



Locked & Loaded (Ricochet 1)

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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-four 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 book contains hot sweaty men, sexy scenes for those over 18, and uncomfortable, sometimes violent scenes.

Total Pages (Source): 31

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:14 am

Chapter 1

ANOTHER ROUND exploded uncomfortably close to the jagged boulders that Rick “Ricochet” Brennan and the half of his Force Recon team had been using as cover while they did surveillance. Rick thought it was pure luck that he was the only one left behind the rock. The rest of his team was spread out to their designated areas along the perimeter of the enemy camp.

“Jesus, Rick. The RPG’s are getting closer.” His teammate crackled over the communication earpiece.

“Shut it, Savoy. They don’t know we’re here.” Rick growled as he belly crawled along the cold, hard ground until he could see around the edge of the rock outcropping. Using the government-grade thermal night vision scope of his rifle, he watched the scene below. “Looks like they’re just fucking around, launching RPG’s for fun. Fucking idiots.” Rick whispered so the enemy wouldn’t hear him, not flinching at the sharp gravel that was digging into his elbows. He had been trained to ignore discomfort, even torture, as part of his intense training.

“I see them.” Dashiell “Dash” Savoy, his radio operator, said over the earpiece that each team member wore. “God, they are fucking around. Shooting off RPG’s in the middle of the night just for hell of it! Stupid and careless.”

Rick continued his surveillance through the scope. “Better for us that they’re off their game. This will be easy with half of them not paying attention. Plus, the noise of the rockets will provide cover.” He laughed to himself. It was always easier to kill morons than intelligent, well-trained soldiers.

“What’s our next move, staff sergeant?” Bixby, Rick’s second in command asked. Rick ducked back behind the boulders, his breath puffing in front of him in the cold night air. Before he first joined the Marines, he never would have thought Iraq could be so fucking freezing. He damn well knew better now. He hated this hellhole.

Without missing a beat, Rick decided on a plan. “Everyone get in place. We’ll meet back at the drop point at,” he checked his watch, “zero-two thirty, assuming the mission is successful.”

“Got it, staff sergeant.”

“Alright. Get ready men. We’re up.” Rick gathered up his gear, checking his high-precision sniper rifle before packing the rest into his fifty-pound rucksack. The other men did the same with their weapons, efficiently and silently. The six members of the Force Recon team were well trained and used to working as a single unit after five years together and dozens of successful covert missions.

Using the thermal scope, Rick studied the enemy soldiers as they horsed around, shoving each other playfully while they loaded up another rocket-propelled grenade. He examined them, counting how many were visible. It was difficult with parts of the camp on fire from the rounds they launched, but doable.

Satisfied he got their numbers correct, Rick moved into position in his hide sight and checked in with his team.

“Ricochet, in.”

“Dash, in.”

“Austin, in.”

“Romo, in.”

“Stone, in.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:14 am

“Woody, in.”

Everyone was locked and loaded. Rick patiently continued viewing through his scope, knowing that each member of his team was doing the exact same thing. Waiting. Watching. Learning. Ready to take the shot when the opportunity presented itself. Then he saw their target walk out of a dilapidated shack, smiling and smoking a cigarette.

“Go hot,” Rick whispered into his piece.

He didn’t need confirmation to know that each Marine had moved their finger to the trigger of their rifle. Their Barrett M107 sniper rifles could hit a target from 1800 meters out and could cut through armor or walls like a knife through butter. With the thermal scopes mounted on them, success was almost guaranteed.

“Stone, you got sights?” Rick asked his point man. He was the best sniper on the team. Not that every single one of them couldn’t make the shot, but if you could use your best, you did.

“Negative.” Vic responded. “Fire from the RPG is between me and the target. Can’t get a thermal print.”

Shit. Rick specifically chose that hide sight for Vic knowing he was their best sniper.

“I got sights, staff sergeant,” said Bixby.

“Roger, Bixby. Take your shot when ready.” Rick focused through his sights, waiting

for his sergeant to take out the high-ranking rebel leader that had been holed up high in the mountains of Iraq. A man responsible for killing thousands of civilians and ordering dozens of suicide bombs around the Middle East and Europe.

Rick waited, controlling his breaths so they came evenly, quietly. Patience was an essential part of being a Force Recon Marine. Unfortunately, it was never Rick's strongest trait. He was naturally restless and twitchy. When on a mission, minutes seemed to take hours, but his body was trained to be still for long periods of time. It was Rick's mind that never stopped going, which made this part of his job pure torture.

A single shot echoed across the camp.

"Target eliminated, staff sergeant."

"We're out," Rick said, letting his team know it was time to pack up and head for the rendezvous point on the other side of the mountain.

He couldn't wait to get the fuck off of this frozen rock. His team parachuted in by helo six days ago, taking four days to hike in, two days to do recon and complete the primary mission. Getting the hell out of here with their intel was priority number one now that the target had been eliminated.

Vic and Dash were to wait for him two clicks down the mountain's east side. Then the three of them would trek another eight clicks to the helo pick up point where they would find the other half of their team.

Just as Rick got to his feet, a loud explosion rocked the camp, sending a fireball thirty feet into the night sky.

"Man down! Man down!" Romo's panicked voice crackled through the earpiece.

“What’s going on?” Rick asked, chills going down his back. He was sweating even though the temperature was close to freezing. No way would he lose a man on this shit stain of a mountain.

“RPG landed near Bixby. Injury to abdomen, most likely shrapnel,” Romo answered. Rick could hear the panic beneath the man’s steady voice.

“I’m almost to you. I’ll get your six, you get Bixby out of here,” Michael “Woody” Atwood replied, his breathing heavy through the earpiece. Rick knew that Woody was going full speed towards the injured Bixby. He was the most experienced field medic in the group so it was fortunate that he was closest.

“Fuck!” Rick cursed. He felt helpless not being able to get to his men. They were his responsibility. “Get Bixby and meet us at the rendezvous. Got it?”

“Yes, staff sergeant.” He knew his men would rather die than leave Bixby behind. There was no doubt they’d do their damndest to get him out.

Rick threw his heavy rucksack on his back and turned towards the path down the mountain. A ripple of heat singed the back of his neck at the edge of his helmet a split second before the deafening noise reached him.

Rick flew through the air, his body shoved up and off of the ground by an invisible hand. When he landed, the wind was knocked out of him, leaving him gasping for air. Rick struggled to get to his feet, but he couldn’t manage to catch his breath. A blinding streak of pain shot through his leg, forcing him to choke down the urge to scream. His mind quickly processed the injury.

I’m on fire.

I'm a highly trained lethal weapon, and I'm going to die on this frozen fucking rock. I'll burn to death because I can't shake the explosion out of my head or make my fucking legs work.

The smell of burning flesh hit him at the same time the red-hot sensation in his leg went past pain to excruciating.

Don't scream. The rebels will find you if you scream.

Funny, Rick thought. He knew he wouldn't survive if he didn't do something. He had been trained to fight, to survive situations exactly like this, but he was completely and totally helpless.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:14 am

When Rick joined the Marines, he thought up a hundred different ways he could be injured or even meet his death. Hell, he thought it was hilarious at the time to come up with new ideas with his fellow recruits. But being rendered completely powerless, unable to fight, was not how Rick wanted to die.

Chapter 2

ANNETTE QUINN HARDY hid under the bed in the guestroom, terrified of what would happen if she were found. Trembling, she covered her nose and mouth so she wouldn't sneeze from the dust bunnies that had collected under the old mattress.

I'm twenty-three years old, and I'm cowering under a bed.

A loud crash from the kitchen made Quinn flinch, causing her to hit her head on the metal bedframe. She bit the inside of her cheek, stifling her cry of pain, terrified to give away her hiding place.

The thunderous noise moved from the kitchen to the family room, every thump and bang resonating throughout the modest ranch house. Heavy boots stomped through each room, echoing in Quinn's ears. Her pale skin was covered in goose bumps from the terror and adrenaline racing through her veins.

"Annie! Where the fuck are you, bitch!"

She shuddered at the sound of his voice, a voice that had tortured her every day for the last two plus years. Her heart was beating so fast it actually hurt in her chest.

“Woman, you better get your ass out here!”

Quinn squeezed her eyes shut, escaping the fright by pretending she was back at her father’s house in rural Georgia. In her mind, she could see it as plain as day, her running around barefoot, catching lightning bugs in the big backyard while her dad laughed, snapping pictures of her as she finally caught one and put it in a jar.

Another loud crash reverberated throughout the single story house, shaking her from her fantasy. Quinn could hear Travis’ heavy boots crunching over broken glass in the family room.

My daddy’s flag! He wouldn’t.

“When I find you Annie, you’re gonna regret the day you were born.”

Quinn curled up into a ball, tucking herself as far back under the bed as she could. She cringed at the sound of her old name. She hadn’t thought of herself as Annie since the day she decided she was going to leave her husband, building a new life in her mind. How had she ever thought that Travis was special? That he was a good man?

You saw what you wanted to see, Quinn.

She had wanted a reason to not go back to that tiny town in Georgia like all of her friends, stuck in the middle of nowhere. Travis was a way out and Quinn was stupid. She truly believed he would be her savior, a stand up man she could be proud of.

Instead, he’s most likely going to kill me someday.

The footsteps grew louder, her panic increasing with each step. Quinn could hear Travis in the nearby master bedroom, angrily tearing everything out of the closet in

his mission to find her.

“Annie!”

The hot tears ran down her cheeks. Quinn wiped them away angrily, biting on her hand to muffle the sobs. She hated that Travis made her feel weak, made her feel afraid. The fact that he had this power over her made her sick. Travis controlled everything.

They lived in rural Texas, halfway between San Antonio and nothing. She didn't have a car, a phone, or access to money. When her daddy died, she was left alone. She had no other family that would try to find her or worry about her. So much for leaving a small town, Quinn went from the middle of nowhere to the middle of “no one's ever going to find your body because the nearest house is ten miles away”.

Alone. Always alone.

Right now, after living in hell for two years, Quinn would take alone any day of the week. If being with someone meant being with Travis? Alone sounded really really great.

“You bitch!”

The door to the guest bedroom slammed open, bouncing off the wall with a loud bang. Quinn trembled with fear, her teeth chattering together so loud she knew Travis had to be able to hear them.

His scuffed boots appeared in the doorway. Those goddamn boots. How many times had she been kicked by Travis' beloved cowboy boots? Too many to count. The pointed toes were especially effective at breaking her ribs, not that she'd ever had them x-rayed to know for sure. Travis would never take her to the hospital, because

then he'd be found out for the abusive piece of shit he was. Sometimes, Quinn fantasized about putting on those boots and kicking Travis repeatedly in the nuts.

The boots stopped right next to the bed. God, what she wouldn't give for a knife right now. To sink it into his leg, hear him howl in pain. She could steal his keys and drive away, leaving his sorry ass behind. As stupid as Quinn thought he was, Travis was too smart to leave anything to chance. He kept every last sharp object locked up so she couldn't plan anything devious.

Travis had to know she hated him. He could certainly see it in her eyes every time he looked at her. She couldn't hide her disgust anymore. She didn't want to hide it.

Quinn watched in horror as Travis bent down, his handsome face coming into view from her hiding place. Her pulse drummed wildly, beating so fast she was sure she'd have a heart attack right then and there.

"There you are. Y'all had me worried, darlin'," he said in a sugary sweet voice.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:14 am

She knew his game. Kind Travis was a trick, designed to make her lower her guard. Then, when she wasn't expecting it, he'd turn on her and beat the ever-living shit out of her.

"Fuck you, Trav!"

Quinn knew she was making it worse by yelling at her husband. Maybe she wanted to die. No, that wasn't true. She wanted to live, just not here with Travis. Death would be preferable to this.

"Don't be that way, Annie. Come out darlin'. I've missed you."

"Leave me alone!"

Travis stood up. Was he going to leave? Quinn knew better, but that damn emotion—hope, got her every time.

Suddenly, she was no longer under the bed. Travis had flipped the mattress and box spring over and onto the floor, leaving her exposed beneath the metal slats of the frame. Quinn ducked, but Travis was faster. He reached out and grabbed her by her hair.

"Get out of there, bitch. You know better than to fucking hide from me!"

Quinn cried from the pain that sliced across her scalp as Travis dragged her out from under the bed.

“Stop Travis! You’re hurting me!”

“Shut up!”

He yanked her out of the bedroom, never letting go of the length of dark hair he had wrapped around his fist. Travis flung her to the floor of the living room, flipping her to her back and putting one of those goddamn boots on her throat before she could move.

Quinn knew he could kill her if he applied enough pressure to crush her windpipe. Her lungs began to burn from the lack of oxygen. Black spots appeared in the periphery of her vision. She scrabbled to get a hold of his foot with both hands, using all of her strength to try to push him off. Nothing happened, he didn’t even flinch.

This is it. He’s going to kill me this time.

“You think you can beat me? You’re weak! You’re a useless piece of shit, Annie. The only thing you’re good for is fucking.”

Travis finally lifted his foot and Quinn gasped, sucking in huge gulps of precious air. She rolled to her side, coughing and sputtering as she wheezed through her raw throat. Quinn clawed at the carpet, trying to put some distance between her and her husband. She recoiled when he laughed at her, a cruel, taunting laugh that rattled her to her bones.

Quinn cried out when her palm slipped on a shard of glass, ripping her hand open from pinky to thumb. She saw the remnants of her daddy’s flag case scattered across the floor. The American flag presented to her at his funeral by the Marine detail that carried his casket, lying forgotten on the carpet.

“You bastard!” Quinn screamed.

Her vision clouded with rage, she snatched up a piece of glass and lunged for Travis. Quick as a snake, his huge hand easily caught her wrist, squeezing until Quinn was sure her bones would snap in half. The weapon fell out of her hand, uselessly clattering to the floor.

Travis backhanded her— hard — and her head hit the floor, bouncing off of the strewn remains of her father's flag case. His fist reared back and landed on her face. Stars exploded behind her eyelids in an overwhelming wave of pain.

Quinn simultaneously wished she'd blackout so this could end and that she would stay awake so she could fight.

"I'm going to teach you, Annie. You'll learn who's boss in this house."

Travis shoved her dress up to her waist and straddled her thighs, pressing his heavy weight down on her.

"No! No, no, no! Travis, don't do this." Huge sobs wracked her chest, causing her to sputter and cough.

"Shut up!" He punched her in the face again.

Quinn felt her lip split open, the metallic taste of blood filling her mouth.

Travis tore her panties off in one rough tug. Her eyes too swollen to see, Quinn could hear him unbuckling his belt and lowering his zipper. The sound of each tooth of the zipper unfastening brought her closer to living her worst nightmare.

Travis held her down and entered her roughly, grunting on top of her like a rutting animal. Quinn's body was unprepared for the intrusion. She could feel the delicate flesh tearing inside. The sheriff's badge on his shirt jabbed her in the breast with each

hard thrust, a reminder of how absolute his power over her was. It took every molecule of strength to keep quiet, to keep from vomiting all over Travis. She did that once. He kicked her so hard she couldn't take a deep breath for over a month.

Silent tears ran freely down her cheeks, burning a path across her skin.

Funny, Quinn thought, she knew she wouldn't live much longer if she didn't do something about Travis. But she wasn't trained to fight. She didn't know how to survive situations like this. Quinn was completely and totally helpless.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:14 am

The first time Travis hit her, a month after they were married, she knew what her future looked like. Today, the beatings she suffered through? This was exactly how she thought she'd eventually die.

Chapter 3

RICK COULD smell the acrid smoke, the singed flesh burning his nostrils. His face was pressed to the ground, debris and rock cutting into his cheek. When he opened his eyes, he could see a halo of fire glowing bright against the pitch-black sky. He vaguely registered the flames that ate through his camos and thermals quickly, seeking out his unblemished skin.

“Staff sergeant!” His earpiece was filled with his teammates’ calls to him. Rick couldn’t move or speak. His brain was too rattled to form words.

“Rick! Ricochet! Come in.”

Leave, he thought to himself. Get Bixby out of here. He knew his team wouldn’t go. They would never leave a man behind. They would find him. Alive or dead, they would find him.

Rick startled awake with a gasp, sweating. Fucking dreams. It’s been over a year since he left the Marines, two since that night on the mountain, and it played in his mind as if it were only yesterday. His own private movie, shown on a never-ending loop.

Christ, it never ends.

Rick glanced over at his bed partner, some blonde chick he picked up at a bar last night. He struggled to remember her name, only recalling that he called her peaches because she tasted like peach Schnapps, most likely because she drank way too much of it at the bar. She was fun, but it was time to go. Rick slid out of bed as quietly as possible, not wanting to have the “thanks it was great, no I’m not going to call you again” conversation. He stretched when he got to his feet, the now familiar pull of tight skin flexing over the back of his left thigh.

Shit. It was late, or early depending how you thought of it. He never fell asleep at a woman’s house. He never wanted to. Rick knew he was tired, he didn’t realize how tired until now. Constant lack of sleep will do that to a person. The shrink gave him pills, but Rick didn’t do tranquilizers. Years spent as a Marine had him trained to be able to spring into action at a moment’s notice, even from a deep sleep. He refused to let his guard down by being knocked out and helpless by drugs.

Rick had to be at the gym tomorrow, okay, this morning by eight or Mack would chew his ass up and spit it out before he could even get his first cup of coffee. He quickly dressed and slipped out the door, the thought of a hot shower at his own house giving him more pleasure than the blonde he left in bed.

“SO, I EXPLAINED everything to you yesterday,” Tucker said to Quinn.

“Yes, I got it,” she responded. Tucker was taking his job of training her very seriously. Too seriously in Quinn’s opinion. The man never stopped talking, and not in a social, friendly way. It was more of a regurgitation of the employee handbook than an actual conversation.

