



A Covert Affair: A Deadly Ops Novel

By Katie Reus



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The explosively passionate new Deadly Ops novel from Katie Reus, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Edge of Danger*.



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A beautiful, successful restaurateur, Amelia Rios enjoys giving back to her community, especially to struggling women. Then a woman she recently hired stops showing up for work, and, unfortunately, she isn't the first to go missing.

Soon Amelia finds herself thrust into a shadowy, dark world, working side by side with Nathan, the only man she's ever loved. They must confront old feelings as they battle a ruthless enemy preying on the poor and weak. The heat simmering between Nathan and Amelia could mean a second chance for them—but first they have to survive.



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Editorial Review

Review

"This second-chance-at-love story is filled with fast-paced action, treachery, as well as danger and a big helping of romance." ---RT Book Reviews

About the Author

Katie Reus is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of sexy romantic suspense and dark paranormal romance, including the Red Stone Security series, the Moon Shifter novels, and the Deadly Ops series. She has a degree in psychology and lives near Biloxi, Mississippi, with her husband.

An avid reader her whole life, Sophie Eastlake happily extends her love of books to her passion for narrating. Sophie lives in New York, where she survives the subway grind with a book in her hand and drops in on every literary reading she can find.

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Chapter 2

Amelia Rios took the tulip-shaped champagne glass from her date, Iker Mercado, with a smile. At forty-five, he was seventeen years older than her and definitely the oldest man she'd ever been on a date with. Not that she dated much, not with her schedule. But Mercado was interesting, charming, handsome, and he didn't have a reputation as a man-whore. If he had, she would have declined his invitation. In her experience, playboy types tended to have little respect for her gender. No, thank you.

If anything, the man had practically lived like a saint for the last twenty-five years. She knew from gossip that his wife had died at nineteen during childbirth. He'd only been twenty, yet had raised his daughter and had never gotten remarried or really even dated. If gossip was to be believed, of course. In this case, she believed it.

"You look beautiful tonight," he murmured, his gaze raking over her appreciatively. But not in a creepy way. Everything about him was so polished, from his tailored tuxedo to his genuine smile. When he looked at people or talked to them, he was always engaged and none of it seemed forced.

"You look pretty good yourself." She smiled, pasting on the brightest one she could muster. She rarely came to events such as the auction Mercado was putting on. She always felt like an impostor at things like this. While no one could say she didn't look the part with her sleek black dress, new manicure and pedicure, and, thanks to a friend, an intricate hairstyle that looked as if she'd paid a fortune to have it done, she still felt like a fraud. It was her own insecurities, something she was well aware of. Didn't change the fact that she felt like a big fake standing around with so many women of Miami's high society, all of whom were decked out in glittering, blinding jewelry. Part of her that she hated admitting existed wondered why Mercado had even asked her to this thing. He'd pursued her decently enough too, asking her out three times before she'd agreed.

She was pretty, she knew that, but so many of the women were wealthy and elegant with the right pedigree. She was none of those things. She'd lived in dumps for years before finally getting her restaurants off the

ground. Now she made a good living, but some days she still felt like that young girl working double shifts seven days a week and so desperate to claw her way out of her life that she'd have done practically anything. People who think money can't buy you happiness have never been poor. Not that she actually thought money could buy happiness, but it sure as hell paid the bills and gave her stability.

"So, how do you think it's going? Or is it too soon to tell?" she continued, taking advantage of it just being the two of them. Considering he was the one putting on the silent auction for charity and was a well-respected man, they'd barely had more than a minute of alone time tonight. Oddly she wasn't that disappointed. The man was perfect on paper and incredibly nice, but she didn't feel much of a spark.

"I think it's going well." He stepped a fraction closer, letting his hand settle on one of her hips in a loose, but somehow still possessive gesture. It didn't make her uncomfortable, but it was surprising. "Though I now see that asking you to this for our first date was a mistake."

Shock rippled through her at his words. Did he not think she was the right kind of woman to bring to this? "Was it?" Her words came out icier than she'd intended.

He blinked in surprise, a small frown pulling at his mouth. "We've had no private time. I'd like to take you out again soon, just the two of us. Maybe I'll cook for you?"

Oh God, she felt like an idiot. She wanted to crush all her insecurities, but sometimes they just flared to the surface with no warning. The clenching in her gut dissipated when it registered he hadn't been insulting her. "I—"

"Iker!" A female voice cut off the rest of what Amelia had been about to say.

