

WATCHING HER EVERY MOVE

by

Diana DeRicci

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CHAPTER ONE

Stacee palmed her receipt from the girl at the register and with a final smile, strode out of the gold-gilded boutique doors into the calm spring sunshine. Swinging her black and white striped purchase bags in obvious victory, she paused on the broad sidewalk, waiting for her best friend Kay to catch up. Six sweaters and two outfits, all designer labels, were a hell of an after-season find. The better dressed she was, the better the impression made on her buyers. She didn't play in the small leagues anymore. She had to look the part. Dressing for business made sense.

"I know that smile," Kay said with a matching grin, joining her. She'd made some great finds too, carrying several plastic and paper bags, her little purse on her shoulder by a thin black spaghetti strap. She pulled it off and dropped it in the bag of the last store she'd been to, so she'd always know where it was. Kind of an odd habit, but Stacee knew she'd done it since Junior High.

"I scored. Was there any doubt?" Stacee arched a fine eyebrow questioningly. The sunshine felt wonderful beating down on them, winter beginning to feel like a much forgotten song—lovely to hear, not missed until it's heard drifted out from a radio that can't be found.

Kay laughed in triumph, holding her own bags up to show off the names of the stores. "None."

She had barely said those words when the unexpected wall of a man slammed into Stacee, smacking her into the pavement with a startled cry. Her head cracked painfully against pavement, the impact sounding like a gun had been fired right next to her ear. Stars exploded. She couldn't breathe! She felt like a gasping fish, trying to suck in air. Weight bore down on her as someone scrabbled against her, flattening her chest to the sidewalk making finding air next to impossible. Sharp pain flared outward from the side of her head when the first shallow breath filled her screaming lungs. Her world faded to gray then blacked out.

* * * *

Jonas leapt at the man as his prey tried to scramble over the poor woman he'd crashed into.

"Freeze," he snarled, shackling the man's collar in a relentless grip. He yanked at the young man, almost a boy really, practically jerking him to his feet in his rush of anger, forgetting to watch

his strength for a brief moment. Jonas would have caught him. No one could outrun him. The poor woman had just made it a shorter chase. The young man lurched off of the woman he'd collided with, flailing and clawing to wrench himself free.

"Stacee." The woman who had blocked any other avenue of his guy's getaway dropped to her knees, shopping bags scattered in colorful disarray around the pair. Staring at her unmoving friend in numb shock, her features paled. Jonas couldn't spare either more than a glance. His attention was on the guy in his fist, but it bothered him that she still lay prone on the ground.

The youth twisted and fought against the steel of Jonas's grip but there was no way in Hell he'd let him get away now. Not after months of surveillance and tracking. Too much was at stake in this investigation. "Where is the packet?" Yanking uncooperative hands behind his back, Jonas snapped handcuffs on his capture. Deep draughts filled his lungs after his three block chase.

"I don't have anything!" he shouted.

Jonas shook him and the youth's light black jacket shimmied and swayed with the force behind Jonas's tugs. He bucked his shoulders trying to dislodge Jonas. It didn't work. He shoved him against glass, pressing him into the storefront with no remorse. Jonas was oblivious to the gathering crowd gawking and murmuring amongst themselves. His attention was on one person only. He searched the young man's pockets and along his waistband for anything. He scowled when he came up empty on all counts.

"Where is it?" Jonas demanded, leaning in close to make sure his growl of anger wasn't missed. Or misunderstood. Stupidly, the young man showed no fear at the threat right behind him.

All Jonas got in answer was a smug, arrogant smirk over a shoulder.

"That isn't going to work on the judge," he warned quietly, leaning in to make sure the point wasn't lost on his quarry. Sirens wailed. The street cops were arriving along with his department. There was no mistaking the two different types of vehicles. People began to crush in wanting to see more. *Damn 'bloody wreck' gawkers!* Of course, no one had stopped to help the poor woman out cold on the pavement. He had moments when he just hated the human race.

"Step back!" Jonas shouted over the crowd. "Police business." Most ignored him, stopping like statues rather than dispersing. They were smart enough to create an invisible line and not cross it. Good to know his snarl still worked. No sense in escalating the free drama into a full blown riot.

"Stacee," the other woman whimpered, brushing away a tangle of auburn red hair from her friend's face. Only about two minutes had passed since she'd been hit, but she still wasn't moving.

He couldn't let go of the blonde guy in his grip, but spared the unconscious woman a quick

studying look. Shoulder length hair spilled across her back, where he did a quick inventory down to a tapered waist and a very nice rear, showcased by designer's intuition in form-fitting jeans. "Is she breathing?"

Her friend snapped up at his question, her eyes full of worry, then nodded from her side on the ground.

"Make way!" an authoritative voice shouted, splitting the crowd. Several uniformed police officers, and a few who weren't, poured into the little drama central unfolding on the sidewalk.

Jonas shoved the young man toward one of the plains-clothes guys with a nod. The officers in blue began crowd control. Jonas knelt by the injured woman.

"What's her name?" He lifted his face fleetingly to make eye contact, but dropped his gaze again to pay attention to the lady as he checked for her pulse.