“Great. Then I’ll let you get to it. Remember, no unexpected visitors. Ever. If they argue, call me or Mack, but don’t let them past the lobby.”

Quinn had to hold back the urge to roll her eyes. Instead, she smiled at the man and

settled in the chair behind her desk. Her desk. She had her first job. Quinn was equal parts excited and terrified. What if she couldn't do it? She shook her head. Mack wouldn't have given her the job if he didn't think she could handle it. Besides, it was nothing more than a glorified receptionist and quasi-housekeeper position for a mixed martial arts training facility. It wasn't as if she was being asked to do quantum physics.

By the time she was done with her freak out, Quinn noticed that Tucker had left her to her own devices. Thank god. He was a nice guy, but after two days of his "training", she was ready to be without her very talkative, very repetitive shadow.

The phone rang as Quinn booted up and logged onto her computer.

Taking a deep breath, she answered her very first phone call, saying exactly what Tucker drilled into her—three times. "Sanctum MMA, this is Quinn, can I help you?"

"Quinn? Who the hell are you?" a gruff voice asked brusquely.

"I'm the new receptionist. Can I help you?" How rude! Great, she was already making enemies.

"Put me to Tucker," he barked.

"Please hold."

Quinn stared at the phone as if it might tell her what this guy's problem was. Irritated, she picked the handset back up and transferred the call to Tucker's line, stabbing the button harder than necessary.

"Jerk," she muttered.

“That’s not a very nice way to greet guests.”

Quinn jumped in her seat, clutching her chest in surprise. She spun the chair around to face the lobby, ready to chastise whoever snuck up on her. Instead of snapping at the offender, her mouth fell open when she got a look at the beautiful man leaning over the counter in front of her desk. He was smiling, looking more like a magazine ad for designer jeans or expensive cologne than someone who would be hanging out in a sweaty gym in Atlanta.

“I-I wasn’t talking to you.” The gorgeous man lifted an eyebrow. Whoops! “I mean, when I said jerk. Oh my gosh, sorry. I didn’t mean to say it again. Crud.” Quinn sank into her chair, her face burning with embarrassment.

“It’s alright.” He grinned, showing off two perfect rows of straight, white teeth. “I’m Rick. You must be Quinn. Mack mentioned something about a new employee. Have to tell you though, with a name like Quinn, I was expecting you to be a man.”

Quinn bristled at Rick’s assumption, straightening up so she would look more professional. “Well, obviously, I’m not a man.”

Rick’s eyes gleamed, his mouth quirking up in a smirk. “Obviously not, doll,” he drawled as his piercing blue eyes raked over her body lasciviously.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:14 am

Quinn didn't know if she should be flattered or angry at the way Rick devoured her with his gaze or at his patronizing nickname. He was striking— tall, dark, and handsome — with a hint of danger surrounding him. And his eyes! They were the brightest, most unbelievable shade of aquamarine that Quinn had ever seen. They matched the Caribbean blue of the faded T-shirt that stretched over his well-defined chest. She didn't think she'd ever seen anyone with eyes like that before. Primitive lust coiled inside her, making her heat up from the inside out.

Still, even with his stunning perfection and the hormonal reaction she had to him, Rick was kind of irritating, all flirty and good-looking, slinging lines and eyeing Quinn as if she were naked and spread out on a buffet. Definitely a stereotypical bad boy, one Quinn would make sure to stay far away from.

Yeah, I've had enough of the bad boy image to last a lifetime.

She decided to nip this att

raction in the bud before it started. Quinn made her face blandly neutral as she spoke.

“Well, if you know Mack, I'm assuming you know your way around so you don't need me. If you don't mind.” She forced herself to tear her attention away from the stunning man, turning back to her computer as if he wasn't the walking, talking image of Adonis.

“Nice to meet you... Quinn. Be good, doll,” Rick said, a smile evident in his rich voice even though she couldn't see it.

A quiet beep let her know that Rick swiped a card through a keypad mounted on the wall, unlocking the sealed door that led further into the facility. She heard the soft click of the door relocking when it closed behind him.

“Jesus,” Quinn whispered, wanting to fan herself dramatically. Were there really men walking around looking like that? She blinked hard a few times to clear her mind of Rick and his gorgeous eyes, and chest, and biceps, and ass... crud. Inhaling deep to slow down her racing hormones and stop the tingling feelings they inspired, Quinn focused on the figures Mack asked her to enter into the financial spreadsheets.

Throughout the day, her mind inadvertently kept drifting back to Rick. No, she scolded herself. He was bad news, and bad was not what she needed right now— or ever. Resigned to keeping him firmly in the category of “look but don’t touch”, she continued to work. Her little pep talk seemed to have done the trick. She was proud that she managed to forget about Rick for a whole five minutes.

RICK HEADED TO the offices at the back of the building. Sanctum, an MMA training facility, was renowned in the fighting world for their world-class experts and varied training techniques. Besides Rick’s Muay Thai skills, they also had a Ju Jitsu titleholder, a champion kick boxer, a Kyokushin karate black belt, a Russian Sambo specialist, and a traditional boxing instructor. Rising MMA hopefuls from all over the world applied to get a chance to train at Sanctum. What they didn’t know, was that each trainer had other skills in their various backgrounds. Skills necessary to carry out Sanctum’s real purpose.

Rick was dragging badly. He needed coffee, ASAP. He went directly to the break room, following the scent of a fresh pot and poured a cup.

“Finally! Here we were thinking you were waiting on an engraved invitation, Ricochet.”

Rick didn't need to turn away from the break room coffee pot to know who was harassing him.

"Hey killer, good morning to you too." Rick stirred some creamer into his mug and leaned back on the counter, facing the huge former Navy SEAL slash Jiu Jitsu expert. "I'm only twenty minutes late. Mack can't possibly be that angry already."

He could, he was probably fuming mad.

Dane Nolan slid his size fourteen booted feet off of the small break room table and stood up. His six foot four inch frame moved as easily and nimbly as a jungle cat. There was no mistaking that the man was a lethal weapon. It shined in his dark eyes, the shrewd way he took in everything around him, strategizing his exit points and constantly planning for attack every second of every day.

Right now, this very dangerous man was getting up in Rick's face, and Rick found it damn amusing.

"Daney... killer," Rick said with a smirk as he sipped his coffee, "what are you doing?" Rick loved poking the big man. With Rick's penchant for silly nicknames and Dane's utter disdain for them, it was always entertaining to watch his reaction.

The large blonde man carefully looked Rick up and down, like one would check out a thoroughbred racehorse they were interested in purchasing. He leaned in close, his nose almost touching Rick's neck, and sniffed.

Rick didn't move an inch, but he did watch his co-worker as he invaded his personal space.

"Just seeing if I could smell the gunpowder, Rick."

“Gunpowder?”

“From your latest ricochet. You know, hit the target, skip out of her bed and on to the next one, leaving destruction in your wake. Mack’s gonna kill you if he finds out that you’re late because you were getting your nuts off.”

Rick put his free hand on Dane’s wide chest and shoved. “Get out of my face, man.” He couldn’t help but laugh with his friend and coworker. Rick didn’t admit to Dane that he was right about why he was late.

“Hey,” Dane joked, “you wouldn’t have earned the nickname if it wasn’t true.”

Rick refilled his mug and followed Dane out of the break room. “Ever stop to think it’s because my name is Rick?”

Dane stopped in the hall, looking over his shoulder with a grin. “Never. Now c’mon. Mack is waiting to debrief us.”

“Great,” Rick groaned as they entered the conference room.

Dane lifted his chin to greet the gruff, fifty-something year-old man sitting at one end of the large table. “Mack.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

Mack scowled, the lines on his face deepening, before resuming his discussion with a thin but muscular black man who was wearing athletic gear and an Atlanta Braves hat.

“Good morning,” the man said to Rick and Dane.

“Price,” Dane responded as he took a seat.

“Hey Ace.” Rick inclined his head in the man’s direction and sat opposite Dane. Ben Price was ex-FBI who quit the bureau when his partner was killed in the line of duty. He was also a champion boxer, having won several world titles in his youth. His right hook was deadly, a fact that Rick discovered the hard way multiple times. Mack recruited Ben hard when he heard he left the bureau, not letting up until the man agreed to work for him.

“Alright assholes. Since you’re late, let’s skip the bullshit.” Mack glared down the table at the three men, making sure to give Rick an extra-long frown. “Tucker is in Mission Control, working on a new case. So he won’t be sitting in on this meeting. I’ve already debriefed him, so unless something comes up, he’s getting a pass.”

Rick sat back in his chair, calm and collected. He’d known Mack for so long, and been the recipient of so much worse than just a disparaging look from him, that he wasn’t phased one bit. In fact, it was damn entertaining to get Mack all riled up. Rick tented his fingers, holding them in front of his lips to hide his smile.

Howard “Mack” McEvoy had been Rick’s staff sergeant during his sixty-five day initial Marine Corps Recon training at Camp Pendleton. The man had screamed in

Rick's face, humiliated him, ran him until he vomited, forced him to clean the latrines, hell... there wasn't much Mack hadn't seen him do.

After sustaining injuries during a Recon mission in Iraq, Rick was honorably discharged from the Marines. Mack heard about it through the grapevine, and with Rick's special-ops background, he offered him a job here with his misfit group of ex-military men and spooks.

"Price here is gonna start." Mack leaned back and waited for Ben to begin.

"Okay, so the mission was to extract three Americans— two journalists and one person of high political importance, and one British journalist— from a militant group in southern Turkey on the Syrian border. Locate, liberate, extract. Casualties of rebels acceptable." Price cleared his throat before continuing. "Result was the removal of all four hostages, alive, with a total of sixteen rebel fatalities. No damage to property, no casualties on our side. Clean in and out."

"Okay," Mack said. "Nolan, your quick summary on the ground."

Dane sat up straight in his chair, pulling a paper out of the manila file he had in front of him. "Helo'd in undetected. Hiked half a day to rebel camp. Gathered intel for approximately two days..."

Rick started spacing out while Dane broke down the three days they spent in Turkey last week. Rick loathed paperwork. His mind was too active to sit at a desk and so was his body. He twitched at the thought of a desk job. Unfortunately, the U.S. government loved paperwork, and they were the main client for their in-demand hired mercenary services. Whenever they did a job for them, it always came with a fuck ton of forms and reports and debriefings. The government used Sanctum to complete their black-ops jobs, jobs that needed to be done, but weren't exactly "legal". Mack had built his oper

ation carefully and selectively. It was the best-kept secret in the country. No one knew what they did outside of very high-ranking officials at the Pentagon.

Over and over throughout the debriefing, Rick's mind wandered back to Quinn. He couldn't remember ever having seen a woman that beautiful in person before. Sure, he'd seen gorgeous women. Fucked a bunch of them too. But this girl? She was stunning, and Rick was positive she wasn't wearing a single bit of makeup to create that look.

But it was something else about Quinn that drew Rick to her. He wasn't sure how to define it, she was just... different. There was a delicateness about her, like a fragile porcelain doll, needing to be wrapped up in his arms and protected from the elements and dangers of the world. That's where he came up with his nickname for her. Rick gave practically everyone he knew a nickname if they didn't already have one. Doll fit Quinn perfectly. But she was also feisty, immediately dismissing him when he came on too strong. The combination of vulnerable and lively really turned him on for some reason.

He was in the middle of wondering where she was from and what she would look like naked, when Mack yelled his name.

"Rick!"

"Yes chief?" He met Mack's scowl with a lazy grin.

"You and Nolan are on your two-week downtime. I've got fighters scheduled for you idiots to train during that time. Don't want you getting all soft on me. Now, get the hell out of here and have your reports typed up and on my desk by tomorrow. Your psych evals are scheduled for Friday."

Rick leapt from his chair, eager to see if the girl was still sitting at the front desk.

Before he could get one foot out the door, he heard Mack's voice again.

"And be nice to Quinn, our new hire. First off, no, she doesn't know what we really do here. Keep it that way. Second, she's the daughter of a very close friend of mine that passed away a few years back. She's like family to me. Don't fuck with her, she's one of us now."

Rick heard Dane and Ben immediately acquiescence to Mack's demand, but he had no doubt that the warning was really for him. Mack knew Rick's reputation and almost certainly didn't want him going anywhere near his friend's daughter. Unfortunately, Rick didn't think he could stay away from the intriguing new receptionist with the wide amber eyes.

Chapter 4

ON THE LAST day of her first full week of work, Quinn shut down her computer and locked up her files for the weekend. She wanted to talk to Mack before she left. He'd been more than generous to her after she showed up in Atlanta last month with nothing more than the clothes on her back, a backpack full of fancy lingerie, and a few dollars in her pocket.

Quinn swiped her badge and headed into the main gym. Usually, she hurried through the large open area, much too uneasy to be surrounded by large, violent men as they hit things. It brought back horrid memories. She tried her best to avoid the men that were training with punching bags, weight sets, or even sparring in one of the three separate fighting rings set up, including what she was told was a regulation sized octagon surrounded by chain link cage. It was bad enough they were huge and intimidating, but while they were fighting? No way could she stomach that sight without freaking out.

"Hey. Quinn, right?"

Quinn froze in place halfway between the lobby and the hallway, too scared to move or speak. Her eyes darted between the two exits as she tried to figure out which escape was closest.

“You okay?”

Quinn’s flicked her gaze to the tall, Latino man as he gracefully stalked towards her. Rationally, she knew she didn’t have anything to be afraid of. Mack assured her that the men in his gym were nothing but professional. But it had been over three years since Quinn had spoken to any male that wasn’t either Travis or Mack, or in passing like the blue-eyed man earlier this week.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

“I’m fine.” Quinn took a step back when the fighter got too close. She struggled with the instinct to bolt from the room.

“Okay.” He held his tape wrapped hands up to show Quinn he meant no harm. “I’m Xander Vega. Mack told me we had a new employee. I just wanted to say hi.”

She let her eyes wander down Xander’s body, trying to feel out how much of a threat he was to her. Barefoot and only wearing a pair of black fight shorts, his dark bronze skin shone with the sweat that glistened on each of his well-defined muscles. Dangerous, her mind told her, overriding the fact that she knew, logically, that he wouldn’t hurt her. Then she remembered his specialty from the schedule she did for the gym... Russian Sambo. He was lethal and it scared the heck out of her.

“Sorry. I-I have to go.” Feeling ridiculous, Quinn ducked her head, turned, and practically ran down the hall to the break room. She shut the door behind her and sagged into it, leaning her forehead against the hard surface. “Shit,” she whispered to herself.

“You do that a lot.”

“Oh my God!” Quinn spun around to see the man with the striking aquamarine eyes, staring at her from his seat at the break room table. She choked, which made her cough, making it difficult to catch her breath.

Rick, his name is Rick.

The dark haired Adonis reclined in his chair, hands clasped behind his head as he

smirked at Quinn. “You okay there?” She nodded, still unable to speak. “You scare too easily, doll.”

“What?” Quinn rasped as she dug her fingernails into her palms to stop her hands from trembling. She was still recovering from surprise he gave her, otherwise she would have scolded him for the doll comment... maybe. If she weren’t so frightened of the man.

“Every time I see you, you’re cursing under your breath.” Rick lifted an enormous bottle of water to his mouth and chugged down a third of it, never taking his sharp gaze off of Quinn’s. She noticed the large hand he had wrapped around the drink, knuckles scarred and bruised from fighting. That’s what all of these men did for a living, they fought or trained other men to fight. Those hands could hit... hard.

Danger! Her mind told her again. Quinn’s heart was racing frantically, feeling as if it may explode in her chest.

She shivered in response, but not from the fear she should be feeling from being so close to such a dangerous man. No, Quinn shivered because he was so damn hot she couldn’t stop imagining those large, rough hands running all over her skin. The way his lips surrounded the bottle and his throat working to swallow... she felt it in a way that made her uncomfortable. The fear mingling with desire had her flat-out confused.

Quinn unintentionally let her eyes roam over his broad chest, which was covered by only a thin, tight T-shirt that had the sleeves cut off and was damp with sweat. His sinewy arms were on full display, each muscle cut perfectly. The only mark on his beautiful tan skin was a black tattoo of a skull inside a circle with wings coming off of it and a knife or weapon behind. For a minute, she thought she recognized the tattoo, but she wasn’t close enough to know for sure.

I would love to lick that tattoo. Oh my god, where did that come from?

Feeling her neck and cheeks flame up from her deviant thoughts, Quinn quickly gathered herself, remembering that this cocky man was poking fun at her. Dangerous or not, that made her mad. She narrowed her eyes at his annoyingly gorgeous face.

“Well, you like to sneak up on people. It’s not nice. And, I’m not your doll.” She crossed her arms over her chest, trying to look confident when all she really wanted to do was run out of here and hide, or maybe run across the room and straddle his lap. She was equally torn between the two. So what did she do? Nothing. Her feet were rooted to the spot.

“Sneak up on people? You came in here, remember?” Rick pushed his chair back and got to his feet in one surprisingly nimble move for such a big man. Quinn swallowed when she got a good look at how tall he was, having to tilt her head back to see his face. The last time they spoke, she had been sitting while he leaned over her desk, his muscular body hidden behind the half wall that separated her from the lobby. Now that they were both standing, she could see that he was much, much taller than her petite five foot four inch frame. Her subconscious kept screaming at her.

Danger!

Quinn instinctively backed up, not stopping until she felt the kitchenette’s countertop dig into her lower back. Rick continued forward, only halting when there were just inches separating his large body from hers. He put his hands on the cabinets behind her, one on either side of her head caging her in. A small whimper fell from her lips and her breath stuttered. Quinn balled up her hands, running a fingertip over the ridge on her right palm. She shuddered from the thought of that scar, but when she remembered how she got it, she felt somewhat stronger. It was her badge of courage.

