

**When a deadly traitor
threatens to dishonor a top-secret agency,
A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY
begins....**

Caleb Carpenter

Piercing eyes, menacing dark looks—a powerfully seductive man!

A man with more secrets than even his monstrous reputation reveals, Caleb is determined to find a bride to complete his empire—a woman who will stand by his side as he conquers the Western world.

Rachel Grunwald

Beautiful, blond, with a vulnerability no man has ever touched...until now.

This SPEAR operative has a personal stake in bringing Caleb Carpenter—and his entire compound—down. But going undercover as Caleb’s bride has unanticipated dangers once Caleb reveals the true power of his passion....

The Traitor

Known only as “Simon,” he’s due to make an appearance at Caleb’s compound....

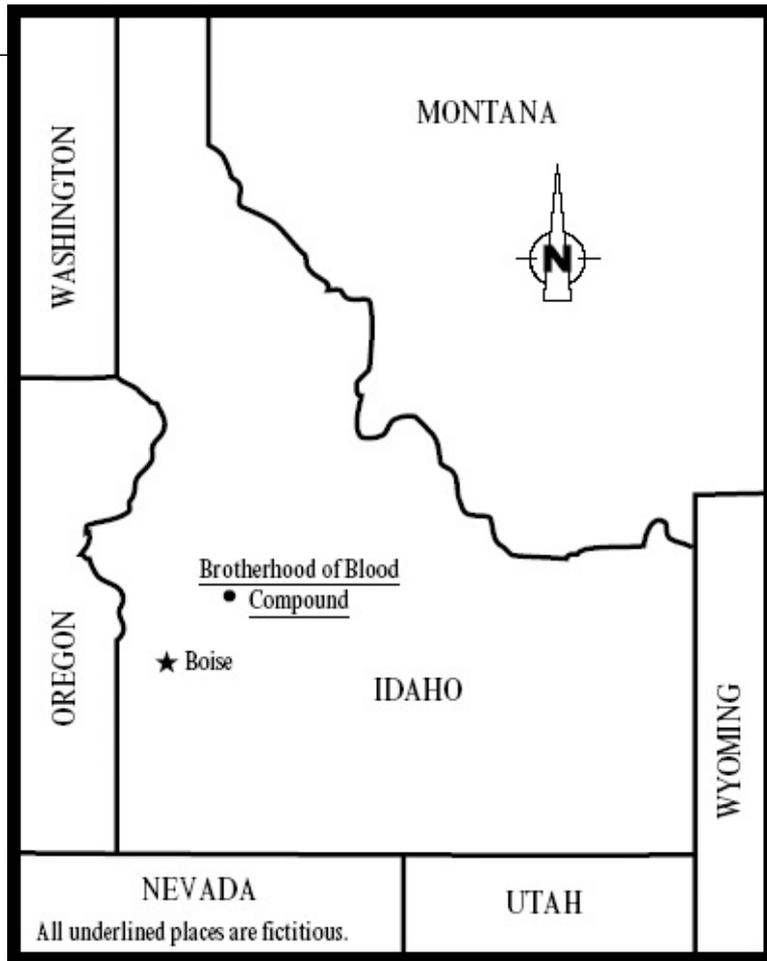
No one knows what’s driving this deadly villain, only that he seems determined to destroy SPEAR’s top man. It’s up to Rachel to stop Simon—before Caleb’s seduction stops her!

Kylie Brant

UNDERCOVER BRIDE

Silhouette[®] 
INTIMATE™ MOMENTS[®]
Published by Silhouette Books
America's Publisher of Contemporary Romance

For Aunt Marty, with love and fond memories



A note from gifted author Kylie Brant, author of over ten books for Silhouette:

Dear Reader,

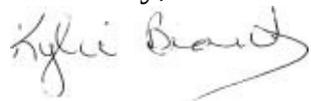
This is my first opportunity to work with a continuity series, and I'm incredibly pleased to be included in *A YEAR OF LOVING DANGEROUSLY*. The plots are suspenseful, the heroes delicious and the heroines strong and courageous—all the ingredients for page-turners!

Undercover Bride is the second book in the series and poses the kind of dilemma I relish. After all, what could possibly go wrong when a female secret agent investigates a white supremacy group and its handsome, dynamic leader? As it turns out, plenty can happen—and does!

My writing shares time with my full-time teaching job, my husband and five children. Now that two of my kids are in college, we only juggle three athletic calendars each season. These days, the most time my husband and I spend together is sitting on a bleacher at a game of some kind! We're also veterans of emergency-room visits, usually the result of the aforementioned sports. But when the games are over, the housework done (sort of!), I can close the office door, turn on the computer and just dream away. And in between the frequent interruptions of phone, husband, children and dog, Rachel and Caleb's story unfolded.

I invite you to sit back, block out *your* distractions and immerse yourself in the results!

Sincerely,



Readers may contact me at: P.O. Box 231 Charles City, IA 50616.

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Chapter 1

He didn't look like a man committed to spreading hatred, prejudice and destruction.

Rachel Grunwald tacked the color eight-by-ten glossy onto the padded wall before her where she could study it while she continued her workout. The photo of Caleb Carpenter managed to convey an aura of power; an invisible energy that all but crackled just below the surface. Based on physical appearance alone, she would have guessed the man as high-level military, or even as one of those exorbitantly priced motivational speakers that seemed to abound these days. As the leader of The Brotherhood of Blood, Carpenter was, in a manner of speaking, both.

