

Deal

By Jill Irving

Camp Barstow

Summer, my favorite time of year! Every year since I was seven, Dad has made arrangements for me to be involved in a Summer Marine Corp program, affectionately known as Kid's Boot Camp. Okay, I realize it's not really boot camp, not as difficult. It's not like anyone really thinks kids should go through true boot camp. But it's a chance to teach us military brats the way of life that our folks follow and instill discipline. But they also teach us skills that might actually help us in the real world, like teamwork, problem-solving and self-defense. Granted, they don't teach you twenty ways to kill a man with your bare hands and I've never shot anything more powerful than a pistol with blanks, but it's more than a lot of kids know. It's much better than school. I can count on eight weeks of having a real place in the world that I earn.

Barstow was in California. It wasn't the first time dad had been assigned in California, but we arrived here just after school got out, so everyone was new. They divided the camp up into four age groups, each having a little more physical difficulty and more chances to show our teamwork and leadership abilities. I hadn't quite made it into the final category, so I was one of the oldest in the third grouping. There were only three other girls in the program, one of us in each age grouping. We had a separate wing of the barracks from the boys so we'd have separate showers and privacy. There were fifteen "campers" in our grouping.

First day was like any other camp. They had us meet and form lines in our squad or "chalk". So we all lined up like good soldiers and had the drill sergeant tell us all what pansies we were. The language is probably cleaner than real boot camp, but I'm sure it feels the same. Then we're all sent off to get our equipment and find our bunks. Unlike real boot camp, we aren't all forced to get the hair buzz, although the service is available for those who aren't "girly-girls" about their hair.

First time I went to camp I had my hair buzzed. Mom freaked. Even though mom doesn't have a lot to do with my life, there are some little concessions I've made to keep the peace. One is about the hair. No buzz-cuts! She wants me to be recognizable as a girl, even if I won't dress like one. Me, I kind of liked the buzz-cut, my head stayed cool and it didn't take long to wash. But hey I was seven years old then, boys had cooties anyway! So I stay out of the barber line now, and keep my hair long enough to be recognizable as...well...hair.

In the barracks, I had my first run-in. TJ, the girl in the older group, took one look at me and sized me up as competition. Heck, maybe she thought I was in her chalk. I was taller than her. She hip checked me walking into the bunk room.

"Stay out of my way!" She hissed at me.

Now, I could have played this one of two ways. One would have made every day an adventure for the rest of camp, but I figured it didn't make a difference, she wasn't in my chalk. "I'll do my best. Since I'm in chalk 3 and you're in 4, I'm not likely to be in your way too much." I looked around the large bunk room. "So the only competition we've really got is over bunks." I gestured to the room. "So let's make this easy...take your pick!"

TJ took a second look at me, probably trying to refigure my age. Then she glanced around the cavernous space.

"There are enough bunks here for each of us to take up six and still not be in each other's way." I added hefting my bag more firmly on my shoulder.

TJ stomped into the room and threw her duffel down on the bunk in the center of the room. She turned back and glared at me.

"You really chalk 3?"

"Really, truly!" I announced with a grin. I crossed into the room and threw my bag on the nearest bunk.

"I figured you for a challenge to my command." She plunked down on her bunk.

"Eight years, eight different camps. I know how things work, but I don't stay in place long enough to work up to leadership." I started emptying my duffel.

"Doesn't matter!" She flipped over her shoulder. "You're as big as anyone in your chalk, I bet. In fact, I bet you run circles around them." She finally smiled.

"Yeah, well...they're guys...that's not hard."

"True." She agreed.

After that TJ and I had no issues. Funny how backing down sometimes is the best method of dealing with folks! Dad would be amazed that I could do it. Actually, my folks are always amazed at the fact that I seem to get along very well at camp, and make enemies like crazy at school. I don't understand why they can't see the difference.