“And,” he said, close enough that she could smell him, a faint mixture of aftershave and sweat. It was potent enough to make her bite her lip so she wouldn’t try to lick his neck or bury her face in his chest and inhale that masculine scent. “Lots of people

think I'm nice... doll." Then he smirked.

Quinn's mouth fell open at his arrogance.

Jerk!

Attraction or not, frightened or not, his slick overconfidence grated on her nerves. Braver than she'd felt for the first time in a long time, Quinn smiled at the egotistical man with the hypnotizing eyes. She refused to be another one of Rick's groupies, and she was quite sure he had plenty of them falling for his easy charm and rugged perfection. "Yeah, well, those people that think you're nice? I'm not one of them."

Trembling, she ducked under Rick's arm, unable to keep herself from noticing how hard his abs were as she nudged by. Pretending to be fearless, Quinn snatched her purse out of her locker, and left without saying another word.

RICK RUBBED a hand down his face, wondering how he lost the upper hand in his conversation with Quinn. None of his usual charms worked on the tough yet delicate girl. He thought about their quick exchange for a moment and then laughed. This girl pushed all of his buttons— definitely gorgeous, sweet but feisty, and best of all, not willing to let him get away with charming the pants right off of her.

His smile fell and a rush of desire tugged at his balls. Lust he understood, but it was other, much more unfamiliar emotions flooding through him that had him off balance, the ones that came from his heart, not his dick.

Mack warned him to stay away from Quinn and Rick was so u

sed to following Mack's orders that he never thought twice about doing anything but whatever the man said. This was different. Quinn was different. Rick didn't think he had the strength to stay away from the intriguing girl with the smart mouth and

luscious lips. He wanted more of that feeling, more of that playful banter and those sexy eyes as they ran over his body.

Considering this was the first time he was interested in a woman, and not just what she'd look like naked and sucking his cock, he'd say it would be damn near impossible for him to do what Mack ordered.

QUINN SPENT THE next day in her apartment, doing laundry and pretty much just laying around. She hadn't had a day to herself in so long that she forgot how much she enjoyed doing nothing. Travis always had a big list of things for her to do around the house. Said he didn't want her sitting around getting fat.

Jerk.

Speaking of jerks, Quinn thought about her brief interaction with Rick the other day in the break room. Normally, a guy like that— big, strong, intimidating— would have had her running out the door as fast as she could go. But when he got close to Quinn, too close actually, all she wanted to do was run her hands up his smooth, hard chest and into his dark hair to see if it was as soft as it looked. No, that wasn't true. She still had the urge to bolt, only now it was buried under a layer of intense desire.

A knock on her door startled her out of her daydream. Quinn gripped the couch cushion tightly, her heart hammering in her chest. Travis couldn't have found her, right? She left behind her old identity and had been using her maiden name ever since, leaving no paper trail. When she told Mack that her I.D. had been stolen, he didn't ask a single question. He gave her a job and let her move into the tiny apartment above the gym, no questions asked.

So who would be knocking on her door on a Saturday afternoon? Nausea started to press up from her stomach. Travis.

As if sensing her fear, her visitor spoke. "Quinn, it's Rick."

Quinn tensed up, all of her muscles locked into place. How did Rick know where she lived? She didn't tell a single person, not that she knew anyone or had any friends here. Plus, Mack was supposedly the only person who knew that she was using this space.

Interestingly, in the gym, surrounded by other employees, she wasn't afraid of Rick.

In fact, he brought out the old Quinn. The fun, feisty girl she was before Travis beat the spark out of her. But here, alone, without the comfort of knowing other people were close by? The fear practically strangled her.

“Quinn? I know you’re home. I can hear your television.”

She inhaled, swallowing down a yelp. Reluctantly, Quinn crept over to the door, leaning against the heavy frame. “Rick? Why are you here?” Despite her best efforts to sound casual, her voice wavered, exposing her fear.

“I noticed you don’t have a car. I figured I could give you a ride to the grocery store.”

Quinn’s mind boggled. Grocery store? She shook her head, trying to reconcile the large, intimidating man with the piercing blue eyes and huge ego with this seemingly nice guy who offered rides to the store.

Are there any nice guys? Quinn couldn’t remember a time when she believed there were. She knew she must have at some point, but her complete distrust of anything male, with the exception of Mack, had been deeply ingrained upon her during her time with Travis.

“Ummmm,” she tried to think of logical excuse as to why she couldn’t open the door.

He’s dangerous!

She knew that wasn’t true, even though her subconscious screamed it loud and clear. Something in her gut told her to trust him.

“Quinn,” Rick’s voice sounded softer, like he was trying his best to make her feel comfortable, “I just want to make sure you have everything you need. If you don’t want to go with me, tell me what you want and I’ll bring it back here for you. I don’t

want you to starve.”

The steel wall Quinn built around her heart faltered a little at Rick’s offer.

When she first arrived at Sanctum, Mack explained that he worked with a lot of fighters, that they would surround her on a daily basis. Men who would seem violent and frightening and easily provoked. He assured Quinn that there wasn’t a single one of his men that he wouldn’t trust with his life— or hers. Quinn never told Mack what or whom she was running from, but somehow he seemed to know that she needed to feel secure. It was Mack’s way of letting her know that even a tiny girl like her was safe around his team of huge men.

With a sigh, Quinn went with her gut and gave in, unlatching the door to reveal Rick in all of his tall, toned, blue-eyed glory. She had to stifle a whimper at the sight of him. Dressed in a well worn pair of jeans that hugged him in all the right places and a black Sanctum MMA T-shirt that stretched tight over his chest and biceps, with a pair of aviator sunglasses pushed up on his head, Rick was the picture of male perfection. Waves of desire crashed deep inside, a long dead sensation was awakening between her thighs. She wasn’t quite comfortable with the way her body reacted around Rick, yet she craved more.

Jesus, he’s hot.

Rick leaned with his shoulder on the doorframe, arms crossed, and smirked. “So... you going to invite me in or just stand here and ogle me all day. ‘Cause I gotta say, the ogling works for me, doll.” He waggled his eyebrows comically, his smirk turning into a wide grin.

Self-conscious, and now a little annoyed at the slick act he was using on her, Quinn huffed, stepping back so Rick could enter the tiny apartment. “I was not ogling you.” She slammed the door closed behind him. “I was waiting for you to explain how you

knew I lived here. And I told you before, I'm not your doll."

She didn't care how hot he was or how her body reacted to him. In Quinn's mind, nothing was more of a turn off than an egotistical douchebag who thought he could snap his fingers and have any woman he wanted.

She watched as Rick carefully scanned her personal space. It seemed as if he were mentally mapping out her apartment, judging the way she lived or looking for someone hiding in the shadows.

By the time his eyes made their way back to Quinn, she was downright irritated at his high-handedness. Who the heck did he think he was barging into her apartment like he owned the place, oozing with charm and his infuriating physical perfection?

Rick's brows crinkled in confusion at her sullen expression. "What?"

She scoffed at his bewilderment. He probably wasn't used to women that didn't fall to the ground to worship at his feet. "You still haven't told me how you knew where I lived." She began tapping her foot impatiently, all the while reiterating to herself, "I will not fall for his charms, I will not fall for his charms."

Rick smiled at her, unintimidated by her hostility. He shrugged casually, "Cameras."

Quinn's stomach did a queasy somersault. "C-c-cameras?" Who was watching? Could Travis see her? She knew the thoughts were ridiculous, but the initial reflex to distrust everyone and begin to panic was born from years of abuse.

Rick stepped towards her, his expression meant to be comforting. Instead of it helping, Quinn jumped back as if she'd been shocked with a cattle prod, her mind instinctually screaming at her to run. In her haste, her feet tangled on the edge of the area rug in the small living room and she fell down on her back end.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

“Let me help you up.” Rick extended an arm, taking two steps towards her.

Her subconscious was now shrieking loudly, urging her to move.

Danger! Run! Hurry!

Quinn scurried back, scrambling crab-like on her hands and feet to put more space between her and Rick. The intense fear gripping her felt like a noose around her neck, tightening with every step Rick took.

“Don’t come any closer!” She climbed to her feet, holding a hand out to stop Rick’s movement. Her pulse was flying through her veins, pumping adrenaline to every cell in her body. Quinn felt as if she was on the edge of a razor-thin precipice, one nudge in the wrong direction and she’d go tumbling head first into a full-blown panic attack. He needed

to leave, now.

HOLY SHIT.

“Okay, okay, I won’t move.” Rick tucked his hands into his pockets and took a step back, showing the frightened girl that he wasn’t going to come any closer. He had no idea how their conversation turned from playful and sexually charged to Quinn freaking out, but it was alarming.

Rick studied Quinn as she cowered against the half-wall that divided the kitchen from the small living area. Her cheeks were flushed crimson, her eyes wide and darting

around the room wildly, the hand she held up to keep Rick away was trembling... this was a girl who had seen some terrible things.

If there was one thing Rick knew, it was recognizing someone who lived through something truly horrifying— seen human beings at their worst— only to come out wrecked on the other side. He knew because he was one of those people. The things he saw and did in the Marines would give anyone nightmares. Hell, they gave him nightmares.

His hackles rose at the thought of anyone laying a hand on this tiny, vulnerable woman. Rick clenched his jaw to tamp down the urge to demand the name of whoever had hurt her.

“Listen,” Rick said calmly, breathing steadily to control his anger, “I’m not here to hurt you or bother you. Yes, Mack has cameras around the perimeter of the building.” Rick didn’t feel the need to let her know why they needed the high-powered cameras that were equipped with the latest night vision and facial recognition software to protect a “gym”. “They’re for security. Tucker mentioned seeing you go up the back staircase, that’s all.”

“Oh.”

Rick studied Quinn as her shoulders released some of their tension. Her outstretched hand dropped to her side and she started to look less like a person about to run for their life and more like a regular young woman. No, not regular— gorgeous and special and intriguing was more like it. But also damaged. Rick could see it in her eyes and her obvious actions. The pain she held inside was significant. Something that horrific could never be completely hidden, no matter what mask you put on in public. Some masks were just more convincing than others. He thought of his own horrors then quickly shoved the images away.

“So, my offer still stands. Do you want to go to the store with me? Or would you rather give me a list and I’ll bring you back some food?”

Rick waited for Quinn to kick him out of her apartment.

Miraculously, he caught a hint of a smile on her face. Her head was tipped down and she glanced up through thick, black lashes. The turnaround in her behavior from scared to pleased hit Rick like a punch to the gut. Her smile, it lit up her entire face changing her from gorgeous to fucking stunning. Those large amber eyes glowed with delight, small crinkles forming in the corners, making her that much more beautiful. He didn’t think he’d ever seen anything as striking as a relaxed and happy Quinn Wallace.

“Really?” Her voice made it sound as if he were offering to jet her off to Europe at a moment’s notice. “You’d do that for me?”

It made Rick sad to think that someone offering to grocery shop for her was probably the nicest thing anyone had done for her in a while. That, he could fix. He might not know what happened in her past or be able to change it, but he certainly could make her feel cared for in the here and now.

Being the cause of Quinn smiles became his new fix. One he didn’t think he could go long without. Like an addict, he knew he would crave it, do anything to make it happen. Rick wondered if this would be an addiction that would bring him up high, only to leave him to crash and burn.

QUINN CRINGED INTERNALLY for letting Rick see how surprised she was that people, specifically men, could actually be nice. She didn’t want Rick to know about Travis or that she was hiding from an abusive husband. In her new life, Quinn didn’t want anyone to think she was weak. That way they wouldn’t try to take advantage of her like Travis did after her father died.

When she asked if he really meant it, he seemed surprised. Maybe it was normal for people to go out of their way for strangers. What the heck did she know? Her view of the world was tainted by Travis and his cowboy boots. “Sure. I have to go to the store myself. I didn’t see a car outside, so I figured you could use a lift.”

Quinn finally let her guard down completely. Mack wouldn’t have hired Rick if he weren’t a good guy. Eventually, she’d have to take the first step in starting to trust men again if she ever wanted to live a normal life. That’s what the female counselors at the women’s shelters said time and time again. One of Mack’s trusted employees seemed like a good place to test that theory.

Quinn took a deep breath. “Okay. Just let me get some shoes on first.”

“Sure thing, doll. I’ll wait here.”

Quinn frowned at the pet name but decided maybe it wasn’t so bad after all. In fact, it was kind of growing on her. Grinning, she hurried to the bedroom without comment, slipping on a tattered pair of flip-flops. She left most of her belongings behind in Texas, taking only the essentials. That left her with about two pairs of shoes and five different outfits. Most of those came from a women’s shelter she stayed in the first month after fleeing, others came from the second one.

Quinn didn’t want to keep anything that reminded her of Travis, including her clothes, so it wasn’t much of a loss. The only thing she kept was her extensive collection of lingerie. On the darkest days, shopping online for pretty, frilly underthings was sometimes the only thing keeping her from plunging headfirst into a suicidal depression. No way was she leaving behind the one thing that gave her happiness.

When they reached the parking lot, Rick held open the door to his sleek black sedan, a gesture she hadn’t experienced in years. Chivalry was most definitely not Travis’

thing. The small gesture floored her. Was it possible that Rick wasn't the self-centered douchebag she initially assumed him to be?

"Thank you." Quinn settled into the passenger seat with her hands on her lap, waiting for Rick to circle the car to the driver's side.

She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. The interior smelled like Rick. A delicious combination of his woody aftershave and his own decidedly masculine scent mixed with the soft leather of the seats.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

At the click of the other door opening, Quinn opened her eyes. Rick slid gracefully into the car and within seconds they were pulling out of the lot and onto the main road. They drove in relative silence for a few minutes, Quinn quietly taking in the sights of the Buckhead neighborhood that surrounded the gym.

Rick was the first to break the silence. “You know Mack.”

He didn’t ask it as a question.

“Yes. He served in the Marines with my dad.”

Quinn was careful to keep her eyes forward. Looking at Rick was hazardous to her wellbeing. She was in no place to have any kind of relationship with anyone, and staring at his beautiful face was not a good way to keep her distance.

Relationship, yeah right. Who said he would even want a relationship? I don’t want a relationship. No way.

Rick grunted in acknowledgement, one hand casually draped over the steering wheel. “You grew up in Georgia then.”

Again, not a question.

“If you know all of this about me already, why are we discussing it?” Quinn was becoming irritated that Rick seemed to know everything about her. She had no intentions of telling him about the tiny rural town she grew up in, how she fled the state to go to college in Texas, and when her dad died, she hooked up with Travis and

ruined her life.

“Just making conversation, doll.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Quinn could see Rick smiling. Great, now he was making fun of her. She decided to let the “doll” comment go since Rick was blatantly ignoring her requests to stop using it and it was growing on her. Instead, Quinn decided to turn the conversation around.

“Well, since you know so much about me, why don’t you tell me how you know Mack?”

Rick paused a minute before answering, drumming his thumbs on the steering wheel at a red light. “Mack was my C.O. in boot camp.” He turned to look at her briefly before the light turned. “My commanding officer. Put me through two months of hell.” She saw the corner of his mouth quirk up as he spoke of Mack.

“That makes sense. My dad said that after he had to retire, Mack stayed in the corps.”

“Here we are.” Rick stopped the car in a busy shopping center. It was overflowing with cars as their owners bought their groceries.

Rick strode around the car to open Quinn’s door and once again, she marveled at the fact that men still did courteous things like that. Especially big, hard-assed, narcissistic guys like Rick.

“Share a carriage or go separate?” Rick had a shopping cart in hand, ready to push it into the store, just waiting on her answer.

Quinn debated the intimacy of sharing a shopping cart, then cursed herself for being so stupid. It was a cart, not an engagement ring. “I only need a few things, we can

share if you want.” She shrugged so Rick wouldn’t see the serious thought she gave to such a stupid non-issue.

Rick nodded, directing the cart through the door. Quinn wasn’t positive, but she thought she caught another glimpse of a smile on his face.

Hmmm, huge, muscly, egotistical fighters who open doors for women and push shopping carts. Who would have thought that would be my type?

Wait, is that my type?

Quinn pondered the question as she watched Rick weave up and down each aisle, waiting patiently for her to choose each item. Not once did he rush her or yell at her or call her stupid. His electric blue eyes found hers every once in a while, sending goose bumps down her arms and a heavy dose of straight-up lust racing through her veins.

When they reached the checkout and Rick helped her load her items onto the conveyor belt, the sinewy muscles of his arms and back flexing in front of her, she realized that unfortunately, yes... he was exactly her type.

Chapter 5

“HEY SUGAR, NEED company?”

Rick sipped his beer slowly, turning towards the woman who slid onto the barstool next to him. His gaze lazily swept up her body to her face.

She was pretty but had an unnaturally curvy figure and wore too much m

akeup... things that never bothered Rick before. He wasn’t called Ricochet for

nothing. Hit it and skip out. That was what he did.

Tonight, however, he was off his game. This was the third woman to approach him, offering up exactly what he came here to find. Each time, he found something about the woman that turned him off. All he could think about was a certain innocently seductive brunette. One with a quick wit and a fuck ton of secrets.

Great, she's only been here one week and Quinn somehow managed to break my dick.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

He briefly toyed with the idea of letting this woman blow him in the bathroom and changed his mind. “Nah, not tonight.” Rick dismissed the woman with a wink and turned back to his drink, drumming his fingers on the bar. Who was he kidding? He wasn’t in the mood for a hookup tonight. No, instead he was twitchy and restless, as if his own skin didn’t fit right. Rick threw some money on the bar, pissed that his night didn’t go as planned, and stormed out.

