

# I See You

By Holly Lisle

## Chapter 1

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“...so then the guy sits up on the stretcher, says ‘I don’t feel so good,’ and turns this incredible shade of blue. And falls...out .”

Ryan, the shaggy-haired blond driving the ambulance, hit the air horn—as if the driver ahead of them might have missed the lights and siren, and skidded the ambulance around the man who refused to give them clearance. Dia Courvant’s hand slid to the seat belt that held her to the shotgun seat as the wheels of the ambulance rode over the median, then thudded back to the tarmac again.

Ahh, the joy of driving in Coral Springs, Florida. Dia tightened her grip on the sissy strap as Ryan careened around a couple of cars hurriedly moving into the right lane.

Ryan didn’t miss a breath. “Dude’s got no pulse, no respirations, no nothing .” He sped up for the yellow light, and started hitting the horn to get the people packed into the three lanes ahead of him to start pulling to the right. He kept talking while he drove.

With a laugh in his voice, Ryan said, “And the Hounddog leaps into action. Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. Tubes the guy with blinding speed, drops an eighteen into the jugular; we’re bagging and compressing, the Dog shocks, shocks, epi, and shocks, and he gets us back a faint rhythm.” Ryan took the

ambulance around the, driving far faster than traffic warranted.

But they were running Code 3, which meant “lights, sirens, and wings if you have ‘em,” and with Ryan driving, they damn near did. Dia Courvant braced against the G-forces, and shouted, “So then what?”

“Miracle stuff—the magic of the game. Pure Hounddog. Dude’s heart rhythm gets better, his color improves, his pupils react. All golden, you know? And the wife is standing there watching us work, and while the husband was going down the tubes, she had this weird little smile on her face and she wasn’t saying a word.” Ryan shook his head and laughed. “Soon as she sees the rhythm, soon as we send up a little cheer, the smile goes away, and in a voice that would have frozen Ted Bundy, she turns to Hounddog and she says, ‘You miserable son of a bitch—I ought to kill you.’ And the Dog goes pale as the would-have-been corpse.”

Dia laughed. “Waiting to send her inconvenient hubby off, was she?”

“Indeed.”

Dia shook her head. “Lot of love in that blushing bride.”

“I’m guessing there might have been a lot of insurance policy. I mean, we’re talking Westgate, right? She had that tight, tanned, resurfaced look of a woman just waiting to inherit a nice stack of bling and—”

Dia interrupted him. “Driver at one o’clock doesn’t see us,” and Ryan jammed on the brakes and swore as one of Coral Springs’ many geriatric drivers pulled out in front of the ambulance, oblivious to the lights, the siren, and even the air horn that Ryan hit.

Both of them swore.

It had already been that kind of day.

It was eight AM Friday Morning, not the 13th, not the first of the months. Dia, the paramedic, Ryan Williams, the talkative EMT-Intermediate, and Tyler Frakes, the EMT-CC, who was back in the jump seat with his iPod plugged into his brain and a blissed-out expression on his face, had started their shift at six AM with a big, messy shooting. Philandering husband came home late—very late. Psychotic pit-bull wife met him just inside the door with a shotgun aimed at the family jewels, informed him that he smelled like a five-dollar whore, and made sure the issue wouldn't come up again. So to speak.

Just after seven, they'd been dispatched on what turned out to be a milk run—elderly woman calling in heart attack symptoms so that she could have someone to talk to. At seven-ten AM, she had her suitcases already packed and was sitting prim and proper on the front step, waiting for them when they arrived, having already notified her next door neighbor to keep her cat for her for a few days.

The lady had what Dia and Ryan called “positive suitcase sign” or occasionally “premature packing syndrome”—it was common in South Florida, which had the highest concentration of the elderly per capita in the country. Aside from her PSS, the woman had been, Dia figured, about as healthy as Dia herself. But she was alone, and lonely, and she was willing to go sit in the waiting room of the ER, where she would get to talk to the admitting clerk, the nice triage nurse, and finally to a nice doctor who would listen to her talk about her health for a bit before sending her home or admitting her if he could find anything that might qualify.