Eight weeks! For eight weeks we're all equal, all trying to find our place. It doesn't matter how many times you went to the same camp, or if you were local...you still have to earn your place from the start. It means I'm on equal footing. Usually I start in a new place mid school year. So along with having no friends, I don't have those first few days of school when everyone is allowed to feel around for their place. When I come in, everyone else has their place and I have to prove myself over and over again. It's just...different!

We met again an hour later, lined up in chinks. They introduced our chalk leader, his name was Mike Summers. Mike was such a new Marine that he was still wet behind the ears...but it was supposed to make him more "accessible" to us. He'd just gone through basic training six months before and he'd gone to brat camp a few times while he was in school. He actually asked for the assignment, so at least he wanted to

hang out with us kids. Problem was Mike wasn't a leader. I could tell immediately...some folks are made for command. Mike wasn't!

Jerry Riddell was first in the line, we called him Green Bean. He was built like a distance runner, kind of tall and skinny. Actually, he was a distance runner, pretty darn fast too. Like me, he'd run in a couple marathons. Although unlike me, he really liked it! So Green Bean and I decided to run together. We figured we'd get in a good 10K before breakfast just to keep in shape.

I enjoy running, there's nothing like feeling the power of your own body performing at peak, but 26 miles is a bit much. But then, I didn't sign up for them for fun, it was father-daughter bonding. The first time was when I was younger; we lived in Newport, RI. Dad thought it would be fun to run in the Boston Marathon. So we trained together and ran it together. I didn't run again for a month after we finished, but it was a good experience! Second time, I didn't finish...don't tell Green Bean...we were in California then, and it was freaking hot. I ended up getting heatstroke and spending some quality time in the health center. Actually, Dad didn't finish either, though he might have if I hadn't fallen at his side. He didn't seem too disturbed that we didn't finish, though. That was something, since I hated to disappoint him.

Next in line was Petey Stokes. Poor kid, labeled for life as Petey...rather than being able to graduate to Pete or Peter. The kid was short, barely topping five foot. He was well overdue for a major growth spurt, but I heard his mom was tiny. Poor kid might be stuck short forever. That's probably why he was in brat camp. He needed to learn to defend himself against the big bads. Pete was a good kid though, really dependable.

Casper was next. Don't remember what his real name was. They called him Casper because he was white as a ghost. He wasn't quite an albino, but darn close. Almost no pigmentation in his skin and his hair was platinum blond. He had really pretty blue eyes though! I usually don't use nicknames if they are derogatory, but it didn't take long to realize Casper was the name he was used to responding to. He didn't seem to mind.

Next was Jed Greystoke, like in Tarzan. With a name like that, he quickly introduced us all to his preferred nickname, Grey. Actually Grey fit him pretty well. He had these steel grey eyes that could accuse you or curse with a glance...and he wasn't afraid to use them. Grey liked sci-fi a lot, so we ended up talking about it in our downtime. Grey could easily have been a nerd if he'd let himself, so he volunteered for camp to toughen himself up. I respected him for that, heck, I understood him for that.

Devlin was the most memorable person in the group. He had kind of long dark hair and a devil-may-care attitude that, alternatively, had everyone gnashing their teeth and following him into hell. We started calling him Devil somewhere along the way when he was up to trouble. He'd just shoot us a cheeky grin and launch into some convoluted reasoning as to why whatever was a good idea. He even convinced us, more times than I care to admit.

Devlin was the one who started calling me Deal. He said Delia was too girlie for our chalk. And I was much too tough to be a girl...course he knew just what to say to tick me off. Then he told everyone I was the one who was always "dealing" with everything anyway! That made sense...so the name stuck.

Devlin was a little shorter than me, but I figured there was a growth spurt in his future too. His dad was well over 6' tall. Devlin liked physical activity, more than the rest. He lifted and took martial arts. It didn't take long until the two of us were sparring and wrestling for fun and practice. Maybe he wouldn't have chosen to fight a girl, but there really wasn't any other competition for him. No one else had the same training or strength that he did. Pretty soon, the boys would be catching up to me, but I was still at an age where I was mostly full-sized and they were mostly not.