By the time he got back to his Midtown condo, he was even more agitated and fidgety than he had been at the bar—and after thinking about Quinn the whole ride home, he now had an erection hard enough to pound nails. He poured a rather large scotch and paced back and forth in front of his windows for over an hour, cursing himself for allowing Quinn to wiggle her way into his life so quickly.

Rick replayed the afternoon in his head. Once he got Quinn out of her place and into the store, she became playful, almost mischievous. Her features lit up with a joy he wouldn’t have thought the introverted girl was capable of if he hadn’t seen it for himself. Unfortunately, the minute they got back to her little apartment above the gym, she reverted right back into the timid, nervous wreck he had met earlier.

Quinn didn’t ask him to stay or for help putting her groceries away. She simply thanked him for the ride and hustled him out the door as quickly as possible. Rick thought he had made progress with getting her to relax around him. They were getting along great, and then... nothing. She may as well have said “don’t let the door hit you in the ass on your way out”.

Closing his eyes, he decided he would try going out again tomorrow night. Maybe a different bar would inspire him to find someone. Possibly a brunette... with large

eyes the color of caramel.

Fuck!

Agitated, Rick half-heartedly watched a Braves game until he was tired enough to go to bed. He stripped down to his briefs, checked his Glock 22 before slipping it under his pillow, made sure his Marine-issued KA-BAR knife was within reach on his nightstand and fell asleep, determined to put the beautiful, cock-blocking Quinn Wallace out of his mind for good.

“QUINN! HOW WAS your first few weeks of work?”

Quinn had been trying to get a cup of coffee from the break room, hoping to escape back to her desk without anyone noticing. Wincing, she twisted around to see who found her.

“Mack.” Her tense posture instantly relaxed at the sight of the friendly yet frequently bad-tempered man. He was never ill towards Quinn. He always treated her kindly and with respect. She actually found it pretty entertaining when Mack would yell at one of the burly, muscled men and they would stand there and take it without uttering a single word.

“It’s been wonderful, really. Thank you so much for taking me on.” She shifted awkwardly, so out of practice with making casual conversation that she wasn’t sure what else to say.

“No need to thank me, Quinn. It’s great to have you here. We need a woman around here to keep the guys respectable.” Mack laughed, a warm, friendly laugh that reminded Quinn of her dad.

Quinn smiled at her father’s best friend. Mack seemed to know exactly what to say to

make her feel appreciated and less like an annoyance. Two years with Travis and she never felt as welcome as she had in the three weeks since arriving at Sanctum.

“I should get to the front. It’s almost nine.”

“Sure, Quinn. I’ll bring you a few invoices I need entered once I get organized.”

Mack’s genuine smile left her feeling warm and fuzzy. A way she hadn’t felt since her mom died eleven years ago when she was just twelve.

Quinn left the back offices, crossing through the main gym to reach the front lobby. The space had been empty a few minutes ago, but now there was a man repeatedly kicking a large black bag on the other side of the gym. Not just any man, but what Quinn thought could possibly be the most perfect specimen of masculinity she’d ever laid eyes on. Normally, she would hurry past, not wanting to witness the violence these men could unleash, but the sight in front of her pulled her in like a magnet.

The man’s back was facing Quinn, giving her a full view of his flawless body as he executed each graceful move. Clad only in a pair of black and red fight shorts, she watched as each well-defined muscle in his back rippled, stretched, and flexed with every kick. Sweat beaded, then dripped off of his tan skin, giving her the overwhelming urge to catch each rivulet with her tongue, one by one. When he stopped to hike up his shorts, Quinn noticed a stippled scar high up on the back of one of his legs. It didn’t detract from his beauty. In fact, it only added to his rugged appeal.

Quinn was lost in her little fantasy when she realized the kicks had stopped and the room was deathly silent. Her eyes flicked up from the man’s gorgeous body to land on his face.

Uh-oh.

She found herself staring directly into the deep turquoise eyes of Rick Brennan.

AFTER NINE YEARS in the Marine Corps, seven in Special Forces, Rick had a very well developed sixth sense. He knew when there were eyes on him. It was ingrained in his training and necessary to survival in the field. Right now, the prickly feeling was sliding down his spine as he repeatedly kicked the heavy bag. He finished his reps before stopping to see who was behind him.

Turning slowly, Rick stared across the gym.

Quinn.

Even from far away he could tell she was checking him out. He'd seen that look on dozens of women's faces before. Rick didn't speak, deciding to let her get her fill, taking pleasure in the way her eyes raked over his chest, which was still heaving from exertion. Quinn's gaze finally met his and he swore he felt a crackle of electricity jump between them. It took all of Rick's effort to stop the way his dick was responding to that heated stare. Suddenly, he was infinitely thankful for the athletic cup he was wearing. At least that would spare him the embarrassment of tenting his shorts as Quinn shot lustful glances his way.

The corner of Rick's mouth curved up when he saw Quinn's cheeks turn pink with an adorable blush at being caught gawking. He padded towards her, his movements nearly silent as his bare feet glided over the mats that lined the room.

Quinn's amber eyes widened as he approached, discomfort clearly written all over her beautiful features. Rick desperately wanted to press those soft curves up against the wall and taste those red lips, especially after seeing the raw hunger in her eyes as she checked out his body. But after getting the skittish girl to somewhat trust him on Saturday, he didn't want to ruin his progress by pawing all over her.

“Hello, doll.”

“Rick,” she breathed, then cleared her throat and looked at the floor.

After her bizarre reaction last Saturday, Rick made sure to leave a few feet of space between Quinn and himself when he stopped in front of her. She visibly unwound at his non-threatening approach, the tiny lines on her forehead smoothed out and her downturned mouth curved into a small smile.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

That smile combined with Quinn's bright amber eyes when they flicked back up his body, sent a jolt of desire straight to Rick's cock. He had been unable to stop thinking about her all weekend, and now with all of that blatant desire being aimed directly at him, it was becoming uncomfortably tight in his jock. Better the cup than poking her eye out, he supposed. Rick decided light conversation was the way to go to divert his pressing need and to make her stop her leering. A man could only hold back just so long when a woman eye-fucked him like that.

"You like watching MMA?"

He watched, stunned as she completely cl

osed down right before his eyes. Quinn stiffened up, her body becoming rigid and tense. Her sparkling caramel irises went flat. "No. I don't like fighting. I-I have to get to my desk." She spun on her heel and was gone before Rick could blink.

What in the fuck just happened?

Pissed that he somehow unraveled the progress he made with the nervous Quinn, Rick stormed off to the showers. Still half-hard from her blatant appreciation of his body, he stripped off his shorts and jock, climbing under the spray before the water even had a chance to warm up.

It was cold, but he didn't care. He really needed to get Quinn out of his head. Rick didn't want the trouble or the aggravation of a relationship.

Relationship? I must be losing my mind.

Meeting the girl once, bumping into her a few times, and taking her to the store hardly qualified as anything resembling a relationship. Besides, Rick was never the relationship type, and never would be. He wouldn't even know how to have a relationship, which he definitely didn't want so it didn't matter either way. His cock was the one that was interested in Quinn, all wavy brown hair and long legs leading up to a pert ass.

But damn, the way her eyes burned into him out in the gym had made him even harder, his dick now physically aching for relief. Quinn's dilated pupils and the gorgeous blush that spread up her neck gave away the fact that she had, at the very least, a carnal interest in him. The thought made his cock twitch again.

Shit.

Frustrated, Rick stared down angrily at his traitorous dick, standing tall and erect from his body. He cursed himself for letting Quinn get to him so quickly. His long fingers curled around the hard, smooth shaft, sending shivers down his spine.

Fuck. I can't believe I'm doing this at work.

Knowing he was alone in the showers, Rick reached a hand down to stroke his cock. He got to work right away, alternating between quick pulls of his shaft and swiping his wide thumb over the sensitive head. The now hot water rained down on his slick skin, steaming up the small space quickly. Within minutes, he felt a steady pressure building in his groin, his balls becoming heavy and sensitive. Visions of lush lips and amber eyes flashed behind his closed eyelids.

Rick dropped his head back, his mouth parted as his breath began to speed up. He pulled harder on his sensitive shaft, his breathing growing heavier and his body more desperate with each stroke.

Pleasure rocketed through him, causing his fatigued legs to begin to shake. He had to reach out and slap his free hand against the wet tile to keep from collapsing on the shower floor. Rick grit his teeth, picturing the way Quinn's face looked while looking at his nearly naked body, her eyes hooded and filled with lust. That image pushed Rick right over the edge. With one final thrust of his hips, he shoved his cock through his tight fist and spiraled into an explosive orgasm with a stifled groan. Streams of white jetted out powerfully as he came, hitting the floor before swirling down the drain.

Jesus.

Rick took a minute to let his pulse steady. He was spent. First from the intense work out with the heavy bag and then from jerking off to images of Quinn. Now that he had released the pent-up tension, Rick was thoroughly disgusted with himself. He shouldn't want the beautiful brunette. Mack made it clear he couldn't have her. It was obvious that Quinn had been through something traumatic, and fixing broken people wasn't Rick's expertise. But for some inexplicable reason, Rick was drawn to Quinn. He wanted her to trust him enough to confess all of her secrets, and he knew she damn well had them. He wanted to know what she was so afraid of so he could protect her from it.

With an annoyed huff, Rick quickly dressed, throwing his dirty clothes into his bag.

"Hey Rick!"

Rick became instantly alert at the worried tone of his coworker's voice, the Recon Marine in him shifting into operational mode. "Tucker?"

"I need your help. Mack has me working on the Alvarez op. Can you back me up for a few? I could use your advice since you've been to the area before and know the layout of the terrain. Pax is in a tight spot."

Rick ran a hand over his damp hair. “Sure big man, no problem.”

He followed Tucker out of the locker room and down the hall to Mission Command. Tucker swiped his badge and punched in his code to open the secure door.

The smaller man took his seat behind a massive wall of computer screens, each one depicting different information. Three screens were monitoring the perimeter cameras outside the gym. One displayed the view from a government satellite set to monitor South America, specifically a well-known Columbian drug lord’s estate and base of operations. The other screens showed various other images, including one from a small camera strapped to the helmet of Clint Paxton, former-CIA operative and resident kickboxing champ.

Tucker slipped on a headset and threw a similar one at Rick. “Paxton, I’ve got Ricochet here.”

“Pax, what’ve you got?” Rick never used his snarky nicknames on the job, only the ones that the men used in their official capacity. He studied the sat map while the mercenary filled him in.

“Mission completed, on my way back to the helo for extraction. The bridge that’s supposed to be over the river is gone. You’re familiar with this god-forsaken jungle, Rick. Where can I cross this thing?”

“Okay Pax, hang tight. Give me a minute to check your coordinates.”

Rick swiped the topographical map that had been pulled up on a secure touchscreen computer on Tucker’s desk, scrolling so he could see the entire area at once. Tucker read off Pax’s coordinates for him.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

“I found your position, Pax.” Rick traced a finger further down the river on the map.
“Tucker, where’s the pick up site?”

The wiry man leaned into Rick’s side so he could point at the spot, a small clearing just north of where Clint was waiting.

“Pax, there’s a small rope bridge two klicks west of your position. Head there and you can cross.” Rick showed Tucker the exact location so he could put the coordinates into the nav system that would guide the field operative to the bridge.

“You sure about that bridge Rick? Cuz I gotta tell you, there ain’t shit out here in this sweaty, malaria-filled hellhole.” Rick could hear the man’s steady breathing as he cut his way through the dense jungle.

“Yeah, I’m sure. I helped build it.”

“Well... Okay then. We’re on our way.”

“I’m tracking you and Xavier, Pax,” Tucker said. “No hostiles in sight.”

“Gotcha Tucker. Going silent. We’ll radio if we need you. Just make sure the helo is where it’s supposed to be.”

“Not a problem, helo to arrive at ten hundred hours. That gives you sixteen minutes to rendezvous,” Tucker explained. He flipped a switch and the loud noise of helicopter rotors filled their headsets. “Eagle One, be on the ground at pre-designated location at ten hundred hours.”

“Roger, Mission Command.” The pilot’s voice crackled through the speaker.

Rick and Tucker held their breath as they watched Clint’s camera jostle and bounce through the thick Columbian jungle.

“There!” Rick said, pointing at the screen. “That’s the rope bridge. Shit, I’m glad it’s still intact.”

Tucker turned to Rick, his face a mask of incredulity. “You weren’t sure if it was still there?”

Rick shrugged. “It’s been a few years. It is rope you know. Not exactly long lasting material.”

“Jesus, you’re such an asshole,” Tucker huffed.

“I’m over the bridge. Xav is behind me,” Pax said. “I can hear the helo approaching. By the way Ricochet, when I get back I’m going to kick the shit outta you. Rope bridge my ass! What bullshit. That thing was fucking falling apart. We’re lucky we didn’t fall into the fucking river.”

“Be good, Pax. See ya next week.”

“Deuces.” The communication clicked off.

Rick grinned as he pulled off the headset and dropped it onto the desk. “Another successful mission.”

Tucker gaped at him. “You better hope he’s not in Mission Control on your next op. He’ll send your ass over a cliff or some shit just to get revenge.”

“Nah, he loves me.” Rick’s laugh could be heard all the way down the hall, even once the thick security door closed behind him.

Rick strode into the break room to get some coffee, his smile fading as he once again thought about Quinn’s bizarre reaction in the gym. He was in the middle of pouring himself a mugful from a fresh pot when Dane’s loud voice surprised him.

“Ricochet! How’s it going man?”

Rick jerked, spilling hot coffee all over his hand. “Fuck! You asshole!”

Dane laughed, walking around Rick to grab a chair, turning it around to straddle it backwards. “You’re supposed to be aware of your surroundings at all times, Marine. It’s on you if you were daydreaming, not me.”

After cleaning up the spill, Rick turned around to face his friend, who was grinning. “I want to punch that smile right off your face, killer.” Rick smirked as he sipped his drink, praying the caffeine would help him focus on work instead of a certain brunette.

“So, you go out last night?”

Rick rolled his eyes. They frequently played wingman for each other and when they did, they both got laid pretty much every time. Of course he picked today to ask about sex.

“Yes.”

“So? Did you score?” Dane waggled his eyebrows at Rick.

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“If you’re so interested in my sex life, why didn’t you just come with me?”

Dane threw his head back and laughed. “I told you I had to be here at six to train Sloane. That kid is going to win a belt someday. He’s a beast. Besides, I’ve helped you score with more girls than you could possibly count. Now stop stalling and let me live vicariously.”

Rich grunted. “I helped you score you mean, and as a matter of fact I did get laid last night. Are you happy?” Rick’s gaze dropped to his coffee. He couldn’t watch his friend’s face light up with delight when the thought of last night made Rick sick to his stomach. Him and Dane always traded stories of their conquests, it was their thing. This morning, however, Rick just wasn’t in the mood.

“Niiiiiice. Let me guess, you vanished before the smell of sex had even cleared the room.”

“Fuck you, Nolan.” Rick was starting to get angry at his friend’s line of questioning. It was bad enough that he went back to the bar last night and pictured Quinn the entire time some random girl sucked his dick in the back room. It made him feel like some kind of sick weirdo, like he defiled Quinn or something. But he needed the release. Staying away from Quinn was killing him. He didn’t feel like rehashing how unsatisfying the experience was for Dane’s mid-morning entertainment.

The big man stood up, staring at Rick through narrowed eyes. “What’s your problem?”

Refusing to answer, Rick kept his eyes on his drink, willing the man to let it drop and leave him alone with his misplaced sense of guilt. Dane must have gotten the hint, because seconds later he heard the door open. Rick sighed and saw that he was alone. He was thankful to get at least one thing he wanted this morning.

Chapter 6

QUINN RAN FOR the front desk, hoping that Dane wouldn't catch her eavesdropping on his conversation with Rick. She hadn't meant to listen in. She was only going to grab a bottle of water from the break room when she heard the two men talking about Rick's conquests as she stood in the hall, frozen in place.

She blinked back tears as she sat in the chair behind her desk, not quite understanding why they were there. Rick wasn't her boyfriend, heck, he wasn't really even her friend. What did it matter who he screwed on his own free time?

Because, you thought you felt something special with him, that because he brought you shopping it somehow meant he cared.

Clearly, Quinn was an idiot, because her brain kept telling her over and over again that Rick wasn't good for her. But the kind, thoughtful man she got a glimpse of last weekend had her heart believing there could be more to him than just a good-looking, conceited ass.

Guess not.

The phone rang and Quinn welcomed work today. Anything that would keep her from thinking about Rick and whatever girl he took home last night would be a welcome distraction.

Quinn wished for a distraction and several hours later she was upset that it had been

granted. She wasn't sure what to do first. Answer the very shrill, very persistent phone, help the intimidating fighter that was standing in front of her desk, or use the bathroom, which she hadn't done since she got to work and she was two bottled waters and a cup of coffee into the day.

"If I could just talk to Mack, he'll know where I need to go," the pushy young man in an unzipped red hoodie said for the third time.

"I know." Quinn held up one finger. "Let me just get this call."

Frazzled, she snatched up the receiver. "Sanctum MMA, this is Quinn, can I help you?"

"Hi, this is Brandi. I need Dane, please."

"I'll transfer you." Quinn rolled her eyes sky high before pushing a button, sending the caller directly into Dane's voicemail. Two weeks at the front desk and she was fast becoming tired of being used as Dane's personal slut secretary. Several times a week a different woman with a ridiculous name called and asked for him. Quinn used to try and track him down, but after a week of that bullshit, she started sending the girls directly into his voicemail.

