before dropping it back in her bag. Quinn saw her own phone light up on the table. “I just texted you Dane’s address. Rick should be there.”

“He’s with Dane? All this time he’s been hiding at Dane’s house to avoid me?” Quinn’s eyes bulged at the news, but hope surged through her body. If she could confront him, she could make him see that she didn’t leave him, she left to fix herself. Maybe they could still have some semblance of a relationship, as friends since he’d clearly moved on to other women.

The corners of Mara’s mouth pulled down slightly. “No, Quinn, he’s not hiding. I’ll let Rick tell you what happened, why he’s at Dane’s. It’s not my business to tell.” She picked up her margarita and held it up. “Now, we drink and forget all about men and their dicks!”

Confused and upset, Quinn mimicked Mara, clinking glasses with her before downing half of her glass of wine.

Quinn could hardly put on a happy face, when all she wanted to do was drive right over to Dane’s house and see Rick. Steeling herself, she tossed her hair over her shoulder. Screw him! Tonight, I’m having fun. She gulped down her drink and smiled at Mara, who was pleased to see her letting loose.

Tomorrow. I'll see him tomorrow.

Rick sat on Dane's back patio, staring off into space. He couldn't remember ever being this bored in his life. Even the Braves game he was listening to couldn't hold his interest. The doctor would only release him from the hospital on the promise that he would stay with a friend for at least a couple more days until his stitches came out. Ready to leave the torture of sitting in a hospital bed day after day—and the recurring nightmares from his time in the Marines each night—Rick eagerly agreed to whatever the doctor said.

Now, with Dane at work, Rick realized he wasn't that much better off here than he had been at the hospital, alone all day with only his torturous thoughts to occupy his time. At least the hospital had people coming in and out of his room that he could talk to.

Rick tried to stay busy so he wouldn't obsess over Quinn. He did his first brief workout that morning, walking some and attempting to strengthen his core. It was painful and frustrated him to no end that he couldn't work out the way he wanted. He wouldn't really be able to get back in shape until the stitches came out. They pulled too much when he moved around.

“Rick?”

His head snapped up at the faint sound of Quinn's voice coming from somewhere. He had sworn once he stopped the painkillers that the strange dreams would go away.

Am I so fucked up that now I'm imagining things while I'm awake and unmedicated?

“Rick?”

The second time he heard his name, it was louder and now he knew it wasn't his

mind playing tricks. Quinn was here. Rick chewed on his lip, deciding if he should man up and face her now, or stay quiet and put it off indefinitely.

Rubbing his tired eyes, Rick decided that if nothing else, he wasn't a coward. Dodging her at the gym had been a mistake. He might be a glutton for punishment when it came to Quinn, but he wouldn't be a coward.

"I'm in the back!" He hoped his voice was loud enough for her to find him. Walking to the front door sounded exhausting at this point, and frankly, he didn't really feel like getting up.

Quinn's slender frame came around the corner of Dane's house. Rick swallowed, his heart going a mile a minute at the sight of her. She was just as beautiful as always. Her long hair was pulled up into a high ponytail, her cheekbones were flushed with a hint of pink, and her amber eyes sparkled in the bright sunlight of the hot summer afternoon. She stopped when she saw him on the patio, watching him warily. His gaze zeroed in on her long, tan legs, bared to mid-thigh by her short skirt.

"What are you doing here?" Rick asked, finally getting his brain to function beyond gawking at Quinn's exposed skin. His resolve to keep from flat out begging her to be with him was already crumbling just from the sight of her.

Quinn's eyes darted off nervously and she twisted her hands together. "I—I wanted to talk to you. You haven't been at work. I thought you were avoiding me."

"I haven't been avoiding you, Quinn. I've been... busy." Not a complete lie, but not the entire truth either. Rick couldn't tell Quinn what he really did for a living, what Mack was running behind the scenes at the gym. He tried to sound unaffected by her presence, not wanting her to know how badly she hurt him when she disappeared that night.

“Busy?” Quinn looked around the yard, noting Rick in his casual T-shirt and shorts, his feet bare, looking the very p

icture of relaxation. He knew she didn’t buy his pathetic excuse, not for a single second. “You don’t seem very busy.”

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She knows you're lying. Distract her!

"I'm getting a drink, would you like one?"

Rick moved to stand up and twisted too far, too fast, forcing him to suck in a sharp breath at the discomfort.

Way to distract her, dumbass. Bring attention to the injury you can't explain.

Rick heard her gasp and saw Quinn's eyes zero in on his face as it contorted in pain. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?" She crossed the patio quickly. Her hands reached out, hesitating in the air between them. It made Rick sad that she wanted to help but was hesitant to touch him. Rick visibly deflated when her hands fell back down to her sides. He wanted those hands on him so badly that his skin tingled in anticipation.

"No. Yes—I mean, yes, I'm fine." He winced as he opened the patio door.

I'd be better if you'd touch me.

Rick sighed. He'd have to make something up. It wasn't as if he could tell her what happened on his mission. Were he not in so much pain, physically from the bullet wound and mentally from Quinn's presence, he'd laugh at the thought of explaining his injury. "Oh, this? It's just a through and through from a covert mission I was doing for Mack, who runs a secret mercenary for hire organization out of the gym doing off the books government black ops. No biggie."

"Let me get a drink and I'll explain."

Still suspicious, and now actively hovering close enough that he could smell her intoxicating scent, Quinn followed him inside. “I’ll get the drinks. You should be sitting.”

“I’m tired of sitting,” Rick lied as he grabbed two bottles of water out of his fridge, handing one to Quinn. Their fingers brushed as she took it from him. He inhaled at the spark that zapped between them, yanked his hand away, and took a step back—needing to put some distance there or he’d do something stupid. Like maybe rip her clothes off and worship every inch of her right here on Dane’s kitchen counter.

He went back outside and could hear Quinn following close behind. “It’s better for me to move around every once in a while.” Rick collapsed back into his seat, sweat beading on his brow from the pain and effort of so much activity. He watched cautiously as Quinn dragged over a chair, flopping down in it, her knees close enough to brush against his. He flinched at her hot touch, and then hissed through his teeth when the quick movement pulled at his stitches.

Quinn pulled a face. “Yeah, I can see how much better it is for you when you move.” Her face softened. Showing... concern? Rick was thoroughly confused. She left him in her bed. Vanished for a month and a half. Now she’s here... worried about his well-being? It didn’t make sense. If she gave a shit, she wouldn’t have taken off without explaining. “Tell me,” she urged kindly.

“Yeah, I just don’t really know where to start,” Rick admitted. He didn’t want to go there with Quinn, he couldn’t tell her everything even if he wanted to. Plus, Rick had to keep his emotions in check in order to protect himself from letting her rip out his heart again.

Who are you kidding? You still have frighteningly deep feelings for her that you don’t understand. You know you’d willingly offer up your heart again—even if it

meant getting it shredded over and over.

“Okay. Let’s start here.” Quinn reached out and gently touched above his knee, right at the hem of his cargo shorts, running a finger across the puckered, scarred flesh. “Why don’t you tell me about this? I noticed it... that night.” Her pale skin blushed crimson from the reference to their very hot, yet way too short, time together.

Rick’s muscle twitched from the contact, a warm, tingling sensation spread out from where her hand connected with his marbled skin. Her voice was soothing, comforting as she skimmed her fingers over his leg. She made Rick want to confide in her, to spill all of his secrets and unburden himself.

Why was she doing this to him?

He cleared his throat, knowing he needed to at least attempt to control himself around Quinn, even when every cell in his body screamed at him to grab her and sink into her warm depths. Rick grabbed his water and took a deep swig, hoping it would give him the time he needed to compose his thoughts. He didn’t know how much to tell her. He didn’t want to lay himself bare for her, yet he wanted her to know everything about him. The warring feelings inside of him had his heart racing in his chest.

“Shit.” He rubbed a hand over his disheveled hair, not believing he was actually going to tell her about that night in Iraq. “I was in the Marines. Recon. Enlisted when I was eighteen. They’re—”

“I know what they are. My dad was Force Recon, remember?”

Rick didn’t think she had ever divulged that information about her dad. He knew her father served in the Corps, but not that he was Recon. “Oh. Then you know what we do. What I did.”

“Yes.” Quinn bit her bottom lip. “Well, no, not really. Dad wasn’t allowed to discuss anything specific and I was too young.”

“Right. He wouldn’t have discussed it.” Rick squirmed uncomfortably. It was really hot out now, more so than earlier. Or maybe it was the fact that Quinn was still touching his thigh, her small hand only inches from his traitorous half-hard cock. A bead of sweat formed behind his ear and he could feel it slowly trickling down into the back of his shirt. The heat, her touch, her scent, the fact that he couldn’t move without hurting—he was going to go insane.

If only she would move that hand an inch or two higher... Shit!

He knew she was only touching him to get him to open up, but his dick didn’t get the message. Rick decided that talking might redirect the blood away from his crotch and back to his brain.

“I was burned.”

“Burned?” Her voice wavered. Quinn was probably imagining how it happened. He would spare her those horrific details, besides it was classified.

“It was a few years ago. I had to have skin grafts. That’s what the scars on the front are from. They had to harvest skin to use on the back of my leg where the fire damaged it beyond repair.” Discussing the old injuries was making them itch, a psychological reaction he had whenever he paid it too much attention.

Rick wanted to reach out and scratch his leg, but he didn’t want Quinn to move her hand, despite the fact that his logical side was telling him to back away, to put some space between them. He literally couldn’t will himself to do it. Her touch was soothing, even though it was beginning to arouse him to the point of discomfort. He couldn’t deny that he still wanted her, no matter what she had put him through.

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It was only part of the twisted enigma of feelings rushing through him. Rick warred between the urge to push Quinn away so he could protect his heart, to yank her onto his lap and press her body down onto his throbbing cock, to clutch her face and force her to tell him why she left him hanging for six weeks. But most confusing of all, was his desire to tell Quinn how deeply he felt for her.

Fuck, don't get involved Rick. Remember mom? Dad never let you forget it.

"That's awful, Rick. Is that why you left the Marines?" Quinn's hand lightly squeezed his thigh in a move meant to be soothing. His cock twitched in his cargo shorts, begging to be set free from its now painfully tight confines.

Goddamn dick!

Despite his overwhelming need, or maybe because of his overwhelming need, Rick shoved his chair back until he was out of reach. Quinn's hand fell and she quickly pulled it to her lap. He caught the flash of disappointment in her eyes, the quick show of vulnerability. But the need to protect his heart overrode any hurt feelings and that made Rick feel like a selfish bastard.

"Yes. Since I was overseas, I was taken to a hospital in Germany where they did the surgeries."

"Surgeries? More than one?" Quinn's mouth dropped open in shock.

Rick shrugged, trying to make it seem as though he was unaffected by his past when it was far from the truth. "Five, actually. The damaged area was pretty large. Th

en I returned to Georgia and spent time in Augusta where they have a burn unit. They helped with the rehab and monitored the grafts. By the time everything was done, I wasn't fit to go back into the field, so I took a medical discharge."

Rick looked up at Quinn, their eyes meeting again. The way she looked at him, combined with the memory of her touch, sent electric pulses over his skin, the nerves ultra-sensitized from his increased level of desire and six weeks without sex. He balled his hands into fists, willing his body to resist.

"It's hard to have your choices taken away from you, to not be able to decide for yourself what your life is going to be or where it's going to go. I'm sorry you lost that, Rick. I understand that better than you would think."

Rick stared at Quinn, trying to decipher the meaning behind her words. She sounded... well, sad.

All these fucking secrets...

Rick's head was really throbbing now. His instinct was to ask her what she meant, why she would understand what it was like to have no options, to have your future snatched away. But he couldn't worry about her, wouldn't let himself get in deeper. Rick didn't know if he could do what his brother did, if he could dive in headfirst and put himself out there for another rejection.

Panicking, he ignored Quinn's desolate tone and pretended she didn't say anything meaningful, pretended he didn't want to comfort her and ask what had happened to make her sound so hopeless. Instead, he pushed her away by acting like Ricochet, the asshole player most women saw when they met him.

"So— why are you here anyway? I thought your previous actions pretty much said what you wanted from me. Which was nothing."

