



## Her Secret Spy (Code: Warrior SEALs)

By Cindy Dees

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*From New York Times bestselling author Cindy Dees—a thrilling new romance with a sinister edge*

Lover. Trickster. Villain. Hero. Which of these is undercover spy Max Kuznetsov? Despite her psychic gifts, Lissa Clearmont isn't sure. All she knows is the gorgeous guy saved her life outside her New Orleans curio shop. And now they're fighting brutal Russian mobsters...and feeling extrasensual passion.

Although he's protecting her, Lissa knows Max keeps his darkest self—and true mission—hidden. It pains her when Max doubts the powers that have already cost her a normal life. But when Lissa foretells inescapable danger, Max and his team of SEALs must believe in her...or the dead people she sees will be all of them.

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## **Her Secret Spy (Code: Warrior SEALs) By Cindy Dees Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

### About the Author

Raised on a horse farm in Michigan, Cindy Dees dropped out of high school at 15 to attend the University of Michigan where she earned a B.A. in Russian and East European Studies. She became a U.S. Air Force Pilot, worked at the White House, and was a part-time spy during her military career. Her first novel was published in 2002, and she has published over forty more since then with HRS and HQN. She is a 5-time RITA finalist and 2-time RITA winner and has won numerous other awards.

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Lissa Clearmont looked around her aunt Callista's shop—her shop now—torn between both affection and dismay. The purple string lights hanging all around the ceiling cast a spooky light on the eclectic inventory of Callista's Curiosities of the Magical and Macabre. An inventory that was hers to replenish and grow now, ideally by embracing the inner weirdo she'd spent years doing her best to deny.

Until last month her world had been thoroughly cleaned out of both the magical and the macabre. But then her peculiar aunt called to announce that she'd had a vision and was going to die any day. And, oh, by the way, she'd willed everything she owned, including her wacky store in New Orleans, to her favorite niece.

She hadn't taken Auntie Callista seriously at first, but the woman had been adamant that the end was near and she had to get her affairs in order immediately. The curiosity shop was infamous within the Clearmont clan, which was populated by generations of rational, logical, scientific souls who saw anything having to do with the unexplained, prophetic, occult—or heaven forbid, magic—to be rubbish of the first water. The family grudgingly gave Callista credit for managing to sell her crystals, tarot cards, talismans, spells and palm readings to a gullible public and making what was, by all accounts, a decent living at it. But their patience for her eccentricities ended there.

Lissa, named loosely after her aunt, had been the only family member to take Callista's startling announcement of her forthcoming demise seriously. She'd questioned her aunt in alarm over any diagnoses or heretofore unknown health issues, and Callista had responded firmly that she was in the bloom of fine health. Nonetheless, the spirits had spoken, and she was about to die. Of course, Callista had snorted at the mere mention of visiting a traditional medical doctor.

If only her aunt had been more specific about how she'd expected to die and why. Maybe then Lissa wouldn't have this nagging feeling that something was very wrong with the circumstances of Callista's abrupt death two days after that phone call.

Frustrated, Lissa turned off the bronze lamp by the antique cash register, pausing for a moment to admire the deep rose silk shade with its beaded fringe and black lace edging. It was a pretty little thing in spite of its uselessness at actually emitting light. She trailed her fingertips wistfully through the cool fringe.

Sometimes she felt like the little lamp. Pretty and useless. The only thing in life she was good at was the one thing she was determined to leave behind in this cross-country move to New Orleans. Not that her parents hadn't tried to suppress her talent for years before now. In fact, they'd done everything in their power shy of trying to pray it away to eliminate her gift for seeing past and future events, and, worse, seeing into people's

souls.

She'd kept the shop open late tonight for a coven of witches who'd come in to buy supplies for an upcoming Imbolc ritual. The holiday coincided with a full moon this year, and they were planning to throw a big shindig to celebrate the conjunction. The group couldn't agree quickly on anything, and they'd lingered a full hour after her usual closing time at seven o'clock. She barely had time to rush out and grab some cat food for Mr. Jackson, Callista's entirely cliché black cat, before the convenience store two blocks away closed for the night.

The women had just left in a joyous cluster, taking with them their noise and laughter and leaving her alone. Worse, night had fallen while the customers browsed the shop. To say that the store turned creepy after dark would be like saying the sun was hot. She peered into the dim corners and to the back of dark shelves in an effort to find the source of her unease. Yet again, she failed to spot whatever it was that made her so blasted nervous. It was as if she was being watched by some foreign, and possibly malevolent, force.