"Sorry." Quinn focused her attention on the young man. "What did you need again?" She swiped a stray lock of hair back behind her ear.

The tall blonde man smiled, flashing a flawless set of white teeth and two adorable dimples. "Mack. He's waiting for me. He just took me on as a fighter. He set me up to train with a Muay Thai expert."

Quinn couldn't tear her eyes away from the man's sculpted chest, which was right at eye level from her chair behind the desk. "Ummmm, sorry." She could feel the heat

rising in her cheeks. “Who did you say you were?”

“Chase Hadley.” He further undermined Quinn’s ability to think rationally by removing his sweatshirt, revealing a very tight white tank top underneath, which showcased what could only be called a perfectly sculpted, museum quality torso. Somehow, she felt he was doing it on purpose.

“Right, sorry. I’ll just, ummmm, get Mack. Okay.”

Her fumbling made Chase’s eyes light up and his smile broaden. “You’re cute when you’re nervous.”

Chase leaned his elbows on Quinn’s desk, putting his face about a foot away from hers. She tried to huff her disapproval at being called cute, but it came out more as a squeak. “I’m not nervous.”

Quinn shoved her hands under her desk to wipe her damp palms on her jeans. Before Chase could call her out on her lie, the inner door opened and Rick stepped into the lobby. Quinn watched as his brilliant eyes flicked from her to Chase and back. A small furrow formed between his brows and his mouth turned down at the corners.

Okay, now? Rick looks scary.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

Rick strode right up into Chase's personal space, forcing the younger man to back away from Quinn so he could greet Rick.

"Hey man, I'm Chase. Are you the Muay Thai expert?"

She noticed that Rick grudgingly accepted Chase's outstretched hand. He snapped at the young man as he answered. "Yeah, that's me, kid." Quinn flinched at Rick's harsh tone. She'd never heard Rick be anything but polite.

Realizing that she no longer needed to be part of this conversation, Quinn decided she could sneak away for a bathroom break. Plus, there was way too much testosterone in the lobby and she didn't want to be in the middle of it.

Quinn pushed back from her desk, circling around it to reach the locked inner door. Rick and Chase's position in front of her desk forced her to walk past them, her arm brushing against Rick's as she went. The contact made her gasp, causing both men to stare at her strangely.

Quinn tilted her head up to apologize and found Rick glaring at her with cold, harsh eyes. It was such a frightening stare that Quinn forgot what she had been about to say. Her mouth went dry and her skin broke out in prickly goose bumps. Freaked out, she hurried to the door, swiped her card, and ran down the hall to the women's bathroom.

Quinn locked herself in a stall and leaned back against the door.

What just happened?

Rick seemed abnormally angry, and not just at her but at Chase as well. Quinn swallowed down her nerves and willed her thrumming heart to slow down. Maybe he just woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. She frowned. It was very likely he woke up in someone else's bed this morning. Jealousy streaked through her, unwelcome and frankly, very confusing.

She quickly used the bathroom and washed up. By the time she walked back to her desk, she was even more annoyed by Rick's hostility. If he wanted to be a jerk, then that was his problem. Quinn was done bending over backwards trying to make unreasonable men happy. She suffered through two years of that with Travis and eighteen years with her dad before that. She was never going back to living that way.

As she passed by the door to the men's locker room, she could hear Rick's voice loud and clear, and he did not sound happy. More eavesdropping— Quinn decided there must be something wrong with her to constantly find herself listening in to Rick's conversations. Maybe she was a stalker?

"Like I said kid, Quinn's off limits, got it? She's like family to Mack and I'm not going to

let anyone hurt her. So dial back the bullshit and keep it professional. Understand?"

Shocked and embarrassed, Quinn hurried back to her desk before anyone could catch her spying. She slumped into her chair, worn out from the crazy day.

Rick seemed to think Chase was flirting with her. Was that why he was angry? She bristled at Rick inserting himself in her personal life. He went out and fucked a stranger last night. What the hell business was it of his who flirted with her? Not that she'd ever take Chase up on it, but Rick doesn't know that. Quinn knew she was in no shape to date anyone, even a charming blonde cutie with dimples and a perfect body.

Or a hot, aqua-eyed fighter who gets on my nerves and is a total player.

Whatever. Quinn's head was beginning to ache. She refused to worry about Rick. If he wanted to be angry with her for Chase's flirting, then he could just be angry all by himself. She shut down her computer and retrieved her purse, relieved to be done for the day.

The remainder of the week went by quickly, Chase came and went every day, acting polite but distant. Rick stayed back in the gym, so Quinn only saw him in passing here and there. They exchanged casual hellos, but that was it. It was better that way, she knew it. She had been getting too close to Rick, and her heart couldn't sustain another bad relationship.

By Saturday, Quinn had cabin fever. She needed to get a beat up old car or check the bus schedule at some point. Being confined to the gym or her apartment was too reminiscent of her life back in Texas. Now that she was free to go wherever she wanted, Quinn intended on taking advantage of it. There were a few places she could walk to, but not many. Atlanta was definitely not a walking city.

Since she couldn't really leave, she threw on a sports bra and a pair of shorts, figuring she could at least get some exercise. Plus, a workout would help her focus on something other than Rick's hard muscles and chiseled jawline, not that she hadn't used every opportunity possible to check him out this past week. For someone who swore to stay away from the sexy, dangerous, heart-breaking Rick Brennan, she was doing a terrible job of it.

She shook her head, setting her radio to a hits station. Quinn started with push-ups, then progressed to jumping rope, a routine she used to do in Texas without telling Travis. He would have beaten her if he knew she was exercising behind his back. He wanted to keep her weak and dependent. The thought made her push harder, work to be stronger, to never allow a man to control her again.

About twenty minutes into her workout, Quinn had worked up a good sweat and was starting to feel the natural high as the endorphins flooded her body. She stopped to grab a sip of water when she heard a knock at the door.

She froze.

Her old friend fear reared its ugly head again, clenching tight in her gut, forcing her heart to race and her breathing to pick up. The same paranoid thoughts that plagued her since she left Texas filled her head. Is it Travis? Did he find me? Will he finally kill me?

Even sweaty and hot from her workout, chills broke out all over her body. A voice called out from the other side of the door.

“Doll. It’s Rick.

RICK SMILED AS he stood on the small landing just outside of the tiny apartment above Sanctum. He could hear loud music playing inside, some top forty crap. What was Quinn doing— dancing, singing, cleaning while dancing and singing?

The locks disengaged and the door swung wide open. Rick nearly choked on his tongue at the sight in front of him. Quinn was standing on the threshold with a light sheen of sweat on her body, her hair pulled into a high ponytail, and wearing only a tiny blue sports bra and a pair of shorts so small they couldn’t possibly be legal to wear out in public.

Holy hell, I’m going to croak right here on her doorstep.

“Rick. What are you doing here?” Quinn’s amber eyes shone, but her face looked confused.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

“Ummmm,” Jesus. He couldn’t think with her half naked and within arms length, it was too damn distracting. Her pale thighs were smooth and toned. All he could imagine was having them wrapped around his waist. “I uh, I mean... shit. I was going to bring you to the store again. If... if you wanted, I mean.”

Damn, I sound like a complete and total idiot.

Quinn’s already flushed cheeks turned an even darker shade of crimson as he stammered in her doorway. Her eyes cast downward until she was staring at her own feet. Rick marveled over how long and thick her eyelashes were against her pale skin. Her lush pink mouth captivated him as she licked her lips nervously.

This was a bad idea. His dick had a mind of it’s own whenever he was around Quinn and it was beginning to throb inside his jeans. He hadn’t gotten off since the pathetically unsatisfying experience on Sunday night and jerking in the shower at work and his cock was taking notice.

“You came here just to see if I needed another ride?”

Once again, when Quinn’s shy but pleased gaze lifted to Rick’s face, it hit him like a punch to the gut. He’d seen his share of beautiful women, hell, he’d had his share of beautiful women. But nothing he’d seen in his twenty-eight years would ever compare to the absolute perfection of Quinn Wallace.

Mesmerized, Rick could only nod.

The small smile she rewarded him with made his discomfort totally worth it. Like

another hit of an addict's favorite drug, Rick would probably give anything to see her smile more often. Quinn always looked sad, weary. Giving her a little bit of happiness, if only for something as simple as grocery shopping, seemed like a fair trade for a constant, aching hard-on, the inability to enjoy his usual no strings sex, and never ending mental torture.

"Yeah, I came to see if you needed another ride. Is that alright with you, doll?"

Quinn's gorgeous face relaxed, her smile becoming wider. There were those adorable crinkles around her eyes again. "Yes, it's fine. Let me just throw on a shirt. Uh, come in and just... wait here."

He was pleased that she finally stopped telling him not to call her doll. She was a doll, his doll. Rick watched her tight ass as she scurried off to what he assumed was her bedroom. He groaned at the thought of her and her ass anywhere near a bed. As surreptitiously as possible, he adjusted his painful hard on.

Get your shit together, Brennan.

Minutes later, Quinn emerged with a small pink shirt pulled over her sports bra. She was still wearing the tiny, cheek hugging shorts. As he followed her out of the apartment, her delectable back end swaying with each step, Rick wondered if he had lost his fucking mind.

Chapter 7

AFTER RICK UNEXPECTEDLY showed up at her place again on Saturday, Quinn found herself looking forward to seeing him at work on Monday, which was totally unlike her. The old her anyway, the one Travis broke. Rick was a lot of fun, he was easy to be around, and he said cute things that made her feel warm inside, like "doll" and "be good". So what if he was a charmer, or enjoyed random sex? He wasn't her

boyfriend. She could be friends with him without caving to her desire to find out first hand what Rick was like in bed.

Resigned to the friend zone, where it was safe, Quinn was able to let herself be more comfortable around Rick. He gave her the confidence to be free again. She breezed through the front door of the gym, smiling the entire way to the break room.

“Quinn, you look good today.”

Sitting at the table was Xander Vega, one of the fighters that she found incredibly intimidating her first week at Sanctum.

Was that only three weeks ago?

Who was she kidding? She found all of the fighters intimidating. But after speaking with Xander several times since then, Quinn decided that he was a great guy. In fact, all of the guys at Sanctum were pretty awesome. Big and threatening looking, yes, but gentle and kind and respectful whenever they spoke to her. They really were a family here, looking out for each other all of the time. It felt good to be a part of that. She was almost okay with watching them train, as long as they were hitting equipment and not other people.

“Hi Xander. Thanks. I think I finally know what I’m doing around here. You’re probably just noticing the fact that I’m not walking around confused all the time.”

Quinn brewed a pot of coffee, pouring herself a cup when it was done. She quietly stirred in two sugars before taking a sip.

“Maybe,” Xander finally said. His sharp gaze focused on Quinn, scanning her up and down. She shifted uncomfortably, but knew that he wasn’t being pervy. He was trying to uncover the source of her giant smile.

“I’ll figure it out, Quinn. You can’t hide it from me.” He tapped his finger on the side of his nose as he studied her.

Quinn smirked at Xander, taking another sip of coffee. Her silence made him laugh. He pushed up from the table, crossing to the door in three large strides.

“You’re a trip, Quinn. I gotta go. I have a client in five minutes.”

“See ya, Xander.”

He wagged his fingers over his head without turning back.

Quinn leaned against the counter, thinking back to her weekend with Rick. He was a perfect gentleman on Saturday, taking her to the store, opening doors for her, helping her carry her groceries up to the apartment. Well, a perfect gentleman if you don’t count the few times she caught him staring at her ass and the fact that he flirted like he was training for an Olympic event.

Then there was the fact that she could make Rick blush. It was astounding. Rick... the huge, intimidating, badass former Marine and fighter actually blushed when he realized he’d been busted eye-fucking her.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

Amazingly, Quinn wasn't bothered by his blatant appreciation. It had been so long since a man, or anyone for that matter, looked at her with anything but disgust or ownership. Once she got past her initial discomfort at being flirted with, she ate up the attention that had been severely lacking in her life up to now. The knowledge that they would remain as friends went a long way to helping her relax in his presence.

By the end of the workday, a dark cloud had replaced Quinn's good mood. Even though she tried to convince herself that she wasn't miserable by the fact that Rick didn't show up at the gym today, she knew d

eeep down that his absence was the reason for her sour attitude.

Rick wasn't at work Tuesday either. By Wednesday, Quinn was positively depressed. She found that she missed him way more than she should, way more than she was comfortable with. In a mere three weeks, Rick had somehow wormed his way into her life and was now lodged firmly under her skin.

Quinn was sitting at her desk on Thursday when a tall blonde woman walked into the lobby.

"Can I help you?"

The woman smiled at Quinn. She was genuine and warm. "I'm here to see Clint."

"Okay, I'll track him down." Quinn reached for the phone, but the woman stopped her.

“Don’t worry, he knows I’m here. I texted him.” She held up her cell phone, shaking it at Quinn. “You’re new, right? I’m Mara Paxton, Clint’s wife. I was in the area so we’re grabbing lunch.”

Wife?

The surprise Quinn felt must have shown on her face.

Mara laughed— a big, no holds-barred laugh, all white teeth with her head thrown back. “I’m guessing you didn’t know he was married.”

Quinn felt her cheeks heat up. “I never really thought about it. I mean... I don’t spend a lot of time with the guys or in the gym. I wasn’t, you know, interested in your husband that way.”

Mara snorted and laughed again. “Oh Quinn, I didn’t think that. You’re funny. We should hang out sometime.” She dug through her purse, pulling out a business card that she handed to Quinn. “Here, call me. We’ll get lunch or something.”

Quinn took the card just as the inner door opened. Clint came striding across the lobby, wrapping his perfectly sculpted arms around his wife.

“Hey Mar, ready to go? I could eat a horse right about now.” The tall, bulky man tucked Mara into his side. She beamed up at him, her eyes shining with love.

“Yeah babe. I’m ready.” Mara turned to Quinn. “I was just telling Quinn that me and her should hang out sometime.”

“Oh?” Clint ran a hand through his short, strawberry blonde hair. “That’s good. Quinn’s new to the city, right?” He looked at Quinn expectantly.

“Ummmm, yeah. I am. New that is. To Atlanta, not to Georgia. I grew up an hour north of here.” Quinn wanted to smack herself in the head. She knew better than to give out any information that could link her back to Travis, no matter how unlikely.

Mara clasped her hands together, bouncing on her toes. “How great! I’m from Virginia. We only moved here last year. You could probably show me a few places that I don’t know about.”

Quinn blinked, stunned into silence by Mara’s bubbly insistence that they would be friends. She finally spoke after Clint raised an expectant eyebrow at her. “Uh, okay. Sure.”

“We’ll see you later, Quinn,” Clint said as the couple headed for the door.

“Oh, Clint. I forgot to ask. Do you know where Rick has been? Is he sick or something?” Quinn felt ridiculous asking, but decided that Clint was the one to ask. He would be least likely to make a big deal of it since he hadn’t really been around the last two weeks and didn’t know she had been spending time with Rick. She knew the men traveled for training, but she hadn’t seen Rick on the schedule.

Clint twitched. Just a fraction, but enough that Quinn noticed.

“Ricochet? He’s touring with one of the UFC guys. Some last minute thing in Vegas or something for a fight. He’ll be back next week I think. Not sure.” Quinn nodded in agreement, because she didn’t know what to say.

Ricochet? Quinn had no idea what that meant or why Clint would call Rick that. She noticed Rick had an irritating, yet somehow endearing habit of giving everyone around him a nickname, but this was the first she heard of anyone using one on Rick.

“C’mon Clint. I’m hungry.” Mara tugged on her husband’s hand, leading him

towards the door. “See you later Quinn!”

A soft breeze blew in the front door and they were gone.

QUINN WAITED NERVOUSLY at the bar, her eyes jumping to the door every minute or so. She sipped her drink slowly, not wanting to get drunk before her companion arrived. Her tolerance for being out was wearing thin, especially since in the mere fifteen minutes since she walked through the door of Fado’s Irish Pub, no fewer than six guys had hit on her. The bus she had to take to get here dropped her off earlier than she had liked, but the next bus would have been too late to be on time.

“Quinn!”

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

Quinn jerked her head up and saw Mara Paxton making a beeline for her, weaving gracefully through the Friday happy hour crowd.

“Hey girl! You look great!” Mara beamed as she pulled Quinn into a hug.

“Thanks, uh... you too.” Quinn cursed herself for sounding so stupid. After two years of Travis, her conversational skills were sorely lacking.

“I’m glad you called me. Clint is working this weekend, some out of town client he has to see. It gets so boring without him around.”

“Can I get you a drink?” A cute bartender put a napkin in front of Mara.

“Sure gorgeous, I’ll have a rum and Coke.”

“No problem.” He nodded, checked that Quinn’s beer was still full, and went to mix Mara’s drink.

“Rum and Coke at an Irish pub?” Quinn asked.

Mara grinned. “I like what I like.” She shrugged and pointed at Quinn’s dark Guinness. “And I definitely don’t like that.” Her face twisted up as if she smelled something bad.

“Here you are.” The bartender put Mara’s drink down in front of her, winking at Quinn. “Let me know if either of you ladies needs anything.”

Mara gave Quinn a “he’s so cute and he’s totally hitting on you” look that Quinn promptly ignored. Yeah, he was good looking, dark hair, green eyes, nice body from what Quinn could see, but picking up a guy in a bar? Too cliché for her, not to mention scary.

Holding up her glass, Mara smiled at Quinn. “To new friends.”

“I can drink to that.” Quinn grinned, clinking her beer with Mara’s rum and Coke.

