



## Tall, Dark and Daring: The Admiral's Bride / Identity: Unknown

By Suzanne Brockmann

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### *The Admiral's Bride*

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**Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #1004600 in Books
- Published on: 2011-03-29
- Released on: 2011-03-29
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.62" h x 1.35" w x 4.21" l, .54 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 512 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Suzanne Brockmann is an award-winning author of more than fifty books and is widely recognized as one of the leading voices in romantic suspense. Her work has earned her repeated appearances on the New York Times bestseller list, as well as numerous awards, including Romance Writers of America's #1 Favorite Book of the Year and two RITA awards. Suzanne divides her time between Siesta Key and Boston. Visit her at [www.SuzanneBrockmann.com](http://www.SuzanneBrockmann.com).

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The Pentagon.

Dr. Zoe Lange gazed out the window of the limo as the driver pulled up to the *Pentagon*.

Damn.

She was way underdressed.

Her boss, Patrick Sullivan, had told her only that she was a candidate for an important and potentially long-term assignment. Zoe had figured that appropriate dress for such a meeting meant comfortable—blue jeans, running shoes, a T-shirt with a little blue flower print, and hardly any makeup. She was who she was, after all. If she were going to join a long-term mission, everyone might as well know exactly what to expect right from the start.

She didn't dress up unless she had to.

Unless she were going someplace like, oh, say, the Pentagon.

If she'd known she was coming to the Pentagon, she would have put on her skintight black cat suit, her three-inch heels, dark red lipstick and worn her long blond hair in some kind of fancy French braid, rather than this high-school cheerleader ponytail she was wearing. Because men in the military tended to think female agents who looked like Emma Peel or one of James Bond's babes could hold their own when the going got tough. But little blue flowers, nuh-uh. Little blue flowers meant they'd have to hand her hankies to mop her frightened tears. Never mind the fact that little blue flowers didn't compromise her ability to run hard and fast, the way three-inch heels did.

Well, okay. She was here now. The little blue flowers were going to have to do.

She put on her sunglasses and picked up her oversize handbag that doubled as a briefcase and let herself be escorted by the guards into the building, through all the security checkpoints and into a waiting elevator.

Down. They headed down, further even than the B that marked the basement floor. Even though no more

letters or numbers flashed on the display over the door, they kept sinking. What could possibly be this far down besides hell?

Zoe smiled tightly at the idea of being summoned for a meeting with the devil himself. In her line of business, it was entirely possible. She just hadn't expected to meet him here in D.C.

Finally the elevator stopped and the doors opened with a subdued chime.

The hallway was a clean off-white and very bright, not the dimly lit, smoky magentas and red-oranges of hell. The guards waiting for her outside didn't carry pitchforks. Instead they wore naval uniforms. Navy, huh? Hmm, wasn't *that* interesting?

U.S. Navy Lieutenant Clones One and Two led her down that nondescript corridor, through countless doors that opened and closed automatically. Maxwell Smart would've been right at home.

"Where are we heading, boys?" Zoe asked. "To the Cone of Silence?"

One of the lieutenants looked back at her blankly, either too young or too serious to have seen all those late-night *Get Smart* reruns she'd watched as a kid.

But as they stopped at an unmarked doorway, Zoe realized her joking question had been right on the mark. The door was ridiculously thick, reinforced with steel, layered with everything else—lead included, no doubt—that would render the room within completely spy-proof. No infrared satellites could look through *these* walls and see who was inside. No high-powered microphones could listen in. Nothing that was said inside could be recorded or overheard.

It was, indeed, the equivalent of Maxwell Smart's Cone of Silence.

The outer door—and it was only the first of three she passed through—closed with a thunk, followed by the second. The third door was like a hatch on a ship—she had to step over a rim to get inside. It, too, was sealed tightly behind her.

Apparently, she was the last to arrive.

The inner chamber was not a big room. It was barely sixteen by thirteen, and it was filled with men. Big men, wearing gleaming white naval dress uniforms. The glare was intense. Zoe resisted the urge to pull her sunglasses down from where she'd pushed them atop her head as they all turned to look at her, as they all rose to their feet in a unison display of chivalry.

She looked at them, scanning their faces, looking for someone, *anyone* familiar. The best she could do was count heads—fourteen—and sort through the various ranks on their uniforms.

"Please," she said, with her best professional smile. "Gentlemen. No need to stand on my account."

There were two enlisted men, four lieutenants, one senior chief, two commanders, a captain, a rear admiral lower grade and three—count 'em, *three*—full-grade admirals, complete with scrambled eggs on the hats that were on the table in front of them.