Chapter 5

Quinn's head was spinning with so fast she couldn't process what just happened. Unable to hide it, she winced at the verbal slap Rick had used to backhand her. In the span of a single heartbeat, he had gone from kind to cruel. With her hopes that Rick could forgive her ruined, Quinn simply nodded. She understood that she had hurt his ego, she just hadn't realized how much until he coldly threw it back at her.

Standing up to leave, she stared at his face—so unbelievably attractive and expressive. Those shockingly turquoise eyes showed the depth of the damage she did to this man. He was obviously a very cautious person when it came to... well, pretty much everything. From entering her apartment to crossing a parking lot, Rick took everything in as if he was expecting to find danger around every corner. No one could be trusted. He had willingly given her that trust and she destroyed it.

Time to apologize and get out of here.

She stood at the edge of the patio, ready to leave after she said her piece. "I'm sorry, Rick, for what I did. I really am. I had to get my head on straight." Quinn paused, licking her dry lips. "My dad and I didn't get along real well. My mom died young, when I was a teenager. Dad had to quit the Marines to raise me and not a single day went by that he didn't remind me of that in some way. Not with words necessarily, it was his demeanor. It was as if the life had been sucked out of him, making him angry all the time. The military was his entire existence, it was all he knew."

"That's not your fault Quinn. He shouldn't have put that on you. But I don't see what that has to do with us or what you did."

Quinn glanced at Rick, his expression tight, then down at her feet. "I know. It didn't make it any easier then and it doesn't make it any easier now. Once I turned eighteen, I left for college and didn't look back. While I was away, he died. I never got to

apologize for leaving him or to thank him for giving up his career for me.”

And then I married Travis and put the final touches on completely fucking up my life.

“I’m sorry,” Rick whispered. She glanced back at him. Rick’s eyes told Quinn he meant it, but the silence that followed spoke volumes. He still didn’t trust her or understand why she left.

“I—I managed to avoid clearing out his house until now. That’s where I went, Rick. I was in a bad place when I got here. I needed to get all of that stuff taken care of before I could move forward with my life. It wouldn’t have been fair to either of us for me to get involved with you when my mind was so messed up.”

She watched as he squeezed his eyes shut, his palms pressing into his eyes and grinding down hard. “Why couldn’t you just tell me this instead of disappearing?”

Quinn hesitated, she could feel the blood rush out of her face leaving her dizzy and short of breath. She should tell him, but the thought of telling Rick about Travis had her on the verge of a full-blown panic attack. Her vision began to spin, darkness edging in.

This is why I can’t tell you. I can’t relive it, I can’t.

“Quinn? Hey. Breathe.” Suddenly, Rick was there. She could feel his strong hand on her shoulders, pushing her back onto the chair. Then one hand slid to the back of her neck and her head was shoved down between her legs. “Breathe, Quinn. It’s okay.” A firm grip continued to hold her head down while a large hand rubbed gentle circles on her back.

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Gradually, the panic receded and the spots behind her eyes disappeared. Quinn took a deep, cleansing breath. "I'm fine. You can let go."

"Sit up slowly," Rick instructed, removing his hands. The cold voice had been replaced with his usual warm baritone... he was back to the Rick she knew and cared about.

When he withdrew, she missed his touch immediately, wishing she could curl up on his lap, bury her head in the crook of his neck, and inhale the scent of his skin. Nearly sobbing out loud at the loss of someone she never really had, Quinn sat back up in the chair, quickly rubbing away the tears that had escaped.

Rick leaned towards her from his seat, grabbing both of her hands and covering them with his. The small gesture took away the last vestiges of anxiety, letting Quinn relax until her shoulder slumped. Her Rick was back, even if it was just for a little while to comfort her in this moment, she cherished it. Embarrassed by her freak out, she began to babble.

"I'm sorry about making such a scene. I—"

"Don't apologize for being human, Quinn. I just want to make sure you're okay."

See, he would have comforted anyone like that. Don't read into it and think it's Rick caring about you.

"I'm okay. I'll go. It's hot out here anyway." A shudder wracked her small body, causing her to wrap her arms around herself.

A pained look flashed across Rick's face. He exhaled deeply, blowing the breath out between pursed lips as he looked up at the sky. Resigned, he looked at her. "I don't know if you should drive yet. Why don't you wait a minute to make sure you're okay before you go?"

Quinn didn't speak as Rick got up slowly and led her back into the house. He motioned for her to have a seat on the sofa. It was painfully obvious he was favoring one side of his body as he lowered himself down next to her.

"You never did tell me how you were injured, why you missed work." When he sat, Quinn automatically tucked into Rick's side without thinking, needing the closeness of his body to keep her from spiraling back into darkness.

Rick frowned at her proximity, then she could feel his tense muscles relax into her as he made the decision not to fight her on it. "Oh... yeah that. I was training a guy out of town and took a hard uppercut. Nearly knocked me out cold. When I fell there was a dumbbell on the ground. I landed on it and needed stitches. No big deal."

Quinn sat silent for a moment. Rick's explanation sort of made sense, but something about it didn't feel right. "You missed work because you fell on a free weight? That doesn't seem like the type of injury to cause someone to miss work."

Rick's eyes darted to the floor. "Yeah, well..." He didn't finish his sentence.

Quinn was about to ask more questions when Rick suddenly turned to look at her, trapping her with his unwavering gaze. "Now, I want to know what happened out on the patio. What made you panic like that?"

Quinn had to will her body not to freeze up, to keep the blooming anxiety from taking root again. Swallowing, she knew she couldn't make things right unless she told Rick about Travis, but she couldn't. She wouldn't. She was not going to play the victim,

not in her new life.

Rick waited patiently for Quinn to start talking. Clearly, she didn't want to discuss whatever it was that nearly sent her into a panic attack. He saw her tiny hands trembling as she rubbed them up and down her thighs, as if she could force them to cooperate as long as she kept them moving. Watching her anguish was killing him. He wanted to kiss away her fears, offer to take her pain and suffer in her place. She wasn't going to talk to him— it was obvious. He was so sick of this invisible barrier between them. His secret job, her secret past... it was frustrating as hell.

See, this is why love doesn't work. It's too hard.

Rick remembered how his mom took off when he was a little kid, turning his dad into a total bastard, alone with three sons to raise. Right now, Rick didn't know who was right— his dad or his brother Brandon, who thought that their dad was full of shit and that Rick needed to let love happen whenever it presented itself. The two arguments played over in his head.

Don't let 'em get to you son. They'll tear your goddamn heart out. You remember that.

Dad, and Kyle... god Rick, I didn't want to hear their bullshit. I don't feel the same way dad does. Not all women are like mom.

He dropped his head into his hands, massaging his aching forehead. Rick was so fucking confused. Brandon sounded happy being in love, but god, his dad would think Rick was such a pussy if he could see him now, all broken up over a woman who already did exactly what his dad said she would do one day... leave.

That didn't stop Rick from wanting her and it definitely didn't make him feel any better. He hated that his dad was right, couldn't deny what Quinn did. Although, she

was back and trying to repair whatever they had left, which was more than his mom ever did. And Brandon— Brandon’s words gave him hope. Hope that maybe he could have something great and be happy with a woman someday.

Trying to be subtle, Rick shifted, hi

s confused cock starting to fill again simply from Quinn sitting with her warm thigh pressed against his. Much too late, he realized that inviting her inside was not a good idea. His body and his pride were too broken for what his dick desperately sought.

He coughed, needing her to either start talking or leave before his resolve broke and he led her to Dane’s guest bedroom, thus ending any chance at preserving his dignity... or his stitches. “Quinn? You were going to tell me what happened outside?”

Quinn reclined until her head was resting on the back cushion of the couch. She began speaking softly, so softly Rick had to tilt his head closer in order to hear.

“After I left home, I went to Texas A&M.”

“You went to college?” Rick smiled even though Quinn couldn’t see it. He knew she was smart. It was nice to have it confirmed.

“Yes. I have the first two years done of my computer engineering degree. It sounds silly, but I wanted to be a forensic computer specialist... a professional hacker. I was good, but—I didn’t finish.” She kept staring at the ceiling, unwilling to look at him.

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Rick watched, enthralled, as an adorable blush stained her cheeks. “Don’t be embarrassed about dropping out. Just getting as far as you did is a big deal. I went straight into the Marines, so college was never even on my radar.”

For some reason, the image of Quinn as a hacker popped into his head. She was sleek and sexy, dressed all in black, hunched over a massive bank of computers. The thought made his cock get even harder.

Just when I think she can’t get sexier, she tells me something like that and I nearly burst in my pants.

“Anyway, my dad died while I was away at school and I pretty much gave up.”

Quinn opened her mouth to continue, then changed her mind, mashing her lips into a straight line. Rick wanted to push her, to make her tell him whatever was on the tip of her tongue, but he didn’t. It was obvious that she was leaving something out of her story. But he figured it wouldn’t help his case to demand answers, so there was no point in getting upset. In fact, he needed to get rid of her before he did something stupid, like kissing her senseless and getting slapped in the face or worse— causing her to have another panic attack.

“You seem to be feeling better from your uh, panic attack. Probably good enough to drive home now.” He watched her cringe again at his forced callousness.

Great, turning back into that asshole Ricochet again.

Quinn twisted towards him, those damn haunting eyes of hers filled with so many

questions, probably about his bizarre hot and cold behavior. The look on her face was so heart wrenching he nearly fell to her feet and begged her to let him love her.

Christ, he really was losing it.

No. They weren't in too deep yet. It was better to put an end to it here and now than to have a messy separation later on down the road. Quinn already proved that she didn't want a commitment to him, and he proved in the past that he wasn't a commitment type of guy. They both got what they wanted, one night of hot sex. So what if he thought he felt something else or if Brandon put crazy ideas in his head? It was probably just his imagination or the painkillers he had been taking that made him feel that way.

Unfortunately, Rick couldn't even make himself believe his own bullshit. What he had felt, what he still felt was real. There was no other explanation. He was hopelessly in love with Quinn Wallace.

Fuck.

Acknowledging it made his stomach flip. Beside him, Quinn jumped to her feet, all but sprinting to the door. After his rude dismissal, she wanted to get away from him. He didn't stand a chance in hell at getting her back after his schizophrenic behavior today.

Why do I feel like I'm about to lose everything? I'm a trained killer, a fucking badass mercenary who parachutes into enemy camps in the dark of night, and this tiny girl can bring me to my knees with a single look.

The thought of not being with Quinn was painful, like a bullet to the heart, or to his lower quadrant as it was in this case. It was too much to endure. Rick limped after her, favoring his side as he walked. "Quinn!"

God, could I possibly be anymore confusing? Wanting her one minute and shunning her the next?

Quinn yanked open the front door, stopping when he called out her name.

“What is it Rick?” She sounded tired, exhausted actually, her posture defeated.

When he reached her, Rick held on to the doorframe for support, close enough to touch Quinn. The itch to reach out was overwhelming. The memory of that soft skin sliding beneath his body was in the forefront of his mind. As much as he wanted her, Rick chickened out, shoving his hands into his pockets so he wouldn’t skim his fingers down her cheek. “I—I’ll see you at work.”

Moisture glistened behind her large eyes, her long lashes damp with unshed tears. “Yeah, sure,” she whispered, right before hastily turning and walking to the street.

Rick closed the front door, leaning heavily against the thick wood.

What is Quinn not telling me?

She wasn’t ready for this, for a relationship with Rick, she all but admitted it. Hell, he obviously wasn’t ready for it. He let her go, he had to. He would stay away from her from now on. It was the right thing to do.

So why did it feel so fucking wrong?

Chapter 6

Quinn didn’t remember driving home from Dane’s house after she all but ran away from Rick... again. No, that wasn’t right. This time, he pushed her away. His behavior was so erratic, almost unbalanced, that Quinn didn’t have any clue what he

wanted from her.

Even though her mind agreed it was for the best that they didn't pursue anything, it still shattered her heart. At one point, she was crying so hard in the truck, she was surprised to find she made it back to her apartment above Sanctum in one piece. After a few shots of vodka and convincing herself she was better off without Rick, she calmed down enough to flop into bed, managing to catch a few hours of sleep before another long day at work.

Sitting at her desk with a giant cup of coffee, Quinn made a fourth attempt to input some figures into a simple spreadsheet. Frustrated beyond belief, she kept messing up, unable to focus on anything except her blinding headache and Rick's dejected expression when he asked her to leave Dane's house.