“So, what’s it like working with all those hot, ripped guys? I bet you can hardly focus on your job, what with them half-naked and sweaty all the time.”

Quinn snorted beer through her nose, coughing and sputtering until Mara handed her a napkin with a wicked grin on her face. “Jeez, Mara. Don’t do that to me while I’m drinking!” Quinn giggled as she mopped up the mess.

Mara laughed, her eyes sparkling with humor.

“Anyway,” Quinn said once she caught her breath, “I’m in the front lobby ninety percent of the day. I don’t really see much of the guys unless they’re coming or going.”

Plus, the only guy I want to ogle is one I can’t get involved with.

Mara frowned. “That sucks. Getting to check out the goods has got to be the best perk of working there.”

“I don’t know. I kind of like being out front. Fighting...” Quinn hesitated, trying to find a way to describe her feelings without insulting Mara’s husband, “it’s just too violent for me, I guess.” She shrugged. “Not my thing, really.”

With wide eyes, Mara gaped at Quinn. “Seriously? You work at an MMA training facility and you don’t watch the fighting because it’s too violent?” She chuckled. “You’re a trip, Quinn.”

“Yeah, I know,” Quinn said dejectedly. “Hey, I was curious about something. Something about one of the guys.” She shifted on her barstool, uncomfortable to bring this up but determined to get the answer to her question.

“Shoot, girl.” Mara leaned closer, obviously interested in whatever juicy gossip Quinn was about to dish.

“Well,” Quinn felt her face heat up but pressed on, “do you know why is Rick called Ricochet?”

Mara’s beautiful face split with a wide grin. “Are you crushing on Rick, Quinn? Because he’s totally gorgeous. I could easily see you two together. God, you’d be the hottest couple ever!”

“What? No!” Quinn said a little too vehemently. “No, I’m not crushing on him. He’s been friendly, as in just friends,” she clarified.

When Mara gave her a knowing look. “Honestly. We’re just friends. I wanted to know the reason for his nickname, that’s all.”

“Oh, okay. You’re better off as friends with that boy anyway.” She lifted a perfectly plucked eyebrow. “He’s not known for sticking around, if you know what I mean. He “ricochets” from one bed to another, hardly takes his shoes off before he’s out the door and on to the next girl. That’s what I’ve heard, anyway.” Mara made little air quotes around the word ricochets.

The thick, dark beer Quinn consumed suddenly felt heavy and gross in her stomach.

Disappointment was her initial reaction to Mara's description of Rick as a player. Not that it was a surprise, heck, she heard about his reputation from his own mouth that day in the break room. He was hot, single, and could pretty much get whomever he wanted. It wasn't long before anger replaced the disappointment. It seemed that every single man Quinn came across was a total douche. She was so sick and tired of douches. But with Rick, it seemed like there was more to him than the slick player he portrayed. An unfeeling ass wouldn't bring a stranded woman to the grocery store.

"Good thing we're just friends then." Quinn dropped some money on the bar, feeling suddenly brave and if she would admit it to herself, a little vengeful. If Rick was going out every weekend, why was she sitting at home alone pining for him? She raised a hand to flag down the cute bartender.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

Smiling, he made his way down the now crowded bar, stopping in front of Quinn. He leaned forward on his elbows, his face only a few inches away from Quinn's.

"Need another?" he asked with a playful smirk, wiping the bar without tearing his gaze away from hers.

"Yep. And maybe a date?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Quinn could see Mara's jaw drop. Hell, Quinn couldn't even believe she just did that. Forward was not part of Quinn's repertoire. Quinn didn't even have a repertoire.

Who the heck is this brave girl and what has she done with timid little Quinn?

The bartender threw his towel over his shoulder and grinned, his green eyes sparkling. "I'm sorry to say I can't go on a date with you."

Quinn felt her heart sputter to a stop. She shouldn't have put herself out there like that, out of her comfort zone. Now she felt like an idiot.

"I don't go out with anyone whose name I don't know." He held out his hand. "Chase Gallagher."

Quinn smiled, relieved, and shook the outstretched hand. It was warm, a little too warm maybe, but she shook it nonetheless.

"Quinn Wallace."

“Well Quinn Wallace, now that I know you, I’d love to take you out sometime.” Chase met her eyes, neither of them looking away as their hands stayed clasped over the bar between them.

“Lord have mercy,” Mara said loudly, fanning herself with her hand. “I need another drink if I’m expected to watch you two melt all of my ice with the steamy looks you’re giving each other.”

Embarrassed, Quinn pulled her hand back as Chase laughed.

“Another rum and Coke coming up.”

Quinn sat there stunned, while Mara stared at her, amused.

What the heck did I just do?

BY MONDAY, QUINN was already regretting her upcoming date with Chase. She deserved to have a life, wanted to have a life. One date couldn’t hurt. She just didn’t want to feel so exposed and vulnerable. Being alone with a strange man was not a good way to feel safe.

Quinn did her work quickly and efficiently even as distracted as she was about both her date and the fact that Rick was still gone. Halfway through the day, however, she made a decision. Quinn left her desk to go into the main area of the gym. Her eyes glanced around the room until she found who she was looking for.

“Xavier!” Quinn waved him over.

The man stopped mid-punch, steadied the bag he was hitting, and walked towards Quinn, smiling.

“Quinn. I’m surprised to see you back here.” His smile was white and straight, his dark eyes shining as he approached.

Quinn shifted uncomfortably on her feet, her eyes dropped to the floor, before finally meeting Xavier’s gaze head on. “I need a favor.”

RICK PARKED OUTSIDE Sanctum MMA on Wednesday, glad to be back from his latest covert op. He got out of the car and rolled his neck, wincing at the stiffness that remained after flying eighteen hours in a Globemaster cargo jump seat. He had to hitch a ride with a military flight since passenger airlines don’t land anywhere within hundreds of miles of the op site.

He had been incredibly restless on this last mission, more so than usual, his mind constantly wandering back to Quinn. Rick spent countless hours wondering how Quinn’s long, dark hair would look spread out on his white sheets, what noises she would make if he kissed her, how soft her skin would feel under his rough hands. He wanted to find out, needed to find out. Couldn’t fucking think until he experienced it in real life and not just his overactive imagination.

It nearly drove him crazy during the flight out and back. Rick used his training to block everything out while he was on the ground or during the mission, including Quinn. With others counting on him to give his A-game he was always completely focused. But travel time? He literally tortured himself with fantasies of what they would do together— naked.

Now, just seconds from seeing her again, Rick was suddenly nervous. He could face down a mob of angry insurgents without breaking a sweat, parachute into enemy territory in the pitch black without hesitation, go dark for days with nothing to rely on for survival except his own training, but Quinn? What he felt for her scared the shit out of him.

Get yourself together, Brennan.

He strode into the lobby projecting a confidence he didn't feel. One glance at the front desk and his heart felt as if it stuttered to a stop.

"Tucker? What the fuck are you doing up here? Where's Quinn? Is she sick?"

The wiry man pushed his glasses up on his nose, glancing at Rick from behind his computer screen. "In back." He stabbed his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the main gym. "I'm just watching the door for her while she trains."

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

“Trains?” Rick growled. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Tucker sat up straight and crossed his arms, giving Rick his full attention, something the socially challenged man almost never did. “What’s it to you, Ricochet?”

Rick scowled at Tucker’s use of his nickname, knowing that the man was baiting him. Tucker might look small and geeky and love computers, but he was a fifth degree black belt in Shotokan karate. He had held his own in a spur of the moment karate match with UFC welterweight champion George St. Pierre.

“Nothing. Forget it.” Rick huffed, storming past the front desk and the smirking Tucker. He swiped his badge, irritated at himself for letting Tucker get under his skin. Hell, he was irritated at himself for letting Quinn get under his skin. Rick was even too pissed to call the small guy “big man” like he usually did.

Twenty-eight fucking years without a single person to worry about except myself. Less than a month after Quinn walks through the front door and I barely recognize the guy in the mirror or the thoughts in my own head anymore.

Rick marched into the training area in a cloud of anger.

Fucking Tucker, messing my head all up.

When he reached the edge of the mat covered floor, his world stopped spinning and came to a screeching halt. He blinked, certain that his mind was playing tricks on him. Nope. It wasn’t. Across the gym, standing in front of the heavy bag wearing a tank top and those damn miniature shorts, was Quinn. She was barefoot, punching

and kicking the bag with a jab-front kick combo.

Quinn all sweaty, wearing next to nothing, was a sight to see. But what made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, what Rick immediately zeroed in on, was Xavier's fucking hands on Quinn's hips, touching what belonged to Rick.

Belong to me? Quinn doesn't belong to me.

Rick shook the thoughts from his head, squeezing his eyes shut until the angry red haze cleared. When he opened them back up, he saw Xavier and Quinn staring at him, their lesson interrupted by his odd behavior.

"Hey man." Xavier held up a wrapped hand in greeting. "Good to have you back."

Rick's furious scowl surprised his friend, causing Xavier's dark eyes to narrow suspiciously. Rick flicked his gaze over to Quinn. She stood next to Xav, unmoving, her face blank as she waited for her lesson to continue. It made Rick feel as if he were a mere annoyance.

Already pissed and now embarrassed on top of it, Rick spun on his heel and stomped down the hall. He swiped his badge and punched in his code, opening the door to an empty Mission Control. Rick paced the room, raking his hands through his hair in frustration. He wanted to tear the room apart, but knew he'd face everyone's wrath if he destroyed the expensive equipment.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

These unfamiliar feelings were messing with his head. Rick couldn't define them, couldn't explain them, and had absolutely no idea how to deal with them. The only way he knew how to release frustration was fucking or fighting. Right now, he was way too volatile to fuck.

Fighting it is then.

Decision made, he threw open the door and made his way towards the locker room.

“Ricochet!”

Rick stopped in the hall, letting his head fall back until he was staring up at the acoustical tile ceiling.

“Get your ass in here.”

Shit.

He turned around and skulked into Mack’s office.

“Close the door and take a seat.” Mack pointed to one of the well-worn chairs in front of his desk.

Rick scowled, but did as he was asked, sliding into the seat cautiously. He knew he was about to get his ass handed to him. What he didn’t know was why.

“Chief.” Rick nodded at Mack who was studying him thoughtfully.

“I see you got back from the Middle East okay.”

Rick’s tense frame relaxed. Maybe he wasn’t here to get chewed out.

“Yes sir. Arrived yesterday.”

“Ready for your debriefing later?”

“Yes

sir.”

“Good. Now, I want to talk about Quinn.”

Rick stiffened in his chair, his ingrained training kicking in as he began to feel cornered. Every muscle was suddenly at attention, ready to respond at a moment’s notice to the interrogation.

Crap. He cleared his throat. “Quinn, sir?”

Mack glared, his stern expression letting Rick know that he saw right through his bullshit.

“Quit the sir shit, Rick. Yes, Quinn. You fucking her?”

All of the blood drained from Rick’s face. Then his skin heated up as it rushed back in. All of the times in his life that Mack had yelled at him, humiliated him, made him feel pain like he’d never felt before, he never wanted to hit the man. Today was the closest he’d ever come to seriously thinking about it. “No, I’m not. Not that it’s any of your business... chief.”

Mack leaned over the desk, his face so close that Rick could see every line, every battle scar, and every distinct feature that was earned over the course of twenty years of serving his country.

“Get this straight, Ricochet. Quinn is family. My family. Don’t even think about treating her like you do all your other whores. You want her, you better mean it and make it stick, or you’ll be dealing with me. Are we clear?”

Rick’s eyes went wide as his boss read him the riot act. He was used to having Mack up in his space, yelling. That’s what boot camp was— sixty days of being reamed up and down by your commanding officer. This was a different Mack than Rick was used to. This Mack wasn’t trying to whip a corpsman into shape for Recon. No, he was protecting someone he cared about. Rick knew he wouldn’t cross Mack, but then he didn’t think he could stay away from Quinn either.

“I think...” Rick struggled to come up with words that could define his scattered thoughts. He huffed out an exasperated breath, uncomfortable discussing this with anyone, let alone his boss. “I think I might actually like her, Mack.”

Rick dropped his head into his hands to hide his embarrassment. He rubbed his face tiredly.

Who the fuck talks feelings with their C.O.?

Mack lowered himself back into his chair, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

“Are you shitting me, Rick? Because if you are—”

“No. I’m not.”

“Well holy shit.” Mack’s angry scowl morphed into a knowing smirk. “Ricochet’s gone and found himself some real feelings. And here I didn’t think you had any.”

“Fuck you.” Rick glared at Mack from between his fingers.

“Is that any way to speak to your boss?”

“It is when he’s giving me shit about my personal life.”

Mack grunted his assent. “Don’t fuck it up, Rick. That’s all I’m going to say. She deserves respect.”

Rick stood up. “Can I go now? Or are we gonna sit here all day and have heart to hearts and braid each other’s hair?”

With a deep chuckle, Mack waved a hand, dismissing Rick. “Hey,” he said as Rick’s hand touched the doorknob, “debriefing in the conference room at fourteen hundred hours.”

Rick’s shoulders sagged. “I know.”

God I hate those fucking debriefings. I think I’d rather talk feelings.

Chapter 8

QUINN FLOPPED DOWN onto her couch, completely drained. She had no idea what happened on Rick’s trip to make him such an angry grouch, but it took all of her energy to deal with him since he returned three days ago. He’d been rude, grumpy, and easily provoked. Now that it was Friday, Quinn felt relieved to be done with work, a relaxing weekend ahead of her.

She got up and went to her closet, figuring that deciding what to wear for her date tomorrow would keep her from obsessing over Rick’s strange behavior. Quinn flicked through her meager belongings. It took about three seconds for her to realize that she had nothing to wear.

“Crud.”

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

Quinn stuffed some money in her pocket and headed outside. She could walk to the mall in the same amount of time she would wait for the next bus. At least it was payday and Mack was still paying her in cash. With almost no expenses, she figured she could splurge on a new dress.

Quinn was only a few yards down the sidewalk when someone called out her name. Well, not her name, but close enough.

“Doll! What in the hell are you doing?”

Oh no.

She knew that voice. It took all of her concentration to keep her eyes forward, even when the car pulled up to the curb next to her.

“Hey! Quinn, stop!”

Cursing under her breath, Quinn stopped. In her peripheral vision, she saw Rick leap out of his car and head directly for her.

“Why are you walking, doll?”

Quinn pinched the bridge of her nose, struggling to hold in her rapidly deteriorating self-control. He’d been an ass since he got back and now he thought he had the right to question her?

“Because Rick, some of us don’t own cars.” She continued walking down the

sidewalk, more determined than ever to buy that damn dress for the damn date she didn't even want to go on anymore.

“Wait!” Rick put his hand on Quinn's arm, pulling her to a stop.

She whirled around faster than Rick expected, yanking her arm out of his grasp, her entire body tensing up.

“Don't ever fucking grab me again!”

She watched as Rick flinched back in shock. “I'm sorry,” he whispered. “I just...” He hung his head dejectedly, scratching the back of his neck. “I was going to offer you a ride. This isn't the best neighborhood, that's all. I didn't mean to —”

“I know.” Quinn tried to calm down, but panic streaked down her spine, sending adrenaline racing through her veins. She stuffed her hands in her pockets to hide the fact that they were shaking from her instinctual reaction to Rick grabbing her. Quinn stared at the ground before returning her gaze to his flushed face. Clearly, she hadn't made much progress since leaving Travis. She was still a nervous wreck around men.

Rick broke the silence first. “I'm really sorry. I know you've been mad at me or something, so whatever I did to make you angry, I apologize.”

Quinn gaped at Rick. “You didn't make me mad.”

He shrugged. “I did something. You won't look at me or talk to me since I got back.”

She glanced down the street, desperate to continue on her way, to forget about “Ricochet” and his harem of skanks. Quinn couldn't bring herself to move, to distance herself from this man. A man who was no good for her fragile mental state. A man who had endless strings of one-night stands and never had a lasting

relationship. A man who went out of his way to make her feel comfortable, to make sure she had food and a safe way to get it. A man who pushed every single one of her hot buttons, making her a hormonal mess whenever he was near.

“Alright.”

Rick’s eyes widened. “Alright what?”

“Alright you can give me a ride to the mall.”

Quinn didn’t miss the slight quirk in the corner of Rick’s lips or the wince he made.

“The mall?”

She huffed, her hands on her hips. “Yes, the mall. I can walk if it’s too emasculating for you to set foot in the mall, Rick.”

He laughed at her petulance and opened the passenger side door. “Get in, doll. I guess we’re going to the mall.”

Quinn dropped into the seat, clicking her seat belt in place. She stifled a chuckle when Rick rolled his eyes at the word mall, acting like he was so put out to have to go there. “You can just drop me off out front,” Quinn said as they pulled into the massive parking lot at Lenox Square less than five minutes later.

Rick dismissed her idea immediately. “No. This mall isn’t known for being real safe, Quinn. And it’ll be dark in less than an hour so you’re not walking home. I’ll come in with you.” Rick brought the car to a stop in front of the valet parking sign.

Quinn shook her head, but didn’t bother arguing with Rick. He would do what he wanted no matter what she said. Before the young valet could open her door, she hopped out

of the car and hurried inside, leaving Rick scrambling to trade his keys for a ticket in order to catch up.

If Quinn were being honest with herself, this whole situation was beyond strange. Rick “Ricochet” Brennan, man-whore and Muay Thai expert, was taking her to the mall to buy a dress for a date with another man. Okay, so Rick didn’t exactly know that’s what he was doing. Would he have volunteered to drive her if he did? What would he say if he knew she would rather be going out with him tonight?

