

DEAD HEAT SNEAK PEEK



Romantic Suspense – Print and EBook

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Tracing cyber criminals is what he lives for...

When hackers breach hospital security to steal patient records and begin blackmailing them, Veritas Center's cybercrime expert, Nick Thorn is hired to locate security holes and patch the system. But he doesn't stop there. He wants to bring down the hacker and make her pay. Problem is, he inadvertently inserts himself in FBI Agent Piper Nash's sting to catch the same hacker, and Piper has no choice but to arrest him and force him to stand down.

But the job is suddenly hitting too close to home.

Nick finds himself attracted to Piper and wants to comply, but when his grandmother falls prey to a cyber-attack by the same hacker, he takes the assault very personally and will stop at nothing to find the

hacker. Not even stop for Piper's warnings to take care. They're in a dead heat to the finish line, but what Nick doesn't realize is the hacker has no intention of going to jail, and she's reserved a bullet with Piper's name on it. With time ticking down can Nick partner with Piper to find the killer before a point-blank shot takes her out?

Chapter One

“He’s going to get himself killed!” From the FBI surveillance van, Agent Piper Nash watched in disbelief at the man threatening to ruin her surveillance op.

“Is he trying to pick Jinx up or what?” Fellow cyber squad agent, Hunter Lane, moved closer to the monitor.

Piper didn’t know how to respond to his comment. She couldn’t even comprehend the scene unfolding in front of her. Six months of their elite cyber squad working tirelessly to hunt down a cunning hacker to bring her to justice was quickly going south right before Piper’s eyes.

“We have to stop this guy now.” Hunter squinted at the man chatting up their hacking suspect who called herself Jinx.

“Don’t worry, I will.” Piper fisted her hands. “I won’t let him ruin this op for me, or worse, get himself killed.”

But what could she do?

Something. Anything.

An idea popped into her head. It was unorthodox. But so what? This hacker had ruined the lives of countless people. People like Piper’s cousin and best friend since childhood. No way Piper was letting Jinx get away with hurting her family just because of some man’s random interference. And as lead agent on the investigation, it was up to her to stop him.

She ripped off her blazer and jumped to her feet, careful not to hit her head on the roof of the surveillance van. She snapped her holster and credentials from her belt and tossed everything on the counter.

Hunter gaped at her. “What are you doing? You can’t go out there unarmed.”

“I have to. If I’m carrying, I’ll alert Jinx that law enforcement is watching her and totally blow the

op.” On her way to the door, Piper released the top button of her tailored white blouse to lose the FBI look. “I’ll be back in a few seconds with this bozo in tow.”

Hunter came to his feet. “Don’t do this, Piper. I know you have an ax to grind, but think for once before acting.”

She had an ax to grind all right. Jinx had made public the contents of Elizabeth’s counseling files regarding a horrible rape she’d barely survived. This unscrupulous hacker had deeply hurt someone Piper loved. So yeah, she was going after Jinx to make her pay. No questions asked.

Piper stepped into the misty February evening, heavy clouds obscuring the moon. Sidewalks in the small neighborhood park glistened under street lights, the shrubbery and green space gloomy and foreboding. Not something Piper would even waste time thinking about.

At the moment, she had one mission and one mission only. Get this guy to come with her. Period. That was all. No matter what she had to do. And with his concerted attempt to pick up Jinx, Piper figured she would need to offer herself instead to get him moving.

She hurried toward him, her pumps clicking on the wet sidewalk and drawing Jinx’s attention. The five-foot-eight, blue haired woman with a slight build wore camo pants, an army-green hoodie, and black biker boots. And a mega frown as she watched Piper approach.

The guy snapped his focus to Piper. If she wasn’t so mad at his interference, she’d take a moment to enjoy the way his pricy running attire—a gray-and-red North Face jacket and matching pants—formed to his amazing build. Moisture clung to his toffee brown hair, and he scraped it back with his fingers. His gaze locked on hers, fierce and challenging, as if he didn’t want to be interrupted. He obviously took his flirting seriously.

