

Beau closed the motel room's door and turned to face Tessa, who stood in the middle of the room, frowning. "Problem?" he asked.

"Well, yes. There's only one bed."

"You afraid to share it with me?" He arched an eyebrow in an open dare. "What are you going to do when you're bivouacking with a male team and all of you are crammed into a hide like sardines, spooning with each other?"

Her mint-green eyes narrowed. "I've got no problem sleeping with *you*. The question is, are you okay sleeping with me?"

He snorted. "Honey, I'm not sixteen. I've got my hormones firmly under control, thank you very much." Which might not be entirely true where she was concerned. All of the previous Medusas had lived and worked in very close quarters with her male counterparts. She had to learn to do the same. Starting with him. *Oh, joy.*

"Great," she said cheerfully. "Then you won't mind if I take my pants off. They're still a little wet."

Well, hell. Give the woman points for calling his bluff.

* * *

Mission Medusa: a fierce team of warriors who run into the danger zone...

* * *

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Dear Reader,

I'm beyond excited to welcome you to this, the first book in the return of the Medusas! It has been a few years and times have changed a bit since I wrote the very first Medusa story, *The Medusa Project*, in 2005. Back then, the idea of women in the Special Forces, let alone the idea of an all-female team of special operators, was pure fiction.

Now, some fourteen years later, women in the US military are allowed to serve in any job whose qualifications they can meet, including all of the Special Forces. The US Army uses women in Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) that work side by side with elite male Special Forces units. The first women have completed Army Ranger training, and news outlets are reporting on a few brave women Special Forces operatives serving alongside their male counterparts in irregular roles.

Furthermore, both the Norwegian Army and the Afghan Special Forces have fielded all-female Special Forces teams. Which is to say, the Medusas have become real.

I would like to think that adds even more excitement to these ongoing adventures of the Medusas. So, as always, pour your favorite beverage, sit back, relax and get ready to rock and roll with the baddest babes in combat boots and the men strong and brave enough to work with and love them...

Happy reading!

Cindy

SPECIAL FORCES: THE RECRUIT

Cindy Dees

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Special Forces: The Recruit

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Chapter 1

Staggering a little as she ran, Tessa Wilkes spied the finish line maybe a half mile ahead through waves of heat and dust. Whatever bastard had decided to call a twenty-mile run carrying a forty-pound rucksack a “sprint” should be shot. Right now. She volunteered to pull the trigger.

Her body hurt in every way it was possible to hurt. Three months of grueling, around-the-clock physical training had taken its toll on her. She’d reached the end of her rope, and her fingers were slipping off the last bit of said rope with every agonizing step.

She’d known going in that just because it had become legal for women to begin Special Forces training, it didn’t mean any were going to be allowed to finish the program and play with the big boys. The male instructors would keep doing BS like this run until they broke her. They were never going to back off.

Only she could make the pain stop. By quitting. By giving in. By accepting that she was never going to be one of them. She was sorely tempted to give up on her futile dream when she reached this one last finish line.

But no sooner had the impulse come to her than a wave of sheer, cussed stubbornness slammed through her. She was that horse who would die in the harness, still straining to pull its load.

Her face was on fire. Her lungs were self-combusting. The heavy pack hammered her feet into the ground with every step she took. But onward she staggered. Step after miserable step. At this point any reasonably fit person could walk beside her faster than she was running.

But she. Did. Not. Stop.

She'd asked for this insanity—begged for it, even—which made her misery even worse. It stripped away her right to complain. All she had left was anger.

She reached for her old friend, Fury. Born of rage at being powerless to control her life, it rose from her determination someday to become a strong, independent woman whom no man would ever push around.

Her steps stabilized. Her stride stretched back out into a full run. Less than a quarter mile to go now.

“Damn. Thought we had you there, Wilkes,” a male voice said sardonically from behind her.

She didn't bother turning around to look. *Lambert*. A recently arrived instructor, he always wore mirrored shades and a baseball cap, which meant she had no idea what her latest tormenter actually looked like beyond that lean, chiseled jaw. And a physique modeled after the great masters of sculpture, of course. He never participated in harassing the trainees. He just watched. Mostly her.

He'd been hanging around pretty much continuously

the past few days. Either he was studying her for who knew what inscrutable reason, or he was stalking her. Whatever. They could throw their best head games at her and run her till she dropped. When she got back up, she would just keep on going.