Most of the rest of the chalk weren't memorable, they were pretty much followers or sheep. That's not a bad thing; you need them in the military. But when it comes to having your butt on the line, you want a Devil or Grey around as backup.

So we all got along pretty well in the chalk, and with large group showers, TJ and I never got in each other's way. Although the first time I walked into the shower when she was there, I was little surprised. She looked me over closely, like she had in the bunkhouse, and whistled. It was a bit embarrassing.

"Deal, don't ever let them see you like that." She grinned at me, nodding her head toward my naked form. "They'll never see you the same way again."

She let it ride at that, refusing to explain. I suppose I should have understood, but maybe I didn't want to. With the chalk, I tried to be one of the guys. Biggest worry I ever had was that Devil would try to feel me up while wrestling. Strangely, it never was an issue.

So we turned into a pretty good chalk. We had the usual hijinks but generally did what we were supposed to and stayed out of trouble. Generally! Sometimes Devil got the better of us. We all had to suffer through some KP and bathroom cleanup...but mostly we worked as a team.

Seventh week we were given our big "tactical mission". Success of the mission would allow us to "graduate". For the kids on the edge of an age-grouping, graduation ensured being in the next chalk the following year, for those who weren't, there was still a nice shiny medal for their hat. I wanted my medal, and to graduate to chalk four. I had never had to face the shame of not 'graduating' and I wasn't planning on it this time.

Our mission was to remove several canisters of "nuclear waste" (in actuality I think it was that nasty green hi-c) from a deep water cave that was underwater during high tide. We had one day for planning and would be carried out to the spot with full gear the with an eight hour window for completing the task (low-tide). Our team was to be evaluated on planning, teamwork/cooperation, and the usual leadership/following orders. We were to have an opportunity to use the spelunking skills that we'd been training in and might have the opportunity to use our diving skills as well.

It was a challenging exercise for our chalk, but Mike was supposed to be an expert, and our drill sergeant and a group of marines were on alert and ready to help us if we got in trouble. I was looking forward to the exercise, it was the most interesting "real-world" example of the skills we were learning that I'd been involved in.

During the planning stage, Mike more or less let us run through all our ideas. These ideas ran the gambit of just sending in the strongest of us to taking turns lowering everyone down and then having to climb out fifty feet at a time. In reality, the operation would have been managed in the former matter by the real marines...Dad and an elite team of no more than four would be sent down in full gear to grab it. Since it was a teamwork exercise, no one was expecting us to use that approach. It's too bad we didn't. If Devil, Grey, Casper and I had been the only ones to go in, things would have gone like clockwork.

The morning of the exercise dawned overcast and foggy, but the weather report promised that it would burn off with the sun by mid-morning. Hi-tide was expected on the fives; low-tide around 11 a.m. We were scheduled for pickup at 9am. Plenty of time to double- and triple- check all our equipment. Mike went over everyone's packs and personally filled all our air cans, just in case.

The drop went seamlessly. The chopper was about twenty-five feet above the cave entrance. We each took turns lowering ourselves onto the ledge in front of it. Devil and I went first and spiked our safety lines. Devil was to belay everyone down (though I'm taller he still had me by at least a dozen pounds). I was to lead the way in. We had to drop in the first fifty or so feet before we'd hit a slight downward grade that would lead us to the canister sites.

We were each wearing about twenty pounds of equipment, including our pseudo-hazard suits. We weren't required to put on the hood of the bio suits until we hit the water. My theory was some of the smaller kids would be hurting in less than an hour. So the goal was to get in and get out, but keep an eye on them. Each of the older kids, Casper, Grey, Devil, Green Bean, Pete, and I were all expected to keep track of one or two of the younger ones. Since they were the same kids we were assigned throughout most of the training, my kids were used to staying close and following commands from me. Pete had a little more trouble with his charges; although he was older, he was actually smaller than one of them. It was difficult for him to keep authority with them. Worse, it really wasn't necessary, Green Bean and Casper each had one kid, and they could have each doubled up leaving Pete to just take care of himself.

