

Chapter 1

“Oh no, I look like a hooker!” She became distraught as she approached the building entrance and saw her reflection in the mirrored door. Not carrying an umbrella was a bad decision. The driving rain had turned her white blouse nearly transparent. Not wearing a bra was another bad decision. The cool, damp air made her breasts clearly visible. Her long, blonde hair was soaked. Surprisingly, the corkscrew curls were limp, but still intact. She paused for a minute to catch her breath after scrambling through the rain-soaked city streets. The weather report mentioned only a slight chance of precipitation this afternoon.

Because she switched to homeschooling to care for her ill father, she had not worn her school uniform in over four years. However, it was necessary today in order to complete some last-minute graduation requirements and get her diploma. The pleated, green plaid skirt and white button-down blouse fit perfectly when she was a fourteen-year-old in a training bra. They were not suitable for an eighteen-year-old woman. She should have spent time looking in the mirror before she left home, but vanity was not one of her vices. The skirt was supposed to extend to the knee, but it barely covered half her thighs. The blouse was so snug that the front buttons were straining to contain her ample breasts. It was impossible to tuck in and gapped at the bottom, which exposed her bellybutton. Putting on some over-the-knee stockings was the only way she could get on her black leather loafers. Even with the thin, white stockings, the shoes were still painfully tight. It would have been a waste of money to buy a new uniform. Wiping a stream of water from her eyes, she entered the Marine Corps recruitment center.

Her heart was pounding as she found herself unexpectedly nervous. Worrying about her appearance was the last thing on her mind when she left home, but the rain had thrown a wrench into things and dampened her spirits in the process. This was supposed to be a good day. It was her high school graduation day—a day she had been looking forward to for quite a while. She looked down at her soaked, white blouse and realized it was not going to dry out anytime soon. Panic started to set in. Glancing back at the entrance door, she considered racing home to change her clothes and grab an umbrella. She dismissed the idea since the center closed in an hour and would not reopen again until Monday. The thought of waiting another two days was unbearable. She flipped her arms to purge the remaining excess moisture. A puddle of rainwater formed around her feet on the lobby floor. She squeezed her fists together and tried to regain her confidence. Turning towards the inner lobby door, she leaned against the glass and pushed it open. A cascade of cool air kissed her face as the door slowly gave way.

Military paraphernalia immediately caught her eye as she entered the room. A large flag with the eagle, globe and anchor hung on the wall. Memories of her father raced into her head. It had only been a short time since he passed away, leaving her with no living parents. Her mother died many years ago. Having been in a marine himself, he would laugh at her when she told him her desire to join up. He spent the last several years trying to talk her out of it once he realized she was serious. She never believed he really meant it. She was sure all the things he taught her were leading up to this moment. She closed her eyes and tried to remember some of the things he told her about being in tough situations. Thinking of him gave her a renewed determination, but failed to settle her nerves. After a deep breath, she put on her best smile and headed into the waiting room.

The Spartan-looking room was long and narrow. Uncomfortable metal chairs lined the walls. The aroma of cigar smoke permeated the air. A row of ceiling fans purred softly as their blades cut through the stale air. A spider web precariously hanging from an artificial floor plant flapped in the gentle breeze. Posters and other patriotic propaganda, typical of a military recruiting center, covered the walls. "First to Fight" and "So Proudly We Serve" were some of the common themes. Dog-eared magazines were scattered around the well-lit room. There would be no escaping scrutiny here.

She proceeded toward a large, wooden desk at the end of the office. The room was empty except for a man in uniform seated there. Any hope of drying out a little while waiting in line quickly evaporated. She pulled at her damp blouse, hoping to make it less clingy and revealing.

The man was diligently pecking away at a computer keyboard. He never looked up as she moved cautiously towards him. She stopped before getting too close and closed her eyes for a few precious seconds to regain her composure. This was a defining moment in her young life. In fact, she imagined the future she dreamed of depended on this interaction. She could not remember being so nervous.