“Ahh, well. We’ll break you next time,” he murmured from just behind her. “Or the time after that. If you won’t quit coming after us, we won’t quit coming after you.”

His lightly delivered comment sent a chill through her. He was not lying. They would keep coming after her until they destroyed her.

The finish line of today’s “sprint” loomed ahead, and she pushed herself to reach it by envisioning a big glass of ice water waiting for her. She crossed the finish line and stopped cold, not taking one more running step than necessary as she panted in the oven-like heat.

She’d done it. One more time they’d failed to break her. A stone-faced instructor looked at a stopwatch and recorded her time on a clipboard without comment. She caught Lambert looking over Clipboard Guy’s shoulder. Both men pulled disgusted faces, then Lambert peeled off to head for the instructor’s building.

Screw them. She’d given it everything she had. Just because her triumph was their failure didn’t make it any less of a triumph for her. She bent over, planting her hands on her thighs, sucking in great, awful lungfuls of parched, scorching air.

“Wilkes!”

She looked up sharply at her barked last name.

“My office. Now.”

Crap. That was Major Torsten summoning her. No one knew exactly what he did around here, but even the instructors treated him with deep respect. Frankly, he scared her to death.

In an act of bald-faced defiance, she forced her protesting legs to run to the door of the Quonset hut Torsten loomed in. One corner of his mouth quirked up for just an instant before settling back into its usual tight, disapproving line.

Torsten disappeared inside the building as she trotted up the steps after him.

“Sit.” He pointed at a wooden chair in front of the desk he’d moved behind.

She slipped off her pack and sank into the chair not a moment too soon. Her legs felt entirely boneless. They would have collapsed on their own in a few more seconds. In fact, her entire body felt like a marionette’s with the strings cut. She was going to hurt like a big dog in a few hours. Cool air-conditioning wafted down on her, as blissful as angel’s breath.

“Enjoy the run?” Torsten asked drily.

As if she would give him the satisfaction of showing even a hint of weakness. Not a chance. She shrugged. “Nice scenery. And I’ve done worse.” Which was a total lie.

He opened a cabinet behind his desk and tossed her a bottle of water. She snagged it neatly midair and downed it greedily. Meanwhile, he opened a brown manila folder on his desk and lifted out papers one by one, glancing through them at his leisure. She just enjoyed being still and letting her body temperature return to something resembling normal.

At length, he closed the file and stared at her long and hard enough that she had to consciously tell herself not to squirm. She’d gotten used to the mind games they played around here and had learned not to break awkward silences unless she had something specific to say.

“You’re out,” Torsten announced without warning.

Out? As in *out of training*? Her mind went completely blank. A single word took shape and popped out of her mouth. “Why?”

“You are underperforming. Your run and swim times aren’t coming down fast enough and your physical fitness test scores are not coming up fast enough for you to stand a chance in the remainder of this course. You’re out.”

Shock slammed into her, wiping her mind clean.

Ten years. Ten grueling, miserable, painful years she’d been training in hopes of one day having a shot at the Special Forces—practically around the clock. God, the things she’d sacrificed for this. A normal social life. The relationships she’d let pass her by. The friendships lost. Jobs turned down. She’d geared her *entire life* around this.

It simply couldn’t be over.

Besides. She already met all the minimum required scores to pass this training! And just like that, she was out?

“Are Jones and Peterson out, too?” she blurted. They were men in her class. Men whom she consistently outperformed and outscored.

“I’m not discussing any other trainees with you, Wilkes.”

She looked up at him, then. Stared into ice-blue eyes that did not for a second flinch in the face of her silent outrage. Arguing with him would be useless. Both trainees and instructors called him the Iceberg behind his back because the bastard never thawed and never budged.

The Special Forces did not want her. They had tested her and found her wanting. And they were not going to

debate the decision with her. Just, “You’re out.” Done. Pack your stuff and leave.

Anger exploded abruptly in her gut, knocking the air out of her lungs, and leaving her panting with fury. This sanctimonious bastard dared to hide his misogyny behind her performance numbers? Why not just call it what it was? These male chauvinist pigs just didn’t want to let a girl into their little boys’ club!