Nuisance calls were, and always had been, part of the gig. Dia did them, she tried to maintain her sense of humor about them—but the reason she became a paramedic was to deal with situations like the one she, Ryan, and Tyler back in the jump seat, were heading into.

This was their third call in three hours. They were running hot to a car accident on I-95 that, according to an eyewitness call-in, started when an eighteen-wheeler jackknifed across the road, then expanded to the immediate vehicles following too closely, and finally radiated out to involve drivers going too fast to avoid the expanding wreck.

On that stretch of I-95, seventy MPH was legal and ninety MPH was common. A lot of drivers had been going too fast. It was, by first reports, a big, bloody hell of an accident.

All available units were being dispatched—light rescue, heavy rescue, fire, and police. Odds were that rescue crews would be calling in helicopters once they stabilized the most critical patients.

These were the moments that Dia lived for. This was where she knew she mattered—on the pavement or the thin median strip or in the home of a stranger, where the only thing that separated life from death was her immediate intervention, her ability to assess the situation and the condition of her patient and her skill in making critical, correct decisions.

Ryan reached the interstate on-ramp. “You still on for diving next Sunday?”

She glanced over at him. “Weekend after this one, right? I’m on duty this weekend.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m in. I need to get my underwater hours logged. We’re still doing the old shipwreck, right?” She yelled to the back, “You change your mind, Ty?”

He didn’t answer. She reached around and punched his shoulder, and he pulled the earbuds out. “Huh?”

“Earth to Tyler. Diving Sunday after this one. You in or out?”

"I have a date, dammit, and she hates the ocean. So I have been forced to provide other ideas on how we can get wet."

"Naturally." Ryan laughed as he pulled them onto the median again to get past the backed-up traffic, turned off sirens, and left lights on. Dia could see smoke, but nothing of the actual accident yet. It lay around a bend and behind three lanes of nose-to-tail SUVs, pick-up trucks, and tractor-trailers. He returned his attention to Dia. "Howie and Kelly are going, but Kelly says she wants to bring Sam with her."

"The illusive Sam, who always cancels out because he has an emergency?"

"So she says. We could use one more person, if you know someone who'd like to come along. Boyfriend, maybe?"

"I'm not seeing anyone, and everyone I know, you know, too, so I'm sure you've already asked them."

"Na. Didn't know Kelly was going to screw up the teams." He hit the airhorn as one Lexus SUV tried to push into the median in front of the ambulance to get a little farther in line. The blast scared the jerk into pulling his nose back in line quick enough. "But I'm sure one of the Beta guys will want to come. They're always bitching about missing out on our off-duty stuff."

"They don't bitch about missing this stuff, though, do they?"

"Evenings and nights get their own messes." Dia studied the scene before them and said, "You ought to be the one to bitch, Ryan—I swear you've caught twice as many disasters lately as the rest of us combined."

His grin was wry. "Surprised you noticed. I'm planning on having a serious talk with St. Luke tonight about that very thing."

"You should." She laughed. "He clearly has it in for you."

They reached the outer periphery of the wreck. Other rescue teams that had been closer in were already working the scene.

Dia had her paramedic pack already strapped onto the gurney. She and Ryan ran to the back to grab it, while Tyler found the disaster-scene coordinator and snagged them an assignment.

The scene was chaos. The air was black with greasy smoke and the stink of gasoline and diesel fuels, burning rubber, and other scents darker and worse—smells that were better off not identified. Fire trucks were working the main fire from the rig, and putting down retardant to keep vehicles not already involved from catching fire. Men and a few women moved in and out of the clouds, rescuers and mobile victims seeming to float surreally through the shifting haze. Jaws of Life trucks cut cars apart to reach victims. Overhead a transport chopper made ready to put down on the clean side of the accident; the chopper would airlift critical victims to the closest trauma center. Looking at the wreck, she was sure rescuers would need more helicopters. Between the flames, the smoke, the blood and the wreckage, it looked like Hell had opened up and spit out a parking lot.