Seven of the men were active-duty SEALs. Two of the admirals wore budweisers, as well—the SEAL pin

with an anchor and an eagle in flight gripping Poseidon's pitchfork in one talon and a stylized gun in the other—which meant they'd been SEALs at one time during their long military careers.

One of the SEALs—a blond lieutenant with an even, white-toothed smile and a much too handsome face, who looked as if he might've come straight from the set of *Baywatch*—pulled out a chair for her. Nodding her thanks, she sat next to him.

"Name's Luke O'Donlon," he whispered, holding out his hand.

She shook it quickly, absently, smiling briefly at both O'Donlon and the SEAL on her other side, an enormous African-American man with a shaved head, a diamond stud in his left ear and a wide gold wedding band on his ring finger. As she set her bag down in front of her, her attention was held by the men on the other side of the big table.

Three admirals. Holy Mike. Whatever this assignment was, it required this spy-proof room and three full-grade admirals to launch it.

The admiral without the budweiser had snow-white hair and a face set in a permanent expression of disgust—as if he carried bad fish in his inside jacket pocket. Stonegate, that was his name. Zoe recognized him from his newspaper picture. He was always showing up in the *Washington Post*. He was part politician, something she didn't quite approve of in a man of his rank and standing.

Beside her, O'Donlon cleared his throat and gave her his most winsome smile. He was just too cute, and he knew it, too. "I'm sorry, miss, I didn't catch your name."

"I'm afraid that info's need-to-know," she whispered back, "and probably beyond your security clearance level. Sorry, sailor."

The senior chief next to her overheard and deftly covered his laughter with a cough.

The admiral who had reclaimed his seat next to Stone-gate had a thick head of salt-and-pepper hair. Admiral Mac Forrest. Definitely a cool guy. She'd met him at least twice in the Middle East, the last time just a few months ago. He nodded and smiled as she met his eyes.

The admiral on Mac's left—the man directly across the table from her—was still standing, his face hidden as he quickly rifled through a file. "Now that we're all here," he said, "why don't we get started."

He looked up then, and Zoe found herself looking into eyes that were amazingly, impossibly blue, into a face she would've recognized anywhere.

Jake Robinson.

*The one and only Admiral Jake Robinson.*

Zoe knew he was in his early fifties—he had to be unless he'd performed his heroics in Vietnam as a twelve-year-old. Still, his hair was thick and dark, and the lines around his eyes and mouth only served to give his handsome face strength and maturity.

And handsome was a complete understatement. Jake Robinson was *way* beyond handsome. He needed a

completely new word invented to describe the sheer beauty of his face. His mouth was elegant, gracefully shaped and ready to quirk up into a smile. His nose was masculine perfection, his cheekbones exquisite, his forehead strong. His chin was just the right amount of stubborn, his jawline still sharp.

Lieutenant Cutie-Pie sitting next to her—now *he* was

merely handsome. Jake Robinson, on the other hand, was the Real Deal.

He was looking around the table, quickly making introductions that Zoe knew were mostly for her benefit. Everyone else here knew each other. She tried to listen. The two enlisted SEALs were Skelly and Taylor. One was built like a pro football linebacker, the other looked like Popeye the sailor man. Which was which, she didn't have a clue. The African-American senior chief was named Becker. She'd met O'Donlon. Hawken, Shaw, Jones. Try as she might to memorize names, to attach them permanently to faces, she couldn't do it.

She was too busy flashing hot and cold.

Jake Robinson.

Great glorious God, she was being given a chance to work a long-term assignment under the command of a living legend. His exploits in Vietnam *were* legendary—along with his more recent creation of the Gray Group. Robinson's Gray Group was so highly classified, so top secret, she could only guess the type of assignments he handed out. But she *could* guess. Dangerous. Covert. Intensely important to national security.

And she was going to be part of one.

Zoe's heart was pounding as if she had just run five miles. She took a deep breath, calming herself as the admiral introduced her to the rest of the room. By the time fourteen pairs of very male eyes focused on her, she was completely back in control. Calm. Cool. Collected. Positively serene.

Except thirteen of those fourteen pairs of very male eyes didn't seem to notice how absolutely serene she was. Instead, they all focused on her ponytail and her little blue flowers. She could read their speculation quite clearly. She was the secretary, right? Sent in to take notes while the big strong men talked.

Guess again, boys.