She pressed words past her clenched teeth. “I get why you are resisting allowing women into your hallowed band of brothers. But it’s a mistake. Not many women have what it takes, but a few of us do.”

He leaned back in his leather executive chair and merely continued to stare at her, his entire demeanor cold and emotionless.

She warmed to her subject and ignored his body language shouting at her to shut the heck up. “We have talents and skills that would be an asset to the teams. You guys are weaker because of our exclusion. Other countries are already figuring that out, and you’ll end up scrambling to play catch-up. But by the time you catch on, the women you need will be so pissed off we’ll have moved on to other jobs. Other lives. You’ll be poison to the very women you need.”

“Are you done?” he snapped.

She crossed her arms defensively over her chest and pressed her lips tightly together, the rest of the rant she so badly wanted to throw at him barely contained. Silently, she flung the worst names at him she could think of.

Out of good names, she reverted to her Venezuelan mother’s native tongue for more.

He said more mildly, “You’ve got orders.”

“To where?” she demanded. God, that was fast. He’d already gotten her assigned to some other base? The

man didn't mess around when he tossed someone out of his unit.

"Phoenix."

What on earth did the Army have for her to do in Phoenix, Arizona? The only military base nearby was Luke Air Force Base in Glendale. She wasn't being cross-posted to the Air Force, was she?

"Lambo!" Torsten called.

Lambert of the gorgeous jaw poked his head in the door, hat and sunglasses gone for the first time, and she did a no-kidding, wrench-her-neck double take. She'd seen some beautiful men in her life, but behind the disguise, this one was in a class all his own. The guy was a walking recruitment poster. The motto on it would be, "Join the Army and become a living god."

His American flag-blue gaze took her in coolly. Thoroughly. And everywhere his scrutiny touched her, she abruptly felt naked. *On fire.*

He looked away from her like she was about as interesting as a cockroach. She sagged in her chair and let go of the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"Sir?" the god asked in a smooth, confident voice.

Oh, man. Her ovaries just melted.

Lambert stepped fully into the doorway and liquid heat pooled in her groin. The guy was hotness personified. Raw sex appeal rolled off him in waves that made her feel as if she was drowning in lust. Cripes. There should be nothing the least bit attractive about this guy. She wanted to *be* a Spec Ops warrior, not *do* a Spec Ops warrior.

"You have your orders, Beau. *Direct orders.*"

Lambert scowled fiercely at Torsten, and she looked back and forth between them. What was she missing? Why the emphasis on the words *direct orders*?

Torsten continued, “Escort Wilkes to the airfield. Put her on a plane and get her off my base. You know what her orders are. See to it she follows them.”

Torsten didn’t have to be nasty about it. He’d already won.

Lambert frowned thunderously, clearly not pleased—at all—at having to babysit her. He glared at Torsten, who glared back. If she didn’t know better, she would say they were communicating silently through some secret warrior mind powers.

Lambert made a sound of disgust, and Torsten replied, “Your objections are duly noted. But we’re doing this my way.”

“It’s a mistake—” Lambert started.

Torsten cut him off, snapping, “We’ve already had this discussion. Report back to me *after* you’ve gotten your head out of your ass.”

Lambert spun on his heel, scowling. “Let’s go, Wilkes. I’ve got places to go and things to do.”

She hefted her pack wearily over one shoulder and headed for the door after “Lambo.” She would lay odds he got that handle not entirely because of his last name but also in honor of a Lamborghini—the sleek, sexy Italian sports car.

“Hustle up, Wilkes,” Torsten said sharply. “Your ride’s already waiting. You’re late.”

She scowled. She couldn’t very well be late for an appointment she didn’t even know she had until ten seconds ago. “What about my gear back at the dorm?”

“It’ll be shipped to you.”

Wow. He really had it in for her, didn’t he?

She paused in the doorway and looked back at him. She spoke with quiet certainty, not by way of a whine, but stating a fact. “You’re making a mistake, Major.”

“I’m absolutely certain I’m not. And someday you’ll come to agree with me,” he retorted.

Never.

Tears burned at her eyes and she blinked them back furiously. She would be *damned* if she cried in front of these jerks. They didn’t deserve her tears. And she didn’t deserve this rude treatment. She was a freaking Army officer with a distinguished career behind her *and* ahead of her.