Dia tried to guess the number of vehicles crushed, overturned, and on their sides. Her best estimate was close to twenty, with considerably more run off the roads, or with bent fenders, or crumpled hoods or trunks.

This thing had happened at the worst possible spot, where the dip on the far side of an overpass and a curve created a rare blind spot in the Interstate. And it had happened at the worst possible time—during rush-hour.

A firefighter waved them over. “They’ve about got this car cut open. We have three victims inside; we’re pretty sure one is DOA. The second is hurt pretty bad. Third is a kid in a car seat, looks okay.”

Dia nodded. She crouched down and peered through the right

side of the windshield, where she could see the unmoving passenger, the unmoving driver, and a little girl still strapped into her car seat, hanging upside down sobbing. Dia's gut knotted. It didn't look like either mom or dad had come out too well in this one.

Ryan leaned over her shoulder. "What do we have?"

"Possible DOA on the driver's side. Airbags deployed, it's hard to see. On the passenger side, I'm seeing probable crushing injuries, lot of blood. Neither front seat victim is conscious. Could be two alive, two dead. No telling. Little girl in the back seat looks okay."

"Some good news, then," he said. His face was grim.

"Some. Not much." She looked over the wreck scene, where victims who could move on their own were calling for help for themselves, or for those who couldn't. EMTs were wrapping shocky family members in blankets, giving them water, loading them into the backs of ambulances.

The fireman yelled clear, and Ryan said, "Let's be heroes," and Dia, kit in hand, ran forward. She got to the mother first, and quickly checked pulse and respirations; she got a weak, thready pulse and counted fast, shallow respirations, but something was a hell of a lot better than nothing. Blood bubbled from the corners of the woman's mouth, from lacerations on her face and scalp, and from her nose.

"Cervical collar," Dia said, "split board, then backboard. Field strip her, and let's see what injuries we're working with, and what we need to stabilize."

"Don't want to scoop and run?" Ryan asked.

"With a possible pneumothorax or hemothorax? No. I want some idea of what is wrong."

Dia couldn't let the possibility of spinal injuries leave her

mind for a second. If the woman had a fracture somewhere along her spine, one wrong move could grind the bones against each other, destroying the delicate spinal cord and paralyzing her or even killing her. Dia put on a hard cervical collar, and she and Ryan worked a half-board behind the woman's back, then strapped her to it. They slid in head blocks to prevent her head from moving from side to side.

In the back seat, the little girl sobbed, "Mommy! Mommy. I want Mommy!"

Doing what I can to make sure you still have one , Dia thought. "We'll get you out of there as soon as we get Mommy," she yelled. "And you can ride to the hospital with her."

When the woman was immobilized, Dia, Ryan, and a cop got her turned right side up and moved her out. A fireman climbed in and brought the child out, and stood holding her while Dia and Ryan put her mother on a long board and did their assessment.

The woman had broken ribs, a broken leg, an open fracture of the right collarbone, numerous lacerations, and was unresponsive. But her pupils were reactive. She was still breathing on her own, and when they got pressure dressings on the worst of the wounds, got her on mask oxygen, and opened up the IVs to replace her fluid, her heart and her breathing both slowed down a bit.

"She going to make it?" a man asked her.

"She's going to be fine," Ryan said. " We're working on her."

Dia didn't look up—she was busy. She hated correcting Ryan, but he occasionally let enthusiasm and confidence run away with him, and she didn't want to give someone a guarantee; this woman wasn't stable enough for that. "She looks worse than she is," Dia amended. "I'm concerned that she's not conscious. But her pupils are good, deep reflexes are good. I think she'll come out of it okay."

“Good,” he said.