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

Quinn thought he would driver her even if he knew it was for a date, though he wouldn't like it one bit. Rick honestly seemed to want to make sure Quinn stayed safe, something she hadn't been the last few years with Travis and then for a year on her own after she left him.

"Can you slow down?"

"Sorry," Quinn paced her steps, not realizing how fast she was walking. She was feeling guilty for letting Rick come shopping with her. Suddenly, it didn't feel right to have him help out for her date with Chase. Guilt warred inside her, right alongside lust and fear.

"Where to first?" Rick asked.

She saw Rick scanning the mall, looking carefully up and around at all of the different stores. Quinn noticed he did that a lot, took in his surroundings. The first time he was at her apartment he did that and it made her feel violated. Now she knew that Rick was just an exceptionally perceptive individual. He even knew that she was angry with him this past week. No way would Quinn ever admit that it was disappointment at having his reputation confirmed by Mara, it was too humiliating. No doubt he would laugh if he knew she had thought about him romantically.

Quinn was beyond naïve when it came to sex, only having been with Travis, and that wasn't pleasurable at all. Rick, apparently, had fucked half of the women of Atlanta if she believed Mara, and she did. Mara had no reason to lie, and Rick was so good looking and so easy going, Quinn didn't doubt that he could bed any woman he wanted just by using those stunning turquoise eyes.

Quinn groaned under her breath at the thought of Rick turning those charms on her. Blood started flowing to areas of her body that she had forgotten existed a long time ago. Molten heat pooled between her legs, making her uncomfortable and horny as hell.

“Here.” Quinn took a sharp right turn, ducking into the nearest women’s clothing store so Rick wouldn’t notice the blush spreading up her neck and into her face or her rapid, shallow breathing.

She heard muffled swearing behind her.

“Jesus, Quinn. Give me a head’s up. I nearly took out a family and tripped over a stroller.”

“Sorry,” Quinn snapped rudely, frustrated by the sudden, untimely awakening of her hormones.

“You really want to shop here?”

“Why, is it not good enough for you?”

“No doll, this is a plus sized store.”

Quinn lifted her head and finally looked around. “Oops.”

That’s it. I’m losing my mind.

RICK STARED AT Quinn incredulously as she stumbled nervously through the mall. He’d noticed her hands shaking earlier after he stupidly grabbed her on the sidewalk. Her over the top reaction had abuse victim written all over it, just like that day in her apartment when he got too close.

Now, watching her dart into a plus sized store to buy a dress for her very petite figure, he knew she wasn't in the right frame of mind to be left alone.

"This isn't the store I wanted to go into." She sounded on the verge of tears.

"Yeah, I figured," Rick answered lightly, trying to lift the dark cloud that had settled between them. "Why don't we try Bloomingdales?" He stepped back so she could pass him without touching. No way did he want a repeat of her earlier meltdown on the street.

Quinn wandered out into the mall atrium, helplessly lost.

"This way, doll." He kept his voice gentle, when all he wanted to do was bundle her up in his arms, drive her home, and hold her until she felt safe and secure.

This fucking sucks.

The one thing he wanted to do more than anything was touch her, and it was the one thing that freaked Quinn out the most.

Rick led Quinn into Bloomingdale's, directly to the women's dress department. "Do you want me to wait somewhere else?" he asked, praying she said no. He really didn't want to leave her by herself.

Quinn didn't respond. Just a flick of her eyes to his let him know that she heard his question. Since she didn't answer, he figured he could do as he pleased. Rick casually followed her through the racks, watching her gently caress each dress that interested her. He smiled when he noticed a tiny crinkle form between her eyes each time she looked at a price tag that she didn't like.

Quinn spent a long time staring at a short, lavender dress. Rick knew she would be

stunning in it. In the end, she frowned and put it back on the rack.

After selecting three dresses, Quinn headed for the fitting room. Rick trailed behind, folding his tall frame onto a low, overstuffed chair near the door. “I’ll wait here. Just yell if you need me.”

Quinn disappeared behind a louvered door for several minutes before coming out.

Sweet baby Jesus.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

Rick's jaw dropped at the sight in front of him. It was Quinn, but somehow... not. The pale blue sheath she was wearing hugged every single one of her curves perfectly. Her fair skin was glowing, a healthy pink staining her high cheekbones. The dark fall of wavy hair down her back contrasted perfectly with the fabric.

"Wow. You look —"

"Ridiculous?" Quinn stood in front of the tri-fold mirror, biting her lip anxiously.

Drawn to Quinn like a magnet, Rick's eyes found hers in the reflection as he came up behind her. "I was going to say stunning, but I'm not sure it would do you justice."

He struggled to keep his hands to himself, to resist the urge to slide his fingers down the soft skin of her arms and watch her shiver from his touch, to lift that thick hair and put it over her shoulder so he could kiss her slender neck. He wanted it so much that it physically hurt to hold back when what he craved was within reach.

Instead, Rick balled his hands up into fists, grinding his teeth together so hard he was surprised Quinn couldn't hear it.

"I'll try another one."

"Okay."

Rick backed up so Quinn could slip past him. Once she was behind the closed door, he palmed his now-hard dick, willing it to go down before Quinn finished in the changing room. Ten long minutes spent thinking about the time a fellow Marine got a

compound fracture of his tibia during jump school and Rick's cock was back under control.

Quinn emerged from the dressing room with the pale blue sheath dress over her arm. "I like this one."

Rick stood as she approached. "Me too."

He saw Quinn's eyes widen slightly and realized he was probably staring at her like a lovesick puppy.

Fuck me. I'm such an ass.

"Are you ready to pay for that so we can get out of here?" Rick barked.

Quinn flinched at his hostile tone. "Yes."

"Good."

He didn't really care that he was being a dickhead. Well, he did, he just didn't want to admit to himself that he was falling for this girl. He didn't want her to see it, didn't want to think about it, let alone discuss it with her. It was much easier to push her away by being a massive asshat.

The ride back to Sanctum was quiet, neither one of them having much to say. After Quinn's freak out and Rick's cold shoulder, it wasn't surprising that things were awkward between them.

He pulled the car around the back of the building, turning it off so he could walk Quinn to her door.

“Don’t get out,” Quinn snapped, holding a hand up to stop him. “I can do it myself. Thanks for the ride. I’ll see you later.” Before he could say anything or explain his shitty behavior, she grabbed her dress and bolted up the back staircase, disappearing into her apartment.

Rick punched the steering wheel, pissed at his inability to act like a normal fucking human with normal fucking emotions. Years of purposely distancing himself from people other than his teammates wouldn’t be an easy thing to overcome. Hell, he hadn’t wanted to overcome it. Rick had been perfectly happy on his own, only spending time with women for stress relief.

Until now.

Chapter 9

QUINN GLANCED AT the clock... two hours until her date. She should have cancelled it. She wanted to cancel it. But when she was truly honest with herself, Quinn knew she had to go through with it in order to move on.

It had been over a year since she left Travis, and Annette Hardy, behind. She had spent months in different women’s shelters as she made her way from Texas to Georgia. Every counselor she met with along the way told her the same thing. She would always carry the mental, and physical scars of the abuse she suffered, but only time would heal the gaping wounds enough to carry on with her life. Uncurling her fingers, she stared at the three-inch, jagged pink scar on her palm, a constant reminder of how she finally was able to get away from her husband.

Fidgety and anxious, Quinn took a long, hot shower to loosen her tense muscles. She dried off and meticulously began to straighten her long wavy hair, one small section at a time. Fifteen minutes later, when she turned off the hair dryer, Quinn could hear someone loudly and persistently banging on her front door.

Ice ran through her veins, sending chills down the back of her neck. That gut reaction came rushing in like an out of control freight train.

Travis. He found me.

Quinn put down the hair dryer, moving silently from the bedroom to the kitchen. With a shaky hand, she pulled a large knife from the butcher block and tiptoed to the door.

The banging started up again and Quinn had to bite back a scream. Her heart was beating so fast, she thought it might fly out of her chest and take off.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

“Quinn! Dammit. I’m freaking out! Are you hurt in there?”

She nearly cried with

h relief when she heard Rick’s voice from the other side of the door. Shaking, Quinn unhooked the chain and slipped the deadbolt. She no sooner had the door open and Rick was pushing inside, searching the room like a predator flushing out its prey.

When Rick decided the room was empty and finally turned to face Quinn, she saw his eyes go straight to her hand. Trembling all over, she looked down to she was still clutching the seven-inch chef’s knife, her knuckles white from the tight grip she had on the weapon. Calmly, without showing any hint of fear or hesitation, Rick walked over to Quinn and gently pried her fingers off of the knife. He brought it to the kitchen, placing it gently on the counter top.

The relief Quinn had initially felt at Rick’s appearance quickly evolved into anger.

“What the hell, Rick! You scared the crap out of me! Why the heck are you beating down my door?”

Instead of apologizing, Rick stepped up, toe-to-toe, and threw her fury right back at her. “I was knocking for ten fucking minutes, Quinn! I thought you were hurt in here or worse! Christ, you took five years off my life.” She saw his hand twitch as he rubbed it down his face, but any softening in her attitude from seeing that he was truly concerned was overtaken by the adrenaline pulsing through her veins.

“I was in the shower, jerk! Then I was drying my hair. Why the heck would you think

I was hurt?”

Rick’s rage disintegrated before her eyes. His demeanor went from furious to neutral in the span of two seconds. “I thought you may have fallen or something.” Rick’s tone was calm, collected.

It was total bullshit and she knew it. His shaking hand proved that he cared. That he was worried... about her.

Quinn gaped. Rick was clearly lying, but why? Why wouldn’t he admit it? They were friends and friends cared about each other.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe I wasn’t home?”

Rick scoffed. “No.”

That was it, that one arrogant word. Now Quinn was royally pissed. “Oh, I see. You think I’m just sitting around here all day waiting on you to swoop in and save me? Well screw you, Ricochet!”

Quinn stabbed her finger into Rick’s chest as his eyes widened. She knew she was playing with fire. She just didn’t care anymore. He was being a conceited ass and she didn’t deserve it. “For your information, I have a date in an hour. I’m not a lonely old spinster. So if you don’t mind, now that you’ve barged in and can see that I’m perfectly fine you can get the hell out!”

Quinn reached behind her and opened the door, tired of being bossed around and manhandled by men. Where was Rick two years ago when Travis was beating her on a daily basis? Where was his concern then?

“A date?” Rick gawked at her.

“Yes,” she folded her arms over her chest, “I know it’s shocking to you that pathetic little Quinn is getting a life, but you’ll get over it.”

Rick’s face fell. The shock and anger diffused, leaving him looking crushed. He wouldn’t make eye contact with Quinn as he walked past her and out the door. Without another word, Rick was gone. If Quinn didn’t know any better, she’d have sworn he looked... hurt.

I can’t believe it. ‘Ricochet’ Rick might actually care.

A MOTHER FUCKING date!

Rick felt like he was going to crawl out of his own skin. He wanted to fight, and he wanted it bad. To go inside the gym, find a sparring partner, and feel his knuckles burn, feel the power in his body as he lunged and punched another person.

Fighting and fucking, those were Rick’s two favorite forms of stress relief. Of course, now that Quinn and her hot little ass were occupying his every thought, fucking was completely off the table. Rick knew there was no way he would find any woman interesting enough or gorgeous enough to hook up with since meeting Quinn. Hell, with his one and only hook up since they met, he couldn’t even get it up without picturing her.

Rick couldn’t fight tonight either. Because then he wouldn’t be able to make sure Quinn was safe on her date. Instead, he took his frustration and used it for surveillance.

Aggravated and restless by the constant deluge of foreign feelings— things like affection and love— Rick patiently watched Quinn’s apartment from his car. He parked next door at a tiny bagel shop run by a nice couple from Long Island. That way Quinn, or anyone from the gym, wouldn’t spot him acting like a total psycho.

Relationships might not be something Rick understood, but surveillance... that he could do in his sleep, no matter how pissed off he was. At exactly eighteen hundred hours, he observed a late model SUV as it pulled into the lot and around the back of the gym.

Fucking douche is right on time. I hate him.

A tall, dark-haired man in his mid-twenties got out of the car, bounding happily up the stairs to Quinn's door. Rick gripped the steering wheel hard enough to feel pressure in his knuckles. The door opened and the man disappeared inside.

Fucker's good looking too, bastard.

It took all of Rick's training to rein in his swirling, intense emotions. Staying calm under pressure was easy when you weren't emotionally involved. But this shit? Watching Quinn go on a date with another man? It was fucking torture, even for Rick with his years of Force Recon experience.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

Less than five minutes later, the man emerged with Quinn. Rick's mouth fell open and he nearly jumped out of the car to confront them when he saw her wearing the dress and a pair of fuck-me heels. The blue dress that he helped her shop for at the friggin mall. The one that made her look like a walking wet dream. It was for her date with this loser?

Fuming, Rick watched as the fuckwit helped Quinn into his SUV, catching him stare at her ass as she climbed in. He waited until they pulled out into traffic before following them out of the parking lot, turning towards downtown Atlanta.

Two hours later, Rick decided that Quinn's date was a very boring man that Rick wanted to knock out cold. Drinks, dinner, drive back to her apartment... not exactly inventive. Not that Rick could talk about sweeping women off their feet. His idea of a date was a quick fuck and an even quicker exit, preferably without speaking or exchanging names.

Back in his parking spot at the deserted bagel shop, Rick watched as the man walked with Quinn up the stairs to her door. An unfamiliar feeling gnawed at Rick's insides. It was making him crazy with anger. Jealousy?

If he fucking thinks he's going inside with her...

Rick was holding his breath as the couple reached the top step. Quinn's date leaned down as if he was going to kiss her, but at the last second Quinn moved her head and the man got a hug instead. Rick slowly released his breath, finding himself slightly disappointed that he wouldn't get to kick anyone's ass tonight yet smiling at Quinn's rebuff.

They chatted for another minute or two, then the asshole turned and walked back down the stairs. Alone. The haze of fury that had been clouding his vision since Quinn left for her date started to recede, leaving Rick feeling oddly vulnerable... and ridiculous. He shook his head, hardly recognizing himself any more.

Rick started his car, moving it from the bagel shop to the lot behind Sanctum. His car passed Quinn's date's as Rick was pulling into the driveway. Rick scowled at the man behind the wheel of the SUV, though it was dark and he doubted the guy could see him.

Why the fuck am I even here?

Rick couldn't explain his bizarre behavior tonight. He didn't want to think about what it might mean either. All he wanted was for the empty ache in his gut to go away. Somehow, he instinctively knew that the only person who could ease it was the girl on the other side of the door he found himself knocking on.

"Chase? Is that you?"

"Chase? Is that the name of the asshole you had me shopping for last night?"

"Rick?" Quinn's voice muffled by the door.

"Yeah. Can you open the door... please?"

"Why are you here?"

"Quinn, just let me in and I'll explain."

Rick thumped his forehead against the doorframe, suddenly

scared shitless that Quinn would turn him away. The sound of locks being disengaged made the heavy pressure on his chest lessen... but only somewhat.

The door opened slowly, revealing Quinn, barefoot and still wearing the pale blue dress from her date.

“Come in.” She was frowning, her brows drawn together.

“Thanks.” He knew his face was most likely not friendly. More like openly hostile, actually. He wasn’t pissed at her, he was pissed at— what the fuck was he pissed at?

“Were you... were you spying on me, Rick?”

Rick moved further into the apartment, needing some space around him so he wouldn’t feel so boxed in. Now that he was here, he didn’t know what to say.

“Fuck, doll. I...” He fisted his hair, pacing in front of Quinn’s couch.

“Rick? Are you mad at me? For not telling you that the dress was for a date?”

“Yes... no. Shit, I don’t know what I’m feeling, Quinn.” Rick stopped pacing and faced Quinn.

“Then why are you here?”

His heart skipped a beat when he looked at her. Why was he here? Because every thought he could manage to form completely centered on Quinn? Rick decided to go with honesty, since he didn’t want Quinn to misunderstand his intentions.

“Because I have to be near you. I can’t just sit back and do nothing, let some other guy come in and take you away from me.”

Quinn's expression turned from irritated to confused to shocked in the span of a single heartbeat. "What? What do you mean?"

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

Rick saw something there, in her eyes. Lust? Hate? The desire to kick him out of her apartment and never talk to him again? He wasn't sure, but whatever was there, good or bad, he needed to know like he needed his next breath.

"I mean... I don't know why, but I need you, Quinn. I can't watch you go out with some preppy douche, when you won't go out with me."

Her eyes were as big as saucers. "You've never asked me out, Rick," she said in a whisper.

Unable to stay away any longer, Rick crossed the room, stopping just inches away from Quinn. He was so close he could feel the heat coming off of her flushed skin. Leaning in, Rick inhaled the sweet fragrance of her hair, his cock stirring in his jeans. He lifted a hand— slowly so she wouldn't flinch, and slid it behind her neck, up into her soft hair. Using his other hand, Rick gently touched Quinn's chin, tilting her head back until he could look into her wide, nervous eyes.

"Will you go out with me?"

Quinn's pupils dilated, nearly eclipsing the warm amber. He leaned down, their mouths almost touching. Her response was a faint rush of air across his lips. "Yes."

Rick's mouth crashed down on hers. He watched, entranced, as her eyelids fluttered shut. His lips scraped gently over hers, just enough to send a frisson of electricity over his skin. Rick slid his hand down Quinn's jaw and behind her ear so that both of his hands were cupping the sides of her head, his long fingers threading up into that thick dark hair. Stepping closer, Rick increased the pressure of the kiss, skimming his

tongue along the seam of Quinn's soft lips, his stubble brushing across her chin.