The walk of shame from the Quonset hut to the parking lot with Captain America at her side like a jailer was perhaps the worst hundred yards of her life. She felt the eyes on her. Everyone...*everyone*...noted her departure. She could physically feel on her skin the satisfaction of the boys’ club as it closed ranks against her. It was all she could do not to vomit up Torsten’s bottle of water in her humiliation as she climbed into a Hummer, her head held high.

It was a fight, but she wrestled back another bout of threatening tears as Lambert started the Jeep’s engine. She wasn’t going to cry for this jerk, either. A girl had to have a little pride, after all.

Lambert backed out of the parking spot and headed for the airfield. She commented sourly, “I knew folks around here hated the idea of women special operators, but this dramatic show of expulsion is a little excessive.”

“Take it up with Torsten. I’m just following orders.”

Orders he sounded irritated as heck over. What did he have to be mad about? He wasn’t the one being publicly humiliated. She had to get her mind off what was happening or she was going to break down and sob in front of all of them, and she would *never* give them that satisfaction. Searching desperately for a distraction, she mumbled, “What’s in Phoenix?”

Her escort merely shrugged. Even that casual gesture of his shoulder, fraught with rippling muscle under smooth, bronzed skin and a tight black T-shirt, was sexy as hell. At least Torsten had given her one last piece of eye candy to enjoy before he dashed her dreams and ended her life.

Lambo drove her straight to the airfield without saying a word. But disapproval rolled off him in tangible waves. All these guys were flaming jerks. Too bad she was so wasted from the run she couldn't think up any better epithets to call him in her mind.

She spied an airplane, apparently waiting for her, and stared. It was a twin turboprop plane that would carry about eight passengers. Except there didn't appear to be any other passengers milling around waiting to go. Surely, Torsten hadn't ordered up an entire airplane just to get rid of her.

Lambert came around to open her door for her as she stared back and forth doubtfully between aircraft and man.

He smiled wryly at her. All the oxygen in her vicinity disappeared, and she caught herself swaying toward him slightly. Dang, that man was attractive. Like a giant, man-shaped electromagnet. The pull of him crackled through her individual cells, realigning them into his orbit whether she willed it or not.

Maybe she was reacting to him so strongly because she was frazzled from the run and her abrupt ejection from the Special Forces pipeline. Whatever the reason, being this close to Lambert was throwing her seriously off balance.

She took a step out of the vehicle—or tried to, at any rate—and pitched forward, straight into her escort.

Impressions assailed her from every direction. His

stomach was as hard and ridged with muscle as it looked. Heat poured off his body. He smelled like a forest on a lazy summer day. And he made her think of hot, sweaty sex.

He grabbed her by her upper arms and dragged her up his body deliciously. An unmistakably hard, impressively large bulge pressed against her belly. He acted as if he barely noticed her weight. His strength was breathtaking. Literally. She had trouble inhaling properly as her entire body melted in a puddle of unwilling lust. *Oh, who was she kidding? It was totally willing lust.*

Beau Lambert stared down at the smoking-hot woman plastered against him. Her skin was a totally edible shade of café au lait, her hair wavy and dark, coffee brown. But what really stood out were those eyes of hers, mint green and practically glowing against her darkly tanned skin. She wasn't model material unless modeling agencies went for exotic types, not quite beautiful but undeniably unforgettable. He would 100 percent buy her a drink if he saw her across a crowded bar.

At the moment her cheeks were flushed, her eyes wide with surprise. His nostrils flared at the sudden sexual awareness he sensed in her.

Dammit, this was exactly why he hated the idea of women special operators.

His stare dropped to the neck of her tank top and the curves of her upper breasts. How was a woman as buff as she was that bountifully endowed? Talk about winning the genetic lottery. This woman had hit the mega millions jackpot in that department.

Get your head out of your crotch, man. Tessa Wilkes was an Army officer, not a sex object. But he couldn't resist a last glance at that swelling cleavage. She checked

pretty much every box on his hot female checklist. She even had the cocky attitude and sassy mouth he secretly loved.

He murmured, "If you can't stand on your own two feet, this little adventure is going to be over before it ever gets rolling."

"What adventure? What are your orders?" she demanded. "Let me guess. Put me on that plane and make sure I don't bolt before it goes airborne."