"Stacee. With two e's," she replied in a shaken voice. The two women must have been good friends for her to explain that to him.

Jonas looked over his shoulder. "Thompson. Call me an ambulance." The man did so without hesitation.

The woman chose that moment to try to move beneath his touch. She moaned, shaken and fighting to get her bearings. "Easy," he cautioned. "Don't move yet. The EMTs will take you to the hospital."

"No." She groaned, trying to turn over. His hand stayed her with gentle pressure, proving she wasn't ready to move yet. A sudden shudder rocked her frame, worrying him. What if something more had happened to the poor woman than being knocked out cold when she'd been hit?

"Miss, you've been hurt."

"She hates hospitals," her friend explained to him. Worry shadowed her gaze.

"She doesn't have much of a choice," Jonas stated. His hand settled on the woman's back only to hold her still. "She was knocked unconscious. She needs an x-ray at the least."

A near silent moan of dismay reached his ears from beneath his fingertips, carrying up his arm. She shuddered once more then slackened. It only took a few minutes for the ambulance to arrive and a gurney to carry her away.

Jonas studied the crowd as it began to disperse, searching for what, he didn't know, but hoped he'd see it. He didn't after several minutes of searching, and his brow furrowed. He knew he felt it. Someone was watching the activity on the street and sidewalk. There were too many scents in the air to try to find just one, and even if he did, he wouldn't recognize it in the morass of city life.

The larger problem was: where was the packet? Those memory chips had to be found! He cursed silently under his breath. The young man hadn't had the package on him. Had he lost it? Had he ditched it somewhere on the run after the handoff? Where? The chase had been short and swift. It wasn't as though there were a lot of places he could have just tossed the brown envelope on the street.

He spun when the slam of a door pulled him back to the scene. Strobing red and blue lights snapped his focus to the moment at hand. "What hospital?" he asked, seeing the EMT lock the doors to the rear, hiding the woman on the gurney strapped in for the ride. Unaware of what prompted his need to know, he waited for the answer.

"Southern Memorial."

He nodded then watched the lights disappear down the block, turning right at the next intersection. Downtown city streets were a bitch. One ways and nothing but traffic.

The woman's friend had gathered their shopping bags and was standing, looking around rather stunned.

"Would you like someone to walk you to your car?" he asked her. The brunette seemed a bit shocked and he wanted her to breathe a while before she got behind the wheel.

When she nodded, he signaled for one of the guys on his team to walk with her to her car. He then retraced his steps to his own vehicle, searching for any possible hiding places along the way where the courier could've tossed the memory chips to come back for them later. Ledges, drains, planters. Anything that could be obscure from passing view but reachable. He didn't see a single helpful thing on his way. Those three chips had sensitive information on them. Security sensitive. National security sensitive. They had to be found.

Jonas uncovered the right delivery point to confiscate the stolen chips just that morning from his network. Talk about moving fast when good fortune landed in his lap. Except the damn jerk hadn't had them on his person when he'd crashed into the poor woman. He was positive he hadn't missed the hand off either. That was today. He knew he wasn't wrong about that. The courier was his mark. There hadn't been anyone else in the informant's tip. He even had the guy's description. The delivery to the second. The chips were due to go to the buyer today so the courier had to have them on him somewhere. Only...Jonas didn't know who the buyer was, or where this silent buyer was from. And now the chips were missing.

Not the most auspicious day in his career.

He let out a snarled sigh. Eight months of work and now a dead end to report back to the

DOD.

Gripping the steering wheel in clenched fists, aggravation rode his failure like an eight second bull ride up and down his nerves. A not in the least bit pleasant feeling. Out of habit of covering all the angles and possibilities he drove to the hospital. He couldn't pinpoint any deeper need to check on the woman or why she was on his to-do list now. That unanswered oddity wasn't helping his aggravation level in the least.

He parked on one of the multi-level garage floors and headed through the automatic doors, instantly feeling the temperature change and the array of scents in the air. He avoided hospitals like the plague. Working like any other fed the anonymity, made what he was hard to distinguish outside of his own kind. Being one of a very highly respected pack, he had ways of avoiding random drug tests from the city and department piss tests that would make for some very uncomfortable conversations if he should ever have his secret discovered. Could explain his deep dislike for all things medical and nosy.

At the nurse's station, he gave a description and the injured woman's first name, explaining her situation briefly. When the duty nurse frowned, he showed his badge and offered a toothy grin. "It's private business," he intoned coolly. The nurse gave him an arched look for throwing his weight around but divulged the room number after only a moment of searching. Must not have been too many Stacey's that afternoon with head trauma.

He found the room with S. Hales on the temporary door plaque. The door was cracked and he heard conversation. He paused to listen. His investigation was one thing, privacy was another. He could claim either for standing just outside the door.

"Just a headache right now. I don't think they're going to make me stay for long."

"Well, that's good. You didn't look so hot coming in. I know how your blood pressure rockets when they start getting pokey and proddy on you."

