

## THE END IS THE BEGINNING



Screams shrilled as she gasped for air. Screams from people? Screams from metal scraping and snapping apart? She couldn't tell. Icy water gushed across her body and all she could hear again were the muffled sounds of a ship fracturing in half. The rail she gripped between her slippery hands wouldn't do her any good if they sank to the bottom of the channel. As the waves subsided again, she wiped the stinging salty water out of her eyes and desperately looked around for salvation. No one could help her. The cold consumed her. She calmly began to make peace with death.

Silence and darkness ensued.

Reveille rapidly shocked her out of her sleep and she whacked her knee and elbow on the hard concrete floor. Feeling around on her body as she hung off of her bed tangled in her stark white sheets, she released a long sigh of relief when she realized she wasn't engulfed in salt water and blood at the floor of the ocean.

At the urging of the other girls in her barracks, she quickly scrambled to her feet and neatly made her bed, all the while trying to tuck her brown t-shirt into her camo cargo pants and tie her dark red hair back into a ponytail. She had taken to sleeping in her

fatigues since her bunkmates thought it was hilarious to hide various articles of her clothing for days at a time. Basic training antics.

The door at the end of the 2 long rows of beds slammed and everyone quickly dashed to their footlockers and stood at attention. Their drill sergeant paused in front of each girl, shouting something demeaning, which was normal. Normal because the point of basic training was to break down the individual so they could unite as a whole group, yet it felt different that day since they had just completed their basic training.

“Today,” she shouted, abruptly turning to face the group of forty girls. “Today is the day you have all been waiting for. Your basic combat training is over. Now, you will all be drilled, tested, tortured, and tested again to try and tell us more about your strengths, but more importantly, your weaknesses. You will *not* like some of the exercises we use but that is *not* my problem. Now it is time to listen to a new leader, your captain, your boss. You will do everything he says. Is that clear?”

“Ma’am yes ma’am!” the girls shouted in unison, anxiously waiting for this mysterious male captain to make an appearance. They had been with all females for over eight weeks and had nearly forgotten the look and sound of a man. They’d all seen the jeeps coming in with the officers in the previous days but hadn’t known what to make of it.

Placement Training, the next step with the new ranking officer. Captain Connor, their new *boss*, was a hard ass but he was also the best. The girls would be in good hands and ready for combat.

They apprehensively arrived at an advanced individual training course on the base. Tall, small, heavy, thin, blonde, brunette, Black, Hispanic, White...this unit ran the gamut on diversity.

“This is Captain Connor. He was trained and served in the Special Forces, and later served in the fourth Psychological Group in Fort Bragg. He has a master’s in psychology. He will train you to

think as the enemy thinks, and he will show you how to overcome your greatest fears. This is where I leave you. Captain?”

The girls saluted their drill sergeant as she saluted back and quickly left. It was all very unceremonious considering the amount of time they'd spent together, but better than it being long and drawn out.

Then they turned anxiously to Captain Connor.

A tall man with broad shoulders and a short light brown military cut, he folded his hands behind his back and paced back and forth, his steps crunching the dried leaves that had recently fallen to the muddy ground. His posture made the muscles in his arms flex, causing him to look even more militant and manly—as if that was possible.

Wind whistled through the bare tree branches and the sun warmed their backs as they waited silently. Their thoughts ran away with them in the silence. *What would he be like? Would this really be harder than basic training? And was he really hot or had it just been too long since they'd seen a man?*

Captain Connor sized his new unit up. The new program that Major Taylor had implemented was designed to physically and mentally acclimate the troops from basic training to combat, more specifically in special operations, something he specialized in as a captain, but the program was still in its infant stages and he wasn't sure what the results would be. He had worked with women before, too, but these *girls* looked straight out of high school. Some were tall and awkward, others heavy and tattooed; and the short, scrawny one at the end of the line looked like the one the drill sergeant had warned him about.

“Careful of this one,” the DS had said. “She looks like cream and sugar, speaks like a southern belle, but she's the toughest, most talented, and most *difficult* private this side of the Mason-Dixon line.”

He paused and sighed as he realized that this new program could be very interesting indeed. Women in combat? On the front

lines? It was new to the US but he could certainly get behind it if these girls could prove themselves. Not girls, women. No, soldiers. He'd been instructed to never address them as *Ladies*. He knew that, at least. He was to treat them just the same as his male trainees.

"Privates," he said in greeting with a quick nod. "My name is Captain Connor, and you will be answering to me over the next months. However, you will not be answering to *only* me. You will have a unit leader, someone to lead and keep order when I'm not around, someone chosen from among this group."

The girls all smiled and looked around at each other up and down the line.

"And your unit leader will be determined today. In the next hour, in fact. We reward accomplishment on this base, not popularity. Whoever can get through this course with the least number of faults and in the shortest time will be your new leader. You will fault when you drop your weapon or venture out of bounds. Speed and accuracy, lad-*privates*, and you will have yourselves a unit leader."

To his surprise, the girls all moaned and groaned in unison. There were grumblings and knowing looks between them. He'd thought this plan was ingenious, but they seemed unhappy about it.

Then they all looked down the line at the short scrawny one with the dark red hair who pretended not to notice their glares as she stared at the toe of her brown boot digging into the leaves.

"Is there a problem?" he loudly asked, getting their attention again.

Sighing and glancing back at the lieutenant holding a clipboard behind him he rolled his eyes and turned to the girls—*trainees*. He'd have to take care of this quickly or he would never regain control.

"Lieutenant Reyes has a stop watch and your names listed alphabetically. Go and check in with him and begin the competition."