She fixed her eyes on the man as she resumed her trek towards the desk. She wondered what he would think about her. He was a large, stout man in his forties, she guessed. His short, red hair was starting to gray slightly at the temples. His uniform was impressive. It was apparent from the stripes and medals that he had been in the service for many years. A long scar crossed his left cheek and ran half way down his neck. He looked like one tough bastard. There was a sinking feeling in her stomach. Someone younger might be more forgiving about her appearance.

He took no notice of her as he leaned over the computer. Sweat was beading around his receding hairline as he typed. His stubby fingers struggled with the keys. It was unusual to see someone using a keyboard since voice recognition was so much easier. Brushing a few loose curls of hair away from her eyes, she reached the front of the desk. A huge ashtray full of ashes and half-chewed cigar ends caught her eye as she grazed the top of the work surface. A nameplate engraved "Staff Sgt. R. O'Connor" sat next to a dish of chocolates on the well-organized desk. A small camera was motionless on the wall behind him.

She paused to stare at the candy before announcing herself. It had been a long time since she enjoyed anything sweet. She considered eating a piece to calm her nerves. At that instant the sergeant looked up, a large unlit cigar protruding from his mouth. "You've got to be kidding me!" he snapped. He raised a large, bushy eyebrow in her direction.

Startled, she took a step back and tried to regain her already shaky composure.

"The guys remembered my birthday after all," he said in amazement. He noticed the puzzled look on her face. "They almost sent you here too late for my birthday," he said, slower, hoping it would clarify things.

"I'm not sure I understand . . ."

"You're from the strip club down the street, right? Those guys couldn't pick the right time, but they sure picked the right girl," he said, leaning forward to get a better view of her legs.

"I'm here to sign up," she said tentatively.

"Save the act, honey," he said, holding up his hand. "Like someone would normally walk around in an outfit like that. Nice rack by the way," he said, laughing. He looked back and

waved at the camera on the wall. “Hi guys and thanks!” He assumed his friends were watching the show.

“Sir, I know I look ridiculous, but this is a real school uniform.” She hoped the “sir” would impress him.

“We don’t have time for this. Take off your panties.”

“Excuse me?”

“You are wearing panties, right?”

“Yes, sir,” she gulped.

“Well, take them off and give them to me!” he demanded. He held out his hand and wiggled his fingers at her.

She looked at him, dumbfounded. He appeared to be serious. Fear shot through her. Her stomach reeled. She stood frozen for a moment, cycling through some of the almost inevitable outcomes if she obliged. But her desire to become a marine was overpowering. She reached her long nails under her skirt and slowly slipped her panties off. Against her better judgment, she handed them to him.

“These aren’t exactly what I was expecting,” he said, holding up the plain, white panties. Then to her dismay, he started rubbing the panties on his face. He buried his nose into them and breathed deeply. “Ah, but they sure smell good.” He was surprised that she did not seem to be getting into what he was doing. “I can even taste you,” he said, licking the crotch slowly, hoping to elicit a reaction.

She gasped and looked around to see if anyone else was watching his vulgar actions.

“Well, aren’t you going to dance or do something?” he asked. “As beautiful as you are, it’s not that sexy to just stand there staring at me.”

“There must be some misunderstanding,” she pleaded. “Here’s my transcript and my application.” She handed him the appropriate recruitment documents.

He glanced at the damp papers briefly and then looked back up at her. They were genuine enough. He quickly dropped the panties into his trashcan. “You’re really serious?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” she answered, straightening up.

He set the papers down on his desk. “So you’re not a stripper here for my birthday?”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you but . . .”

“Well, Missy, you should be. The strip club is about two blocks down on the right,” he interrupted and pointed towards the street. He did not know whether to be mad or embarrassed. He looked back down to continue typing, hoping she would go away.

Her heart sank. Calling her a stripper was the worst thing he could say. The Marines had a reputation of being tough to get into. A recruiter’s primary focus was to make sure you fit into the physically intimidating profile they cherished. She gathered her strength in an attempt to overcome his initial impression of her.

“Sir, my name is Cassiopeia, not Missy, but everyone calls me Cassy. My qualification and aptitude test scores were above average and I passed the physical exam when they were given locally. I just picked up my school documents showing I graduated. I’m sorry about disturbing you, sir, but I just want to enlist,” she asked, trying to remain as calm as possible.