She drew her arms up and slowly slid one foot behind her to rest on point. Eyes fixed dispassionately on the photo, she arched her back and raised her leg, the fluid movement as graceful as ballet.

Most would consider the man handsome. His piercing blue eyes contrasted sharply with his short, sleek black hair. Some might mistake the strength in his jaw as a mark of integrity; the squared-off chin as a sign of determination. Few, she imagined, would look at the man and guess him a racist who preached death or deportation for the non-Aryan and disabled.

She spun, her foot shooting out to land hard against the picture. If Carpenter had actually been standing before her, she would have just broken his nose. A slight frown marred her exquisite face. Her timing was off. She'd aimed for his nose. With an acquired patience, she ran through the move a dozen more times, until she was satisfied with it. In her eight years as an agent she'd found it most effective to neutralize an opponent completely, rather than to merely annoy.

She bent to the palm-size tape recorder on the floor and pressed Play. Moving to the long foam-packed punching bag, she swiped her face and bare midriff with a towel and waited for the quietly measured tones of a man she'd never met to describe her next mission.

"Angel. You're looking as gorgeous as ever."

Sending a rapid series of jabs and fake crosses to the center of the bag, she grunted at the recorded words. "Always the charmer, Jonah. If you only knew." She could feel the trickle of perspiration matting her blond hair, but disregarded it. A shower would revive the perfect looks she'd been born with, the looks that had given rise to the agency's nickname for her. The angelic face was as much a tool as the body she punished into well-honed condition. Both masked a will of finely forged steel.

"You've heard, I'm sure, about the events surrounding the kidnap and rescue of East Kirby's son. I'm sorry to say we failed to apprehend the kidnapper."

The mastermind of the plot, Rachel knew, was thought to be the same person attempting to destroy SPEAR, the top-secret agency she worked for, and the man at its helm, Jonah himself. All the agency had to go on at this point was a name Jeff had overheard one of his captors mention. She fainted right, then plowed her left fist into the bag, imagining for the moment it was the stomach of the traitor, a man known only as Simon.

"Jeff Kirby was found buried alive on The Brotherhood of Blood compound in Idaho, which is owned and operated by Caleb Carpenter. He was traumatized, but he'll be okay. A photo of Carpenter has been included. We need to discover the link between him and Simon. With your experience, of course, you're perfectly suited for the task."

The experience Jonah referred to was her specialty at anti-militia assignments. Her most recent

task had been to infiltrate Comrades, a white-supremacist group hidden deep in the Appalachian Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. She'd moved her way up in the organization, from instructor of hand-to-hand combat tactics to junior advisor to the commander.

Panting, she moved away from the bag and grabbed one of the ropes that dangled from the overhead beams she'd left intact when she'd had the old barn renovated for her home. Scrambling up it, she kept her mind focused on the words coming from the machine, and off her straining muscles.

"Carpenter is said to be looking for a wife to complete his hold on the new union he's creating. He's considering candidates from all over the nation. I assume you'll have no difficulty arranging an introduction. And then in convincing him that you are a woman worthy of bearing his seed to propagate his empire."

Having reached the top of the rope, Rachel heaved herself to sit astride the beam, then rose to balance, arms outstretched. "Sure, Jonah," she murmured, as she tiptoed the length of the beam. Constructing a spin on pirouette, she crossed back to the rope and began her descent. "Pretend fiancé to a man handsome as sin who just happens to be Satan's counterpart? No problem."

"I knew I could rely on you." Was that a hint of amusement she heard in Jonah's voice? Not for the first time, she had the uneasy feeling that the man in charge of SPEAR was extremely familiar with the way she thought. An incredible feat for someone who was, for all intents, a stranger to her.

"We know it's Carpenter's stated intention to unite all the militia groups in the nation into one army capable of taking down the U.S. government." Jonah's voice hardened. "Obviously, he's positioning himself to become the new national leader. I need details, Angel. Who's he dealing with, and how does he hope to bring about the revolution? And finally, what tie does Simon have with The Brotherhood? His involvement, I'm certain, is critical."

She released the rope and dropped lightly to the floor. The tape was now silent, save for a faint whirring sound as its automatic destruction mechanism activated. Picking up the towel, she looped it around her neck, before reaching for the photo and recorder. She was accustomed to the abrupt end of Jonah's messages. Once he'd described the mission, the details were left to his agents. It made sense. She'd be the lone agent in the Idaho compound, and the danger of the assignment was such that she'd have to think on her feet. Any plans made were subject to split-second changes, depending on the circumstances.

The loft area held only her workout room, bedroom and bath. She walked through the bedroom now, tossing the equipment on the bed, and stripping on the way to the bathroom. She bypassed the oversize tub and stepped into the shower, setting the temperature just shy of frigid.

After the shower she rummaged through the kitchen for the makings of some sort of dinner. Her refrigerator held a pound of margarine and a bottle of wine. Since she'd been living in the Comrades' stronghold, she'd spent little time at home. She finally had to settle for a can of heated soup and a handful of stale crackers. After she finished, she poured herself a glass of wine. Now was the time to think about those details. Physically soothed, with the edge of adrenaline still humming, her mind would be sharper, her instinct more certain. First, though, she went to her office and shredded the picture of Carpenter. The slim celluloid tube the picture had been encased in, along with the recorder cartridge, went into the fire she'd started in the fireplace.

