



## Glitter and Gunfire (Shadow Agents)

By Cynthia Eden

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Cassidy didn't need the former Army Ranger to play hero and blow her cover. Using herself as bait was the first step in bringing a killer to justice. How could she do that with Cale shadowing her every move...and awakening feelings that tempted her to put her life-and heart-on the line?

\*\*Previously published in the Harlequin Intrigue line.

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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

Cynthia Eden is a national best-selling author of romantic suspense novels and paranormal romances. Her books have received starred reviews from Publishers Weekly, and her novel, DEADLY FEAR, was named a RITA® finalist for best romantic suspense. Cynthia lives in the Deep South, loves horror movies, and has an addiction to chocolate. More information about Cynthia may be found on her website ([www.cynthiaeden.com](http://www.cynthiaeden.com)) or on her Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/cynthiaedenfanpage](http://www.facebook.com/cynthiaedenfanpage)).

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Playing babysitter to some rich, overindulged society debutante wasn't exactly EOD Agent Cale Lane's idea of a good time.

Give him a dense jungle, the furious blast of gunfire and the adrenaline spike of a deadly mission any day of the week, but stick him in a stuffy ballroom like this—

This too-posh place might as well be hell to him. But, no, it wasn't hell—it was Carnival. Elaborate decorations streamed from the ceiling in bursts of gold, green and purple. The tables were covered, decked out, and the band played on a stage that shimmered with light.

From his perch near the back wall, Cale shifted slightly in his tux. He was supposed to be blending in with everyone else, and he was trying his best. Blending was normally a specialty for him. He was used to being camouflaged on missions, but most missions weren't like this one.

*Cassidy Sherridan.*

His eyes narrowed on the sleek blonde. The far-too-attractive, far-too-tempting Cassidy. He'd been sent down to Rio de Janeiro with the express orders to watch Cassidy.

And that was exactly what he'd been doing for the past five torturous days.

She looked up, then, her dark green eyes catching his gaze on her. For an instant, he thought tension might have tightened her delicate jaw, but then she smiled that slow, flirtatious smile that revealed the dimple in her right cheek.

She started walking toward him. Not that the woman walked so much as glided, and he had to admit she was sexy when she walked. No, Cassidy was sexy—period. The slit in her emerald dress parted, revealing legs that probably could have graced a runway someplace.

Her heels were high, vicious spikes, her dress was strapless, fitting her like a silken glove, and Cassidy...

*She's the mission.*

He couldn't let himself forget that. He hadn't been swayed by a pretty face before, and he wasn't going to start losing his cool now.

Cassidy held a champagne flute in one delicate hand. She nodded her head to a few people as she passed by

them and said a couple of polite words while keeping her perfect smile in place. Some of the other guests were decked out in their Carnival masks. The celebration was going full swing in Rio. Earlier, Cassidy had even worn a small, delicate eye-mask.

The mask was gone now.

And she was right in front of him.

Still smiling faintly, she said, "You know, it would probably help things considerably if you stopped looking as if you were being tortured as you stood over here."

He'd been tortured a few times. Memories that he didn't want to relive, right then.

"It's a party," she continued in that husky voice that reminded him too much of dark bedrooms. "Not a prison."

What would she know of prison? Or torture? Cale cocked a brow and let his gaze sweep over her. Cassidy Sherridan was a mystery to him. A gorgeous, too-fancy mystery. Her blond hair was swept back in a twist, the style accentuating her high cheekbones and those deep green eyes that made him think of things a soldier should *not* be thinking about.

Her nose was delicate, her chin a little too pointed. Her skin was flawless, golden, and she—

She was trying to distract him.

"Don't you have admirers to entertain?" he asked, his voice a rough growl, one that was a direct contrast to the softness of Cassidy's voice.

She laughed lightly. "And here I believed that I was entertaining an admirer. The way you've been staring at me all night...actually, for the past few days, it made me think that I did have an admirer in you." Now it was her turn to study him. Her gaze sharpened. "Why have you been following me?"

Her scent, light, sweet, seemed to fill the air around them. "Sorry, ma'am," he drawled, letting his Texas accent slip out deliberately. He'd long ago learned how to ditch and retrieve that accent at will. "But I think you have me confused with someone else."

Cassidy shook her head. "No, I think it would be very hard to confuse a man like you with anyone else." Her smile was still in place, but a brittle edge had entered her voice. Then, surprising him, she stepped forward. Her arms came up, as if she were hugging him, and he responded instinctively, wrapping his own arms around her.

Cassidy's body was slender and warm against his. Because of her high heels and the fact that Cassidy's own height skirted just above five foot eleven, their mouths were close. Temptingly close.

But she didn't kiss him. She pushed up onto her toes. Her mouth slipped toward his left ear, and she whispered, "Stop tailing me before you ruin everything."