Without looking up, he raised his arm and with an underhanded wave, he muttered, “Away with you now. I’m busy, little girl.” He returned to his work. She changed her mind about the

stripper comment being the worst thing he could say.

“Don’t you guys usually wait until after we join to give us crap?” she said as politely as the statement would allow.

The comment perked his attention. He stopped typing and reared his puffy head. He looked at her as if she had just broken the television remote and there were two good games on at the same time. Glancing at the papers again, he calmly leaned back and crossed his arms. The wooden chair creaked with the stress of his weight. He was never in favor of allowing testing for seniors at high schools and churches. The Military Enlistment Processing Stations were much more intimidating. He leaned forward and reexamined her carefully to make sure his initial perception was correct. Her lack of heavy makeup and jewelry were the only disconnects to his first impression. She only had on red lipstick and black mascara. She wore no visible jewelry. More makeup would have made her look older, but not any more attractive. He rolled his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. She tried to maintain eye contact. It was difficult not to watch the cigar as it rolled from side to side. He eased back into his chair again, reclined and peered at the ceiling. He shook his head and rolled his eyes. The cigar remained in constant motion.

Cassy was biting her tongue. The sergeant was silent for what seemed like an eternity. Her stomach was churning. As each second passed, she became even more embarrassed about the way she looked. She regretted not buying a bra even though she did not normally wear one. She should own at least one that fit for occasions just like this. The thin construction of her damp, white blouse left little to the imagination. She cursed the weatherman. She had a strong urge to fold her arms and cover the area, but she resisted. Besides, she did not have enough arms to cover all the problems. She did not know whether to pull up on the skirt in an effort to hide some of her exposed stomach or pull down on it to help hide her thighs. She remained standing as straight as she could. Her big, green eyes looked at him as he continued to stare at the ceiling.

Finally, he looked down and broke the silence. “Well, *Missy*, this is a United States Marine Corps recruiting office, not one of those other pansy-ass outfits that might be interested in girlie-girls? We’re looking for a few good *men*,” he said in a loud commanding tone.

She cringed and said, “Yes, sir . . . and the name’s Cassy, sir.”

He could not control himself any longer and began to chuckle. “OK, honey, let’s get serious for a minute. It’s ridiculous to think you could be a marine. Did someone put you up to this?”

“No,” she said, with a puzzled look on her face, “sir,” she added quickly.

He removed the cigar from his mouth and leaned forward. “Well, nobody that looks like you wants to be a marine. You should be jumping out of a cake somewhere!” he bellowed. His outburst startled her and she began to tremble. “You come in here with your long, blonde hair and your big breasts dressed in a skimpy schoolgirl costume and expect me to recruit you? You should just go to the whore-recruiting center. I hear they are looking for new talent. Christ, you wouldn’t last one day in the Marines with those pretty legs, sweet cheeks. Do you realize there’s a good chance you could end up going to the Outer Ring of the galaxy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“No, you don’t. It is fricking dangerous out there. This is not a game!” he yelled. His amusement quickly turned into anger. At this point, his face was becoming as red as his hair.

No amount of control could keep the tears from starting to swell up in her eyes. She cursed her appearance. She wished she were still the skinny, gawky girl she was a few years ago. She relished her younger days as a tomboy when she blended in. Things were simpler then. She dragged herself back into the present and tried to pull herself together.

“How old are you?” the sergeant asked, sensing she was about to cry.

“I turned eighteen in March, sir,” she said, struggling to get her composure back. A tear escaped and ran down her face. She tried to hide it by brushing away a stray curl from her eyes and catching the tear with a single motion. Her trembling hand only highlighted the already obvious situation. “And this really is a school uniform . . . just an old one, sir,” she added, pointing at the school’s name on the heading of the recruitment forms.

“Do your parents know you’re here?” he continued and ignored her gesture.

“Both my parents have passed away, sir,” she replied. Thinking of them again made it difficult to hold back the tears.

He focused on her eyes for the first time. They were big, bedroom eyes and they were a gorgeous, green color. She returned his stare with a puppy-like expression. The sergeant was a hardened veteran, but the sight of a beautiful woman crying was tough to reckon with.