Good. She just needed him to turn that attention on her instead of Jinx.

Piper forced away her irritation, replacing it with the best enticing smile she could muster. “There you are, honey. You’re not planning on standing me up for dinner, are you?”

His brows rose above eyes that she could now see were nut-brown and ringed with long lashes. He was six inches taller than her five-foot-seven and totally ripped. No matter. His size and muscular build didn't intimidate her.

She approached and twined arms with him. Her smile still fixed on his face, she tugged on his arm, pulling him toward the van. She succeeded. Kind of. He took a few steps in the right direction and planted his feet, his muscular legs holding him in place.

He tilted his head, his focus locked to hers. "Do I know—?"

"Come on, honey," she interrupted, her voice raised.

His eyes tightened, and his full lips dipped in a frown. She wouldn't let his stubbornness best her. She tugged on his arm. He widened his stance. *Fine*. She had to go all out. She moved closer and slid her arms around his neck.

He drew back in surprise, but his gaze heated up.

She raised up on tiptoes, catching his musky fragrance that was as enticing as those impossibly gorgeous eyes locking on hers.

"I...I..." His words seemed to freeze in his throat.

She felt a strong pull toward him, her heart giving a kick. *Perfect*. The attraction would help her carry out her subterfuge. She slid her fingers into his damp hair, drew his head down, and kissed him firmly on the mouth. Just a quick peck. That was all she planned. Grab his attention and move. Quickly. Back to the van.

She started to pull away. He drew her tightly against his muscled chest. He pressed his lips against hers, his mouth was warm and urgent. Her world spun, and she forgot all about the op. She hadn't kissed a man like this in years—had never felt these racing emotions.

She wanted more of them. Much more. She lost herself in the kiss, even deepened it.

A hawk cried out in distress from a nearby tree. Her brain fog lifted, the op returning to her mind. She jerked back. Looked into eyes filled with unwavering interest. She took a quick breath and leaned close to his ear.

“I’m FBI Agent Piper Nash,” she whispered. “You’re interfering in my op, and I need you to come with me before you blow our cover and the op.”

He didn’t respond. Not a single word or sound. She leaned back further to assess.

He was breathing hard, his broad chest rising and falling, and he locked eyes with her. “What’s in it for me?”

Say what? “I can’t believe you’d even ask that. This woman broke the law, and I expect you to cooperate.”

His breathing evened out, but he kept his gaze fixed on her. “Free country as far as I can see, and I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake.” She grabbed his hand and jerked him into motion, dragging hard as she stormed toward the van. Surprisingly, he came along.

At the edge of the park, he planted his feet again, jolting her to a stop.

She spun to look up at him. “What’s the problem now?”

“You never said what was in it for me?” His mouth quirked up in a cute smile.

She resisted falling for his charms, though that’s what she desperately wanted to do with this infuriating man. “What do you want?”

“I wouldn’t say no to another kiss.” He grinned at her, flashing even white teeth and taking a handsome face to drop-dead gorgeous, sending her pulse skittering higher.

She’d enjoyed kissing him. Totally. It would be no hardship to do it again, but now it was the

principal of the whole thing. It was like he was blackmailing her to do the right thing. Shouldn't he just want to cooperate with law enforcement?

"I could head back there." He glanced over his shoulder, and his hand tightened.

Piper followed his gaze to find Jinx taking pictures of them. What? Why would Jinx want to take their pictures?

Jinx suddenly spun away—her feet braced, looking like she might bolt. She glanced over her shoulder, her gaze fixed away from Piper and across the clearing.

Piper swung her gaze in the same direction.

"Gun!" The strong arms of the guy she'd just kissed came around Piper's waist. He jerked her against his rock-solid chest and dove behind a small brick storage building, his hard landing reverberating through her body.

Piper's teeth jarred at the impact.

He held fast and rolled on the wet grass, covering her with his large body.

A gunshot rang out, coming from where the other man stood. The sharp report echoed through the foggy night.