If only. He would love nothing better than to toss her on a plane and send her anywhere far, far from him. He'd argued stridently against the assignment Torsten had given him, but the bastard hadn't budged. Torsten was convinced that he, Beau Lambert, was the only man for the job.

Wilkes tried to stand on her own, grimacing in pain, but her legs weren't cooperating yet. He wasn't a complete ass, and he held her upright. Which, of course, meant more belly-to-belly, sex-fantasy-conjuring contact.

She hung in his arms like a rag doll devoid of bones. He remembered that level of exhaustion from his own initial training. A frisson of shared sympathy passed through him. But he shoved it aside. He had no time for sympathy for this woman. Not if he was going to prove Gunnar Torsten wrong.

She mumbled, "First a public humiliation, and now this. I'm so sorry."

She was right about the public part. His orders were to make sure everyone in the program saw him haul Wilkes out. There had to have been at least a hundred witnesses to her departure, all silently gleeful. But she was wrong about the humiliation part. Torsten had other plans for her altogether. If the other trainees and instruc-

tors knew what the boss was up to, they wouldn't be so smug to see Wilkes go.

He commented, "You're closer to the truth than you know."

She looked up at him quizzically, but he offered no explanation. All would become clear to her soon. And frankly, he was too ticked off at what came next to get all talkative with her about it.

He shifted his weight onto his bum leg, and a bolt of white-hot agony shot through him. He sucked in a sharp breath and froze, terrified he'd done something to wreck his knee even worse than it already was. He swore colorfully to himself.

When he'd leaped forward and caught her under the armpits, his right knee had given a mighty shout of protest, shooting daggers up and down his leg in retaliation for the stunt. He tuned in to that pain now, breathing through it until it gradually subsided.

Wilkes made no move to stand on her own. Probably couldn't. He knew all too well the agony of the human body transforming into one giant cramp.

His pain lessened until he was able to register once more the galvanizing sensation of a woman's body snuggled up close to his. She was curvy. And springy in the right places. Sex in a bottle.

"Aww, hell," he muttered. "You really are a girl, aren't you?"

She glanced down at her chest mashed against his. The display of cleavage above the neck of her olive drab tank top was impressive, to say the least. "Last time I checked, I'm still a girl," she declared.

An unwilling crack of laughter slipped out of him before he was able to bite it back.

She felt soft and feminine in his arms. Which went

against everything he knew about her. He'd seen her PFT scores and run times. She was a beast by female standards. Best they'd seen in a long time. All the more reason to ignore the blood surging into his loins. She was a job, not a date. But day-umm, she was hot.

The light green in her eyes was overtaken by black as her pupils dilated. She must have registered his wholly male reaction to her. Not much he could do about that. But then her gaze, peeking up through long, dark lashes, went a little languorous and a whole lot sensual.

Uh-oh. One of them had to be responsible here and do the right thing. At the moment it was going to have to be her because his pulse was pounding through an erection hard enough to hammer nails with.

Instead, she didn't do a blessed thing to stop every sexual part of her from pressing against every sexually corresponding part of him. Worse, she looked ready to have hot, sweaty sex with him this very second. All he had to do was say the word. And the word was hovering right on the tip of his tongue.

It took every ounce of discipline he had to force his feet to take a cautious step back. His knee held. Praise the Lord and pass the potatoes.

He continued to grasp her upper arms until her legs steadied. Or maybe it was his leg he was waiting on to settle down and accept his weight. Or maybe he was waiting for his hard-on to calm down enough that he wasn't on the verge of doubling over in pain around it. Either way, something primal and hungry roared through him as she stared up at him, her huge, green eyes more huge and more green than usual.

"You good?" he asked gruffly.

"I'm great," she breathed back. Lord, she sounded like Marilyn Monroe singing "Happy Birthday" to JFK.

He would bet she was great in bed. Out of bed. Against a wall. In a shower. In the back of a car. On the back of a car...

Stop.

Reluctantly, he set all of those smoking-hot curves and smooth muscles away from him. He had to get control of himself, and fast, or this assignment was going to go to hell in a handbasket of his own weaving.

His hands fell away from her, and something possessive inside him growled at the absence of her heated skin. As for her, she abruptly looked too tongue-tied and, truthfully, too obstinate to thank him. He couldn't help but be amused at her stubbornness. It was a quintessential Special Forces quality. *Pigheaded* was a term that got applied to him frequently, in fact.

