

I lurch upright, gasping for breath. I wake with beads of sweat on my forehead and my shirt sticking to my body. My eyes are wild as I take in my surroundings. Family pictures on the wall, backpack by the door, turquoise duvet on the bed. My room. I scrub my hands down my face and breathe deep, letting the frigid air fill my lungs. It was just another hellish nightmare; a re-run I've come to expect every night for the last couple months. I flop back onto my mattress, staring at the shadows creeping along the ceiling from the trees outside.

"*It was just a dream. It was just a dream,*" I mumble to myself, staving off the shudders and waiting for the cold boil of my blood to calm. I check the time on my phone and groan. 2:15 in the morning.

A familiar ring tone fills the air and I grab my phone, touching the screen to make his worried face appear in video chat.

"Another nightmare?" Drew asks from the phone, furrowing his brows in the video.

"Yeah," I say, rubbing the remaining cobwebs from my eyes.

"Same one?"

"Yeah. I can't get that day out of my head." I sigh and rub the back of my neck. "How long until these nightmares end?"

"Every person is different. You've gotta come to terms with that fact you *had* to kill them."

I shake my head at the screen. "It's not that easy. They had mothers, wives, children. I'm the reason those families are hurting. You, of all people, should know how hard losing a parent is to a child - right or wrong."

Drew closes his eyes momentarily and nods. "Yes, I do. And so do you," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "But it doesn't make your choice any less correct. You killed in

self-defense."

He's right, as usual. I close my eyes, feeling more exhausted than when I crawled into bed three hours ago. "I guess I need more time."

I examine his face on the screen. Drew's emerald eyes are alert, his brown, wavy hair perfectly placed, and he's in a dark button down shirt.

I narrow my eyes at my phone. "Hey, it's like 5:00 am over there. Are you getting an early start? Or are you still awake?"

"Couldn't sleep," he admits, trying to mask a yawn with the back of his hand.

"So, you've been listening to me sleep? Sounds a bit creeper-ish if you ask me." Maybe I should have the Agency issue me a new set of surveillance jewelry so you can't track me from across the country.

He smiles, and his eyes crinkle at the corners. "I can't help it. I miss you...and you never turn your jewelry off."

I rub my ring with my thumb. You can't turn the dumb thing off, remember?" I sigh. "I miss you too. The distance is freakin' killing me." Loneliness threatens to seep in again.

Five months ago, Drew recruited me for the Agency. Now, he's across the country being treated by world-class doctors, enduring intensive rehabilitation to get back to his old fighting self. I'm left to deal with the emotional baggage of what I'd done. Without him.

"How are you healing? Are you seeing any progress?" I ask.

"I met with another doctor yesterday. The bones are almost completely healed and the surgeries deemed a success. Now it's a matter of physical therapy to strengthen the muscles and get me back to the person I was before."

"How much longer are they thinking?"

"Four more months of intensive therapy. They swear by the time I'm done, you'll never know I've been hurt."

"Four more months," I groan. "It's already been two. I don't know if I can go six months without seeing you."

Intellectually, I understand his need to be gone for six months, but emotionally I'm like a caged animal without him here. There are nights when I'm literally pacing my bedroom, unsure what to do with myself until he returns.

I'm a lethal weapon, for Pete's sake. I have *got* to learn how to deal with these emotions on my own. Drew has been my calming force from the moment I met him. He's always known what to say or do. Without him, my moods are choppy at best. Without him, I spend hours at a time working to the point of exhaustion just so I can function without accidentally tearing some person's head off because they had the audacity to breathe. Without Drew to keep me in check, helping me see the rational side of things, I've been struggling to learn how to cope.

"At least I can still stalk you from here," he says with a grin.

I roll my eyes at the screen, then glance at my Agency ring. It has GPS and records all my audio. Between the ring and my earring that houses a video camera, I have absolutely no privacy. And it's also how Drew can "stalk" me from across the country.