Quinn hadn't expected Rick to want her back after what she did. But she had expected he'd be less confused, angry one minute then showing his desire for her the next. Even as he showed her to the door she could sense how undecided he was about how he felt.

Quinn knew that it wasn't fair to give Rick only half of the explanation for her disappearance. He gave her a chance to confess her past with Travis, to justify her reasons for running away, and she blew it. She would have to live with that, she couldn't let him see how weak she was with Travis. Didn't want him to know how she had let herself fall the victim. It was humiliating. Once Rick knew, he would always see her as a pathetic, abused wife, and that was something she couldn't live with. She wanted Rick to be with her because he cared, not because he thought she was damaged goods that needed fixing.

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Weary, Quinn rubbed her eyes, determined to get those damn figures into the damn spreadsheet sometime before lunch. She was so intent on finishing, that she didn't hear the front door open or the footsteps of the man who crossed the lobby to lean against her desk.

“Hey Quinn. How's it going?”

Quinn nearly jumped out of her skin when Dane spoke from directly in front of her desk.

“Jesus, Dane. I didn't hear you come in. How is it that all of you huge men are so quiet when you walk? It's creepy.”

Dane gave her an odd look, his rich brown eyes nearly black as he looked at her. Squirming under the scrutiny, Quinn pretended to move things around on her desk to escape the discomfort of the man's intense stare.

Out of the corner of her eye, Quinn saw Dane shake his head and heard a small chuckle as he dismissed whatever thoughts he had.

“Can I help you, Dane?” she asked without lookin

g up.

“I'm just making sure you're having a good day, Quinn. That's all.”

Quinn's eyes darted up to the waist-high counter in front of her desk where Dane was

drumming his thick fingers rhythmically over the surface. She felt her neck heat up, the air suddenly very hot in the normally over-air conditioned lobby. Over his shoulder, Quinn saw the interior door closing and caught a glimpse of what she thought was Rick's shirt as it went through the small opening right before the door shut tight.

"Really?" she responded, keeping her face as neutral as possible as she stared at Dane, not wanting the large man to see her upset. "You're just here to check on my day?"

Did Rick actually get Dane to chat me up so he could sneak inside without speaking to me?

The thought made Quinn's heart hurt. Was he so upset by her that he would rather avoid her completely than have to tolerate another conversation?

Unfortunately, Dane saw right through her attempt to act unmoved. His reaction shocked the hell out of her. He burst out laughing, throwing his head back as if Quinn were the funniest person in the world. "Right, right. You don't know anything about why I'm standing here, not a thing. You're hysterical Quinn." His eyes flicked to the closed door that Rick disappeared behind. Dane gave Quinn his biggest smile before swiping his badge and disappearing into the gym.

Jesus, these guys are worse than a bunch of high school girls gossiping in front of their lockers. He knows damn well that Rick is avoiding me today, and he knows that I know and he thinks it's funny. Screw you Dane!

Quinn forced herself to brush off the incident with Dane and Rick, doing her best to focus on work and make it through the day unscathed. The trainers, led by Dane no doubt, apparently had other ideas, because every single guy who was at the gym that day made it his personal mission to check on Quinn at least once. Certainly, it was

meant to distract her from any attempts to talk to Rick, not that she wanted to after his immature avoidance tactic.

By five o'clock, Quinn's patience was shot and her nerves were frazzled. It felt if she spent eight hours being interrogated by the men of Sanctum instead of answering phones and inputting data. When the clock hit five, she practically sprinted out the front door to get away from them and their extreme nosiness, skipping her planned training session with Xavier. She was getting pretty good at kickboxing, so she figured she could take one day off.

Relieved to finally be back in her apartment, Quinn hopped in the shower to rinse off after the guys made her sweat all day with their constant interruptions. If she overheard one more joke about Ricochet Rick being all healed up and ready to bounce from bed to bed, she was going to stab one of them with her huge silver letter opener. Apparently, Dane didn't bother to fill them in on the fact that she and Rick had hooked up, or that they had a falling out— or maybe he didn't know. That was fine by her, but listening to the guys loudly plot Rick's next conquest as if she weren't sitting right there was pretty damn irritating.

Feeling clean at last, she threw on a light dress, not wanting to get sweaty all over again in the late summer heat. As she was combing out her wet hair, her cell phone rang. Quinn cursed as she dug through her purse to find it, answering right before it went to voicemail.

“Hello?”

“Miss Wallace?” A kind female voice was on the other end.

“Yes, who's this?”

“This is Linda Fitzgerald. John Wheeler, my colleague at my law firm asked me to

give you a call. He said you were in need of a divorce attorney.”

“Oh.” Quinn stopped in the middle of her living room, her wet hair dripping onto the carpet. “Yes. I do need one, a divorce. I mean an attorney for a divorce.”

A friendly laugh came through the phone. “I can meet with you this Thursday at one, would that be alright?”

Quinn knew that Mack would let her take a long lunch or leave early for an appointment so she agreed to meet at the lawyer’s Midtown office. After hanging up, she finished with her hair, quickly drying and twisting it into a loose bun to keep it off of her neck.

Smiling, Quinn decided to work on a plan to get Rick to give her another chance... as friends. She was determined to make this work. Everything else in her life was falling into place. Her dad’s house was on the market and had a potential buyer, her legal name change would go through by the end of the week, and she was about to cut the cancer known as Travis out of her life for good. Maybe once Travis was gone, she could have another go with Rick, make a real effort at a normal, adult relationship.

Now she just had to get Rick to trust her again and everything would be perfect.

“One more set, Rick. Gimme ten more reps and we’ll call it a day.”

Rick glared at Clint from his reclining position on the mat where he was resting between sets of crunches, his hand clamped down on his healing side. “You have no idea how much this fucking hurts, asshole.”

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“I think I preferred being called stud to asshole. Now quit bitching and finish up. This is nothing compared to Recon boot camp. If you ever want to get back in the field or hell, even back in the cage training, then you’ll do what I say without complaining like a little pussy.”

Rick’s arm shot out to land a hard punch on the big man’s massive bicep before Clint could react. Clint scowled, moving to punch him back, but stopped when he saw Rick laughing at him.

“Real funny, Rick. Don’t poke a sleeping bear. Especially when you’re not at one-hundred percent.” Clint gave Rick a sadistic looking grin. “Now finish your crunches so I can go home. My wife is making her special lemon chicken tonight and I’d like to eat it while it’s still hot.”

Rick finished his last sit up and grabbed his towel off the mat, wiping the sweat off of his face and neck. “Tiger is making her lemon chicken?” His eyebrows raised and his stomach growled at the thought of eating Mara Paxton’s home cooked meal. That recipe was his favorite and that bastard Clint knew it.

Dickhead, rubbing it in.

“Yeah.” Clint gave Rick an evil smile. “Why, you like her lemon chicken?”

Rick scowled. “You know I do. It’s my fucking favorite.” He grunted, standing up with less difficulty than he had last week when his stitches came out.

“Well, come over then. Mara always makes plenty. She was just saying how she

hadn't seen you in a while." Clint grabbed his bottle of water, downing half of it in two big swallows.

Rick paused, the thought of having a real dinner with friends and not crappy take-out while sitting on his couch alone was enough to make his stomach growl. "If you're sure, I'm not going to say no... stud."

Clint laughed. "That's better! I'll see you at seven." The big man turned and walked towards the locker room.

Rick was more excited than he had been in a while and that was depressing. Chicken was the only thing in his life he had to look forward to? His usual night out of going to a bar and meeting a nameless girl to get laid didn't have the appeal it used to have.

Shaking his head, he followed Clint, wondering when fun, charming, bed-hopping Ricochet became so fucking pathetic.

Chapter 7

Quinn's mind was completely preoccupied the entire thirty minute drive over to her best friend Mara's house. Good thing she'd been there before, or she would probably have gotten lost along the way to their Brookhaven home because her mind was wandering all over the place.

Knowing that Travis had been served with divorce papers today had her stomach twisted up in knots to the point she almost pulled over to throw up. Now he would know where to find her, there was no way around that. He may not have her exact address, but the law office would be listed on the paperwork, letting Travis know she was somewhere in Atlanta and he certainly was aware of where she grew up.

Quinn stopped the truck in front of the Paxton home, sitting in the cab for a moment

to calm her racing thoughts. Metro Atlanta was enormous, consisting of over thirty-nine counties and six million people. She convinced herself that there was no way Travis could find out where she lived or worked. Especially with Mack paying her in cash every week.

Quinn shook her head, refusing to worry about Travis tonight. She was here to visit her best friend and have a good meal to distract her from all that crap. Mara planned this dinner specifically so Quinn wouldn't sit around alone in her apartment freaking out about her divorce. Determined to have a good time, she yanked the keys out of the ignition and headed for the front door.

"Quinn." Mara answered the door with a tight smile replacing her usual wide grin, her forehead and the corners of her eyes puckered from stress.

"Mara? Is everything okay?" Quinn dropped her voice to a whisper. "You and Clint aren't fighting or something are you?"

Her normally exuberant friend gave her a stiff hug, whispering in her ear. "I'm sorry Quinn. Clint invited him without asking."

"Huh?" Quinn knitted her brow, confused by Mara's random apology.

Quinn was still trying to figure out what Mara was talking about as they entered the great room. It didn't take long for it to become clear. Surprised, she came to an abrupt halt in the doorway, nearly tripping on her own feet. Before she could think to hide it, her mouth gaped open as her eyes locked with a pair of deep blue-green ones that she knew all too well. Rick.

Christ Mara, this isn't going to be six degrees of awkward or anything!

"Quinn! Glad you could make it!" Clint broke the obvious tension with his usual

cheerfulness, crossing the room to give Quinn a bone-crushing hug.

“Hey Clint. Thanks for having me.” She gave her friend’s husband a weak smile. Her gaze darted back to Rick to find him blatantly staring at her, his face unreadable. Holy uncomfortable. “I—I think I’ll go help Mara in the kitchen.” Quinn turned tail and hurried out of the room like the coward that she was.

Run from my dad, run from Travis, run from Rick, run from my life... I need a new pair of Nikes if this is going to be

my way of dealing with things.

“Mara,” she hissed, “I can’t believe you didn’t at least call to warn me that he’d be here!” Quinn snatched up a glass and the bottle of wine that was airing out on the countertop, poured a healthy serving, and quickly downed a third of it.

“I told you, I didn’t know until it was too late. Besides,” Mara put down the tongs she was using to mix a huge bowl of salad so she could face Quinn, “you would have cancelled if you knew he was here, and you need this to get your mind off of that ass ex of yours. Let it go for just one night. Please?” She put her hands on Quinn’s shoulders, looking her in the eye. “You need to deal with Rick. You work together and you were friends. Good friends. Maybe tonight is the perfect time to fix that.”

Quinn huffed loudly. “He made it quite clear that he doesn’t want anything to do with me, Mar. He even sneaks into work through the back door now just to avoid talking to me.” She took another big swig of her wine.

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“T-that’s... ridiculous!” Mara stuttered and started laughing.

Quinn had to admit that it was in fact absurd. Big bad Ricochet Brennan, avoiding tiny little Quinn Wallace because his feelings were hurt.

They both cackled like hyenas until it was almost time to eat.

Mara bumped Quinn’s hip with hers. “Go talk to him while I distract Clint.”

“What?” Quinn’s eyes bugged out. “Are you nuts?” The wine gave her a warm, tingling feeling all over. She may be slightly buzzed but she wasn’t that brave yet.

“No,” Mara scoffed. “Let him know that you’re okay with everything. That it doesn’t have to be so—weird between you.” She waved her arm at Quinn to scoot.

“But I’m not okay with it. I don’t know what I want, Mara.”

“I know that, Quinn. But he hasn’t said anything about what he wants either, right?” Mara pointed at her with a serving fork. “Go.”

“Fine. I hate you.” She put her glass down, giving Mara an exaggerated pout.

“Love you too.” Mara blew her a kiss, before turning to the archway leading into the great room. “Clint? Can you come here, honey?”

She shooed Quinn out of the room, grinning like the devious master-planner Quinn knew her to be.

“I must be insane to be doing this,” Quinn muttered out loud.

“Doing what, exactly?”

Quinn’s head snapped up at the unexpectedly close proximity of Rick’s rich, seductive baritone.