He reached past her into the back of the vehicle for her pack. He slung it over his shoulder and led her over to the airplane as she stumbled along after him. He trotted up the unfolded steps and turned around, reaching a hand down to her.

"I can do this myself," she stated.

"You didn't leave everything you had out on the course earlier?" he asked in disappointment. Hell, her run time had been respectable even for a guy. Surely, she hadn't run that far, that fast, carrying that much weight, casually.

She stared at his outstretched hand for a long moment. Long enough that he wasn't sure she would accept help from him. Of course, that had been the big ding against her in her training file. She didn't trust men. Had trouble working in a group with others. Tended to be a loner.

But then her palm touched his, and just like that, lightning zinged through his hand and up his arm. It had nothing to do with resentment and everything to do

with something else altogether. Man. All she needed was a crack of thunder to go with all that sexual lightning.

Her gaze lifted to his. They stared at each other for a second that stretched out to infinity. *Whoa*. The moment snapped back into real time sharply, like a rubber band, with the same painful slap against his skin.

He tugged and all but launched her airborne into the plane.

“Crud, you’re strong,” she breathed under her breath.

He didn’t think she’d meant for him to hear it, but he replied, nonetheless. “All special operators have to be.”

“I’m the first to admit that no woman will ever be as strong as a guy at the top of his fitness game. Not even someone like me who’s ridiculously strong relative to most other women.”

“Then why put yourself through the misery?”

“Just because I won’t ever be as strong as a man doesn’t mean I’m not strong enough to do the job. Strength comes in many forms.”

She was right, of course, but he wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction of saying so. “Take a seat,” he ordered.

“No other passengers? This bird is just for me?” she asked.

He moved forward to a small cabinet behind the copilot’s seat. He dug out several bottles of water and tossed them one by one to Wilkes. She caught each easily. Good reflexes. That was something, at least.

“Major Torsten is in a hurry to get you out of here,” he replied as he moved back toward her.

She finished chugging a bottle of water, coming up for air and muttering, “Yeah, I got that memo.”

She sounded a shade bitter. Like it was dawning on her that she really was not going to be a Special Forces

operator. He knew the feeling. And he was definitely bitter about it, too. He wasn't about to accept the doctor's final word that his knee would never be strong enough for him to operate on the teams again.

He'd transformed from a scrawny, picked-on kid into a hard-core warrior, hadn't he? He could transform one lousy, busted knee into a joint strong enough to do the job. No way was he walking away from his brothers in arms. They were his family. His life. What would he do if he couldn't be a special operator?

He dropped into the seat across the aisle from her, and Wilkes stopped slugging the second bottle of water to squeak, "What are you doing?"

"You heard the major. He told me to see to it you get where you're going."

He realized he was massaging his right leg, just above the knee, and jerked his hand away. *No weakness. No pain. His knee was fine.*

She snapped, "I'm not going AWOL just because Torsten tossed me out. I'm going to be pissed off for the next several decades, but I'm not going to throw some giant, career-destroying tantrum over it."

He shrugged. "I've got my orders." As the engines cranked up outside, he leaned his seat back, closed his eyes and settled in for a nap. If she knew what was good for her, she would do the same.

Nope. She was feeling chatty apparently, for she said, "Just how crappy an assignment is Torsten sending me to? Is this punishment for my daring to try for the Special Forces?"

The plane started to taxi. Without opening his eyes, he said shortly, "Operations 101—eat and sleep whenever you get a chance to do either." Surely, she'd already learned that one. Didn't she know *anything*? God al-

mighty, this mission was going to suck worse than he'd thought. And he already thought it was going to suck pretty damned hard.

The plane accelerated down the runway, and he caught her surreptitiously wiping tears away from her cheeks as she stared out the window, her face averted from him. Aww, hell. Now he felt bad for her. And that was the one emotion he couldn't afford where she was concerned.

Thankfully, she had no more inclination to talk. She reclined her seat and went unconscious in a matter of seconds. She had to be beat. He recalled his training as if it was yesterday, and saying it had been hell on earth would not be an exaggeration.

Of course, the real misery for her had just begun. Not that it was going to be any better for him. Someday, somehow, he would find a way to get even with Torsten for this.