Keith, one of Pete's brats, thought it would be cool to check out a side cave while we were waiting for the whole chalk to climb down. He had his partner in crime Matt distract Pete while he made his get away. He didn't really intend to cause trouble, but you don't fool around in caves, especially not caves that can fill up with water in no time flat. Apparently Keith found a small tidal pool which intrigued him. He wasn't gone long enough for us to notice so no one slapped him down for breaking line and not following orders.

Mike was the last one down to the bottom of the drop, but he moved up front before we continued downwards. I figured he should be in the middle so his orders could be heard by everyone, but he insisted as most experienced he should lead. I moved my group towards the middle to be relay-man, so I was closest to Pete's miscreants. I could still hear Sgt. Miller's voice echoing down from the top and both Devil and Mike were

carrying radios to be in constant contact with command. Actually, I had an extra wrapped up in my bag just in case. Never hurts to be prepared!

The rain started coming down once we were all down there. Go figure, the weather report was wrong. We moved out slowly as the grade got steeper, it also got slippery with the rain. We dropped another set of safety lines to hold on to after Casper's kid landed hard on his butt.

I had heard that the marines who dropped the canisters were in and out in just under an hour. I had hoped we could be done in double that time. I kept a close eye on Sean and Bob, my kids, and glared over at Keith and Matt whenever they started to act up. The slipperiness of the slope caused a couple of the kids to fall a bit, and it was our job to keep them from sliding the rest of the way down. At the point of day we were at I figured that we'd still have some water in the canister "room".

Mike had a detailed map with escapes charted out by the team that dropped the canisters, but the rest of us were working by the sonar and aerial pictures that were taken to make the mission realistic. I knew there was another drop a couple hundred feet in and then we'd have three caverns to grab the canisters from. We'd been assigned teams to go into each cavern and grab our canister. Each team had a leader and one person who was the "radiation expert" to handle the canister. One team stayed above as the rescue team, Mike led that team. Grey, Devil and I each lead one of the cavern teams and each had selected our "radiation experts" based solely on swimming ability with all the equipment in consideration of the additional weight of the canisters. I think each of us would have preferred to take it ourselves, but we needed to be ready to help the others.

Mike didn't want all the teams down at once, too many things to divide his attention; problem is it takes longer that way. By the time we reached the final drop point, it was well after low-tide, the water had started rising again up over the canisters. This meant we all had to be in full "radiation" gear along with diving gear. Some of the younger kids were a bit nervous about all the equipment. I figured we'd be better off leaving them with Mike, a nervous, panicky diver is the last thing that we needed down there. But Mike insisted that we all needed to participate. (That didn't carry much weight with me since he had to have a team of "rescuers" anyway.)

As predicted, a couple of the kids spooked underwater. It wasn't really dangerous, but each of the team leaders ended up having to half-carry one of our team out. The whole process took way too long. Mike should have sent the first teams up the slope while the others were diving, but he didn't want to break up the group. I understood his point, safety, but this was taking too long, and climbing that slippery slope wouldn't be fast with twelve tired kids in tow, especially since we could see the rain water was still flowing down the grade.

Pete's team was sent up the slope first, another poor choice on Mike's part. He should have sent Devil or me up. I was ready to start arguing with him, but the tight look on his face made me realize he knew what we were up against. The tide had nearly filled the caverns before we even started back up.

The slope was even more challenging on the way up, even with the safety lines. Pete's trio took twenty minutes to get up to where the ground leveled off. If Devil or I had been

up there first, we would have dropped belay lines and helped pull the kids up, but Pete was too small and too inexperienced to be useful at that. Pete was under orders to hold tight until the next trio reached the top. Grey was in that grouping and was under orders to start leading back to the main drop point.

We still had no belay lines. I could hear the concern in the voices on the radio of the command post with Sgt. Miller. Mike, Devil and I are still all at the bottom. I was getting really antsy. Green Bean's trio was ordered to start up. I took one look at Devil and he nodded his head.

"Request to speak freely, sir." I addressed Mike smartly.