Her gaze fell on the flowers arranged in a vase and set on a table in front of the couch. A special courier had delivered them, with Jonah's message and the photo concealed inside. There was no use saving them. She'd be returning to the Comrades' stronghold in the morning. But she could enjoy the fragrant beauty for a few hours, at least. Picking up her glass of wine, she sank down on the black overstuffed sofa to think.

She let her mind drift, ideas half forming, to be analyzed, rejected, re-formed. Her gaze focused on the large sword prominently displayed above the fireplace. Its blade was still sharp, its point still

keen. She'd carry the scar it had inflicted across her chest to her grave.

~~It served as a reminder. Training, intelligence and caution weren't always enough. Luck, or the lack of it, could be a powerful factor in any assignment. On that particular occasion luck had saved her life.~~

She tipped the wine to her lips and drank. The memory gave her no particular chill. Rachel had accepted the danger of her job soon after she'd been recruited by SPEAR on the college campus.

SPEAR. Stealth, Perseverance, Endeavor, Attack and Rescue, was an agency so guarded that most members of the government didn't even know it existed. Founded by Lincoln during the Civil War, the head of the agency answered only to the current president. SPEAR was called in when hope was lost, or the odds too great to be chanced by another agency. Death before dishonor was the inviolable code all SPEAR agents lived by. She was no longer amazed by the ferocity with which she embraced the doctrine.

Rachel rested the cool side of the goblet against her cheek. It had ceased to seem ironic that she become as much a zealot for her beliefs as had her father, although their views could not be more diametrically opposed. Had it not been for her miserable childhood, for her father, SPEAR would never have sought her out. She accepted that twist of fate, and poured everything she had into the agency which represented all she believed in. Truth. Justice. Loyalty.

It certainly wouldn't be fate she'd rely on as she considered her new mission. It wouldn't be luck. As darkness fell, she made no move to turn on a light. She'd operated in the shadows for long enough to be comfortable in them. And as the flames in the fireplace flickered to charred embers, she considered the best way to get close to Caleb Carpenter. Close enough to learn his secrets, to discover his strategy.

Close enough to destroy him.

At 0900 the next morning Rachel was in uniform seated at the conference table of Donald Parker, Commander of Comrades. Six other advisors were also in attendance. The meeting was a ritual, held twice weekly. Rachel wasn't certain how much input the more senior officials had into Parker's decisions, but from what she'd observed, the man preferred to keep most of the power for himself. That was the case with many of the militia groups she'd infiltrated. Paranoia was so rampant within the organizations that the leader did little delegating. It was a weakness that worked to the advantage of the government. Once the militia leader was removed, without another officer capable of salvaging the organization, its threat was eliminated. She supposed it was too much to hope that Carpenter had similar leadership style. It would make the destruction of the Brotherhood all the more final.

"Take a look at this." The advisors were silent as they perused copies of a fax Parker handed out. The same fax message Rachel had arranged to be delivered to his machine that morning. "Any thoughts on it?"

Rachel was silent as she skimmed the information she'd sent. The message was a copy of the mass mailings sent from The Brotherhood's Compound in Idaho. She never doubted that Carpenter's name would be recognized. The man had been making ripples in the white-supremacy movement for over two years, purportedly financing The Brotherhood's stronghold with his considerable personal wealth. The Brotherhood of Blood was one of the fastest growing militia operations in the nation, a source of grave concern to the U.S. Civil Rights Division.

"What's it to us if Carpenter wants a wife?" Lee Crandall, one of the senior advisors, said finally. "Seems to me with his money he could buy himself just about any woman he wanted."

"I heard he's got a real fancy compound out there," another man noted. "Using his own money t

build it, too. Maybe we should start paying more attention. A guy with unlimited resources could be a threat.”

“Or an ally.” All heads turned in Rachel’s direction. Here was the opening she’d planned for. “If The Brotherhood has that kind of financial backing it might not hurt to have someone there on the inside. Someone with ties to Comrades who gets close to Carpenter might be able to do us some good in the long run.”

Parker leaned back in his chair and let his advisors debate the issue. Rachel said no more. She knew the commander was listening closely, despite the fact that his heavy eyelids were almost closed. With his crew-cut hair, square face and barrel-chested body, he still looked like the Marine drill sergeant he’d been over twenty years ago. He ran the organization like his own personal kingdom, and perhaps it was. A kingdom that bred on hatred for all people of color.

His beliefs were abhorrent and his tactics often shockingly violent. She’d wondered more than once if the man wasn’t a psychopath. When he was spewing his organization’s dogma his eyes would become a bit glazed and his face red as the hate-filled words seemed ripped from his throat. It was at those times that he reminded her of her father.

It was at those times she found herself despising him the most.

“Enough.” Parker waved a hand and the discussion immediately ceased. “Let’s move on. We need to discuss recruiting opportunities in the area. A structure is only as strong as its foundation. We’ve got to get new blood into the ranks. Ideas?”

The rest of the meeting passed without incident. The suggestions were frightening in their simplicity. Web pages, chat rooms, literature, student groups in high school and college...it occurred to her, not for the first time, that hatred had to be taught.

An hour later when the group was dismissed, Parker stopped Rachel before she could leave. “Grunwald. Sit.”