Whoops! Jeez, he always catches me talking to myself.

“Ummmm,” Quinn knew her face must be as red as when she forgot her sunblock and got sunburned in the Bahamas— it blistered it was so bad. She stood motionless, helpless to do anything but stare at the beautiful face she once touched and kissed freely.

“I’m sorry I’m making you uncomfortable, Quinn.”

“You don’t make me uncomfortable,” she responded automatically, her focus drawn to his full lips. Lips she knew to be soft and warm and very talented.

Rick smiled, his eyes lighting up in a disarming way that Quinn hadn’t seen in a while. “That’s why you’re strung so tight it looks like your back is strapped to a wood plank. Because you’re not uncomfortable.”

“I have a lot going on right now. Everything’s not always about you, Rick.” Quinn cringed at the low blow. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.” She dropped heavily onto the couch. “I really do have a lot going on. I haven’t been myself lately.”

“It’s okay. I guess this is good. Talking, I mean.”

Quinn allowed herself to smile. A real smile. “Yeah, it’s good.” Her eyes dropped to the side Rick had been favoring. “It looks like you’re feeling better.”

“I am. Much better. I almost feel human again.”

Quinn had already gone over Rick’s injury in her mind, knowing it didn’t add up, but no way was she going to push the subject at Clint and Mara’s house.

“Hey guys, ready to eat?” Clint appeared in the doorway with two beers in his hand. He handed one to Rick as they made their way into the dining room.

“Smells unbelievable, tiger. Thanks again for having me.” Rick smiled at Mara, who grinned at the nickname he bestowed on her, and took the seat across from his best friend’s wife.

Listening to Rick use his endearing pet name for Mara made her sad. As much as it had irritated her at first, Quinn found that she missed being called “doll”. When she approached the table she found the only available seat was between Rick and Mara. Mara winked at her husband as he filled her wine glass.

Why do I get the distinct feeling that the very nosy Paxton’s planned this?

“More Quinn?” Clint held the bottle out to refill her glass.

“No thanks. I have to drive home later. I’ll stick to water.” Plus, she didn’t want alcohol to impair her senses tonight and make her say something stupid to Rick. Or kiss his delectable lips. Or run her hands all over his rock hard body.

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Shit! Remember Quinn, you need to take care of your baggage first. Divorce, then dating. Rick deserves that if nothing else.

Mara's pointy shoe connected with Quinn's leg, causing her to startle. She snapped out of her daydream, realizing she had been blatantly staring at Rick's mouth... again.

Quinn turned to Mara, mouthing "thanks", grateful to be saved the embarrassment of being caught gawking.

Her friend's shoulders shook as she laughed to herself. Quinn was pleasantly surprised that the rest of the meal went off without a hitch. Everyone fell into comfortable conversation, with no awkward silences or weird moments between her and Rick. It was almost like it was before she screwed everything up. When they were close friends and he would drive her to the grocery store. She missed having that with him. How he took care of her, worried about her well-being, her safety, her happiness. Rick went out of his way to prove to Quinn that not every man was a controlling douchebag.

Dinner ended with Quinn volunteering to clean up the kitchen since Mara cooked. She was elbow deep in soapy water when she felt a familiar warmth at her side.

"Need help?"

She jumped, splashing water out of the sink.

"Oops." Quinn looked down to see dozens of soap bubbles clinging to her shirt.

Rick chuckled, the vibration of his voice going straight to Quinn's core, stoking the embers of desire she still felt for the beautiful man. "Here, I didn't mean to startle you." He took a towel and wiped at the soap, brushing over her sensitive nipples.

Her reaction was instant. Her skin flushed, heat racing through her veins, sparking life into every nerve ending. Quinn's breath picked up, becoming embarrassingly loud in her ears. Her eyes were once again drawn to Rick's mouth, the way the pale pink color reddened as he bit his teeth into his bottom lip as he concentrated on cleaning her up.

God she wanted to suck that lip into her mouth and run her tongue over the teeth marks.

At some point, Rick realized that he was basically pawing at Quinn's breasts with the towel while she gawked at him. She watched as an adorable blush spread up his neck. His hand dropped to his side, clutching the towel in his fist.

"Sorry. Shit. I didn't mean to—"

The tension was too much for her to bear. Rick squeezed his eyes shut as if he was having the same difficulty as Quinn in controlling his body's reactions.

"It's fine. No worries, Rick," she said, her voice unsteady. "Why don't you dry for me, since you're so good with that towel." Rick laughed, the rich sound immediately dissolving the thick tension that hung in the air. Quinn let out a long breath when her attempt at humor worked.

"I am good, aren't I?" He grinned, accepting the plate she handed over, quickly drying it and putting it in a cabinet.

They worked in a comfortable silence until all of the dishes were clean and put away.

Quinn still felt the energy pulsing across the three inch gap between their bodies, she'd have to be dead not to. But if Rick wasn't going to say anything, then she wasn't either. There was no sense in ruining the moment by vocally discussing their very obvious lust for each other.

Just get your divorce, Quinn. Then you can act on it if he's still interested.

Quinn dried her hands off, hanging the small towel on the handle of the oven door. Rick was leaning with one hip against the countertop, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared at the ground.

She could practically see his brain working. His sharp mind piecing together whatever it was that he wanted to say. Quinn decided to pretend she didn't notice Rick's struggle, taking a step to move around him towards the great room.

"Quinn." Rick spoke softly, his normally honeyed tone taking on a soft, gruff vibration that she could feel all the way down to her toes.

She stopped, not wanting to turn around, but ultimately respecting Rick enough to face him head on. Quinn nearly broke at the sight before her. This proud, strong, fearless man looked broken and lost. Eyes that had sparked with humor during dinner now shone with despair. His seductive lips were turned down in a pitiful grimace. Rick opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut. Shaking his head as if to clear it, he tried again and still nothing came out.

The true extent of what she had done to this man weighed down on Quinn heavily. Or maybe he just had his own demons he was facing. Either way, it seemed that Rick was just as tortured and confused as she was. Reaching out, she took his hand, squeezing it reassuringly.

“Rick,” she swallowed loudly, her heart thrumming in her throat. “I—I have to fix myself, things... things about me.” Quinn inhaled deeply, trying to steady herself enough to speak. “I’m sorry. I am. I want to be with you, I just—” Confessing her need for him was probably a mistake but Quinn couldn’t help it. Her feelings were too strong and her resolve was too weak. She sniffed, her lip trembling as she held back the tears that made her vision blurry.

Right before her eyes she watched, as Rick seemed to make a decision. The pain and confusion previously harbored in the deep turquoise vanished. What replaced it sent a shiver throughout her body. It felt as if her nerve endings awakened and desire flared up inside her. That look, she recognized it on his face. Rick wanted her. Desperately.

“Listen,” Rick couldn’t, or wouldn’t, mask his longing as he stared at her. His lustful gaze sent hormones zinging through her bloodstream. “Why don’t we have lunch tomorrow. We can talk then. Now—” his eyes shifted towards the great room where Mara and Clint could be heard laughing, before returning to Quinn, “now isn’t the time for this discussion.”

She gave a small nod. At the very least, she owed him a chance to talk about everything, and frankly, she wanted to talk too. “Tomorrow?”

He sighed, sounding relieved that she agreed. “Yeah. I’ll pick you up. Noon okay?”

Rick carefully slid a hand up over her cheek, cupping the side of her face, the depth of his feelings conveyed through his gentle touch. Ocean-colored eyes searched hers, looking for something—what — Quinn didn’t know.

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“I’ll be here for you, Quinn. As a friend. I don’t like it, I don’t understand it, and I... well, I want more. But obviously you have something you think you can’t tell me.” He moved closer, his mouth only a few inches from hers. His warm breath caressed her skin as he spoke, giving her goose bumps. “You can tell me, Quinn. When you’re ready. Believe me, I understand secrets. Until then, I won’t press you for more than you can give.” She shivered under his touch.

Rick gave her a small smile, dropping his hand back to his side.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. No hiding.”

Quinn made a noise that was more like a squeak than a yes. When he left the room, she braced her hands on the edge of the sink, needing the support to stay upright. Her legs were shaking, on the verge of giving out.

God, he affects me so much. Just his touch makes me an incoherent mess. Why am I resisting this?

Rick’s deep voice traveled from the great room, saying his good-byes to Clint and Mara. A minute later, the front door closed and Quinn sagged against the countertop. The warring feelings she had been hiding from Rick were about to burst out of her against her will. Tears welled up again, demanding to be released, burning the back of her eyes as she held them in.

Mara entered the kitchen, putting an arm around Quinn’s shoulders and pulling her into a hug.

“It’ll be okay, Quinn. Like I said, whatever it is that makes you happy, you need to acknowledge it and take it. You deserve that much. Don’t hold back because of your asshole ex.”

Quinn hugged her friend back as the tears came, needing the warmth of human contact to allay her fears about Travis, about Rick, about the direction her life was headed. She loved Mara, but in the back of her mind, she selfishly wished that Rick were the one holding her.

Chapter 8

Quinn stood up from where she was anxiously sitting on the couch and marched into her tiny bathroom, checking her hair for what felt like the millionth time. She glanced, again, at the clock on her nightstand. Eleven fifty-five.

God! Why am I so nervous! It’s just lunch with Rick, not a date with the firing squad. Get yourself together, Quinn!

Even though she had been expecting it, the knock on her front door made her jump. For a brief second, Quinn hesitated, unsure if she was doing the right thing by meeting Rick.

She wanted to go to lunch with him. She wanted to be with Rick pretty much all of the time. But what she wanted and what she needed were two completely different things and leading him on seemed cruel.

Another knock, louder this time, ended her pointless deliberation. She agreed to lunch with a friend and he was here, waiting on her doorstep while she argued with herself like an idiot. There was no way she was going to back out on him now, especially since the last time she bailed on Rick, it caused a rift between them a mile wide.

Quinn forced herself to open the door and her traitorous body responded to the sight before her just like it always did. She shuddered as a delicious tingle rolled down her spine, gathering at the juncture of her thighs in a frustrating knot of desire. No man had ever caused this blatant of a sexual response in Quinn. It was as if Rick were created specifically to push every single one of her buttons simultaneously, bringing out every shameless, dirty thought she ever had and replaying them over and over in her head with Rick as the star performer.

“Hey. Are you ready?” Rick stood stiffly on her doorstep, clearly as uncomfortable as she was.

Unable to stop herself, Quinn’s gaze dropped to the bulge in the front of Rick’s jeans. The thick package she discovered there was cradled perfectly by the tight denim, making her mouth water. By the looks of things, Rick was just as affected. She flicked her gaze back up to find his pupils blown with lust.

“Ummmm, I’m ready. Just let me grab my purse.” Quinn fumbled with the door, almost shutting it in Rick’s face.

Nervously laughing, he caught it before it could hit him. “Trying to break my nose?” He slid inside the apartment, closing the door behind him.

“Yes... I mean no! I didn’t mean to. It slipped. My uh, hands are sweaty from the heat.” An image of Rick all sweaty and naked, grappling another man in the ring flashed through her brain, causing her to stumble. Quinn cursed her nerves and her dirty, dirty mind.

“Sure thing, Quinn. It slipped.”

She eyed Rick cautiously, looking for any sign of sarcasm in his reply. All she could see was his usual easygoing expression. Maybe a bit tighter around the eyes and

mouth, but that was easily explained by the stressful situation and the hard-on he was sporting in his pants. Quinn decided to let the comment go, slinging her purse over her shoulder with false confidence.

“Let’s go.”

Rick reclined in a small booth tucked away in a dark corner of the restaurant. So far, this lunch was a disaster. The conversation was forced, from the look in her eyes Quinn was either anxious as hell or incredibly horny, his view of two pert nipples poking through her dress meant she wasn’t wearing a bra, and if the throbbing between his own legs wasn’t a clear signal of how he felt, he didn’t know what was. All Rick wanted to do was skip the meal, bring her back to his condo, and spend the day with her naked on his bed.

“So, you said you had to sort out everything with your dad’s estate. Did that go okay?”

No matter how much he wanted to get the fuck out of here and rip off her clothes, Rick was still curious to know more about Quinn’s father and how it related to her bailing on him three months ago.

Quinn stared at her glass of water, aimlessly pushing the ice cubes around with a straw. “It went fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yeah.”

