



SEALS OF SHADOW FORCE: SPY DIVISION

COVERT TACTICS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MISTY EVANS



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SERIES, BOOK 5

MISTY EVANS



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ONE

C hapter One

“THIS WAS A BAD IDEA. Worst of the century, in fact,” Rory murmured into his Bluetooth. The restaurant was packed, his cane barely finding a clear piece of real estate as he maneuvered past the various tables. Some patrons didn’t notice him; the heavy curiosity or judgments of others felt like sticky spiderwebs on the back of his neck.

“You’re fine, you big baby,” Dr. Vivian Montgomery said in his ear. “Amelia will love this place, and you need to get out more. Win, win.”

The latest addition to Shadow Force International was a royal pain in his ass. His boss, Beatrice Reese, who had employed the psychologist, and also insisted he take physical therapy from Dr. Amelia Thorpe, was an even bigger pain. The Queen B and Vivi had decided to play matchmakers. Like the two of them knew him better than he knew himself.

“I’m 46 years old—old enough to be her dad—and she’s...” He wasn’t sure how to explain it. Explain her. Amelia, even at work, dressed in heels and designer suits. She

carried \$600 handbags, and had her hair styled every week from some fancy salon. He never wore anything but camo pants and hole-y T-shirts. He occasionally combed his hair, preferring to wear it in a low ponytail at the base of his neck. “She’s so goddamn far above my class, she shouldn’t even give me the time of day.”

“Stop with the self -sabotage.” He heard the squeak of Vivi’s chair. She really needed to grease it. “We talked about this. The difference in your ages is not that much—she’s 31.”

She looked far younger.

Following the host, he finally made it to the table he’d reserved for the two of them, overlooking the D.C. lights. This was definitely Amelia’s type of place. He was content at the local bar and grill, or staying in his room at SFI with a microwave dinner and a football game. “She deserves better. When she finds out the details about my background...” The guy frowned, but handed him a menu. Rory pointed to the Bluetooth in his ear, hiding his cane on the other side of his chair. “Sorry, my therapist never cuts me any slack.”

The host had the good sense not to comment and gave a fake smile as he stuffed a second black bound booklet in front of Rory. “Our wine menu. Would you like to order a bottle so it can breathe before the other party gets here? I can recommend the Bordeaux ’89. A unique vintage with stellar body. The Haut Brion Blanc, in fact, is considered one of the best white Bordeaux wines ever produced.”

Hell, he knew nothing about snooty drinks, but Amelia would probably loved it. “Give me a minute, would you?”

“Of course.” The man half-bowed and hurried away.

“She’s not here yet.” Had probably changed her mind. That was better for both of them, wasn’t it?

Vivi sighed. “Take a deep breath and relax. She is habitually late, you know that. If I had to guess, I bet she’s nervous as you are.”

He ignored the menus and the lingering gazes of those who found him more interesting than their dinner. “Who could blame her? She’s finally come to her senses and realized I’m a loser and I can never give her the kind of life she wants. *Deserves.*”

“You sound like a man in love, and here I thought this was nothing more than a casual date. That’s what you insisted it was when you were in my office last time, wasn’t it?”

He dragged a hand across his face and stared out at the night filled with city lights that all seemed mock him. This town had made him, and then broken him. His SEAL days were long past, his ghost work for the government, a bit more recent. While Amelia knew his history, like most of those who worked for Shadow Force, it was top-secret and there was a reason he stayed hidden in the bowels of SFI. She had no clue about the things he’d done for his country. Sure, some of them were heroic, but others less so.

In all honesty, he should’ve been six feet under with some of the terrorists and dictators he’d taken out. Would have been, if not for Beatrice and her husband, Cal. Along with Emit Petit, who’d founded Shadow Force, the infamous Rory Tephra would have been nothing more than the legend he’d created for himself—a ghost.

“What do I do if she *does* show up?” It was a longshot and he knew it, but his knee wouldn’t stop bobbing under the table, his gaze flicking to the entrance. Along with the rest of SFI,

Amelia had given him a reason to live—and he was walking again, thanks to her and her therapy routine.

“You enjoy a night with a smart, beautiful woman.” This was said with a *duh* tone.

He took out his phone and typed a text to Amelia. *Something's come up. Sorry, I can't make it.* His thumb hovered over a sad face emoji. She'd be relieved. Was probably at this moment trying to come up with an excuse to blow him off.

Yet, he couldn't bring himself to hit *Send*.