Piper's hand automatically went to her sidearm. Came up empty. *Right*. It was on the counter in the van. She should've listened to Hunter. Now they were sitting ducks until Hunter could react.

She tried to push away from the man.

He held tightly. "Not safe to get up."

"I'm an agent for crying out loud," she snapped. "Let me up."

He changed to a one-arm hold and reached behind his back. He whipped his arm back, a gun fixed in

his hand.

She gaped at him. "Please tell me you have a carry permit for that and you know how to use it."

"I do."

She couldn't waste time asking why this guy carried, but she had to question if he was an innocent guy attempting to pick up Jinx or someone who was involved in her crimes.

"Give me the gun," she demanded.

"No." He rolled seamlessly to a squat.

Piper couldn't very well fight for the weapon. She was no match for his size and strength. She rose up on her knees, keeping an eye on him in her peripheral vision as she checked on Jinx. Piper expected the hacker to be lying on the ground, blood running from her chest, but she stood, feet planted, handgun pointed at the shooter.

Wait. She was armed, too? Piper hadn't seen that coming. Not at all.

Jinx fired off two rounds, spun, and raced into the darkened woods. Piper watched, feeling helpless as the shooter aimed his weapon at Jinx's departing figure. He pumped a shot in her direction. Then another and another. He suddenly whirled to look at Piper.

She expected to take fire. Ducked down. Held her breath. Listened. Waited for the bullets.

The sound of violence faded, wind rustling through the trees rising up and taking over. She popped up to assess. The shooter was bolting into the shadowy darkness, heading for the main road. She searched for physical details to use for an alert. Too dark. All she could make out was his height of about five-ten and his wiry build. She needed more. Needed to go after him. But she couldn't. Not without her service weapon.

Footsteps sounded behind her. She spun as Hunter stepped out of the shadows. She'd never been so glad to see her fellow agent in her life.

He'd strapped on body armor and held another vest tucked under one arm, her holster and gun in one hand, his sidearm in the other. "Piper?"

"Over here," she called. "I'm fine."

He kept his weapon focused on the shooter's last location and backed toward her. "I called in locals for backup and to cordon off the park exits."

She reached up for her holster. "Drop the Kevlar and your cuffs and go after the shooter. I'll follow Jinx."

Not taking his gaze from the clearing, Hunter released the body armor, then dropped shiny silver cuffs to the grass and set off.

Piper pulled her sidearm from the holster and faced the guy who was still squatting, ready to spring into action. "I'll take your weapon."

He narrowed his eyes. "I've done nothing wrong here."

"Until I know that for sure, I can't leave an armed man behind. Place the weapon on the ground and back away."

He hesitated as if he didn't want to comply but set the gun down and scooted back. She cautiously retrieved the small black pistol and tucked it in her waistband. She grabbed the cuffs and moved toward the man again. He opened his mouth to speak, but she slapped a cuff on his wrist.

"Hey." He tried to jerk back, but she was quicker and clamped the other cuff to a nearby bicycle rack.

She grabbed her body armor and slipped it over her head.

The man eyed her, his wide jaw clenched in the shadowy light playing on the planes of his face. "You can't honestly be arresting me after I just saved your life."

"Arresting you, no." She tugged the Velcro on her vest closed. "But keeping a stubborn man from

running out and getting himself shot, yes.”

She crept from her hiding place, hearing the sound of the man jangling the cuffs on the pipe. She ignored his attempt to get free and kept her head on a swivel as she caught up to Hunter. She scanned the area for Jinx, but the hacker had gotten away.

Piper moved cautiously down the winding path. She searched for a trail of blood. Found none. If Jinx had been shot, the wound wasn't bleeding profusely. Piper inched forward, searching the area. Misty drizzle wetted her face as fog rolled in, and the street lights above barely cut through the haze, leaving thick shrubbery as a perfect hiding place.

Piper searched behind each one but reached the street bustling with cars hissing over the rain-slick roads and no sign of Jinx. They'd lost her. Six months of online investigating to locate this crafty hacker and arrange this op, and she'd disappeared into the murky night the same way she whispered through the online world. Hidden and dangerous.