She obeyed silently, waiting until the door had closed for the commander to speak. He studied her without a word for a few moments, his eyes giving nothing away.

“How was your visit home this weekend?”

Not even by a flicker of an eyelash did she reflect her surprise at the question.

“Fine, sir.”

“And your mother? She’s doing well?”

Rachel didn’t have to feign her hesitation. The sudden knot in her chest was all too real. All too familiar. “She’s about the same, sir.” It didn’t surprise her that Parker knew about her bi-monthly visits to her mother’s nursing home in Philadelphia, but it did surprise her that he’d mention it. He’d never pretended to be a leader who cared about his members’ personal lives.

The man took his time taking a cigar from the wooden box on the corner of his desk and lighting it. After puffing for a moment, he said, “I’d like to hear more about what you said earlier. About this Carpenter fax.”

“I just wondered if an applicant from Comrades might be advantageous to us, sir.”

His gaze shifted away from hers and he leaned back in his chair. “That’s what I wondered, too. If we send someone who Carpenter doesn’t choose, what the hell. It’d be a goodwill gesture, the kind that might do us some good if The Brotherhood continues to grow. And if our applicant was selected as his wife—” he paused to exhale a stream of smoke “—well, that wouldn’t do us any harm, either.”

Voice carefully neutral, Rachel said, “Well, if you’re considering applicants, I would suggest Western or Bailey, sir.”

“I’ve already decided on the candidate, Grunwald. You.”

“Me?”

The man nodded, and she knew the deal was made. Once he’d reached a decision he never strayed

from it and he'd just been led, neatly, irrevocably, to the outcome she'd arranged. "We have to think of the future. I've never met Carpenter, but I've been keeping track of him. And I think he has one thing right. He believes that all the militia groups in the country will have to join forces to effect real change in this country. Revolution will come with strength in our ranks, and strength can only come through unity. When that time comes, I want to make sure Comrades remains among the leadership. An alliance between you and Carpenter could ensure that."

When she didn't answer, he continued, "I know this probably isn't the way you planned to serve but change doesn't come without great sacrifice. You have to consider the good for the Aryan race, not just about yourself. Think about how this step could advance our cause. Think—" his voice dropped persuasively "—about how your father would feel about your work."

A faint smile crossed her lips, and her words were edged in irony. "Sir, I think about that every day."

Two days later Rachel was in a private limo, approaching the fortress that housed The Brotherhood of Blood. Parker had wasted no time proceeding with his plan. Rachel's candidacy, consisting of pictures and background, had been shared with The Brotherhood via faxes and phone calls. She'd been accepted for Carpenter's consideration.

What kind of man, she wondered, arranged for a wife in this manner? One who thought himself too busy, too important, to be bothered with the social rudiments of what society politely referred to as dating? Or one who had so little regard for women, for their importance, that appearance and background were the most important factors to be considered? The answer, she suspected, was both. The e-mail response from The Brotherhood had made it clear that Rachel would stay at the compound for a thirty-day trial period, and that she would have no say in Carpenter's final decision. She was content with the time frame. A month would give her plenty of time to determine the connection between Carpenter and Simon.

Glancing at her watch, she saw that it had been over three hours since they'd left the airport. They would be approaching the compound soon, but she didn't bother glancing out the windows. The glass was so deeply tinted that she could make out little more than filtered light and vague shapes. An effort by The Brotherhood to protect the secret of their site, she imagined. It wouldn't matter. Jonah knew exactly where the compound was located.

The limo slowed to a stop and the driver got out of the car. After a few minutes he returned to the vehicle, and began a slow approach. Security gate, Rachel guessed. She wondered just how protected the compound was. Certainly Carpenter believed in precautions. She was fairly sure that her bags had been searched at the airport, while she'd waited in the limo. However, she'd been undisturbed at the invasion of privacy. Though there were a few items among her personal belongings that should raise some questions, it would take an astute man, indeed, to find them, let alone identify them.

She reached into her purse and withdrew a compact mirror. With a critical eye, she smoothed her hair and renewed her lipstick. The beauty reflected in the mirror failed to register. It was a tool, nothing more. Looks could be as potent a weapon as any she'd ever wielded. She'd learned to use every weapon she had at her disposal most effectively.

The car pulled to a stop and she replaced the items she'd used in her purse. The back passenger door opened, and the driver extended a hand to her. Rachel accepted his help and stepped out of the car, blinking in the sunlight.

Hundreds of people were assembled at her side, facing a stage placed on a rolling green lawn. The troops were clad in black fatigues, and their voices swelled in unison as they shouted fervored

agreement to the speaker's words. Above the stage on either side flew black flags emblazoned with a fist holding a torch, dripping blood. The banners seemed to frame the man on the center of the platform, the man who had the troops transfixed.

Caleb Carpenter.

He, too, was clad in black, although rather than fatigues he was wearing dress pants and shirt. He paced back and forth across the stage, speaking into a microphone, and every sentence he uttered seemed to send the crowd into a frenzy.

Anticipation pricking her nerves, Rachel ran her palm down the front of her pink skirt to smooth wrinkles acquired by the long ride. Her eyes never left the man who stood front and center. He resembled a big jungle cat, dark and lethal, prowling the stage, roaring intentions of certain death for its prey.