Which was maybe a good thing. She wasn't certain she wanted to go on another date with him anyway. If the spark wasn't there, she doubted it would magically appear during another date. Deep down she wondered if she'd ever feel that "thing" with anyone. She did once, but that was so long ago. Over a decade. And she was pretty certain she'd just built up the combustible attraction in her mind. No one could have been that sexy, that intense, that—

She realized that Mercado was introducing her to someone. Naomi Baronet. A beautiful woman with bright red hair swept up into a simple twist. She was likely in her forties. Her features were sharp, defined, and elegant. Amelia smiled and shook the hand the woman was offering. Thank God she didn't have to do the air-kiss thing so many people had been doing tonight. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"You as well, Miss Rios." Her eyes glinted with something that made Amelia feel uneasy. The woman watched her like a bug under a microscope.

But she kept her smile in place. "Please call me Amelia."

"And you must call me Naomi. I've been wanting to meet you for a while now." Her smile was easy, her teeth a brilliant white, but there was no warmth in her eyes.

"You have?" Amelia couldn't imagine why. She had never even heard of this woman.

Naomi nodded, her eyes narrowing just a fraction as Iker slid his arm around Amelia's waist, holding her loosely, but still close. It felt as if he was being protective. "Yes, I know you've been working in tandem with Maria and all those . . . unfortunate women." Disdain laced the last two words, even as she tried to mask it. "I know Maria's father disapproves of all the time she spends at that center, but she's such a giving

woman. I don't know how she does it."

Unfortunate women? "That" center? This woman was like a cartoon character. Amelia forced herself to keep her voice even. Sometimes her temper got away with her, and tonight was not the time for that. "She does a great service to our community. And those 'unfortunate' women are basically young girls who had nothing growing up and simply want a better life for themselves. And they're not afraid to work hard for it." Something Amelia could appreciate. Ice coated her voice even as she tried to order herself to keep that facade in place. But people like Naomi, who wore entitlement around her like a silk wrap, annoyed her.

The woman blinked in surprise, but before she could respond, Iker's grip on Amelia tightened. "Naomi, I see someone I need to speak to, but save me a dance." As he steered Amelia away, she inwardly cringed.

"Ah, sorry if I was—"

"Don't apologize," he said through a smile. "She is . . . an unlikable individual. And if you see me dancing with her later, I beg you to come save me." The light humor in his voice eased the tightness in her chest.

"You're not friends with her?"

"No. I've done business with her brother, but that's the extent of our relationship. She's here because she wants to show off her jewelry and be seen. She doesn't care about our community." It was clear he did care.

Amelia wondered what was wrong with her. Why she didn't feel more of a spark for him. The setting tonight was perfectly romantic. Afro-Cuban jazz played in the background, the band he'd hired nothing less than spectacular. The music—along with the servers walking around wearing fedoras and the birds-of-paradise centerpieces—gave the auction a vintage, glamorous Old Havana feel.

"There's something I need to tell you," he continued, pulling her closer to the dance floor, expertly maneuvering through the throng of people. "I had you checked out before asking you on a date."

Gathering her thoughts, she took a sip of her champagne before responding, "You mean like investigated?"

He nodded. "Yes. I don't date much and I'm careful when I do."

Whoa, he must be wealthier than she'd realized, something that made her incredibly uncomfortable. "Okay." She wasn't even certain how to respond.

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, seemingly uncomfortable as well, which was at odds with the polished man. "I wanted to be up-front with you. I should probably apologize, but I'm not sorry. I've gotten burned in the past by women who wanted only one thing from me."

The ghost of a smile touched her lips. It was refreshing that he was being so honest, but also a little unnerving. "I Googled you," she admitted. Definitely not the same thing as having her investigated, though.

He smiled, the charming man perfectly back in place. His hair was a honey brown with just a few faint hints of gray peeking through. "And?"

"And you seem pretty decent."

He laughed at that. "You do wonders for my ego."

Shrugging, she took another sip of her champagne. "So, what did you find out about me that I probably

wouldn't have shared on a first date?" She couldn't help wondering what he'd discovered in his investigation. Probably that she'd changed her last name. Maybe he'd figured out why, maybe not. She wasn't going to offer up the information, not unless they got to know each other better. It was too hard to talk about. Having her name linked to her mother's, a prostitute, wasn't something she'd wanted for the rest of her life.

"You're the owner of two successful restaurants, something I already knew anyway."

"How do you know they're successful?"

Now he shrugged, all casual innocence. "About a year ago I looked into buying commercial property near La Cocina de Amelia. I checked out the surrounding businesses to see how profitable they were."

Smart. "Did you buy the property?"

A brief nod. "I did. I wish I'd gone into one of your restaurants back then, though. Maybe we would have met sooner." His eyes darkened at that, undeniable heat simmering there.

She felt her cheeks warm up just a bit at the boldness in his gaze. She still wasn't sure she felt anything for him and loathed herself for it. Loathed that after a decade she still had lingering feelings for a man she knew she'd never see again. It was her own fault, but it didn't lessen the emotions one iota. Glancing away, she nearly dropped her glass when she spotted Nathan freaking Ortiz moving around the edge of the dance floor, headed her way.