He stiffened at her words and at the sudden hard jolt of arousal that knifed through him. Her breath blew lightly against his ear. His fingers tightened around her waist. To onlookers, Cale knew it would appear that

they were embracing but, holding her this tightly, he felt the hard tension in Cassidy's body.

Cassidy Sherridan was furious with him.

"I don't care who sent you." She whispered the words. He felt her lips press lightly against his ear. His body hardened. Then she said, "The last thing I need is an EOD agent in my way."

*An EOD agent.* She *did* realize who—what—he was, and that was some very surprising news, mostly because there were only a few people in the world with enough clearance to know about the Elite Operations Division. According to the U.S. government, the EOD didn't exist.

Not officially, anyway.

The Elite Operations Division operated far below the radar. The EOD agents had all been hand selected by Bruce Mercer, the man who seemed to *be* the EOD. The agents went out on the most deadly missions. They took the cases that others—in the *official* U.S. agencies—couldn't handle. Their very success and survival depended on the EOD's secrecy.

But this woman, who went to a series of parties, night after night, barely sliding into her hotel room past dawn, this woman with a dozen admirers always close to her, this woman who seemed to burn through ridiculous amounts of money in mere moments. *She* knew about the EOD?

So much for secrecy.

Her fingers pressed against his shoulders as Cassidy leaned back to study him once more. "I didn't catch your name."

Because he hadn't given it to her. "But maybe that's for the best," she added with a little nod. "Since this is the end of our acquaintance."

No, it wasn't even close to the end.

"When I walk away in a moment, I expect you to do the same," Cassidy told him.

The woman was giving him orders? Almost cute.

"Head to the back door. It's ten feet on your right. Go down the stairs there. That's the entrance and exit used by the staff at this event. None of the guests will notice when you leave."

Ah, yes, she *was* giving him an order. And it wasn't as cute anymore.

"I don't want to see you again." She was smiling as she said it, but her eyes had hardened. "Don't get in my way."

Then she turned and walked away.

*Interesting.*

His gaze slid over the slender column of her back. Far too much skin—such golden, perfect skin—was

revealed by the plunging back of her gown.

She didn't look at him. Just headed over to a pretty redhead, and the two women immediately started talking, their voices seemingly happy and light.

Cale realized that Cassidy Sherridan had just dismissed him.

He wasn't the type of man to be dismissed.

When he had a mission, he executed that mission. An angry debutante wasn't about to get in *his* way.

Cale glanced toward the exit she'd indicated, then right back to her.

With a faint smile curving his lips, he started to stalk his prey.

Voices rose and fell around her, and Cassidy tried hard to focus through the rumble—and to ignore the wild pounding of her heart.

*He's gone. You 're in control. You have this—*

"Um...Cassidy?" Her friend Genevieve Chevalier's voice had dropped, so Cassidy had to lean closer to hear her words in the crush of people. "Who is that delectable man coming after you?" A light French accent brushed her words.

Cassidy blinked at her. Wait, had Genevieve just said... *coming after?*

Cassidy locked her back teeth even as she gave a smile, the same fake smile that she'd grown used to offering people in the past year. "I'm sure I don't know who you're talking about." She laughed lightly. "But then, this room is full of delectable men."

Not that she paid those men much notice. Ever since she'd arrived at the charity ball, she'd been totally focused on *him*.

She glanced over her shoulder, following Genevieve's gaze. The man in question should have been heading toward the exit. The stranger—the guy with the dark blue eyes, the hard jaw, the face that she found both dangerous and sexy—was striding toward her.

He was tall, around six foot three, with wide shoulders. She'd first noticed him three days ago—mostly because it was hard to ignore a man like him. Especially with that dark intensity that seemed to pulsate off him.

The day she'd noticed him for the first time, they'd been at another party, another glittering ballroom, one decked out in the familiar gold-and-purple colors of Carnival. He'd been leaning against the back wall there, too, watching her.

But not with lust in his eyes, the way others sometimes did.

Instead, cold calculation had filled his stare.

"He seems very taken with you," Genevieve murmured.

With an effort, she kept her smile in place. He should have *taken* himself out of there. Like she couldn't spot an EOD agent a mile away.

Deliberately, she looked away from him, making a point of giving the man her back. *Take a hint*. The band started to play again, a slow, romantic tune, and some of the chatter quieted just as—

A hand closed over her shoulder. Warm, strong, his. Every muscle in Cassidy's body tightened in response to that touch.

"I want this dance." His words were rough, a demand, certainly not the suave invitation that most of the men at this event would have offered her.

But, then, he wasn't most men.

Genevieve stood watching them, her golden eyes wide.

Cassidy realized the stranger hadn't given her much choice. She could refuse, then Genevieve—glorious gossip that she was—would want to know why. The point had been to make the mysterious man vanish, not to pull him into her life even more.

He'd obviously missed the point.

"One dance," she agreed softly, inclining her head in what she hoped appeared to be a gracious move.

She'd be sure he got the point this time.