She turned her head just enough to get a glimpse of the guy who'd asked. Badge on his hip, and shoulder holster over a white long-sleeved shirt, sleeves rolled up—so he wasn't a friend or family member who'd already been rescued. Detective, then. Not someone who'd been looking for a guarantee. Dia caught an impression of height and lean muscularity, of short, wind-tousled hair.

Detective. She was already back at work, but that pinged a little in the back of her mind.

Detective. Funny. They weren't regulars at traffic accidents.

And then the woman was ready to travel; she wasn't critical enough to require a helicopter evac, so Dia and Ryan and Tyler would drive her. She told Tyler, “Make sure we have her ID with her. And we'll take the kid in with us. We want to keep the family together. Black indelible marker on the mother and the kid, pull the last name off the driver's license, and add an identifying number so that everyone can keep them matched up. No telling how many other parents and kids are banged up in this—let's not give anyone an Amber Alert opportunity.”

They rolled the woman to the ambulance, strapped the kid and her car seat into the front, and Ryan called in while they were en route.

“Early thirties white female, unresponsive, vitals BP ninety over forty, heart rate one-twenty, cardiac rhythm sinus tachycardia. Open fractures to the left clavicle, right femur, suspected closed fracture to the left femur...”

Tyler was in the jump seat. Dia monitored the IVs, breathing, and bleeding from the bench seat in the back, drug kit in hand but so far unused. She could do considerably more for a heart attack victim than she could for trauma.

The woman in front of her wasn't much older than Dia was. She had a husband—firemen were still cutting him out of the vehicle, and he might or might not still be alive. Dia hadn't checked. She got the woman and the child. Someone else would pick up the man when he was reachable, and haul him off to whichever hospital would take him.

Dia would drop off her two, and never know what happened to them.

She'd wonder, though. Wonder if this woman's story would have a happy ending, if the little girl would get her mommy and daddy back, if the woman would ever wake up, if she'd find out that her husband had lived, or discover that he'd died. Rescue was only the first piece of a long story—first chapter, and the people who lived and breathed Rescue never got to finish a whole book.

Sometimes, she thought, you just wanted to know it all came out all right. But there were too many patients, too many emergencies, too many hospitals, and always, too little time.

She took another set of vital signs, and the tall, lean detective wandered through her mind again. Why had he been there? Highway Patrol fit at an accident scene. Fire Rescue fit. Fire trucks and firefighters and ambulances and paramedics and EMTs fit.

How did detectives fit?

#

Detective Brig Hafferty walked away from the EMTs who were working on the unconscious woman, aware as he did of the little girl in the arms of the firefighter. Brig didn't want to feel that family's tragedy, but he did. The EMTs were fairly confident of the woman; the little girl was okay, but consensus was that the man, whom they were still trying to cut out of the vehicle, was already dead. And that if he wasn't,

he didn't have much of a chance of surviving.

The death toll on this wreck was rising, and the accident had the feel of one of his. The wreck had occurred during peak traffic flow, it had happened in the Coral Springs area, and it involved more than one fatality in more than one vehicle.

That described a lot of accidents in South Florida, which had some of the deadliest highways in the country. But a six-mile circle with Coral Springs as the center had recently gotten a lot deadlier.

Brig was backtracking from the eighteen-wheeler that was the first wrecked vehicle, working his way down the middle of the highway where he could, looking left and right. Simple humanity made him want to get into the middle of the carnage and start pulling people out with the rest of the people working there, but he couldn't afford to give into that impulse. He tried to stay out of the way of the rescue workers, but he was on an unforgiving clock. He was looking for something that would be swept away by the equipment that would erase all signs of this mess from the roads. The pressure to clear I-95, one of South Florida's main arteries, was intense.

If Brig hoped to find evidence of the crime he suspected, he was going to have to find it in the middle of chaos. There would never be a better time.

He sought a few small shards of debris. It was worse than looking for a needle in a haystack. In the middle of a massive traffic pile-up, it was like looking for hay in a haystack—two or three pieces of hay of a slightly different color than all the rest of the hay. He had to look at every flash of metal, at every broken, twisted scrap, to see if it was his debris. If he found anything, he'd call in a forensics team. Until he found something, this was just another wreck, and South Florida had enough regular crime to keep a small army of

forensics teams busy all day, every day, without sending them on fishing expeditions.