"And I say to you—" the words boomed out over the audience "—we will topple this illegal government. We will tear apart its carcass and feast on the carnage. And upon the ashes of the corruption upon the ruins of the decadence, we will build a new union!" He paused as the voices in the crowd swelled in agreement.

"There will be no mercy for those who have prolonged this moment—no compassion for our enemies. Those who defy us will be destroyed. The filth and unworthy will be deported or eliminated. Our new union will be untainted, and we will sustain it by strict adherence to the doctrine of The Brotherhood. We will set the standard for white purity in this nation."

A howl of support came from the audience. Carpenter made no move to interrupt it. He stood with feet apart, fist raised, in a gesture of arrogant eminence. Despite the heat, Rachel felt a chill ripple over her skin. Carpenter was as vitriolic as any of the militia leaders she'd come into contact with, but he was clearly far more dangerous than most. He possessed a potent presence, one that reached out and gripped the minds of his followers. His words bared their deepest fears, fed the fires of their fanaticism. They were screaming and chanting his name now, and he remained still, head thrown back, his face a mask of triumph and determination.

The driver of the limo reached for Rachel's elbow, and she allowed him to lead her to the makeshift stage. Carpenter raised his hands to still the crowd, and when voices fell silent he began to speak again.

"Just as a revolution is a product of its loyal soldiers, so an empire is the sum of its leadership. Do I have your support?"

"Yes!" the crowd roared.

"Do I have your loyalty?"

"Yes!"

Rachel was close enough to see the perspiration trickling down the side of Carpenter's face. He seemed impervious to the heat. His attention was focused on the people before him, and his own message.

"Our new white union must be guarded closely by a leader with the wisdom and courage to cull the misfits coddled by our society. I vow to be that leader for you, to remain committed to our goals and to build an undefiled empire from which shall spring sons to rule and daughters to serve. To that purpose," Carpenter stopped as the volume of the crowd increased. "To that purpose..." he repeated as the voices ebbed, "I continue to screen applicants for the position of my mate. It is imperative, as your leader, that I choose a woman of purity and integrity, one who will honor our commitment and dedicate herself to her role of begetting heirs to carry out our holy mission."

The crowd was completely silent now. There was an aura of expectancy in the air, and Rachel had an instinctive notion of what was about to happen next. The man at her side obeyed some unspoken command and motioned Rachel up the steps to the stage. As with every new case she worked, she

could feel adrenaline spike through her veins. The game had begun. The boundaries were drawn, the stakes raised, and, although Carpenter didn't yet realize it, the outcome was determined.

The hush of the assembled troops seemed unnatural. She drew herself up to her full height and began mounting the steps, drawing closer to her quarry. She needed to call upon all her poise when she reached the top, when Carpenter turned the considerable force of his presence toward her and reached out a hand.

She walked toward him, her movements sure and deliberate. Their gazes locked. The brilliant blue light in his eyes gave nothing away, nothing except for a luminous, burning intensity. When she reached his side, he clasped her hand in both of his and, his gaze still fixed on hers, raised it to his lips.

Rachel forced a slight smile, despite the renewed shiver sliding down her spine. Under the beam of that charismatic gaze, encased in the warmth of his touch, there was no doubt in her mind that she was in the presence of true evil.

Chapter 2

Her pictures had failed to do her justice. Caleb openly studied the woman at his side as he led her from the dais and into the large home he'd built, which also served as headquarters for The Brotherhood. The photos had reflected Rachel's cool blond looks; the cheekbones that could etch glass, the lips fashioned for wild sin. But the pictures had failed to hint at the intelligence in that level blue gaze, the tensile strength in her grip.

Yes, he'd been prepared to be mildly aroused by her presence, but had never expected to be intrigued. And he'd been completely unprepared for his reaction upon touching her. A response had ricocheted through his system the moment their hands had met. It was involuntary, unfamiliar... fascinating.

What made this woman different from all the others? With her hair fixed in a discreet twist, and the light-pink suit she wore, she could have easily passed for one of the endless stream of available women his mother pushed at him whenever he visited San Francisco. He'd never felt more than a fleeting interest in any woman—until now. A man with his goals could ill afford to get sidetracked, and something told him any involvement with Rachel Grunwald would be a hell of a detour.

They passed through the huge opulent hallway silently, and he opened the door to his office, waited for her to enter. Because he was watching so closely, he saw her quick, all-encompassing glance.

“Please sit down. Can I get you a beverage?”

She went to one of the leather armchairs and sat, crossing one long, lovely leg over the other. Something clutched tightly in his belly, then released.

“Some ice water would be nice.”

Her voice was low and smoky, layered with a hint of the northeast. He moved to the crystal decanters and ice bucket that were kept freshly stocked. “I owe you an apology. I shouldn't have kept you out in the hot sun after the long trip you've had.” Smiling, he handed her the glass of water he'd poured. “I can almost hear my mother chastising me for my manners.”

Rachel took the glass and sipped. “And does your mother live close enough to do her chastising in person?”

Shaking his head, he poured another glass for himself. “No, my family lives in San Francisco, but her lessons were ingrained at a tender age. I still live in fear of her lectures on deportment.”

Rachel smiled back at him; it was impossible not to. The charisma his photo had hinted at was magnified tenfold in person. He sat next to her on the couch, maintaining enough distance between them to be considered proper, but still close enough to put all her senses on alert.

He drained his glass, watching her all the while over its rim, then set it on the table beside the couch. “So, tell me about Rachel Grunwald.”