More pushing with the straw.

“Quinn, look at me.”

Rick waited several excruciating seconds for Quinn to drop the straw and lift her gaze to his. Those big doe eyes, long black lashes fluttering around the golden amber depths, turned him inside out just like they did the very first time he saw them.

“Talk to me, doll. I’m the same guy as I was before. The one who laughed with you at the grocery store as we discussed the pros and cons of almond milk.”

Quinn smiled. “Almond milk. I forgot about that.”

Rick shook his head with a chuckle. “How could you forget one of the strangest conversations to ever take place?” He reached across the table and covered her hand with his. “Your father’s estate?”

To Rick’s surprise, she didn’t yank her hand away. Instead, Quinn laced their fingers together. “There’s not a buyer for the house yet. There was one, but the contract fell through. I’m tired, Rick. I mourned my dad three years ago when he died. Now it feels like I’m doing it all over again.”

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. “I’m sorry. If I can do anything to help you out, let me know.” He wanted to know why she waited three years to take care of her father’s estate, but the waitress chose to deliver their food before he could ask.

Quinn pulled her hand back onto her lap when their plates were set down. Rick missed the contact, the warmth he felt from her touch, and not just in his hand. Being close to Quinn made his entire body vibrate, giving him a reassuring, floating feeling that made his skin hum with pleasure.

Neither of them needed anything else, so the server left them alone. Miraculously, Quinn continued their conversation without him having to spur her on for details.

“Once I get a buyer, I still have to get the rest of the furniture out. My realtor and lawyer said a furnished house sells better so—” Quinn shrugged, letting the sentence trail off as she took a bite of her sandwich.

Is this really what they were going to talk about? Real estate?

Rick wanted to ask what was going on between the two of them, about their relationship or lack thereof. He wanted to know if she felt the same overwhelming pull that he did, if she wanted him the way he wanted her... permanently.

Instead, he continued discussing Quinn’s future, a future that didn’t appear to include him.

“Do you have any plans to get a car of your own?” Rick had been wondering why Quinn was still driving Mack’s old beater of a truck. If she got an inheritance, it made sense to Rick that she would use some of the money to purchase a car.

“I want to. I don’t have a license yet.”

Rick grinned. “No license? But you’re driving Mack’s truck? Does he know this, you little law breaker?”

For the first time in a long time, Rick heard Quinn laugh. A loud, genuine laugh that

rang through his heart and touched his soul.

“Law breaker? Hardly,” she scoffed. “I just don’t want to go through the trouble to get a license and then have to change my...” The conversation came to an abrupt halt. Quinn looked up at Rick slack-mouthed, with discernible fear in her wide eyes.

“Change? Change what?”

She waved a shaky hand in the air dismissively. “Nothing. I don’t know what I was saying.”

Rick knew she was lying. He didn’t even need the extensive interrogation training he received in the Marines to see the blatant lie.

What in the hell is she hiding from me?

He was getting damn sick of the evasiveness and the games that Quinn played. Unfortunately, this wasn’t the time or the place to get into an argument with her and he promised that he wouldn’t push her to discuss things. Rick silently seethed, clenching his hands under the table.

The rest of the meal was finished quickly. Neither of them touched on subjects other than safe, impersonal ones, sports, traffic, and the weather.

Fuck! I’m sitting here discussing the mother fucking weather while the girl I love slips through my fingers.

Love? A bolt of fear shot through Rick’s heart, jump starting it until it was pumping erratically against his chest.

I love her?

Rick mulled it over as they drove back to Quinn's apartment, turning it over in his mind a hundred different ways with no clear answer. He walked her up the stairs, waiting for her to unlock the door. As he stood there watching her, the sun glinting off of the golden highlights in her dark hair, it finally hit him, sucking the air from his lungs.

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Without a doubt, I fucking love her.

Quinn opened the door, turning to say good-bye. This time, Rick wasn't going to let her push him away. There would be no more keeping him at arm's length. He loved her, and he wasn't going to give up. Pride be damned, he'd fucking grovel on his knees if that's what it took.

Rick inhaled a deep breath and moved into the apartment, forcing Quinn to step back so he could fit through the doorway.

“Rick, what—”

Done with the bullshit dance they'd been doing, he silenced Quinn by crushing his mouth over hers, spinning them until her back hit the partially open door, slamming it closed. Rick pressed his weight against her, pinning her soft body against the thick slab of wood as he dominated her, thrusting his denim-covered cock against her abdomen. He could sense the exact moment Quinn stopped fighting, giving herself over to the pleasure. Her tense muscles relaxed and her mouth joined in, yet she allowed Rick to control the kiss.

Lips and teeth mashed together brutally, Rick's tongue plunging into the depths of her mouth. This wasn't a gentle kiss meant to be romantic. No, it was a rough display of possessiveness, of pent up desire. It was all of Rick's love and anguish coming out in one overwhelming display of need and power.

He slid his arms around Quinn's waist, gripping her round backside and pressing his fingers deep into the soft flesh. He tugged her hips forward, grinding their groins

together almost painfully. Quinn moaned into Rick's mouth, her desperate sounds acting like gasoline on the fire roaring through his body.

"Fuck, doll."

His hands felt their way down from her ass to her thighs, finding the hem of her dress. Rick yanked it up and off, the material breaking their kiss for a moment as he threw it over his shoulder.

Scrabbling for a handhold, Quinn raked her nails down Rick's ripped torso to his waist, hurriedly unbuttoning his jeans. She shoved them down to his knees along with his briefs as he continued his assault on her mouth. His thick cock fell out of its restrictive confines, pointing proudly up and out. Groaning with relief, Rick pulled off his own shirt, and then quickly pushed his pants down the rest of the way, discarding them and his shoes. He seized the sides of Quinn's miniscule scrap of underwear and tugged, easily ripping them at the seam.

Both naked and desperate, they crashed back together, hot skin sliding against hot skin, hands grabbing onto whatever flesh came in contact with. Rick lifted Quinn up and tilted her back, effortlessly lowering them both to the area rug next to the door.

"Oh God, Rick..."

Completely out of control and unable to slow down, Rick thrust deep into her, cursing as her wet heat stretched to accommodate his harsh intrusion, gripping his cock in its tight confines.

"So fucking perfect," he grunted.

Quinn clung to his broad shoulders, hooking her legs around his waist and locking

them at the ankles. It felt as if she couldn't get close enough to him, wanted to become a part of him, to crawl up inside and live under his skin. She whimpered, a half-moaning half-wailing sound that he found unbearable sexy, upping his need to uncontrollable levels.

Rick rolled his hips violently, bucking into Quinn over and over as they rutted like animals on the floor. The noises coming from them both were loud and primal and completely uninhibited.

“Ungh! Jesus, Quinn.... Shit, fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Without warning, Quinn shoved hard off the ground and rolled them over, sitting astride Rick with a wicked smile on her face. Somehow, he knew he was in for the ride of his life, and he couldn't fucking wait.

Quinn had no idea how this happened. One minute, the air between her and Rick was tense and uncomfortable. The next minute, sparks were flying and she found herself at the mercy of his hard body as he pinned her against the door.

Their chemistry was explosive, both of them going at it as if they would never have sex again. It was hedonistic and raw, and Quinn loved every single second of it. It was filled with passion and emotion, not the violent punishment Travis used to give her.

Rick had her down on the living room floor before she could blink, fucking her so hard she thought they might break through the ceiling of the gym below and crash down into the training area. Hearing Rick's enthusiastic shouts and growls as he thrust into her, gave her the courage to do something she'd never done before—assert herself during sex.

Because Rick was so intent on pounding her right through the hardwoods and sending

up a litany of curses, he wasn't paying enough attention to stop her from pushing off with one foot, turning them over until she was straddling his hips. They both froze. Quinn gazed down at his beautiful body, his defined pecs heaving, his turquoise eyes flashing with lust, his pale pink lips ope

n as he tried to catch his breath. He was stunning.

She ran her eyes over every inch of that beautiful torso, from his wide shoulders down to his rippling abs. "You look amazing," she whispered. Quinn expected him to grin at her complement, or at least give her one of his cocky comebacks. But he stayed silent, his eyes glazed over with lust and his mouth parted as he panted with need.

The fact that Rick could easily overpower her, but allowed her to take control, made the whole scene even more erotic. The fact that he trusted her enough to let her direct their lovemaking just like she trusted him not to hurt her physically was hands-down the sexiest thing she'd ever experienced.

Taking advantage of her position, Quinn slid her greedy hands over the hard ridges of his abs, tracing each one with her fingertips. Moving further up, she raked her thumbnails over the two copper disks on his chest, watching as they tightened under her touch. Bending down, Quinn laved her tongue over one, tugging on the pert nipple with her teeth.

"Shit!" Rick's hips bucked up involuntarily, driving his thick cock deep into her. Smiling at his reaction, she trailed her mouth over to the other side, nibbling on his dark nipple until he was babbling incoherently, thrusting his pelvis up wildly.

"Jesus... doll. Shit, shit... don't stop! Oh God. Oh God. Oh God."

Quinn's hair fell in a dark cascade around them as she licked her way up his salty,

corded neck to the prominent Adam's apple on his throat. Relishing the reactions she was drawing from Rick, Quinn latched on to it, sucking the stubble on his neck into her mouth, swirling her tongue over the sensitive skin. Quinn trembled when her breasts brushed lightly over Rick's chest, stimulating the responsive skin. His hot masculine taste burst on her tongue, shooting streaks of pleasure so powerful down her spine that she contracted around his cock from the ecstasy.

"Holy fuck." Rick's breath was coming faster, his hips now moving of their own accord. She could feel the vibration of his voice in her mouth and it lit her up like a solar flare. More aroused than she'd ever been in her life, Quinn traveled further up, licking Rick's swollen bottom lip, biting it lightly then latching her mouth onto his. He was thrashing beneath her, gripping her hips tightly, attempting to move her up and down on his cock.

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She broke the kiss with a gasp, sitting up straight on his lap. Bracing her hands on her chest, Quinn's wide eyes locked onto Rick's.

His responses to her touch made her feel sexy and powerful. "Are you ready for me to ride you?" she rasped.

Rick's mouth fell open at her uncharacteristically vulgar words. "Holy shit, god yes. Fuck, Quinn. Do it." His eyes were wild with desire, the pupils so large she could barely make out the turquoise.

Rick bent his knees, putting his feet flat on the floor for leverage. He gripped her waist with his large hands, more than ready for her to move.

Quinn leaned back and closed her eyes, shifting slowly at first, grinding the tiny bundle of nerves that made up the epicenter of her pleasure down hard on Rick's pelvis. She wanted to draw out this moment, make it last forever, but it was too much, yet not enough at the same time. Quinn had to have more.

"Rick, oh my god... you feel so good." She moaned and writhed, picking up speed as the friction on her clit sent spasms rocketing through her. Every time her hips came down, the head of Rick's cock drew across a sensitive spot deep inside her, making Quinn's legs shake and causing an immense pleasure to quickly build inside her body.

As the sensations intensified, her rhythm began to falter. Sensing her inability to keep up the pace, Rick took over, lifting her up with his hands then slamming her down on his cock as his hips thrust off of the floor. Quinn continued using her fatigued leg

muscles to elevate her body up and down on his hard shaft, coming almost all the way off before crashing back down, driving his engorged cock deeper and deeper inside each time.

“Quinn, I can’t— I’m gonna come, doll.” Rick squeezed his eyes shut, concentrating on holding back his orgasm, needing Quinn to come first.

“Rick, I’m there with you, don’t stop.” Biting his lip, Rick continued the fast pace, using his arm strength to slam her down on his cock over and over again. When Quinn’s moans turned into one long, loud wail, he held her down and ground his hips up into her clit, sending her careening over the edge.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, Rick! Fuck me hard!”

Quinn’s filthy mouth did him in. Rick thrust up one final time and her slick pussy convulsed around him. A flood of heat burst from his balls, jetting out in mind-blowing wave after mind-blowing wave as a string of obscenities tore from his throat.

Making sure Quinn wouldn’t fall over, Rick let go of her waist, his tired arms flopping to his sides. He didn’t think he had ever come that hard in his life.

Quinn shuddered one last time and collapsed on his sweaty chest, her hair spread out over his body in a soft cascade. Rick folded his arms around her back, hugging her tight and dipped his head to steal a quick kiss.