She would go to ground now, doubling her security. The odds of tracking her down again were slim. Piper might never get the chance to inflict the revenge she so desperately wanted to exact for her cousin.

No. She couldn't think that way. Couldn't give up. She had to keep investigating. Do her best.

She holstered her weapon and called Hunter. “Jinx got away.”

“Shooter, too.”

Sirens sounded and lights twisted through the fog as a patrol car careened to the curb. “Officers are arriving on scene.”

“Here, too,” Hunter said. “I'll have them call in the canine unit.”

“You do that while I deal with the guy who interfered in our op.” But first, she went to meet the officer as he climbed out of his patrol vehicle.

Around six-one, he had dishwater blond hair in a buzz cut, and she put him in his middle twenties, young enough to be a rookie. Hopefully, a well-trained rookie.

“Agent Piper Nash,” she said. “ID’s in the surveillance van.”

“Officer Byrd,” the young guy said as he planted his feet in a no-nonsense stance. “Canine unit will be here in less than five.”

Piper nodded. “After you cordon off this entrance, would you be willing to serve as officer of record?”

“Absolutely.” Enthusiasm radiated from his expressive eyes. “Anything you need, if I’m able to provide it, I’m glad to help.”

“Thank you, Officer Byrd.”

“Erik. It’s Erik.”

“And I’m Piper,” she said. “You can start by making sure the alert on the female suspect is detailed. She’s five-eight. Slight build. Blue hair chopped at the chin in a blunt cut. Wearing camo pants, an army-green hoodie, and black biker boots.”

“Will do.” He lifted his radio to his mouth.

She turned back toward the cuffed guy, but just the thought of seeing him again increased her irritation. She’d kissed him, for goodness’ sake, and couldn’t stomach facing him. He wasn’t responsible for a shooter arriving on scene and for this op going sideways, but she needed a scapegoat for her anger, and she feared she would take it out on him.

She could put it off if she got someone to transport him to the office for questioning. Agent Fiona Larson, who’d recently been assigned to their cyber squad, was just the person. As a rookie, she would do almost anything to get in on a field op, even one that had gone south, including racing over here at the drop of a hat. Piper texted her the park address and added, *Urgent. Meet me here ASAP for person-of-interest transport.*

On my way, came the reply, as Piper had hoped.

She set off, shining the bright beam over the ground and searching for something—anything—to lead her back to Jinx. An object reflected back at her from the side of the path. A phone. She hurried to where it lay in the wet mulch.

Had Jinx dropped it? Could it be true, or did someone else lose one?

She squatted to get a better look. The screen was barely misted over. With all the rain they'd been having, if it had been lying there for long, it would be slick with moisture.

Piper's pulse kicked up. She should leave the phone for forensics to document, but the rain could damage it. She wouldn't let that happen. No way. She snapped pictures, making sure to get the surroundings so she could map the phone on the forensic sketch. She pulled her shirt sleeve down, picked up the phone, and continued down the path. In the clearing, she found Hunter jogging toward her.

She held up the phone. "I think I found Jinx's phone."

"Could we be that lucky? Not only would we have data but DNA and prints, too."

"I hope so." Piper swung into step beside Hunter and itched to see what the phone might contain. "We need to have forensics process the phone then have techs image it right away."

Hunter was an experienced agent, so she didn't need to remind him of the golden rule of electronic evidence—never modify the original media—which could happen simply by waking up the device. They needed to preserve the integrity of potential evidence for any court proceedings by making a copy of the phone's files to review. The imaging process took precious time, but she had no choice.

He gestured at a slug embedded in the trash can. "Never in a million years did I expect this to turn into a gun battle."

"Crazy, right?" Her brain hummed with nervous energy as she thought of what to do next.

Hunter pulled back his powerful shoulders, standing tall and towering over her. “Jinx got off a few shots. Clearly she’s willing to kill.”

“Which makes her very dangerous.”

Hunter’s eyes narrowed. “And finding her is even more urgent. Especially with someone gunning for her, too.”

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