The composure that was so much a part of her had her settling back against the couch cushions, as she casually straightened her skirt. “I assume Commander Parker sent you a fax on my background. What would you like to know?” She was, she thought, ready for anything. She'd expected an inquisition; welcomed it. The sooner her credentials were accepted, the sooner she could start her investigation.

“What would I like to know?” He was as close as he dared get; not as close as he wished to be. She smelled female. Her perfume, something subtle and alluring, made his palms itch. “Almost

everything, I believe. Let's start with your hair. What would you call that color?"

~~Those gorgeous blue eyes blinked. He enjoyed knowing that he'd managed to surprise her. "I beg your pardon?"~~

"It first reminded me of polished brass." He reached out a finger to smooth a strand that had worked free. "But I don't believe the description quite does yours justice."

Why, he was *flirting* with her! It was so unexpected, yet so jarringly familiar, that Rachel wanted to laugh. Amusement tinged her voice. "Blond. I call it blond."

"Functional, if unimaginative." He leaned back against the couch, already craving a repeat of the light touch. "Search of the perfect phrase will keep me awake nights."

Her brows skimmed upward. "Mr. Carpenter, I suspect you've had a great deal of practice in the art of frivolous conversation."

"Caleb." He noted her free hand, lying loosely on her lap, free of any show of nerves. She wasn't intimidated; wasn't even anxious. He liked that about her. He was liking more and more about her by the second. "And I suspect that you've been the recipient of a great deal of flattery in your time."

"Ah, but none quite as accomplished as yours." She was comfortable in the banter. Sexual attraction could often provide a convenient shield, blinding men to her true intentions. She would be curiously disappointed if Carpenter proved to be so uncomplicated. She was competitive enough to wish for a worthy adversary. It remained to be seen just how worthy he would prove to be.

"You'll find that I'm curious about all sorts of things—whether your eyes are really an identical match for the deep waters off St. Thomas, how your mouth could so perfectly resemble my favorite shade of rose, and what would make a woman like you, one who's probably had a trail of poor fools in her wake since she could walk, agree to be a stranger's wife. At least," his eyes gleamed, "agree to be *considered* for the position."

His abrupt change of topic was designed to shake her. She mentally raised her estimation of him a couple of notches. His tactics may have worked on someone less prepared. "And I'm wondering," she brought the glass to her lips and sipped, "what would make a man like you, one who's obviously used to women swooning in his presence, consider complete strangers for the position."

He regarded her for a moment, then his lips curved very slightly in a smile that was somehow more genuine than the ones he'd graced her with previously. "So, there's a hint of temper beneath the tailoring. I'm...intrigued, Rachel."

He imbued the syllables of her name with a dark liquid essence that hinted at mysterious fires that remained contained. For the moment.

Her gaze was level. "Does it surprise you that a woman would be as committed to the future of the white race as you are?" She nodded her head toward the window. "I believe I saw women among your assembled troops outside earlier." He didn't answer for a moment, and she held her breath, wondering if she'd misjudged him. She had to rely on first impressions and instinct to guide her in the type of woman he would look for. Parker would never have stood for being addressed in such a manner, but she thought that Carpenter, *Caleb*, had more substance. Which, of course, made him more difficult to predict.

"Actually, it's been a very long time since I've been surprised by a woman." He watched her sip from her glass, and mentally applauded her poise. "But, I have a feeling that you're going to change that for me, Rachel."

Their gazes meshed. The brilliant intensity of his eyes was almost mesmerizing, she thought. Had she not seen them aglow with a fanatical gleam outside earlier, they may have affected her differently. But he was, she reminded herself, a zealot of the worst order. It shouldn't surprise her that he was charismatic. Recent history was full of fanatics who'd used a strong personal magnetism to draw followers to a cause—often with disastrous results.

A man entered the room, stopped short inside the doorway. "General Carpenter?"

~~"Come in, Kevin."~~ Was there a shade of irritation in Carpenter's voice? Rachel observed closely but could see no reflection of it on his face. "Rachel, meet Colonel Kevin Sutherland. He's my second in command."

"A situation has arisen that you should be apprised of." Sutherland wore the black fatigues she'd seen the troops outfitted in, and possessed the sunburned face of a man unaccustomed to spending time outdoors. In his midfifties, his fading red hair was still thick above a stern countenance. His name stirred in the deep recesses of her memory, but she was certain he hadn't been mentioned in Jonah's briefing. "A couple of the men on patrol told me those Hispanics were sneaking back onto the property. Probably coming through the pass in the southwest corner."

"The same ones who were run off a couple of weeks ago?"

The man shrugged. Clearly, to him, the people's identity were of little importance. "You want me to authorize the men to get rid of them for good this time?"

Rachel's blood iced. Surely the man hadn't just casually suggested murder. She'd been too long in the field to rush to conclusions. He could just as easily be talking about taking measures to make the property more secure. But the alternate possibility failed to completely satisfy.

"I believe you're right. Further action seems inevitable, but I'll handle it myself." Carpenter got up from the couch and walked over to one of two desks, opening a drawer and removing a gun. A Beretta, Rachel noted, her heart racing violently. And he was handling the weapon with an ease that spoke of familiarity.

Carpenter checked the cartridge, resecured the safety, then tucked the gun into the waistband at the small of his back. With grim purpose on his face, in his movements, he looked like a man readying for a mission. "I trust you'll excuse me while I handle some unpleasant business, Rachel. Colonel Sutherland will see you to your room."