Rick gently turned them until they were lying side by side on the thick carpet. When he slipped out of her, he heard her whimper softly. It took a moment for them to recover, then Quinn spoke.

“I’m clean Rick. In case you were wondering.”

“What?” he answered, his voice husky with sleep.

“I mean, we didn’t use a condom, so I’m telling you that I’m safe.”

“What!” Rick repeated, sitting up quickly, his expression horrified. “Holy shit,” he whispered. He let his head thump back down on the floor, staring at the ceiling in disbelief. If there was one thing the Marines, his dad, and his two brothers taught him, it was that you wrapped it up. Every. Single. Time.

Quinn ran a hand up his arm, tugging him back down to the floor. Reluctantly, he acquiesced, taking her back in his arms.

“I’m on birth control. The implant they put in your arm. It’s fine.”

She didn’t mention how she went behind Travis’s back and got the implant done shortly after they were married and his true nature reared its hideous head. No way was she going to have a baby with a man like him. After she left him, she was tested for STD’s at the women’s shelter. Quinn assumed he had been cheating on her throughout the duration of their marriage. When he would get mad at her, which was often, he would allude to having sex with other women. Whether it was all talk to hurt her or whether it was real, Quinn didn’t know or care. She was just grateful he didn’t give her an incurable disease.

“Crap. I’m sorry Quinn. I didn’t even think about it. I’m clean too. Mack does physicals on us all the time. Jesus, I’m such an asshole.”

“Hey!” Quinn snapped. “You’re not an asshole.” She stared him down, refusing to look away. “We were both a little caught up in the moment, okay?” She couldn’t help the smirk that pulled at her lips, thinking about their uncontrollable passion.

Rick scrubbed a hand down his face and sighed. “Yeah. I’m good. Better than good

actually.” He looked around the room, clothes scattered everywhere, and smiled. “Want to get off of the floor? My ass is numb.”

Together, they laughed, walking hand in hand to the bedroom. As they snuggled up together under the covers and she was safe in the cocoon of Rick’s arms, Quinn decided that this time, she wasn’t going anywhere. She was right where she belonged, and nothing had ever felt so good.

Chapter 9

Rick woke up a few hours later, the sun still shining brightly in the mid-August afternoon sky. He panicked for a brief second, certain that he would find Quinn gone again. When he felt her warm body shift next to him in bed, his racing heart slowed back down.

She’s here. With me. Lying in my arms.

He couldn’t stop the wide grin that spread across his face. She stayed with him, and not only did she not run away, they had earth shattering, life-altering sex. Rick felt his cock swelling again just from the memory.

Being careful not to disturb Quinn, Rick slipped out from under the covers to use the bathroom. When he came back into the room, he stopped next to the bed to get his visual fill of Quinn’s unparalleled beauty. With her asleep, he could ogle as much as he wanted without her knowing how obsessed he was with anything and everything about her.

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Quinn was lying on her stomach, hugging a pillow under her head as she slept. The room was warm enough that she had kicked off the sheet at some point, exposing all of that perfect, creamy flesh. Rick leaned over and gently fingered a lock of her dark hair. Its soft texture slipping easily through his loose hold.

Swollen, ruby red lips contrasted starkly with both the white bedding and her pale skin. They were parted just enough to flood Rick with images of them stretching wide around his thick cock as he thrust it down her throat. His suddenly insatiable dick stirred to life, pulsing with a rush of blood to his groin.

Ignoring his arousal, Rick's eyes continued down the gentle slope of Quinn's spine, longing to trace the curved line with his tongue. The swell of her hips, starting with two small dimples just above her round ass, begged to be grabbed with his large hands to brace himself as he sunk in deep.

Shit.

His now completely hard dick pulsed, too full to disregard. Rick wrapped his hand around the shaft, stroking languidly as he raked his eyes up and down Quinn's sleeping form. Not wanting to get caught standing over the bed, jerking himself off like a pervert, Rick slid back under the covers. Quinn must have sensed his movement, because she immediately curled up next to him, that perfect ass pressing against his aching hard-on.

The friction pulled a low moan from Rick's throat, escaping in a sharp hiss from his between his clenched teeth.

He swore he heard a faint giggle right before Quinn ground those delectable hips back onto his stiff cock. When she began to move, sliding his shaft along the cleft between her buttocks, he realized she was torturing him on purpose.

Rick gave her ass a light slap, and rasped in her ear. “You’re being very naughty, Quinn.”

Quinn immediately froze, her entire body becoming rigid and tense. Rick could almost see the cold veil that dropped over them, chilling the room enough that he actually shivered.

He wanted to kick his own ass for being so fucking stupid. Rick knew Quinn had all of the signs of being abused, so w

hy in the hell would he play around by slapping her?

“I—I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done—”

‘It’s fine, Rick. I’m fine.’ He could tell Quinn was trying to keep her voice light and unaffected, but he could hear the slight waver and feel her body tremble beneath his touch.

Rick yanked his hands back as if her skin scalded him, wanting to give Quinn space to recover from his mistake. He rolled onto his back, making sure that their bodies didn’t touch anywhere, not wanting to make the situation any worse.

“I’m thirsty.” And with that brief statement, Quinn leapt out of bed, hurriedly pulling on a tank top and shorts. She was dressed and out of the room in less than ten seconds, leaving Rick’s head spinning.

“Jesus. I’m such a fuck up.” Rick scolded himself quietly while digging the heels of

his hands into his eyes.

He slowly shuffled into his clothes, which were lying in a crumpled heap on the floor. The more he thought about Quinn's reaction, the angrier he got. Someone had put his hands on Quinn, her reactions to certain situations made it more than obvious. But who? Her father? It seemed that Quinn had a strained relationship the man, but Mack said he was a close friend. They served together in the Corps. Knowing Mack, and his judge of character, Rick doubted he'd be friends with a man who would beat his daughter.

That left a lover or boyfriend as the most likely suspect. Rick's fists were clenched so tight his knuckles began to ache from the strain. If he ever found out who the bastard was that turned this gorgeous, playful, intelligent girl into such a frightened, untrusting mess, he would probably kill them with his bare hands.

Unsure of what to expect next, Rick took a deep breath and left the bedroom.

Quinn was standing at her living room window, watching the light traffic in front of the gym. A puke green Jeep Wrangler with it's top down flew into the parking lot, jerking to an abrupt stop. Quinn smiled as Tucker jumped from the car and disappeared through the door beneath where she stood.

"That guy is one of the worst drivers I've ever encountered." Rick said from next to her, looking out the window at the same scene.

She laughed at Rick's assessment of Sanctum's I.T. specialist. His Jeep was sitting crooked, taking up two parking spaces. "I can see that."

Thankful that Rick lightened the mood, Quinn glanced over at him. His face turned serious and it looked as though he was about to say something when her phone rang.

“Sorry.” Quinn pulled her phone out of her purse, not at all sorry for the interruption. The last thing she wanted to discuss with Rick was the reason for her reaction to his playful swat.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mrs. Hardy?”

“Ummmm,” Quinn was suddenly very aware of Rick standing half a foot away, listening to her side of the conversation. She didn’t bother to correct her name with the man on the other end and have to explain it to Rick. “Yes?”

“This is Bradley Stanton. I’m calling from your lawyer’s office. We need you to come down and sign a form for your divorce. It was an oversight the last time you were in.” The man coughed into the phone. He sounded horribly sick.

Quinn rubbed a hand across her forehead. “When?”

“I’ll be in the office Sunday morning from ten to eleven. Anytime during that would be fine. It should only take a minute.”

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“Alright. I’ll be there before eleven on Sunday.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hardy.”

She hung up, staring blankly at her phone.

“Something wrong?” Rick reached out as if to comfort her, but made a face and pulled his hand back.

“No. Nothing big. I have to sign something at my lawyer’s office. Probably for my dad’s estate.” Quinn felt ill at how easily the lie fell from her lips. No way was she going to explain her divorce to Rick right now. Not until it was over and done with, and even then, she wasn’t sure how much she would want to share.

“Oh. Okay.” His forehead wrinkled in confusion. “On a Sunday?”

She shrugged. “I’ve met them on the weekend before. I guess they have a lot of work to do, so there’s always someone there.”

Quinn watched Rick begin to reach for her, then hesitate. He was obviously unsure of what he should do next. She didn’t want him to be uncomfortable touching her. Heck, she wanted his hands on her as much as possible. Once again, Travis was ruining her life and this time managing to do it from almost a thousand miles away.

Well, screw Travis. I want to be with Rick, so that’s what I’m going to do. I’m not going to deny myself anymore.

She took a step forward, closing the distance between their bodies, pressing against Rick until they were joined from chest to hips. His tight muscles loosened under her touch. Rick lightly skimmed his hands up her back until they were buried in her long hair.

Her head tilted up to find a sad look in his beautiful blue eyes. As his mouth descended onto hers, Quinn felt confused by Rick's grave expression. When their lips met, her eyelids became heavy despite her racing thoughts. Her lids fluttered shut, their mouths softly sliding together in an emotional kiss that brought up more questions than it answered.

Rick broke apart first. "I should get going. You probably have stuff to do and I don't want to—"

"Wait." Quinn held onto Rick's arms as he tried to pull away. Her pulse raced through her veins. This was harder than she thought it would be, asking what was wrong, why he was so sad. She couldn't do it. Chickening out, she asked him about his plans instead. "Can I... I mean, what are you doing later?"

Quinn didn't miss the look of surprise that flicked across Rick's face. "You're asking to see me? Like, a date?"

The smirk on his lips let Quinn know that he was teasing her, and she was glad to see his mood improve. She went along with his joking instead of being embarrassed and insecure like she normally would. Feeling brave, she met his playful smirk with a wide grin. "Yes, like a date."

Rick dipped his head again, pulling her into a deep kiss, needy and with purpose. This kiss was much more passionate than the tender one he gave her a few minutes ago. Rick groaned when Quinn's lips parted, letting his tongue swirl around hers, drawing it into his mouth. She kissed him back with equal enthusiasm, nipping at his lips,

running her hands over his rough morning stubble, unable to get enough of him. The tension between them had melted away, both of them comforting each other with their hands and mouths.

When they finally parted, it was only because they needed to breathe. Rick's mouth was swollen and wet from Quinn's kisses. The way he was looking at her caused desire to burn deep inside. She had to steady herself by gripping Rick's arm, wobbly from the power of that kiss.

"I'd better go," Rick said, his voice gravelly.

"Okay. I'll call you later?"

Quinn followed Rick to the door where he stopped to finish their conversation. "Why don't you just come to my place when you're done? I'll text my address to you."

She didn't mention that she already knew where he lived and had already been to his condo in a very non-stalkery way. No need to make anything weird since they finally managed to tear down the barriers between them.

She smiled, "Sure. I'll see you around six then?"

He gave her a final quick peck on the lips. "Definitely."

Rick decided to stop by the gym downstairs for a quick workout before heading home. The place was empty, but Tucker's Jeep was still out front, hogging the same two spaces he pulled into earlier.

The door to Mission Control unlocked with a soft click when he put his code in, letting Rick into the climate-controlled room. Computers of all types and sizes combined to create a low hum that buzzed in his ears.

“Hey Rick.”

Tucker sat in his usual chair, Bluetooth over his ear, as he scanned three separate computer screens and watched two camera views at the same time. The man’s fingers slid rapidly over a touchscreen, pulling up sites and typin

g in data faster than Rick’s eyes could keep up.

“I didn’t know there was an operation today.” Rick put his hands on his hips, his gaze flicking between the different screens in front of him.

“There’s not. Well, not a real operation. It’s more like we’re helping out another agency.” Tucker continued furiously typing, never looking up at Rick as he spoke.

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“Another agency?” Rick asked, making air quotes around the words. “Like the CIA?”

Tucker’s fingers finally stopped. The corner of his mouth quirked up. “Maybe. I can neither confirm nor deny the identity of the other agency.”

Rick laughed. “Riiiiight. No worries. I’m going to get in a quick workout.”

“Your girlfriend just left the parking lot,” Tucker said flatly, motioning towards the screen showing a real time view of the front of the gym.

Rick frowned. “She’s not my girlfriend.” Is she? “And she’s allowed to do what she wants. Besides, I don’t see how it’s any of your business.”