Nathan. Ortiz.

Had she lost her ever-loving mind? She gave herself a hard mental shake and looked away. When she found her gaze drawn directly back to the man again, she realized that no, she hadn't lost her mind.

Taller than her—but who wasn't?—muscular, yet lean, he filled out his tuxedo with absolute perfection. He had the sleek lines of a graceful predator. Though he wasn't looking at her, there was no doubt in her mind that he'd seen her and was making his way over here. He was moving with far too much purpose. What was he doing here? Was he living in Miami again? The last she knew he'd joined the Marine Corps, but that had been twelve years ago. She guessed he could be on social media, but she only had accounts for her business, not herself, so she didn't know. She'd been tempted a time or two to look him up but had never followed through. She figured he'd gotten married and had kids by now—not something she needed to see or know about. She didn't begrudge him any happiness, but the thought of him settling down with someone had just been too depressing. Actually seeing pictures of him on social media with a smiling, happy family? No, thanks. It wasn't as if they had any common friends, so she'd never heard an inkling about him over the years. That alone had made it so much easier to bury her curiosity. Or at least ignore it.

Just watching him move was like watching—Gah, she couldn't even think of a good analogy, but a low-grade heat started building inside her, her nipples tightening almost painfully in awareness. The man was even sexier than she remembered, but there was nothing boyish about him anymore. He'd been eighteen the last time she saw him, so he'd be almost thirty now. He had a bit of scruff on his face, not a full-on beard, but oh sweet Lord, he was gorgeous. She absolutely hated that her body just seemed to flare to life at the mere sight of him. Like a switch flipping, she didn't even feel like herself right now. She wanted to crawl out of her skin to escape this surreal sensation of watching the man whom she'd never gotten over make his way toward her and her date.

Amelia tore her gaze from Nathan as he disappeared behind a cluster of people and focused on Iker, who was

still smiling at her. Guilt suffused her, but thank God he couldn't read her mind. She wanted to ask him to dance, to drag him out onto the gleaming wooden floor and get away from Nathan. If that made her a coward, she didn't care. When Iker plucked a new champagne glass for her from one of the passing servers, she didn't protest.

"I'd like you to meet an associate of mine," Iker murmured, slipping his arm around her waist in the same way he'd done with Naomi, only this time his grip was tighter, less casual. Definitely a male-territorial thing, if she had to guess.

When she turned in his arm, looking up to meet his associate, she shouldn't have been surprised to see Nathan. But the shock of seeing him up close was a punch to her senses. Blood rushed to her face and she inwardly cursed her reaction.

"Amelia, this is Miguel Ortiz."

Miguel? Nathan's eyes were the same dark espresso she remembered. She didn't know what to make of the name Miguel but didn't comment on that. If he was using another name, she figured he didn't want to admit they knew each other. So she didn't acknowledge that she knew him, instead smiling politely as she held out a hand.

He took it, shook her hand almost stiffly, formally. It was weird touching him again after so long. Just feeling his skin against her brought up far too many memories. Ones that should stay buried. The man had always been so talented with his fingers and mouth. So, so talented. Something she shouldn't be thinking about.

"A pleasure to meet you." His words were raspy, but it was clear he didn't plan to acknowledge her either. Okay, so he was definitely using an alias.

She'd be lying if she said she wasn't curious why. No matter what, she certainly wasn't going to call him out in front of anyone else. She swallowed hard, forcing her throat to work. "You too." Two words—she was a freaking rock star. She swallowed again, this time subtly. "Are you in antiquities too?" she asked, looking between the two men, thankful that she seemed to have herself under control.

Nathan looked at Iker, something dark in his gaze. "Something like that."

She wasn't sure what passed between them, but Iker seemed annoyed. He was still all charm, but something had shifted.

"Would it offend you if I asked your date for a dance?" Nathan asked, his gaze perfectly placid and polite. But there was something in his eyes she couldn't get a handle on.

"I don't speak for Amelia." Iker's voice was butter smooth.

Now Nathan turned that laserlike focus on her again. "Will you dance with me?"

A soft Cuban beat filled the air as the lights dimmed a fraction. "Uh . . ." She glanced at Iker. She didn't want to be rude and they'd both already danced with other people earlier in the evening. Still, it felt as if it might be impolite to say yes, but she really wanted to talk to Nathan—or Miguel—and ask why he was using another name and why he was in Miami. For a brief moment she wondered if he was in some sort of criminal business, but almost immediately she discarded that idea. The Nathan she'd known had seen the world in black and white; he'd been so damn honorable about everything. Since she wasn't going to find out by

guessing, she let her curiosity win. “Do you mind?”

Iker’s expression was soft as he shook his head. “No, but save the next one for me.” Surprising her, he kissed her forehead in a sweet gesture.