He strode to the door and was gone. She considered her options, uneasily aware that she had none. She had no way of following the man; no way of observing, or preventing, what might happen next. Her heart was in a vise as she considered the possibility of civilian casualties occurring within an hour of her arrival at the compound. Rarely had she felt so helpless.

She rose, her next steps as yet unresolved, but Sutherland stopped her.

"Miss Grunwald, if you have a moment."

Rachel looked at the door then at the man. "Actually, I think I'd like to be shown to my room now, if that's possible."

"Certainly. I'll just keep you a few minutes." It was clear from his posture that the civility was merely perfunctory. Reluctantly, she sat in the seat he indicated.

Sutherland rounded the corner of the second desk in the room and sat down. He unlocked a drawer in it, took out a manila folder, and reached over the desk to hand it to her. "I think you'll find the information contained there to be sufficient for your complete understanding of your purpose here, but I'll summarize it for you. First, you must remember that you are a guest here, whose presence is solely reliant upon General Carpenter's wishes."

Still preoccupied by her worry over Carpenter's intentions, she said distractedly, "I understand that I'm here for a trial basis of thirty days, awaiting General Carpenter's decision."

"That is not completely correct. You *may* be here for up to thirty days. The last candidate was sent away after less than three weeks."

With a great deal of effort, Rachel shifted her attention from the situation that might be evolving between Carpenter and the trespassers. She forced herself to focus on the man before her. There was something in his tone, in his demeanor, that warned her. There was information to be had here. It was obvious that Sutherland was not completely happy about her presence at the compound. Again she

tried, in vain, to remember why the man's name seemed so familiar.

~~She kept her words carefully neutral. "I didn't realize there had been another candidate."~~

His brows raised in what might have been derision. "You thought you were the first? No, Miss Grunwald, actually there have been two others before you, both since deemed unsuitable. It is imperative that General Carpenter chooses the most superior mate. The future of The Brotherhood is dependent upon his heirs."

From his choice of words, Rachel reflected, he could have been speaking of the finest stock of breeding mares. Perhaps, as far as he was concerned, that's all women were.

She indulged herself with a fleeting vision of a high back kick striking his arrogant square chin. Her voice was expressionless. "I understand."

He didn't appear to hear her. "It will take a truly remarkable woman to prove worthy of Caleb Carpenter, worthy of the honor to be his wife. More than mere beauty will be necessary. Dedication to our cause, and loyalty to the death must be the standard by which each candidate is judged."

"I believe my background speaks for itself."

Her quietly measured words seemed to bring him up short. For the first time he looked a bit disconcerted. "Yes." His fingers splayed over the desktop. "Hans Grunwald was a great man. You must be very proud of your father. He was truly a leader who lived his beliefs."

"And died for them."

"Your father was martyred for a just cause. None of us can ask for greater glory in our deaths than that." His eyes met hers again across the polished walnut desktop. "You have far to go, indeed, to live up to your father's legacy."

Farther still, Rachel thought, with an age-old weariness, to live it down.

"Of course, time will tell if you are worthy to continue your father's crusade." Sutherland pursed his lips and steepled his fingers. "And whether this is the avenue in which you will do so. At any rate—" he nodded toward the folder he had given her—"you'll find everything else you need to know in there. That information also outlines standards of conduct befitting someone in your situation."

Rachel slowly lifted her gaze from the folder in her hand. She knew she hadn't imagined the insolence that had crept into his tone. "Meaning?"

He made a dismissive gesture. "The last candidate was sent away for moral turpitude. The soldier found in her bedroom was dismissed as well."

"I see." One fingernail tapped slowly on the folder. "So I can safely assume that these lofty standards you refer to will provide protection for me, as well."

"Your protection is understood." Sutherland's face flushed at the intimation. "The Brotherhood respects a woman's sanctity outside of marriage. It is completely disrespectful of you to imply otherwise."

Voice even, Rachel replied, "No more disrespectful, Colonel Sutherland, than your earlier insinuation to me."

His jaw tight, Sutherland rose, indicating that she was dismissed. "The soldier outside the door will take you to your room."

As she exited the office, Rachel had the distinct impression that he wished he could dismiss her from the compound as easily.

The large richly furnished room she was shown to looked out over the front lawn. Her luggage was already there, stacked in a neat pile. She thanked the young soldier who'd accompanied her upstairs, and waited for the door to close behind him. The smile abruptly faded from her lips as she

turned back toward her luggage. The first order of business was to check the security in her bedroom. It wouldn't be the first time a genial host had provided her with a room complete with hidden cameras or bugs.

She went to the largest of her suitcases and lifted it on her bed. Opening it, she removed a small CD player, set it on the bedside table, and turned it on. Unhooking the small remote attached, she tossed it, with seeming nonchalance, next to the suitcase. Then she went about unpacking, keeping a close eye on the small piece of equipment. The fake remote, in fact, housed delicate sensors that would detect any recording equipment in the nearby vicinity. By the time she'd finished her unpacking, there was no discreet telltale light winking from the remote. The room was free of security devices.

She quickly finished the unpacking. Checking her watch, she decided there was time to explore the upstairs before changing for dinner. She wanted to get a thorough map of the compound fixed in her head, and she'd begin with the house.