Tucker held up his hands. “Hey man, if it’s on the cameras, I’m going to see it. Remember that.”

Rick grunted. “Well, don’t fucking spy on her, dickhead.”

“Uh-huh. Sure. Whatever.” Tucker’s head was back down, fingers flying over the screen again.

Instead of smacking the back of Tucker’s head like he wanted to, Rick decided to hit the heavy bag for a while. His repaired side felt much better and after chatting with Tucker, he was annoyed enough to be motivated.

The entire time he was punching and kicking, he thought about what Tucker said. Was Quinn his girlfriend? Rick never had a girlfriend before. He never wanted one.

This time? He wanted to say yes. He wanted to claim her and for everyone to know it. Maybe his brother's pep talk worked. Rick smiled as he decided he would see what Quinn thought about that when she came over later, and to his utter surprise, he couldn't wait.

Chapter 10

Was it possible to be more nervous than you've ever been in your life, yet unbelievably excited at the same time? Quinn decided it must be, because that's how she felt as she drove towards Rick's condo. Her heart was thumping wildly and her palms were slick on the steering wheel. Determined to remain calm, she made a mental grocery list to keep her mind occupied.

The next thing Quinn knew, she was standing in front of Rick's door. Blinking hard, she realized she had no idea how she got from the parking garage to this spot. It was reminiscent of the few times she would get in the truck to go somewhere and completely space out, only to arrive at her destination unable to remember any part of actually driving.

I'm losing it. He's just a man, Quinn. A good man. One who won't beat the crap out of you because he didn't like the dinner you cooked or the way you said 'hello'.

Steadying herself, she raised her hand and knocked on the door.

As soon as it opened, it revealed Rick, casually dressed in jeans and a navy, short sleeve burnout tee. His usual heavy black boots were gone, his feet bare on the dark hardwood floor. Every worry Quinn had evaporated the minute she looked up at his handsome face. She felt hot, too hot considering the air conditioner was on full blast, blowing out into the hallway where she stood.

"Come on in." Rick stepped back so Quinn could enter. The door closed behind her

and she felt his hand on her lower back. Rick gently spun her around to face him, wrapping his arms around her waist. “Do I get a kiss?”

Quinn laughed at the adorable smirk he flashed her. “If that’s what you want.”

“Oh, I want that and a whole lot more, doll, but I’ll start with a kiss.” One of his hands slid up the curve of her back to rest at the nape of her neck. Because outside it was a humid day in the middle of a long Georgia summer, her hair was swept into a loose updo. The few pieces that escaped were curling down around her face.

Rick pulled her in as he tipped his head down, brushing his lips across hers lightly. She tried to deepen the kiss, her hands going behind his back to fist his shirt. Quinn could feel him smile against her mouth, and gasped as he slowly licked her bottom lip, sucking on it seductively.

“Rick...” Quinn shuddered when he released her lip and stepped back. She immediately missed the warmth of his body against hers, the comforting scent of his woodsy aftershave, the wet heat of his mouth and tongue.

Rick chuckled at her obvious displeasure. “After dinner, doll. First, let me feed you.”

Quinn enjoyed her dinner immensely. Rick had prepared everything himself, which was yet another first. Never before had a man cooked a meal for her, not since she was old enough to fend for herself. They fell into a comfortable conversation, as if they had known each other for years instead of months. She threw questions at Rick at lightening speed, not only because she wanted to know everything about him, but also because she didn’t want to discuss her own history with Travis.

“So you have two brothers?”

“Yep, both older.” Rick took a sip of the beer he was holding, his expression giving

away nothing.

“Do you still talk to them?”

He shrugged. “Some, not as much as I should, probably.”

Quinn shifted on the couch so she could face Rick, their knees bumping together. “Why not? I don’t have any siblings. I think if I did, I’d want to talk to them all the time.” She remembered wishing for a baby sister when she was younger, someone to play with and share girly secrets. Maybe a sister would have talked some sense into her, made her see what a loser Travis was before it was too late.

Before she could let herself get swept away on the what if train of thought, Rick responded. “My dad... he’s pretty, ummmm, opinionated.”

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“I don’t understand. What does that have to do with your brothers?”

Rick swirled the half empty bottle in front of his mouth before taking another sip. Quinn watched his throat work, his Adam’s apple bobbing as it swallowed the beer down.

“I guess I don’t like who he raised us to be. Talking to my brothers makes me realize that I’m the same as them, a selfish, uncaring asshole. Well, one brother may have broken the mold, the jury’s still out.”

Quinn put her mug of Irish coffee down on the end table so she could put her hands on Rick’s firm thigh. “You are not selfish or uncaring, Rick. Why would you think that?”

Again he shrugged. Quinn was baffled. No way would she ever have dreamed that cocky, self-assured Rick thought so poorly of himself.

She grabbed his rough, battle-scarred hands and brought them to her lips, kissing gently over the bumps and indentations earned in the ring. “You are one of the most generous, honorable men I’ve ever met.” Ignoring the scoffing noise he made, she continued, “You offered to drive a girl you didn’t know to the grocery store, you took me to the mall and made sure I got home okay, you enlisted in the Marines and fought for your country until you couldn’t anymore... explain to me how that makes you selfish?”

Rick was closer now, his lips just inches from hers, their combined hands between them. Quinn let go, putting her hands back down on his muscular thighs, squeezing

them so he knew she was listening.

“You didn’t know me before, Quinn. I was a different man than the one you see now. I took what,” he cleared his throat, “who I wanted without guilt or shame. I didn’t think of anyone else’s feelings but my own. I did things not caring who would be left behind to pick up the pieces.” Rick swallowed hard, his brilliant blue eyes locked on hers. “It’s you. You make me different. You make me want to be better than the man I was raised to be, the men my brothers became.” Rick’s hands came up to cup the sides of Quinn’s face, his thumbs gently stroking her blush-stained cheeks. “I don’t know how this happened, or why, but... there’s something about you, Quinn. Something that makes me feel things I didn’t ever expect to feel.”

Quinn’s mouth dropped open. She was speechless at Rick’s honesty. Once she finally figured out how to stop gaping and make noise, all that came out was a strangled, gurgling sound.

Rick closed his eyes, his lips pressed together as if in pain. “It’s okay if you don’t feel the same way, Quinn.” His blue eyes opened, refocusing on her with a look so adoring that it touched the deepest, most damaged recesses of Quinn’s heart.

“I—I do, Rick. I’m not sure what it is, but I feel it too,” she whispered, her breath hitching in her chest.

Their declarations ignited something deep inside Quinn, something she hadn’t felt... well, ever, certainly not with Travis. The glowing embers of desire that had been burning in her since she arrived at Rick’s condo, flamed up into a roaring blaze of frantic need.

Grasping her by the waist, Rick easily pulled Quinn onto his lap. With a groan, their mouths met in a hot, messy tangle of tongues and teeth, impatient and full of raw hunger. When they parted, Quinn inhaled a deep breath, biting her bottom lip and

moaning as Rick savagely attacked the sensitive skin of her neck, sucking and nipping his way down to her shoulder.

Rick's hands found the hem of her shirt, yanking it up and over her head. Quinn stood up, hurriedly shedding the rest of her clothes, desperate for skin-on-skin contact. She grabbed his shirt, impatiently pulling it off, then attacked his belt and jeans. Rick lifted his hips off the couch so she could shove them down and out of the way.

Naked, Quinn slid to the ground between Rick's thighs, staring at his stiff cock, jutting up from his lap, the swollen head shining with pre-cum. She wanted to do this, more than she ever thought she would. Wanted to taste him, to make him scream, to make him writhe and beg. With Travis, forcing her to do this was the worst kind of violation and he knew it. He used it to control her. Not this time.

Today, she was going to exorcise the ghosts of her past by giving this man an amazing blowjob and loving it.

Meeting Rick's glazed eyes, she licked her lips and eagerly swallowed him down.

Rick watched Quinn go to her knees without a stitch of clothing on, licking her lips and staring at his cock like it was her favorite meal and she was fucking starving. He nearly came when her mouth opened wide and engulfed him, her tight heat swallowing him down to the base.

"Holy fuck!" His hips jerked on the couch and it took all of his concentration not to thrust up and gag her. "Jesus, doll." He let out a low hiss between his teeth as she tightened her lips around his cock and sucked—hard.

Quinn moaned as she took Rick deep again, sending toe-curling vibrations down into his groin, drawing his balls up tight. He could feel the head of his cock nudge the back of her throat and nearly exploded. About to burst from her talented mouth, Rick

gently pushed her away. Quinn released his cock and looked up at him, her red lips swollen and shiny with saliva.

“Did I do something wrong?” The insecure look on her face nearly broke him.

Rick pulled her up onto his lap to straddle him, sliding a hand behind her neck. “No, you did something right. I was about to come, and when that happens, I want to be buried inside of you.”

He flipped them so Quinn was beneath him on the couch. She lifted her hips instinctually as he teasingly slid his cock over her wet pussy.

“Rick, I need you inside me... please.” He didn’t think it was possible, but his dick got even harder when Quinn begged.

“Not yet, doll. This time, I want to go slow. I want to taste you.”

Rick grasped the back of her thighs, pushing them back and hooking them over his shoulders. He took in the sight in front of him, Quinn spread out as he lay between her legs, her breaths coming fast and loud, her small breasts moving as her chest rose and fell.

“So fucking beautiful.”

Rick flattened his tongue and took a long, slow swipe over her pussy, savoring the sweet taste. He gently sucked her clit into his mouth, then swirled the tip of his tongue around it. Quinn let out a muffled string of words and groans that had his cock harder than it had ever been in his life.

“Don’t hold back, Quinn. I want to hear you scream.”

He thrust one finger into her depths and curled it forward. Rick knew he found the right spot when Quinn began to thrash on the couch, her moans getting louder and louder. Adding a second finger, Rick slid his tongue back over her clit, latching on and flicking it until she was screaming for release.

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“God Rick, yes! Jesus... ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod. Rick, don’t stop! I’m—”

She shattered beneath him, her tight pussy pulsing around his fingers. Rick continued licking her until she begged him to stop.

“Please, please, stop. I need you to fuck me, Rick.”

He climbed up on top of her, teasing her again by sliding his cock across her sensitive folds.

“Now!” Quinn head snapped up to meet his gaze, her eyes blazing with carnal need. She gripped the hair at the base of his neck and pulled, just enough for him to feel a sting of pain that made blood thunder to his already hard as steel cock.

“I quite like this demanding side of you, doll.” Rick smirked as he lifted his hips, lining himself up with her opening. In one deep thrust, he was in as far as he could go, his balls slapping against her ass.

Rick plunged in and out quickly a few more times before lowering down on top of Quinn, bracing himself on his forearms. She pulled his head down for a kiss, a kiss so passionate Rick felt sparks of electricity tingle down his spine to his groin.

“God, I need you,” he whispered against her lips as he moved slowly, torturously against her.

Her amber eyes conveyed everything she could possibly say. Was it love? Lust? Whatever it was, it was a connection greater than any he’d ever felt before. Quinn

shifted and Rick sensed her body stiffening up. She wrapped her legs around his waist, urging him to go faster by digging her heels into his ass.

“Fuck, I’m close doll. I need you to come for me.” Rick ground his teeth together, attempting to hold back his orgasm, a trickle of sweat running down the center of his back. He knew she was almost there again already. Her breath was coming fast from parted lips, and her eyes were glazed over and nearly rolling back in her head.

“Rick—” A deep, throaty moan escaped as her back arched up off the couch.

“Fuck. Holy—fuck, fuck... Jesus, Quinn.”

Quinn convulsed around him, squeezing his cock tight. He threw his head back and thrust deep twice more, his body jerking as he came long and loud.

Exhausted, Rick pressed his forehead to Quinn’s. She pushed his sweaty hair back with her hands, gently raking her nails across his scalp.

“I— that was amazing.” Her voice was small, no more than a soft sigh, as she lay loose and relaxed beneath him.

Rick wrapped his arms around Quinn’s small body, hugging her tight. “Everything you do is amazing.” Pulling back, he grinned as he met her gaze. “What do you think? Want to get a shower?”

Quinn’s mouth twisted into a mischievous smirk. “Only if you’re in there with me.”

“I think I can manage that.” He winked. “I have to warn you, we might not get very clean.