The soft murmur a voices and occasional laughter was normal for a high-priced, popular restaurant like this, but it grated on his nerves. It took everything in him not to jump up and run. Of course, *running* was technically out of the question, but he could move pretty quickly with his cane. “I'm a disabled freak. The only reason she said yes to this is because she feels sorry for me.”

Another tight sigh issued from the other end of the call. “You're right. You should just go home.” He heard the snap of Montgomery's briefcase, a sound with finality to it. “Live the rest of your life as a hermit, getting your thrills from hacking into top secret government files and watching the rest of us live full, exciting lives. You don't deserve happiness, right? And you certainly don't deserve Amelia, who's helped you overcome the mental block that kept you in a wheelchair, and who lights up like a firecracker every time she sees you in PT. Every damn time, in fact, she sees you, period. Go ahead and break her heart, asshole. She'll be in my office next week crying over you. I can hardly wait.”

The raw vehemence in her tone took him aback. “What...?” And then he caught on. “I know you're a genius,

but I am no idiot. I see what you're trying to do here, Doctor, and I don't appreciate it."

"I don't appreciate you wasting my time. Order the wine, smile when she arrives, and remember the questions we scripted in your session last week. All you need to do is act human for a couple hours. Stretch goal—try charming. Forget about your age and your past. This is about your future, Rory. You're allowed to have fun, and Amelia is nuts about you. Don't fuck this up."

He typically appreciated her directness, but tonight, like everything else, it annoyed him. Stretch goals—she was always making him go after shit way out of his comfort zone. Acting as if he were normal. As if he had charm in spades, rather than less than a teaspoonful. Hell, he didn't even have that much.

If he hadn't been sitting in the midst of dozens of people, he would've taken the Bluetooth from his ear and fired it across the room into the wall. Instead, he heard Vivi disconnect, effectively handing him the reins of his own life to control.

Which was exactly what she was supposed to do. *Damn it.* She'd outsmarted him again.

Brooding for a minute, he toyed with his options. He could shoot off that text to Amelia and cancel, letting her off the hook. He could sit here and be embarrassed when she canceled on him.

Or...he could wait and see if she showed up.

Stretch goal.

He glanced at the entrance, swallowed his pride, and loosened the tie around his neck. Picked lint from his jacket.

Fiddled with his napkin.

When the waiter approached with two glasses of ice water, he tried to smile, found it was too much to ask, and attempted to not growl instead. “The maître d’ mentioned an 89 Bordeaux.” After the guy’s description of it, Rory didn’t want to know how much it cost. “I’d like to start with a bottle of that.”

The waiter looked thrilled. “Marvelous choice. A unique vintage,” he echoed. “You must know your wines. I’ll be right back.”

“Yeah, I know a lot about unique vintages.” *Myself included.* “You don’t happen to have Michelob on tap, do you?”

The waiter hesitated, his brows dipping. “A glass of that, too?”

Rory nodded and the guy scurried off.

The lights in the distance winked at him. He would try to be human, maybe even *charming*. He used to be able to turn that charm on and off without even thinking. *Used to.* Life was so different now. He snorted to himself. Being charming was definitely too much of a stretch.

But he had rehearsed those questions that Montgomery had given him to ask Amelia—How to Make Polite Conversation 101—and maybe, if he was lucky, he would indeed not fuck this up.

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MEET MISTY

USA TODAY Bestselling Author Misty Evans has published over eighty novels and writes romantic suspense, urban fantasy, and paranormal romance. Under her pen name, Nyx Halliwell, she also writes cozy mysteries.

When not reading or writing, she embraces her inner gypsy and loves music, movies, and hanging out with her husband, twin sons, and three spoiled puppies. She's a crafter at heart and has far too many projects to finish.

Don't want to miss a single adventure? Visit www.mistyevansbooks.com to find out ALL the news!

Check out her humorous pen name Nyx Halliwell for magical mysteries <https://www.nyxhalliwell.com>.



LETTER FROM MISTY

Hello Beautiful Reader!

Thank you for reading this story! It is an honor and a privilege to write stories for you. I'm an indie author and every fan is important to me. I pour my heart into each story and do my best to bring you an escape from the real world.

I hope you enjoyed this one, and I'd like to ask a favor – would you mind leaving a review at your favorite retailer? Or share your enjoyment of it with a friend or family member? I'd really appreciate it, and reviews help other readers find books they will love too.

Readers are the key to my success - not a traditional publishing deal (had one), an agent (had two), or a publicity team (yep, you guessed it, had one of those as well.)

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Thank you and happy reading!

Misty