Shuddering a little, she wrapped herself in her favorite vintage wool coat, locked the iron grillwork over the glass door behind her and hurried away from the store into the bowels of the night. It was a sorry thing when a dark, deserted street in a dodgy neighborhood in a sometimes violent city felt safer to her than her own store did. Aunt Callista would have told her to do some sort of exorcism or cleaning ritual to the curiosity shop and see if she could improve the place's vibe. A white sage smudge probably wouldn't be enough. No, a full spell, complete with a ritual circle, libations, candles—

*Stop whispering into my brain, Aunt Callista! You're gone. I'll make my own decisions.* She didn't do that kind of woo-woo stuff anymore. Immersing herself in the mystical world had cost her too much. Brought her too much pain. No more. Henceforth, she would live life as a normal, mundane human being.

A warning vibrated somewhere in the back of her mind, and she scoffed at it. *Nope.* She didn't pay attention to baseless intuitions and vibes anymore. She could handle life entirely on her own. The powers that be could just get over it.

Something big slammed into her from behind as a hand slapped over her mouth, yanking her back against what turned out to be a powerful body. "Don't fight. Don't make a sound, or else I'll mess you up right here."

*Son of a—* Stupid warning intuition had to go and be right, didn't it? But then panic and terror rolled through her, and all else disappeared in the face of certainty that this man was intent on doing something terrible to her.

The voice vibrated with malice. Urgency. Accent: local. Smell: cigarette smoke and cheap strip club. This assailant clearly planned to harm her or worse.

His plan roared through her mind, projected so loudly he might as well have spoken the words. He was going to drag her into an abandoned space—big, open, drafty like a warehouse of some kind—tear off her clothes, beat her up, cow her into submission and then do unspeakable things to her before finally strangling her.

She fought then. For her life. With all the violence and desperation her five-foot-two frame could muster. Which wasn't enough, of course. But she gave it her best shot. Her attacker merely tightened his arms around her in a vise that crushed her ribs and made breathing nigh unto impossible, and then he waited out the expenditure of her remaining oxygen. This obviously wasn't the first time the man had done this.

An image of another girl's face, bloody, scared and pleading for her life, flashed into Lissa's head. She froze, arrested momentarily by the image, memorizing the face carefully.

Lifting her slight frame mostly off her feet, the man dragged her backward toward an alley even darker than the street they currently wrestled on. If only he would take his hand away from her mouth and nose and let her draw a proper breath. Then she could scream. Or fight some more. Or do *something* to save herself.

She felt herself dropping into a state of shock. This must be what it was like to be a gazelle in the moments after a lioness caught its neck in her mighty jaws and crunched into it. Paralysis first and then blessedly numbing shock. The gazelle wouldn't even be aware of its bleeding muscles being ripped away by razor-sharp teeth, its living organs being torn from its warm belly. There would be just the shock. The blessed, detached, distant awareness of encroaching death. Warmth. Quiet. Calm. She was going to die, if not right now, then soon, at this man's hands.

Vague regret at having never been in love—the real thing, with all-consuming need, soaring heights of ecstasy, a melding of minds and souls, and, of course, really great sex—passed over her. She was too young to die. And she sincerely wished it didn't have to be like this.

But maybe it was fated. She'd been conceived in violence, after all. Maybe that meant she had to leave this life the same way. Was this some cosmic evening out of the scales? Had she never been meant to be born? Was that why the universe saw fit to take her out like this? Or was it some wrong she'd committed in her own life coming back to haunt—

Something big and fast flew at her from the side. More shadow than man. But big. Fully as big as her attacker. A second attacker? *Oh, Lord.* Were they going to gang-rape her?

Her first attacker grunted as the newcomer barreled into him and Lissa, knocking all of them into a pile on the ground. She rolled clear of the melee of flailing limbs as the two men struggled to untangle themselves.

She scrambled to her hands and knees, sucking air into her oxygen-starved lungs gratefully. *Must get up.* Run away while they still tried to gain their feet. She must fly like the wind—

But no wind could outrun the wave of psychic power that rolled over her as she panted on the sidewalk. It was as if a great floodgate had swung open and a massive flood of energy clobbered her. The scale of it was staggering. It made the rest of her life look as though she'd been sipping at a trickle of psychic power from a leaky faucet. But this. This was unbelievable. Time had no boundaries; her vision had no limits. Knowledge of all things was right there, hers for the taking.