As he helped her off of the couch and they made their way into the bathroom, Rick

couldn't remember a time when he had ever felt so content. Maybe he should have said the words... told Quinn he loved her. Selfishly, he didn't want to ruin what they had. He knew his job—the lying, the danger, the travel— plus his own fear of settling down, would eventually become a problem for them. Rick pushed the dark thoughts to the back of his mind, deciding he could worry about the details another day.

Chapter 11

Jesus it's hot in here.

Quinn blinked slowly, her eyelids heavy with sleep. The room was stifling. She could feel sweat beading up between her shoulder blades as she lay on her stomach.

When she tried to prop herself up on an elbow, something heavy was pressing her down into the bed. Quinn shifted to see Rick sleeping peacefully next to her, one heavily muscled leg and arm thrown over her back, keeping her pinned to his boiling hot side.

She couldn't help but smile when she thought about last night, how they made love on the couch and again in the shower. Quinn had no idea sex could feel so good, be so powerful of a connection between two people. Hell, her only previous experience had been with Travis, and he had never made her feel that way. Usually he made her feel like a useless slut. Last night was the first time anyone had ever gone down on her, and it was freaking amazing.

Quinn realized how idiotic she must look, grinning at Rick as he slept. Unbidden, her mind recalled an image from last night in the shower, and despite the heat a shiver ran down her spine. She frowned at one particular memory.

Quinn drank in the sight before her as the showerhead rained water down on Rick's muscular physique. After holding her up against the tile wall and fucking her in the

steamy heat until she nearly passed out, he had tenderly washed every inch of her body.

Now, Quinn was eagerly anticipating her chance to return the favor, eager to get her hands on his body. She poured some of Rick's body wash into her palm, rubbing it across his broad chest until it turned into thick, fragrant foam that smelled just like him.

"Your hands feel so good, doll." Rick was practically purring as she ran her greedy fingers over each rock hard muscle.

"You're perfect," she murmured, working her way down his defined abs.

When Quinn got to those delicious 'v' shaped muscles that pointed straight down towards his gorgeous cock, she choked, her eyes wide. Coughing, Quinn struggled to catch her breath.

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“Are you okay?” Rick rubbed her back until the fit subsided, his brows pulled together in concern.

“I’m fine,” she wheezed when she was finally able to speak. “Let... let me do your back.” Quinn struggled to k

eeep her voice from breaking.

Rick turned around, but she caught a wary expression on his handsome face. She must not be holding it together well. He knew something was up.

Quinn lifted her trembling hands, already knowing what she would find on his tan skin, but her mind not quite accepting the truth. Her gaze drifted down. There it was, a mirror image of what she saw on Rick’s abdomen— a round, pink scar down low near his waist. Quinn recognized it immediately. Her father had two similar scars on his flesh, though faded to a pale white over the years. She’d know it anywhere.

A bullet wound.

Quinn wiggled out from under Rick’s hold, trying not to disturb him. Unfortunately, he was too heavy and holding onto her too tight to escape unnoticed. When she shoved his arm off, Rick’s eyes popped open.

“G’morning, doll. Did you sleep well?” Rick released her, grinning as he lazily turned onto his back to stretch.

Unable to stop herself, Quinn’s eyes narrowed in on the raw, pink wound that was

exposed. The cool air from the ceiling fan rushing across her skin helped to mask the reason for the goose bumps that broke out on her flesh. She jerked upright, throwing her legs over the side of the bed. Quinn didn't want Rick to catch her looking at his injury, let alone have him realize that she knew he lied to her about it.

She heard the sheet rustling behind her. "You okay?"

Swallowing down her nerves, Quinn pasted a smile on her face and looked at Rick over her shoulder. "Never been better."

He returned her smile, so she focused on getting dressed before he figured out something was up.

"Want to get some breakfast?"

Rick came around the bed, sliding his hands around her waist. He had on a loose pair of athletic pants and a tank top, covering up the evidence of his injury. Holding back the tears that pressed against the back of her eyes, Quinn threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down into a kiss.

"I can't. I have to meet my lawyer today."

Rick frowned. "I forgot. I could come with you and we could get breakfast afterwards."

"No!"

Rick's eyebrows shot up at her outburst.

"I'm sorry. It's just that this is something I want to do on my own, for myself. You know?"

Quinn could tell that Rick didn't like her answer, but he also didn't insist that she let him tag along. "Okay. Can I come by later?" He lifted a hand to trace his thumb across her jawline.

Nodding, Quinn replied, "I'll call you when I'm done."

"Alright." Rick cupped the end of her chin, tilting it up so he could kiss her again.

This time, Quinn melted into his touch. She would ask Rick or maybe Mara about the bullet wound later. Right now, every emotion she had for this man was racing through her veins, overwhelming enough to help her forget her concern. Rick's tongue plunged into her mouth, parting her lips to gain access, giving her a long, sensual kiss.

When they finally separated and Rick dropped his hands and emptiness flooded Quinn's heart. She didn't want to leave. She wanted to strip naked, dive back into bed, and lose herself in Rick's embrace all day. Lawyers, her divorce, and bullet wounds could wait until another time.

Sighing, Quinn knew she had to get this over with so she could cut Travis out of her life for good. She bent down to put on her shoes. Rick followed her to the door, grasping her hand and threading his fingers between hers.

Quinn picked up her purse as Rick opened the door. When she moved past him, he tugged her hand until they faced each other. "Call me as soon as you're done."

"I will."

He gave her one more quick kiss and she left, the door to his condo not clicking shut until she stepped into the elevator. Downstairs, Mack's old truck roared to life when Quinn turned the key. She sat in the garage for a few minutes, waiting for her hands

to stop shaking.

Why would Rick have a bullet wound?

She knew he had served in the Marines, so it wasn't that much of a shock. But this was a fresh wound. He had recently missed work to heal from it. That made it less than a month old.

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Fell on a free weight, yeah right!

Quinn put the truck in gear, driving out of the parking garage, headed in the direction of her lawyer's office. First she would deal with Travis, then she would call Mara. Her best friend would know what to make of Rick's injury. And if she didn't, Quinn was going to ask Rick directly. She thought she loved him, and the thought of someone shooting at him scared her to death.

No way was Quinn going to lose another person she was close to, not after finally finding happiness.

Agitated, Rick stood on the Paxton's front step, hammering his fist on their front door.

"What the fuck, Ricochet? Ring the fucking doorbell!"

Rick shoved past an angry Clint, storming into the house.

"Mara!" Rick yelled out from the foyer as he made his way down the hall.

"Dude, what the hell is your problem?" Confused and irritated, Clint followed his friend to the great room.

"Mara!"

He found Mara Paxton sitting in the great room. "Jesus, Rick. Why are you yelling? Couldn't you have called?" She stood up from the couch, a book and a glass of red

wine in her hand.

Rick stormed over to Mara, getting up in her personal space, knowing he was acting insane. “Where’s Quinn?”

“What?” Mara’s brow pinched in confusion. “Quinn?” Her eyes flicked over Rick’s shoulder to her husband, who clearly had no clue what was going on.

“Don’t bullshit me, Mara. I’m not in the mood. Tell me where she is!”

Clint’s large hands landed on Rick’s shoulders, spinning him away from his wife. “Don’t ever fucking yell at my wife!” His thick finger stabbed into Rick’s chest repeatedly.

Rick slapped Clint’s hand away, snarling in the big man’s face. “Don’t—” Rick warned, his fists came up, the fighter in him ready to strike out.

“Rick. Quinn isn’t here. What’s going on?” Mara’s calm voice penetrated through the haze of testosterone.

The men glared at each other, chests heaving in anger. Rick broke eye contact to glance at Mara. “Quinn... I was supposed to go to her place this afternoon. She never called and never showed up. Last I saw her, she left my place this morning to meet with her lawyer. She’s not at her apartment or at the gym.”

“She’s not with us, Rick. I haven’t heard from Quinn since she left here the other night.”

Rick’s hands dropped to his side, a flood of nerves twisted his insides. “Do you know where her lawyer’s office is? Is it far? She could have had an accident in that deathtrap of Mack’s.” Rick began pacing the room. Quinn wouldn’t have disappeared

again, not after last night.

“It’s in Midtown somewhere,” Mara whispered, her voice weighed down by something— guilt? Worry? Fear?

Rick came to an abrupt halt, his head whipping around to face the suddenly nervous woman. “What aren’t you telling me, Mara?”

She twitched anxiously, glancing at her husband for help.

“Tell him where the lawyer is, Mar. We need to make sure nothing happened to Quinn.”

Mara balked, torn between her loyalty to Quinn and Rick’s concern for her friend’s welfare. Rick’s head went back and forth between the two Paxton’s, not quite understanding why Mara was stalling with her answer.

“Mar—” Clint warned. “I’ll tell him if you don’t.”

“What? Tell me what? Don’t fuck around with me!” Rick was becoming unhinged.

Mara huffed in exasperation. “Fine, but if she gets pissed, it’s on you.” She pointed at her husband before turning to Rick. “Get your car, Rick. I’ll show you where it is.”

“Oh fuck no!” Clint snapped. “You’re not going unless I’m going with you. Ricochet here is in the middle of a meltdown. No way are you getting in a car with him alone.” He turned to Rick. “I’ll drive.”

Rick scowled, grinding his teeth together. “I think I can drive, Pax. I have over two hundred and fifty hours of tactical driving instruction under my belt, plus real life experience. I can manage just fine. We’re fucking wasting time!”

Rick knew he was being an asshole to his friend. He just couldn't be bothered to care right now. He stormed out of the house, keys in hand, with Mara and Clint hot on his heels. They no sooner piled into Rick's car and he was tearing out of the driveway, headed toward Midtown.

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As they got closer, Rick started to panic. Quinn could seriously be lying in a ditch somewhere, Mack's crappy truck overturned with her trapped inside. "Where do I go, Mara? Tell me!"

"Don't snap at me, Rick. I'm trying to remember. I'm ninety percent sure it's on the next street." Mara was typing on her phone while glancing at the letterhead they had stopped to get from Quinn's apartment. After insisting she could find the place, Mara hadn't been able to remember the law firm's name. "She's going to be pissed that you broke into her place, Rick."

Rick gripped the steering wheel harder, pressing his mouth into a tight line. Like he could give a shit about picking a lock if Quinn was in need of his help.

"There!" Mara pointed to a building on the left.

Even with traffic barreling towards them from the opposite lane, Rick jerked the wheel in front of them, pulling into the drive right before getting clipped by an oncoming SUV.

"You asshole!" Clint smacked the back of Rick's head. "My wife is in the goddamn car."

"I fucking know that, Clint!" Rick used the back of his hand to wipe the sweat from his brow. He drove into the attached parking deck, scanning each level for Mack's truck. There were very few cars left, so it wasn't a difficult search.

"There!" Clint pointed to the left.

Rick jerked the car to a stop and jumped out, not bothering to turn off the ignition or pull into a parking spot

.

“Oh my God,” Mara whispered, her hands covering her mouth as she exited the car.

Clint and Mara exchanged horrified looks while Rick stood next to the cab of the rusty old Ford.

All of the training in the world couldn't have prepared Rick for what he saw. The driver's side door of the truck was open, the interior lights dead. Quinn's purse and its contents were scattered along the oil-stained concrete. The rest of level three was completely empty.

Trembling, Rick hunched down to examine a small, dark spot on the ground, swiping his index finger through it. When he lifted his hand, the end of his finger was red.

Blood. Quinn's blood.

He sank to his knees, not able to feel the rough concrete that dug into his skin, tearing at his flesh. Rick wasn't sure if the scream he heard echoing through the garage came from Mara, or from him. All he knew was that the only woman he had ever loved was gone, the woman worth changing his life for, and something terrible had happened to her. A rush of regret made him nauseous.

I never told her I loved her.

“Rick.” Mara put a shaky hand on his shoulder. “I think I know who did this.” Her voice was thick as she spoke between sobs.

Rick staggered to his feet, clutching Mara's arms for support. “Who? Tell me. If they

hurt her, I'm going to fucking kill them!" Mara's eyes widened at the seriousness of Rick's statement, the truth in his eyes. She understood that he meant every word he said.

"Mara!"

Tears began to fall, streaming down her cheeks. "It... it was her husband."

End of part 2