“I’m sorry to hear about your parents,” he said with a glimmer of compassion in his voice. “But why are you doing this? You must know that you’re not marine material.” He wondered if there were any tissues around.

“Sir, my dad was a marine. In fact, there’s always been a marine in our family. I’m the only one left to carry on the tradition.” She wiped the tears away with her half-sleeve. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think I could be a good marine, sir.”

The sergeant rubbed his chin and pondered the comment. Although he admired her determination, there was simply no way she could possibly make it through the program. The graduation rate of his recruits dictated his performance evaluation and she was a sure zero in that category. He caught himself staring at her breasts beneath her wet blouse. Feelings of lust, guilt and inadequacy were starting to eat away at him. Her beauty was almost radiating. He had not felt this aroused in years. He needed to get her out of the building for his own good.

“I’m sorry, but this isn’t going to work,” he said, finally.

Her dream began to fade. She wanted to run out and start this all over again. She looked back at the door. Maybe this was all a bad dream and she would wake up any minute. She started to shiver compulsively as the air conditioning continued to pour cool air over her damp clothes.

“I’d suggest you try the Army if you’re really serious about becoming part of the military,” he said and went back to typing.

Cassy stood and stared at him for a moment. Her world was collapsing around her. She sniffed back more tears. She sighed and turned to head towards the exit of the building.

He realized she left her papers and called out to her. “Miss . . .” he looked at the papers to see her last name. “Rising,” he added.

She turned quickly, hoping he had changed his mind.

“Miss Rising, you forgot your papers.”

Her shoulders slumped as she headed back towards the desk.

“Rising,” he said, thinking aloud. “Are you any relation to Frank Rising?”

"I'm his daughter," she said, quietly reaching out for the papers.

"Damn, your mother must have been a real looker because that was one ugly SOB," he said, laughing.

"You knew my dad?" she asked, perking up.

"Knew him? He saved my ass more than once. He was the best marine I've ever served with," he answered. "If you inherited even a tiny fraction of his talents, then I'm going to reconsider your request to join."

"Yes!" Cassy screamed and jumped in the air. She caught her rising skirt before it revealed too much. Her face turned red with embarrassment.

The sergeant's cigar plummeted to the floor. He knew he should look away, but the sight hypnotized him.

"Sorry about that," she said, grimacing.

"It's not your fault. Do you want these back?" He leaned over and picked her panties out of the trash with a pencil tip and showed them to her.

"That's all right." She pictured him licking the crotch. He threw them back in the trash.

"I really want to apologize about the whole stripper thing. Frank is probably rolling over in his grave right now."

"What stripper thing?" she asked, winking.

He smiled, appreciating her discretion in a delicate situation.

She stood in front of him, fidgeting with excitement. She could barely control herself and wanted to dance with joy.

"You do understand you still have to make it through basic training?" he asked, laughing at her enthusiasm.

"Of course, sir," she answered. She clutched her hands together to keep them occupied.

"OK, then . . . everything seems in order," he said, quickly reviewing her documents. "You need to report to the Central Transportation Station by zero nine hundred tomorrow morning. Take the 'Sky Rail' to Charleston, South Carolina. There will be a ticket waiting at the counter for you. Once you get to Charleston, an NCO will meet you and direct you to a shuttle that will take you to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot on Parris Island. Do you understand these instructions?" he asked, recapturing his commanding tone.

"Aye-aye, sir!" she yelled, thrusting her chest outward. The pressure of her surging breasts was almost too much for her tight blouse to handle. He was only a popped button or two away from seeing a strip show after all.

"Good luck," he said.

"Thank you, sir," she said, giving her best salute. "Oh, and happy birthday, sir!" she said, handing him his cigar. "You dropped it earlier," she added with a coy smile.

He graciously took it and popped it back in his mouth. He immediately started moving it from side to side again. She smiled at the sight and then turned to leave. She started by walking, then quickly broke into a gallop. The hint of a smile started to crack his gruff exterior as he watched her youthful exuberance.

"*You may be ready for the Marines, but I'm not sure the Marines are ready for you,*" he thought as he watched her disappear from the room.