Something hot and wet and smelling of iron splattered her face, jolting her out of the vision and banging the floodgates of time and power shut. In front of her nose, a fist connected with her attacker's jaw again. Hard. With a smack of flesh on flesh that spoke of violent intent. *Wait. What?* The new man had just slugged his partner in crime? Maybe *not* his partner in crime?

Very belatedly she realized the two men were fighting. The second man was rescuing her! *Well, then. That changes things.* She pushed to her feet, balled up her fists, waited for an opening...and dived into the fray.

Max mentally groaned as the woman he'd just rescued leaped into the fracas in a misguided attempt to help him. He could kill this punk here and now if he wanted to, but he was trying hard to keep the guy alive so the police could have a chat with him. The attack on the woman had been too practiced, too perfect, for some

amateur lowlife looking to score drug money. This guy was a professional stalker of women.

The woman, however, had different ideas. She seemed hell-bent on killing the bastard and was punching and kicking with all her strength. Although, on second thought, she was probably too tiny to do the guy any serious damage. And it was undoubtedly therapeutic for her to kick the hell out of the punk for scaring her like that.

The stalker finally rolled into a fetal ball with his arms over his head to protect himself from the woman's fury, which was prodigious now that she wasn't on the verge of dying.

Max rolled away and pressed to his feet, panting. He jerked his leather bomber jacket back into place and dusted off his jeans, which were torn at one knee. Dammit, he liked these jeans.

"Okay, lady," he said drily. "That's enough, or else the cops will charge you with assault when they get here instead of that jackass."

The woman looked up at him, confused. As if she was just now registering what her feet and fists were doing. "Oh. Oh! Right." She stumbled back and commenced shaking so hard he could see it from where he stood.

The attacker made a move to jump to his feet and take off, but Max put a hand on the back of the guy's neck and shoved him down to the ground with casual strength. "You stay right there, or I'll break your neck." The punk lurched one more time, and Max increased the pressure. "For real, man. I'll kill you. Right here. Right now. No compunction."

The punk subsided.

For good measure, Max went down to one knee, kneeling on the spot between the guy's shoulder blades and no doubt pressing the stalker's cheek painfully into the gravel-strewn sidewalk. He glanced up at the woman. "Ma'am, if you'd be so kind as to call nine-one-one. Tell them to send the nearest cruiser. Then tell them to call Detective Bastien LeBlanc and pass the message that Max could use a hand."

"Is that your name?" the woman asked in a shaky voice close to tears. "Max?"

"Please make the call, ma'am."

"What is it?"

"What is what? You mean my name?" he echoed blankly. That was a good question. He'd been living under that other name, not his own, for so long, he almost didn't remember his real name anymore. Not that he had any great fondness for either his real name or his real life. All of it had turned out to be a lie of epic proportions. And he was so caught in this new lie, so deeply ensnared in its tangles, he couldn't breathe, let alone move.

"Max," he mumbled. "Call me Max."

"Max what?"

Damn, she was persistent. "Smith," he muttered under his breath.

In what little light there was in this crappy corner of town, he made out a faint frown puckering her brow. The sort of frown that said a person didn't believe what she was hearing and was trying to understand why the speaker would lie to her. An urge to tell her the truth, to tell her his real name, bubbled up from somewhere deep in his gut.

But thankfully a siren's wail sounded just then, and the woman looked away, relief painted in every sweet line of her face. She was a little thing. She looked like Mary Poppins in that old-fashioned wool coat and those funny curved-heel granny shoes. Her hair was curly, and about half of it remained in a bun at the back of her neck. The rest fell around her face in a wild, sexy riot of curls that fit her face massively better than the old lady attire did.

A police car careened around the corner, and in the glare of the headlights he saw the woman's curls were dark, dark red. Almost maroon. And she was young, midtwenties maybe. Which he supposed wasn't *that* young. It was just the age of his younger sister, who would forever and always be his baby sister, even when she turned old and gray.

Like his sister, the woman trembling in front of him was beautiful in an old-fashioned way. Her skin was porcelain, her lips rosy and full, her eyes huge and dark. Her beauty was soft.

Under any other circumstances but these, he would have registered this woman as ridiculously attractive, walked away from her and then obsessed about her for weeks afterward, kicking himself for not talking to her or at least getting her name and phone number.

It wasn't that he'd never successfully put the moves on a hot female. But he'd been undercover for so long that he was starting to worry about forgetting how to come on to women at all.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Ray Shippee:**

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**Kenneth Cunningham:**

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