Before she could react or think, Nathan took her hand and she found herself in his arms. She was glad she’d worn heels so she was better matched for him, height-wise. He was six feet tall, the same as Iker. But Nathan’s presence was somehow bigger, more intense. Of course that was probably just to her, not the entire room.

As one of his big hands landed on her hip, more of those stupid memories pushed themselves up, including the one of her at his school’s prom. It had been so damn cliché, but they’d lost their virginity to each other after the prom. It was a sweet memory, one she’d always cherished. Despite the surreal quality of the situation, she wanted to lean into him, to soak up all of him. It had been so long since she saw him, since she ended things with him in the worst way possible, and it was difficult to believe he was here. She still felt guilty about the way she’d cut him out of her life so abruptly.

“The beard’s new,” she murmured as they swayed with what could have been a practiced rhythm. It seemed that years of separation didn’t affect that. Their movements might as well have been choreographed.

To her surprise, the hint of a smile played across those full lips. “How long have you been with Iker Mercado?”

“I don’t answer your questions, Miguel, until you tell me why you’re calling yourself—”

The grip on her hip tightened, a clear indication for silence, before he gently spun her in time with the steady beat. She was incredibly grateful for the simple three-step dance pattern. Unlike some of the complicated dances from earlier in the evening, this one she could do without thinking. Which was good because way too many questions invaded her mind. He was obviously being secretive for a reason, and she wanted to know why. Her mind circled back to the criminal angle, but she couldn’t make that work in her head. It just didn’t fit. Still, twelve years had passed. People changed.

They were silent as they danced, and though she figured she should probably wonder or care if Iker was watching them, she had eyes only for Nathan. But as she looked into his dark eyes, it was a reminder of all she’d lost. She was the one who’d ended things with him because of her own cowardice and deep-seated issues. She’d been so ashamed back then, so immersed in her own pain at what she’d lost that she’d brutally cut him out of her life. It was one of her biggest regrets.

Pain she thought she’d locked up bubbled to the surface, clawing at her insides. If she thought too hard or long about everything that had gone down between them, she’d slip into a funk and not be able to get out of it for a day or so. She couldn’t do that now.

Still moving in time with the music, she looked at his chest instead of his face. It made it easier to breathe.

“Are you going to say anything to him?” Nathan finally murmured.

She figured she understood what he meant. Would she tell Iker that his name was Nathan? She didn’t even have to think about it. No matter what, she could never betray him. It didn’t matter how many years had passed. He was the boy—now man—she’d lost her virginity to. The first person she’d ever loved. Hell, the first person who’d ever loved her, because her mother certainly hadn’t. “No, but you will give me answers.”

“Not here,” he said simply. Since he hadn’t said no, she understood he meant to tell her later. Which just piqued her curiosity even more. “You look beautiful,” he continued, his grip possessive.

Slight irritation popped inside her at the way he held her. “Thank you. You look good too.”

His lips quirked up almost playfully. “Just good?”

Seeing him almost smile did something strange to her insides. She should be pushing him for more answers but found herself giving him a half smile. “Would handsome make your ego feel better? Or maybe . . . pretty?” She snickered at the dark look he gave her. When they were together he’d gotten grief from plenty of the boys in her neighborhood for being “a pretty boy.” Until he’d kicked the ass of more than one of them.

“Are you and Mercado serious?” Nathan’s gaze grew even darker, all traces of amusement fading.

She shouldn’t tell him a damn thing. He wasn’t even using his real name. Still, she couldn’t seem to stop the truth from coming out. “It’s our first date.”

Though it was marginal, his grip on her relaxed. “Good.” There was a wealth of meaning in that one word.

“When do you plan on answering my questions?” Because she had plenty.

“Meet up with me after the auction.” He wasn’t even bothering to ask her, just ordering.

It pissed her off. Despite her curiosity, she pursed her lips and met his gaze dead-on. “If I’d ever had a mother who cared about me, I’m sure she would have told me not to meet up with strangers. And you, Miguel, are a stranger.” A stranger who’d seen every inch of her naked.

His jaw tightened in annoyance. “I’ll answer your questions, I swear.”

There was no real way she was just walking away after missing him and wondering about him for twelve damn years. She couldn’t even pretend not to be rabidly curious. “Can you remember my phone number if I tell it to you?”

He nodded, so she quickly rattled off her number. It was slight, but she felt him relax a fraction. As the song ended she stepped away from him, surprised at the feeling of loss as his arms fell from her. She quickly turned, making her way back to her date.

Iker was talking to two men, but he frowned over her head, likely at Nathan, as she made her way to him. She pasted on a smile for Iker when he met her gaze, though, hoping it looked real.

Unfortunately all her thoughts were on the man she’d left on the dance floor and the answers she’d soon be getting from him.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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