Then, she moaned. That single sound, just a quiet vibration coming from Quinn's throat, sent Rick's desire from hot to molten. A fire ignited in his belly, moving lower, pulsing hot through his veins. He broke away, pressing their foreheads together long enough to catch his breath.

"Jesus, doll."

Rick felt her small hands timidly reach out, pressing against his broad chest. He was afraid she was about to push him away, but to his amazement, her fingers curled into the thin fabric of his shirt, fisting it so she could hold him close.

When Quinn moaned again, Rick's cock took over and his brain took a backseat to his overwhelming physical need to be with this woman. He thrust his tongue deep into her mouth, swallowing the sounds she made. Rick grabbed her, pressing the length of her body against his, providing some much needed friction for the rock hard erection that was straining against his jeans. Rick had never wanted anyone like this before, wanted a connection that went beyond sex, a connection that was deepened because of sex. His head spun from the inexorable power Quinn had over him.

Rick grunted as Quinn ground shamelessly against his dick, making him wild with lust. His control was on the verge of snapping. He hadn't expected her to be so brazen. He had expected her to be timid, almost shy. The fact that she was unashamed at taking what she wanted turned him on more than he thought possible. Rick gripped her hair and gently pulled her head back so he could see into her eyes.

"What do you want?" he panted. "I can't... I can't go further if you're going to stop me, doll. I usually have great self-control, but not... not around you." His dick pulsed against his button fly, straining for release.

Quinn's eyes glinted in the soft light of her living room. She looked down, and then back up, studying Rick's body with an intensity he could feel all the way to his groin. He thought he may combust from the torture of waiting for her response. Her tongue darted out to moisten her full lips. "I want you," she whispered.

"Thank fuck for that." Rick wasted no time reaching behind her back and fumbling for the zipper on her dress. He needed to feel her skin— now. Once he found the zipper, he pulled it down, quickly sliding the dress off her shoulders, leaving it in a silky pile on the floor.

Quinn's short nails raked down Rick's chest, across his ribcage to the hem of his shirt, leaving his skin sensitive and aching for more. This was a different woman from the shy, frightened girl he first met. This Quinn was bold, brave, and knew what she wanted and what she enjoyed. This Quinn was going to rock his fucking world.

Quinn snagged the edge of the fabric and ripped it up his torso, over his shoulders. Rick's height kept her from getting the shirt all the way off, so he helped to shrug out of it. Once his flesh was exposed, she immediately put her hands back on his body. They felt hot as coals on his skin, stoking the fire building deep inside. Unable to decide which part of her he wanted to explore next, he dove in to get another taste her sweet mouth.

Teeth and tongues clashing and twisting, skin on skin, Rick walked them backwards, crossing to what he assumed was her bedroom. When he stumbled on a small corner table nearly sending them both to the floor, he toed off his shoes, put his hands under the tight ass he'd been obsessing over, and easily lifted Quinn. With a soft moan, her legs wrapped around his waist and locked behind his back. They continued kissing as Rick carried her to the bedroom, moving until his thighs hit the edge of the mattress. He fell onto the bed with Quinn tucked safely beneath him, his body situated perfectly between her thighs when they landed.

They finally broke their kiss, gasping for breath and staring at each other in awe. He let his eyes travel over every inch of the woman on the bed, laid out and ready for him to take. She was stunning, her lips swollen and wet, her eyes half-lidded and filled with desire, her hips kept arching up into him, grinding against his stiff cock. Need sizzled down his body, whipping the fire inside into a raging inferno.

“Sweet Jesus.” Rick paused, his breath hitching. “You’re so fucking gorgeous, doll. Even better than I imagined.”

Relief and need shook Rick’s body, a deep contentment spreading through him now that he finally had Quinn. Once she gave him permission to touch her freely, he found he couldn’t stop. Propped on his elbows, he used one hand to smooth her wild hair back from her face. The other touched whatever part of her he could reach, her neck, her shoulder, her breasts... he didn’t care what, he couldn’t get enough. He wanted to touch her until his fingers mapped out her entire body.

She met his gaze, her lips curling in the corners. “You imagined me?”

He grunted. “You know I did. You’re all I’ve thought about since the day I met you.”

Rick lowered his head so he could lick and kiss up and down Quinn’s sensitive neck, trailing his hot tongue down her collarbone. His wandering hands traced a path down her sides, reveling in the soft texture and the sweet taste of her skin. Rick slid his hands behind her back, swiftly unhooking her lacy bra and tossing it aside, desperate to see more of her. He greedily took one of her breasts in his mouth, sucking and nipping until Quinn was thrashing wildly beneath him, panting and whispering Rick’s name.

She wedged her hand into the small space between their bodies, tugging at the top of Rick’s jeans. Able to pop the first button one-handed, Quinn struggled to release the rest.

“Let me help.” Rick pushed to his feet, shoving down his jeans and socks in one swift move. He stopped to pull a condom out of his wallet and felt his cheeks heat up, ashamed for Quinn to know he was the kind of guy that kept protection on him at all times. Self-conscious, he cleared his throat and tossed it on the bed. “Always be prepared, right?”

She raised an eyebrow but simply hooked her fingers in the edge of her panties and slowly slid them off, her eyes never leaving his.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Rick nearly came then and there. He had thought about this moment, non-stop for weeks, in fact. Not one of Rick’s fantasies had prepared him for this moment. Everything about the woman that had dominated his every thought, his every breath, his every reason for living since he met her, was absolutely perfect. His hooded gaze raked across every inch, committing everything to his memory.

Rick watched as Quinn let her eyes skim over his toned muscles, her expression filled with desire— until they focused in on his left thigh and widened.

Fuck.

He was so caught up in this girl that he forgot about his scars. Her eyes wandered slowly back up his body, finally meeting his with a heavy, shamelessly needy stare. The scars don't bother her? She's not going to ask? If Quinn wasn't going to mention the scars, neither was Rick. It wasn't something he talked about with anyone. Ever. Usually, he was fucking a no name stranger in a dark room, so his scars never came up.

Quinn writhed on the bed and moaned, spurring Rick's attention back to the present. "Are you going to stand there all day?"

God this girl completely annihilates my concentration.

He tore open the condom and quickly rolled it on, lowering himself back over her lithe body. Rick nearly came just from the feel of her hot skin sliding against his. Even the familiar tight pull of the scars on the back of his leg didn't lessen the pleasure.

"Jesus, you feel so fucking good."

W

hen Rick dipped his head to taste her mouth again, Quinn responded— more frantic, hungrier than before. Her hips jerked and lifted off the bed, rubbing against Rick's sheathed cock. The contact forced a huff of air out of his lungs. "You're going to make me lose it if you don't stop doing that, doll."

Quinn's eyes narrowed on her gorgeous flushed face. "What are you waiting for then?" The challenge in her words was playful but flat out fucking hot.

Rick stilled, his heart thumping loudly in his ears. "You. I've been waiting for you," he admitted in another moment of weakness that he'd certainly regret.

He dropped his forehead to her shoulder and slipped his hand between them, lining himself up with her slick opening. Slowly, he pushed in. His breath stuttered against Quinn's neck when the head of his cock breached her tight pussy.

Right then and there, Rick knew this was different... she was different. It was as if he had lived his entire life tense and stressed out, and now he was given permission to relax, to submit to the feelings he had held back for so long. The revelation was so powerful, Rick had to hold still or he would lose it before they even began.

"God— shit, doll. I'm not going to be able to hold back for very long."

He ground his teeth together, desperately trying to rein in his impending orgasm. The tightness in his balls told him he wouldn't have long. Desperate, he reached down to squeeze the base of his dick, hard. Rick felt the impending wave of release subside to a pleasurable ache.

He looked at Quinn as she bit her lower lip, her eyes glazed over and her chest rising and falling rapidly. Rick didn't think he had ever seen anything more erotic in his life. Slowly, he thrust his hips forward, pushing inch by inch, taking his time to revel in the tight heat, to listen to Quinn's soft whimpers, pressing gradually until his entire cock was buried deep inside her. The gripping, wet heat that wrapped around his sensitive flesh was enough to wipe his mind clean.

"Please, Rick." Quinn panted between words, her hands clutching at his muscular shoulders. "Move. Do something, anything, fuck me!" Hearing Quinn's sweet voice

utter such a filthy demand spurred Rick into action.

Unable to form a rational thought, Rick let pure instinct take over and began to move— sharp, deep thrusts he used to create a rhythm that had them both moaning and grunting shamelessly. In the span of a few minutes, the pleasure went from merely mind-blowing to holy-shit-I-can-die-happy-now.

“Jesus, oh god, fuck, fuuuuck...” he muttered a string of expletives and braced his knees on the mattress as he drove them closer to their goal.

Quinn’s hands slid up and down Rick’s taut arms as he braced them on either side of her head. His sensitized skin reacted to her touch, sending a crackle of electricity down his spine, coiling, building in intensity in his groin. He pounced on her swollen mouth again, licking her lips and plunging his tongue in and out fiercely, fucking her mouth as he fucked them to the sweetest, most intense pleasure he’d ever known.

She whimpered, skimming her fingers down his sides until they dug into his backside as he devoured her mouth. Quinn gripped his firm ass, pulling Rick further forward with each snap of his hips, helping to drive his cock deeper and deeper with every thrust.

Even though she had been loud in her vocalizations and the moment was hotter than any he had ever experienced, his name came out as a reverent whisper on her lips, a quick breath against his mouth as she crashed over the edge. “Rick.”

Then Quinn detonated, her entire body stiffening beneath him. She cried out as her short nails dug into the smooth skin of his ass, gripping the hard muscles. He felt her contract around his cock, the tight spasms propelling him right over the edge with her.

Rick choked on a gasp as the pleasure that had been building in the base of his spine

exploded from deep inside him. With a loud roar, Rick let himself go, spilling into the condom as he drove through Quinn's orgasm into his own toe-curling release.

Exhausted and elated, Rick's arms gave out, too tired to hold his body up any longer. He collapsed in a sweaty heap on top of Quinn, both of them panting, struggling to catch their breath. Not wanting to crush her small frame, Rick rolled over, pulling out and quickly tossing the condom to the floor.

Lying next to Quinn on the bed, he pushed his arm under her shoulders and scooted over until she was curled up next to him. It surprised Rick that he wanted to "cuddle". He didn't do cuddling, or feeling, or sleepovers for that matter, but he wanted them all with Quinn. Hell, he wanted everything with Quinn, and that scared the fuck out of him.

Quinn's fingers drew light circles on his chest. He could feel her soft, warm breaths against the side of his neck. Rick pressed a small kiss on the top of her head, inhaling the addictive fragrance of her hair.

"You okay?" he asked, worried that Quinn would regret what just happened.

"I'm good."

"Want to talk about it?"

Who the hell have I become? Cuddling? Talking about feelings?

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

“No. I’m tired, Rick. Let’s just go to sleep.”

An odd sensation churned in Rick’s subconscious. Something was off with Quinn, but he couldn’t pinpoint exactly what. He didn’t want to push her to talk about it, at least, not right now. All he wanted to do was bask in how right this felt. Sex before had never been bad, but it had never been like it was with Quinn—overwhelming, emotional, and hitting him right smack in his previously empty heart.

Rick reached down and tugged the blankets up over them both, making sure Quinn was fully covered. Sleep started to drag him under. Pulling her close, Rick wondered how he would bring up the fact that he was falling in love with her.

Tomorrow, he decided. They would talk tomorrow.

QUINN WIPED AWAY the tears that ran down her cheeks as she drove up a nearly empty highway early on Sunday morning, headed towards her father’s place on Lake Lanier. She never sold the old house when he died, instructing her father’s lawyers to continue paying the taxes out of her inheritance until she said otherwise. A sizable inheritance she never told Travis about, wisely choosing to keep it hidden from him the entire time they were married.

She had been afraid to access the account until now. Worried that when Travis started looking for her—and she had no doubt he would—that he could use the money to track her down if there were any activity on the account. Now, over a year after leaving him, Quinn felt it was time to confront her past and claim what was hers.

Then there was Rick. Just thinking about him hurt her so much she thought she’d die

from the pain. What she was feeling was too much, too soon. In her mind, what they did was more than just fucking, it was everything. It was pleasure, comfort, safety, and love all wrapped up in one amazing night. Quinn might be inexperienced, but she felt real emotions in every single touch, every kiss.

What shocked her the most was how safe she felt in his arms. She was tiny compared to him, fragile, vulnerable. Rick could really hurt her. Physically, he was much larger and more dangerous than Travis, yet Quinn knew that even though he could hurt her, he never would. Beneath Rick she felt protected, loved... and that was exactly why she left.

She couldn't afford to get involved with Rick. She was still married to Travis, for god's sake! Quinn needed to tie up her old life before she could create a new one, especially with someone like Rick. He had heartbreak written all over him. He was a good-looking player, used to fucking and running. Rick was the complete opposite of what should be her first post-Travis relationship. She must have been crazy to let emotions and desire overrule her brain last night.

A relationship with Rick was doomed to fail, not that he would even want a relationship. Better to stop now than when she got in too deep. It was less painful to be the one to leave than to be the one who woke up alone after Rick did one of his infamous midnight escapes.

Quinn turned the wheel, pulling Mack's old Ford pickup truck into her dad's driveway, the driveway where she learned to ride a bike, where

she used to draw with chalk and play jump rope with her friends. She put the truck in park, scrubbing her hands over her tired, tear-streaked face. Drained, Quinn trudged up the path to the front door.

Time to take care of my shitty past, so I can finally start my future.

Quinn put the key she got from her dad's lawyer in the lock and turned.

BRIGHT SUNLIGHT FILTERED through the window, streaking across Rick's face. He squinted, his sleep-addled brain taking a moment to catch up. Rick turned onto his stomach, burying his head into the blankets to block out the light. He slid his hand under the pillow, reaching for his Glock and jerked awake when he realized it wasn't there.

Trained to quickly assess his surroundings, Rick oriented himself and finally recognized the room from last night.

Quinn. I spent the night with Quinn.

He turned to her side of the bed, finding it empty. With a groan, Rick swung his feet to the floor, gripping the soft wool rug with his toes. The huge scars on his left leg felt extra tight this morning when he flexed, probably because he didn't do his stretches before falling asleep.

Jesus, I must have been tired. I never forget to do my stretches, or where I am when I wake up. If I had met this girl while I was in the Marines— shit, I wouldn't have made it through a single mission with a clear head.

Rick walked around the bed and found his jeans, shuffling into them without bothering to locate his boxers. He smiled, thinking about last night. Quinn was amazing. They were amazing together, just like he knew they'd be. After their intense, almost desperate release, they slept for an hour or so, and made love again, slower, tasting and touching and feeling until they were both too tired to move. Rick had felt things that he never felt during sex before.

Love. Is this what it feels like?

He wasn't one hundred percent sure, but if this was what it felt like, he was wondering why he waited so long to experience it.

Grinning, Rick left the bedroom to find Quinn. He wanted to tell her how he felt, how he was falling in love with her, how he was desperate to start the next chapter of his life with her. When he didn't find Quinn in the living room or the kitchen, his stomach started to ache, a dreadful, churning that swirled around and around, taunting him.

He ran through the bedroom to check the bathroom. She wasn't there either.

Where the fuck could she be?

Quinn didn't have a car, so she couldn't have gone far. Rick quickly dressed, sprinted down the stairs, and around to the front of the gym. Now in a full panic, he burst through the front door, swiping his badge to enter the main gym. It was Sunday, so the gym was mostly empty, but Rick saw Xavier training a huge black guy in the cage across the room.

"Xav!"

The two men stopped sparring when Rick ran up to the edge of the ring. Xavier took his mouth guard out so he could speak. His gaze flicked over Rick's face.

"Rick? What's going on? You look like shit."

"Xav, shut the fuck up. Have you seen Quinn today?"

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:15 am

The big man's dark eyes flashed a look of annoyance, then surprise.

“Yeah man. She asked me for a ride to Mack's. About an hour, hour and a half ago.”

“And you did it?” Rick yelled, his hands white-knuckling the chain links of the cage.

“What the fuck? Of course I did. It was just a fucking ride.” Xavier and the other man were staring at Rick like he lost his mind.

Maybe I am losing my mind.

“Fuck.” Rick spun on his heel and ran out of the training room, back through the lobby towards his car.

He pulled out his phone as he pushed the fob to unlock the doors, impatiently waiting for Mack to answer.

“Rick?”

“Mack! Thank fuck! Is Quinn there with you?” Rick's heart was beating frantically, threatening to burst out of his chest. He suddenly understood why he had never looked for love before. It might feel incredible when everything was roses and sunshine, but when it wasn't, it fucking hurt like a punch to the nuts.

“No—”

“But Xavier said—”

“She was here. She left. Asked if she could borrow my truck to get some personal issues taken care of. Said she’d return it another time.”

Rick stopped next to his car, leaning his elbows on the roof and fisting his hair with his free hand. “Jesus, tell me you didn’t.” The gnawing in Rick’s gut turned into a rock, sitting heavy in his stomach.

“What did you do to her, Rick?”

Rick swallowed back the bile that threatened to rise, keeping it down just long enough to explain. “Nothing! I didn’t do anything! I don’t... I don’t know what’s going on.” It felt as if he was going to burst out of his own skin. Anxiety bloomed deep inside Rick’s chest, forcing his heart to beat faster, making his breath catch in his lungs.

Mack sighed, and the sound sent Rick’s emotions into a tailspin. “I didn’t realize she hadn’t spoken to you.”

Rick hesitated, not sure if he wanted to ask. He swallowed loudly, closed his eyes, and whispered, “About what?”

“Son, I hate to be the one to tell you this. Quinn left, and I don’t know if she’s coming back.”

End Part One