"Dr. Zoe Lange is one of *the* top experts in the country—possibly in the world—in biological and chemical weapons," Jake Robinson told them in his husky baritone voice.

Around the room, eyebrows went up. Zoe could almost smell the skepticism. Across the table, the admiral's eyes were sparkling with amusement. Clearly, the skepticism's stench was strong enough for him to smell it, as well.

"Dr. Lange works for Pat Sullivan," he added matter-of-factly, and the mood in the room instantly changed. The Agency. He didn't even need to say the name of the organization. They all knew what it was—and what she did for a living. Admiral Robinson had known exactly what to say to make them all sit up and take notice of her, little blue flowers or not. She sent him a smile of thanks.

"I truly appreciate your being able to join us here today, Doctor." The admiral smiled at her, and it was all Zoe could do not to melt at his feet.

It was true. Everything she'd ever read or heard about Jake Robinson's smile was absolutely true. It was warm and genuine. It was completely inclusive. It lit him from within, made his eyes even more blue. It made her want to follow him anywhere. *Anywhere*.

"It's my pleasure, Admiral," she murmured. "I'm honored that you invited me. I hope I can be of assistance."

"Actually—" his face sobered—"it's unfortunate that we need your assistance." He looked around the table, all amusement gone from his eyes. "Two weeks ago, there was a break-in at the Arches military testing lab just outside of Boulder, Colorado."

Zoe stopped watching the man's eyes and started paying attention to his words. A break-in. At Arches. Holy Mike.

She wasn't the only one shifting uneasily in her seat. Beside her, Senior Chief Becker was downright uncomfortable, as were most of the other SEALs. Like Zoe, they all knew what was tested at Arches. They all knew what was *stored* there, as well. Anthrax. Botulinum toxin. Sarin. The lethal nerve gas VX. And the newest man-made tool of death and chemical destruction, Triple X.

The last time Zoe had been in Arches, she'd written a hundred-and-fifty-page report on the weaknesses in their security system. She wondered now if anyone at all had bothered to read it.

"The break-in was done without force, without forced entry, even," the admiral continued. "Six canisters of a deadly nerve agent were removed and replaced—it was only by dumb luck we discovered the switch."

Zoe couldn't stand it a minute longer. "Admiral, what exactly was taken?"

Stonegate and several of the other high-ranking officers were looking at her as if she deserved to get her mouth washed for speaking out of order. But she didn't give a damn. She needed to know. And Jake Robinson didn't seem to mind.

He met her gaze steadily, and she saw the answer in his eyes even before he opened his mouth to speak. It was the worst possible scenario she could imagine.

Trip X. *Six* canisters? Oh, God.

She realized she'd said the words aloud as he nodded. "Oh, God is right," he agreed with rather grim humor. "Dr. Lange, perhaps I could impose upon you to explain exactly what Triple X is, as well as our options for dealing with this little problem."

Little problem? Holy Mike, this was no *little* problem. "Our options for dealing with it are extremely simple, sir," she said. "We have only one option—there are no choices here. We need to find and regain possession of the missing canisters. Believe me, gentlemen, Triple X is not something we want floating around out there. And particularly not *six* canisters' worth." She looked at the admiral. "How in God's name did this happen?"

"How's not important right now," he told her almost gently. "Right now we need to focus on *what*. Please continue, Doctor."

Zoe nodded. The thought of six canisters of Triple X set loose on the unsuspecting world made her blood



feel like ice water as it flowed through her veins. It was terrifying. And she wasn't used to feeling terrified, even though her job was a frightening one most of the time. She spent hours upon hours learning the awful details of all the different weapons of mass destruction that were out there, ready to wreak havoc on the planet. But she'd learned to sleep dreamlessly at night, untouched by nightmares. She'd learned to sit impassively while reading reports of countries that tested chemical weapons on prisoners and the infirm. Women and children.

But six missing canisters of Trip X...

That scared her to death.

Still, she took a deep breath and stood up, because she'd also learned how to give tight, to-the-point, emotionless information even when she was badly shaken.

"Triple X is currently the nastiest chemical weapon in the world," she reported. "It's twenty times more potent than the nerve agent VX, and like VX, it kills by paralysis. Get a noseful of Triple X, gentlemen, and you choke to death, because your lungs, like the other muscles in your body, slowly seize up. Trip X or Tri X or T-X. It's all the same thing—airborne death."

Zoe moved around the table to the whiteboard that was on the wall behind Admiral Robinson. She picked up a marker and scribbled the two chemical components on the board, labeling them A and B.

## **Users Review**

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