An amused chuckle was the answer. "You are a master of understatement. That's why the floor nurse wants me to be watched for a few hours. My blood pressure did a Mount Vesuvius impression."

Confident he wasn't interrupting anything dire, he tapped on the door. A quick "Yes?" drew him through into the room. The injured woman's voice was rich and full, like the dark eyes that found his. She didn't seem to have suffered too greatly from her mishap on the sidewalk.

"Sorry to bother you," he explained, apologizing for the interruption.

The woman at her side was the same friend from earlier, looking much more in charge of

herself. She stood to leave.

“I’ll see you later, Stacee. Call me when you get home so I know you’re okay, okay?”

Stacee nodded in answer then lifted a hand to the bandage on her head with a combined wince. Watching every detail, it wasn’t hard to guess the movement didn’t help any. The door drifted closed behind her friend’s departure.

He spotted the shopping bags at the end of the bed. “Special delivery?” he asked kindly as an opener, nodding at the brightly colored bags. He walked closer, around the end of the bed to stand at her side. He didn’t sit down.

“Work clothes. I probably won’t see her until after next week, so better now than naked.”

Her humor made him smile. She seemed to be completely relaxed. Even with a bandage the size of a dinner plate on her head, she was lovely. Soft skin that was pale but reminded him of summer peaches. Rich, auburn hair, with streaks of red that flowed around her shoulders. Thick. The kind of hair he could bury his hands into. He briefly remembered the feel of it when he’d sought her pulse earlier. The beguiling scent of her skin filled the room and he drew a deep breath without thinking about why he did. An aromatic, like a lotion mixed with her own feminine scent. Alluring, yet unique.

He dragged his thoughts back from his appraisal, returning to his purpose. It took a few heartbeats to clear his thoughts to get that far. Then he frowned, and fought it. It wasn’t her fault that his day had gone to Hell before lunch.

“I owe you an apology and thanks.” Best to get it said, get what he needed then get the hell out of that room. Now that he knew that unique attraction of her scent, he found himself wanting more of it, and of her.

“Oh?” she inquired. He felt the weight of her steady stare studying him. He knew the look. He’d just done the same thing to her. And he had to admit, he didn’t hate the feeling.

“For being the wall that stopped my guy from getting away. He hit you a lot harder than I think any of us had originally thought. People getting hurt has never sat well with me.”

“That’s kind of you...” she replied expectantly.

“Jonas. Agent Dreyer.”

“Jonas Dreyer?” He nodded in the affirmative. “Stacee Hales, but I guess you knew that already.”

He shrugged but smiled to soften it. He had to check all happenstance. He didn’t think this woman was in any way part of the chip theft, just an unfortunate bystander, but it never hurt to ask

a few questions. Falling back on training was a safety net too, for being there, in her room. He wasn't sure he could pin any other reasoning to it. He knew he didn't want to think about the attraction that he felt standing so close to her in that bed. She was at a disadvantage for one. Vulnerable. He forced his expression to a placid blankness when he caught her gaze once more.

“Do you think you could answer a couple questions?”

It was her turn to shrug. At least it wasn't a full 'get the hell out of here'. He'd half expected it. He let out a slow breath, ignoring why the thought of her tossing him out on his rear bothered him.

“I won't keep you long.” He asked the basics, pulling out a short notepad and pen. Name and private information. Where she'd been that day, what her next destination had been.

“Saturday shopping with a girlfriend,” she explained, nonplussed. “I got a bonus and was helping stimulate the economy.”

He coughed to hide his chuckle. Her wicked grin was infectious. She had a sweet bottom lip that drew his attention with her laughter. Full and curved with a delicious taunt that crept up whenever those eyes glowed with laughter or teasing. It was the first time he'd ever liked someone on the spot. That was definitely a plus considering.

He snapped the cover of his notepad closed, stunned at the direction of his thoughts. He did *not* need a female complication in his life. Bachelorhood worked just fine. He pulled out a card. “In case you have any questions,” he volunteered, not caring if it sounded lame. He was *not* asking for her phone number. He couldn't remember the last time he'd asked for a girl's number anyway. Probably high school. He'd gone straight to the Army and then onto the force afterward. Even though he had hers, she hadn't given it to *him*. He made sure his subconscious was aware of that fact.

“Agent Dreyer?” She palmed the card and relaxed back onto the bed. “Why all the caution?”

Now that he could answer, just not to her. A gut instinct? A precaution? Something that hadn't sat well since she'd been hit, at the least. He knew someone had been watching the entire time they'd been putting on Drama Downtown for the crowd. Whether it was the next connection, the buyer, or the hand off to the courier he'd caught, he couldn't say. And that uncertainty had every warning bell going off. With an internal smack, he knew why he'd been set on checking on her. He needed to make contact with her. Meet her. Know her. She was going to need his protection.

He never questioned those primal instincts either. This time, he was pretty sure he was going to enjoy his watch.

“Nothing too serious,” he replied, smoothing the little white lie. “Just following through on details.”

“Well, thank you then,” she replied.

He left her room feeling the light breathy sound of her goodbye on his skin for the rest of the day.

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