Palming the phony remote, she opened the bedroom door, then stopped short. The young soldier who'd escorted her upstairs was standing outside her room, leaning against the wall. He quickly straightened when he saw her.

Rachel smiled, a quick mask for her disappointment. "May I help you?"

Her words, or perhaps her sudden reappearance, seemed to have taken the young man by surprise. "No, ma'am." Standing at attention, he fixed his gaze squarely over her left shoulder. "Colonel Sutherland requested that I stay here in case you need anything."

She hid her dismay behind a regal nod. "How thoughtful of him. And of you. Perhaps you can tell me when dinner will be served."

"Dinner?" The soldier's face went blank. "The men eat at six in the mess hall."

"And does General Carpenter join you there?"

"No, ma'am. Not usually." Silence stretched, until comprehension dawned. "You'll be eating with the general, ma'am. In the dining room downstairs."

"And what time would that be?"

He finally looked straight at her, his expression confused. "I couldn't say, ma'am."

The smile she bestowed on him was dazzling. "Would you please find out for me? I don't think either one of us want to be responsible for keeping the general from his dinner this evening."

He looked torn for a moment, but her final sentence appeared to decide him. "I'll do that and be right back."

"Thank you." Rachel waited until the sounds of his retreat receded before opening the door wide and walking into the hall. She'd have to make her search quick.

She was not surprised to find that the door closest to her own was locked. She'd already discovered that her bathroom adjoined to what she could only surmise was another bedroom. The adjoining door had been locked, as well. It would be logical to assume that Carpenter had the suite next to hers. The knowledge had her nerves prickling. There was no doubt that their proximity would grant her easy access to search his quarters. It was the access the proximity granted *him* that lent to her unease.

Continuing down the hallway, she swiftly inspected the rest of the space upstairs. There appeared to be eight bedrooms in all, and none of the rest were occupied. Other than the locks in Carpenter's room, no other security devices were evident. Apparently the man was confident that the security at his front gate was sufficient to keep out unwanted guests.

She mentally took note of the number of windows and their distance to the ground. She would be most comfortable if she could plan at least three different escape routes from various regions in the house. But she'd need closer observation to measure exact drops and distances.

Returning to her room, Rachel entered the bathroom and picked up the hairbrush she'd set on the counter. Grasping it in both hands, she gave it a twist, and the brush separated at a barely visible seam. She reached inside the hollow handle and withdrew a slender wire. Without hesitation she went to the adjoining door and fell to her knees, wielding the flexible wire on the lock. Within seconds she had the door open and started on the one which would open to Carpenter's room. She gave a mental *tsk* of disapproval when it opened just as easily. A man in Carpenter's position should really be more careful.

She swung the door open and surveyed the rich furnishings, the desk strewn with paperwork. When her remote signaled the room was clean, she did a quick walk through. Another doorway in the room proved to be a large walk-in closet, and a third would lead to the hallway.

She strode to the middle of the room, turning slowly, her gaze sweeping the area. Something nagged at the edge of her consciousness. Her brow furrowed for a moment, then she mentally estimated the square footage of the area. It was a good size. But the next door down the hallway from this one had seemed farther away than this space would warrant.

Observing the room again, Rachel's gaze finally fixed on the paneled wall behind Carpenter's bed. Crossing the room to examine it more carefully, she found what she was looking for in the far corner—an almost invisible rectangular crack in the inlaid wood. Carpenter had built himself a secret room.

Again she was forced to revise her opinion of him. Clearly it would be a mistake to underestimate this man. Paranoia and a need for secrecy drove the leaders of these groups. Carpenter would be no different.

Rocking back on her heels a little, she eyed the paneled wall speculatively. There was no knob, no lock in sight. Most likely there was a spring mechanism hidden in the wood itself that would release the door. It would be complicated to break in, but not impossible. Rachel didn't believe in impossible.

Her interest was piqued, but further exploration would have to wait for another day. The sound of voices drifted over to her.

"Next time you disobey a direct order, I won't be so lenient." The words were faint, but unmistakable. "You were told to stay at your post."

Sutherland. Cursing mentally, Rachel hurried toward Carpenter's bathroom, closing and locking the door behind her. There was no longer any question in her mind that the colonel had set the young man outside her door to watch her.

She closed and locked her own bathroom door. With a quick adjustment of the shower, she had the water pounding down, drowning out the voices she'd heard. She slipped the remote into a pocket of the terrycloth robe she'd hung on the back of the door, kicked off her shoes and shed her pantyhose. She stepped under the spray fully clothed, then got out again. Wrapping the robe around her, she wrenched open the door and started into the bedroom, her hair dripping.

"Colonel Sutherland!" The shock in her voice wasn't totally feigned. She'd expected him to be pounding on her door, not standing halfway into her bedroom. The young man who had accompanied him was waiting outside the open door in the hallway, his eyes wide at the scene unfolding before him. Righteous indignation dripped from her every word. "What possible excuse could you have for barging into my private quarters?"

The colonel stared hard at her. "You didn't answer my knock."

"I was in the shower, sir!" The stage had lost a valuable actress in Rachel Grunwald. She literally shook with false fury. "Am I to understand that I can't bathe without fearing an intrusion?"

The soldier was taking in the scene with avid interest. Good. An audience only made the pretense more valuable. If Sutherland was going to align himself against her, she may need to discredit him in

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