This, though, felt right. His gut had that tightness it got when he was looking at murder, not stupid human error.

He worked his way through crushed cars, avoiding for the moment the images of bodies being pulled from wreckage, the screams of the wounded, the sobs of the grieving, the blood. He kept a silent space around himself, in which he and the road and a few faint charred marks would find each other. In which he and a handful of twisted copper shards would connect. He was going to have to go back a ways—eighteen-wheelers, like trains, had a lot of forward momentum to shed when outside forces stopped them. He could see gouges this one had left in the tarmac in its slide toward its final stopping point. Long arcing streaks of rubber marked the road, and in places, peels of turf dug up along the berm lay inverted, dirt and pale white roots exposed, like lacerations in the earth.

The violence of physics collided with the violence of a man.

He walked in his artificial silence, careful of every step he took, letting gut and nerves and instinct pull him back. Back.

Back.

In the middle of blocked traffic, between rows of stuck onlookers parked in the middle of the road, he found the explosion point. One asshole was pulled out of line—the guy had been thinking about trying to pull onto the berm and then...well, the morons who did that never had much of a plan after they got themselves into the grass. The jerk had probably figured he could run up the road a ways along the side and magically bypass whatever it was that had all these other people stuck.

Brig, though, saw a curl of copper where the jackass would have been had he not been a jackass.

Crouching down, Brig shined a flashlight under some of the cars that were where they were supposed to be. More bits of copper gleamed back at him. Under his foot, he discovered a shard of some electronic component.

And back another few feet, the scorch marks on the highway where the bomb had gone off.

Yeah. This was one of his, all right.

He pulled out his radio. "This is Kilo-22, on site on I-95 at the Coral Springs exit."

"Yeah, Brig, I gotcha." The dispatcher was Mary Finkle, who had been dispatching since God created radio, and who was utterly unflappable. "Whatcha need?"

"Forensics team, and airlift them if you have to," he drawled. "Got a Code-55 here, and I need some folks to come take pictures of the pieces and sweep them all up before they get gone."

"Ten-four, Kilo-22. I'll send them right out."

He studied the fragments.

This was number five in a series for him. The fifth explosive device somehow set off in the middle of traffic that had caused a wreck with fatalities. He'd fallen into the first one when a sharp-eyed fireman had spotted something suspicious well back of the collision point, and had called for a detective.

Brig and his partner, Stan Chang, had been following up on accidents with fatalities ever since. So that they didn't miss anything, they had a notice in auto body repair shops to call if cars with explosives damage to the undercarriage showed up.

This was one of about thirty active homicide cases on his desk at the moment. This one, however, had moved itself to the top

of the pile.

Crouching near the debris, he thought about the EMTs who'd been working on the unconscious woman. They'd been focused, tunneled way down into what they were doing. Sort of like him while he was trying to find his bomb shards.

He wondered if any of the three of them had been seeing wrecks like this. If they might have some useful information for him that they didn't even know they had. They were, often enough, first responders to accidents.

In his experience, EMTs were only useful where information about victims was required. They were wound a bit too tight—in general—to see much more than the tiny circle that lay within their work. Still, he and Stan could canvas the local stations, talk to the rescuers, ask around.

Perhaps he could accidentally-on-purpose bump into *her*.

He wondered if he was being disingenuous by considering talking to the woman. Granted, she might have seen something. But she was pretty, too. Striking. A tall, leggy woman, but not thin. She'd been well-muscled, sleek, built like someone who worked out to stay in shape for a demanding, physical job. She'd looked strong. And calm. Self-assured. Alert.

Well, he told himself, even if he was considering seeking her out more because she was hot than because of any other reason, she did look like the sort of woman who might pay attention to details.

He allowed himself a cautious smile.

It never hurt to ask.

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