The girls all moved towards the course and huddled around the

lieutenant as Captain Connor took a knee next to the girl with her chin in her chest and the bullseye on her back.

She lifted her head up and cautiously asked, "Are they gone, sir?"

"If you're asking if your unit has left you in the dust as they entered the course, then yes," he sarcastically replied, leaning back as she suddenly stood up straighter, her entire demeanor immediately more confident.

"Wow, Manes and Nolan looked like they wanted to *kill* me, didn't they?" She snickered, smiling until she saw her new captain's face. She saw the anger in his dark eyes and quickly added, "Sir."

The Captain stood up and folded his arms across his chest. "What's your name, Private?"

"Baylor Burton, sir." She grinned, looking up at him with dark green eyes, and definitely a slight accent pushing through, probably from growing up in Virginia.

"Private Burton, would you mind telling me what in the *hell* that was all about?" he loudly asked, holding his arms out, waiting for a response.

She nodded like she'd been asked that question every day of her life. "The other girls hate me. It's, um, partly because we just come from different backgrounds and wouldn't have ever been genial in any setting, but *mostly* because I threaten them."

"You threaten them?" the Captain asked, wondering why he was engaging her in conversation instead of yelling at her to follow orders. There was something about her— those eyes, the way she spoke to him—that intrigued him.

"Yes, well, I mean, I beat them at everything."

Lieutenant Reyes handed him her file and stood back quietly as his boss flipped through it. The rest of the unit was haphazardly crawling under wires and fumbling with knotted ropes over a rock wall.

"You aren't lying, Private Burton. You actually *do* have the best times in every course and every discipline. Aren't you proud of

your accomplishments? Don't you want to be a leader? You're well on your way to moving up the ladder at a rapid rate."

Ranking was everything in the military.

"I'm just trying to get through basic," she answered quietly, looking around, anywhere but at him.

"Spoiler alert, Trainee, you're finished with basic training," he replied sarcastically, doubt about her abilities growing in the back of his mind. The drill sergeant had been known to creatively keep records just so some girls could get through.

He was surprised when the Private looked directly up at him.

"Sir...they hate me. They don't want me to lead. And frankly, I don't want to be a leader. I just want to serve my country. That's why when you brought up the accomplishment-rewarding factor I had to stay quiet, subdued. If I hadn't, they would have kept fighting you until they all got into trouble," she explained, glancing to her right at the course. She didn't feel like seeing another disappointed face at the moment.

"Well, son of a bitch, Private Burton. That sounds exactly like what a leader would do. You're taking care of them," he replied, putting his hands on his hips and staring down at her. What the hell?

She opened her mouth to reply but for some reason couldn't find a valid response, so in her frustration all she could blurt out with a frown was, "No it doesn't. Sir."

Captain Connor rolled his eyes and pulled out a stop watch. Girls and their insecurities. Trainees, they were trainees.

"Private, you better get your little ass out onto that course right now. And if you lag, I will make you run it again until you beat your time. Then I'll make you do it again and again until there is no possibility of getting a better time. So, save us the time, save us the trouble, and run like hell!" he ordered, pointing to the course and clicking on the watch.

She obediently turned on her heel and began sprinting towards the mud pit in the distance with a knotted rope hanging over it.

Lieutenant Reyes walked up and stood next to him, looking down at the clipboard. "She's cute." Reyes nodded, pulling out the keys to the tan vehicle with the course monitors in it.

"She's trouble." the Captain sighed, walking with him to the van and opening the rear doors. "But, yeah, kind of cute."

They sat inside and switched on the monitors, which were remotely connected to cameras placed throughout the course.

Connor and Reyes leapt out of the van half an hour later and stared at that same little defiant redhead, huffing and catching her breath as she gulped her water and wiped her mud smeared face.

"Was that good?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder. The other girls weren't even in sight yet.

The Captain looked over at Reyes and showed him the stopwatch.

"That's a course record, sir," Reyes mumbled, checking the papers on his clipboard twice.

"Burton, get over here!" Captain Connor yelled, hands on his hips.

Private Burton glanced back around and ran over to them, standing at attention and actually smiling. She did love winning.

"You *knew* you were going to beat them, didn't you?"

"Yes sir. I-I thought I already told you that."

He pressed his lips together to stop the cursing and stepped towards her. "I don't appreciate your little act. I don't appreciate the meek attitude when you so clearly excel, Private. I want only your best and I don't want an argument about it. Go to the track and run twelve laps."

"Yes sir," she quickly saluted, turning and running down the hill towards the athletic fields of the base. She wasn't about to argue. He looked like he was about to blow his top.

"What in the hell was that all about?" he asked, glancing at Reyes.

"I've never seen anything like it, sir. She's like... it's like she's

fighting instinct, except you can tell she *loves* being in training. If that makes sense.”

“Strangely, it does.” He sighed, turning and walking back to the van. “I’ll be reviewing these videos. When the rest of them get back, make them do it again.”

“Yes sir.”

Captain Connor sat at the officer’s table during lunch, but instead of listening to his friends talk about their new respective units, he studied his own, sitting two tables away, all reeling at the fact that Burton was their new leader and her performance had forced them to run the obstacle course twice.

They argued, exchanged words, looked at each other, shrugged, and then sat down, allowing Burton to finally join the table. Connor squinted as he thought he saw a smile sneak out of the corner of her mouth. She wasn’t stupid. She took advantage of his punishment of running twelve laps and used it to get in on the good side of her unit. She was on her way, all right. He needed to figure her out, though. If he couldn’t trust her, how could he train her to be the best?