Cassidy turned toward him, tried to brace herself against the impact of staring right into those blue eyes of his. But there was no bracing that would be good enough. Each time she looked into his eyes, her heart beat faster even as sensual awareness spiked through her.

Handsome, he definitely was. With those strong cheeks, that long blade of a nose and that chiseled jaw, the man certainly would catch the attention of most women. He even had a cleft in his chin, a cleft that softened the roughened edge of his features and made him even more appealing.

His hand closed around hers as he led her onto the dance floor. Cassidy noticed that there were calluses on his fingers, and he was just so...warm.

She swallowed and held her faint smile in place as they began to dance. She tried to keep some precious distance between them but—

He pulled her even closer.

*Annoying.*

"I told you to leave," she gritted out through her locked teeth.

His lips twitched. "Um, you did. But I decided that I wanted to stay."

He was moving easily, fluidly, a bit surprising for a man of his size. A soldier who knew how to dance—and dance well, she realized, as he gave her a little spin and dip.

Her lips parted as she pulled in a quick breath. Then he was moving her again, leading her around the dance floor.

His gaze dropped to her mouth. It seemed to heat. "I think—" his voice was deep, rolling—"that you owe me an explanation."

Her brows climbed. "What?" She didn't owe him anything. They didn't know each other. As soon as the dance ended, their association would end, too.

"Tell me about the EOD," he said. Cassidy realized that he'd just used her trick. When he'd said those words, he'd put his lips right next to her ear and whispered his demand.

Only...had his lips pressed lightly against her ear? It felt as if they had. And his tongue. Had he...licked her? She certainly hadn't...licked...him.

Had she?

Goose bumps rose on her arms. "I don't need to tell you anything."

Really, Mercer had stooped to this level? Sending a new babysitter after her? He'd promised the last agent was it. It looked like he'd broken another promise.

Same story, different day. She should have expected this from him.

"You think I work for something called the EOD," the man told her. She pulled back, staring up at him. His hair was dark, thick, and her fingers were brushing against the nape of his neck.

*Why* were her fingers doing that? She immediately flattened them against the back of his tux.

"Shouldn't you at least tell me what the EOD is?" he pressed.

Cassidy sighed. "Cut the act, okay? I've seen your dossier picture. I know you're an agent." That was how she'd first recognized him at the other party. She had a thing about faces. Once she saw one, she never forgot it.

Actually, there were quite a few things that she couldn't forget.

His jaw hardened just a bit. "Well, I'm at a disadvantage—"

"Yes, you are," she interrupted him, making sure that her voice stayed low so that none of the other dancers would overhear. "Because you've been sent down here for no reason. I *don't* need you."

The song ended. Thankfully. Blessedly.

She tried to pull away from him.



He didn't let her go.

"Are you sure about that?" he asked.

"Yes," she hissed. "I'm sure. I'm perfectly fine. This place is safe—"

A scream cut through the ballroom. At the high-pitched, desperate sound, everyone froze.

Cassidy's blood iced. *Genevieve*. That had been her scream. She *knew* Genevieve's scream.

Cassidy's gaze flew to the right as she looked for her friend. There, near the staircase. One glance and Cassidy knew why her friend had screamed. Men in black—men wearing ski masks and armed with handguns—surrounded Genevieve. One man had a gun to her side. The other three men were fanning out, advancing toward the unarmed guests.

"Anyone moves," the man holding Genevieve shouted, "I kill her." No accent covered his words.

Cassidy's breath heaved in her lungs. No, no, this could not be happening now. It shouldn't be happening—not to Genevieve!

But it *was* happening. She was staring at a nightmare straight from her past. The armed men swept into the crowd.

And—

"Cassidy Sherridan!" the man holding Genevieve shouted.

"We want her."

Cassidy took a step forward.

Only to be halted by the man who was quickly becoming the bane of her existence.

"Too bad," the EOD agent whispered—a whisper that reached only Cassidy's ears. "Because I'm not letting them get you."

He didn't understand what was happening. She did. She was also more than ready to trade herself for Genevieve.

So while everyone else was frozen, she jerked away from the agent and called out, "You want me? I'm right here."

The agent swore.

The masked man shoved Genevieve away and began closing in on Cassidy. His gun was aimed dead center at her chest.

Cassidy lifted her chin and waited.

Only in the next second she wasn't staring at the gun. The EOD agent had grabbed her and pushed her behind him.

*No!*

"Don't play hero," the masked man snarled. "It's a surefire way to end up dead."

"That's a chance I'll take," the agent drawled, letting his Texas accent slip in once more as he pulled out his own weapon. A gun she hadn't even noticed when they'd been dancing.

The men in masks inched closer as everyone else in the room started to rush for the doors.

So much for everyone freezing. *I'm the one they want.*

And if tall, dark and handsome hadn't just tried to be a white knight, the gunmen would have gotten her.

The EOD agent had just ruined her plans.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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