I pout like a petulant child. "Yeah, too bad it doesn't go both ways. It's lonely without you."

"How can you be lonely? Everyone's going in and out of the house and you're never alone. What about Sarah? Aren't you two getting along?"

"It's not the same." I sigh, then bite my lip, feeling a pang of guilt. Drew actually *is* alone. At least I have Patti, Gene and the crew to keep me occupied. Drew has only his

therapists to keep him company. "How about you?" I ask, "How are you doing?"

"Aside from stalking you?" he says, his eyes crinkling again. "It's okay. They've got me working out four to six hours a day, and I'm taking extra online courses to keep busy while I'm waiting around trying to get better." Drew shakes his head. "Apparently, the Agency wants me to get another degree - as if two aren't enough."

"Yeah, well, keep that PT up and you'll be able to do that Iron Man triathlon with me this summer. It'd be soooo much more fun if I were racing you to the finish line."

"I should be so lucky," he says, making a face. "How's the new recruit shaping up? Is he getting along with everyone? Has Randy sweet talked you into taking another assignment?"

"Manny is progressing nicely. He's making improvements by leaps and bounds," I say, trying to be vague. Drew isn't fond of Manny and I can't blame him. The guys have a history, and it hasn't been resolved yet.

"Randy hasn't been so lucky," I say, pursing my lips. "And quite frankly, I'm in no hurry to start working again. The last time didn't go quite as planned." I shudder at the memory of Drew in the trailer where I'd found him nearly dead, and everyone I valued, held captive.

Drew grunts in agreement.

"So, would you be up to the prospect of a visitor in the next few weeks?" I ask wagging my eyebrows. "It'll be Christmas break and I have a few days before I begin training for track."

Drew's face lights up. "Patti and Gene are okay with you visiting me?"

"I don't think they get a say in whether or not I go," I reply, raising an eyebrow.

"Uhhhh, they're still your guardians."

"I was thinking I'd bring Sarah along for the ride," I say with a smile. "It's not quite the same as having you all to myself, but at least I get to see you in the flesh."

He grins. "If you can swing it, I'll welcome *both* of you with open arms."

"This will be the best Christmas *ever!*"

I glance at the clock again. "You'd better get some sleep," Drew says. "You have school in a few hours."

I arch an eyebrow at him. "How about you? Are you gonna get any sleep?"

"Nah. Sleep is highly overrated anyway," he says with a grin. "Besides, I'll take a nap during your Biology."

I make a face at the screen. "I'm jealous already."

He smiles again before wagging a finger at me. "No seriously. Sleep. I'll talk to you at our usual time tonight, okay?"

"Yep."

"So, you're gonna sleep?"

I sigh. "Yeah, yeah. I'll sleep."

He rolls his eyes. "Liar." He flashes a 1,000 watt smile, then ends the conversation, leaving me in the darkness of my room.

"You got that right," I mutter as I climb out of my giant four-poster bed. I'm awake and there's no getting back to sleep now.

I pad into my dresser and open a drawer, pulling out a swimsuit. Changing into the one-piece purple Speedo, I cover up with a robe, then grab my waterproof iPod and earphones, a towel, goggles, and swim cap. I walk out of my room, and down the hall to the communications room. Punching a code into a panel on the side of the TV, I wait for the secret panel in the wall to slide open. WOOSH! Classical music fills the air when the door opens.

"Hey Sarah!" I call to the tattooed redhead on the other side of the wall. "Did you get a

new piercing?”

“Yeah, I did!” She grins, fingering a new hoop on her eyebrow. “Mark and Randy haven't even noticed it yet. You spotted it less than two seconds. Impressive.”

I curl my fingernails to my mouth and blow, polishing them on my shoulder before sniffing. “Yeah, well, that's why I'm the best. Plus, they're guys, so...”

Sarah rolls her eyes and I break into a grin. I look over her shoulder to her desk. “Whatcha doing?”