"What is it, Deal?" Mike barely looked at me; he was watching the rising water levels in the caverns. It was starting to splash up over the lip and onto the ground we were standing on.

"Sir, I believe Devil or I should head up immediately and drop a belay line. If we're here much longer these kids aren't going to be able to climb that slope."

"Are you questioning my command?" He sounded way angry....way over the top considering the concern I could hear from Sgt. Miller.

"Sir, I am suggesting that speed is a necessity at this point, unless you want us swimming out." I examined the rocks up the slope.

Devil jumped in, "Sir, the rocks are such that if we get caught in water down here, someone could get lost in an air pocket and not be able to make it up to dry ground. We need belayers to pull the kids up."

"I need the experienced divers down here!" He stated his tone brooking no argument.

"Grey would be been perfect down here. Casper is also good. Let Devil and I head up and drop down the belay lines, we can get the kids out of here faster." I argued. If it was insubordination, my next step would be worse. I was about one second away from grabbing Devil's radio and make my plea directly to Sgt. Miller.

I could see the beginnings of panic in his eyes, when Mike finally dropped his shoulders, and said, "Make it so."

Devil and I were on the safety line before the echoes of the order had stopped. We made good time back up the line and sent Grey back down after us. He yelled down to clear the line, and made a quick sliding descent.

Pete started towards the main cavern with the four kids that were already up there. I knew that could be trouble, but at least they were above the water line.

Devil had a line down before I'd set myself. Another was down in minutes. I yelled for the littlest kids/worst swimmers to be sent up first. Each of us was practically pulling them up with very little assistance from them on the safety line. However, it was a lot faster getting them up to us this way. Within forty-five minutes, we'd pulled most of them out of there. The water was up to Mike's knees, but the littlest kids were out. Casper came up to lead the rest of the kids out to the top. Devil and I were both getting a little tired, so we were going to need a bit of a rest before we started pulling them back up to the surface.

I figured we could call for help to get them out, but if we did it might reflect badly on our mission. I'd wait to see what the Sgt. said when we got up there.

With the last folks finally climbing out; Mike and Grey both climbed out without assistance, giving us rest time; we had the ropes ready just in case, but didn't have to bear any weight to help them.

Mike and Grey headed up with the rest of the kids, while Devil and I recovered our lines. When we reached the top there was chaos because Keith was missing. He had disappeared somewhere before Pete had reached the top with his group.

Mike was starting to organize search parties, but once again we needed to think about getting them out of there. It was still raining, fairly hard and that would speed up the process of the cavern filling. This time, I waved him aside before starting in.

"We need to get some of these kids out of here. You should report in to Sgt. Miller and have them organize belayers from the top. You stay with the brats and let your team leaders search for Keith." He looked ready to argue again. "Knowing Keith, he wandered off because he doesn't respect Pete's lead. He should have been moved to another group long ago."

Devil added in, "If he's just wandered off, he'll probably respond to Grey, Deal or I. If he's hurt we're going to need a paramedic team to get him out. We might as well get them busy topside." It's funny sometimes, if either Devil or I try to argue, Mike gets haughty, but if we're in agreement, he starts to think we might be right.

"All right!" He pulled out the radio while yelling out instructions. "Casper, Green Bean and Petey, stay here and wait for belay assistance from above. Deal, Grey and Devil spread out and find our MIA." He was on the radio before anyone had started to move. As I turned back towards the deeper caverns, I saw the rest of the chalk circling up.

"I knew we should have just come down with Casper and gotten in and out!" I murmured under my breath to the others as we rushed back in.

I could hear the water and figured it was partially up the slope by now. There were a couple side caves off from the nearly flat surface we were on...each of us took one and went to look for our missing troublemaker, yelling as we went.

Grey called out a couple minutes later, so Devil and I went running. The little twit had slipped down underneath a rock to get closer to the tidal pool, now he was stuck and water was rising. Both Grey and Devil had some width on me, so I was volunteered to go down. I removed my pack and my "hazard" gear. Devil setup a harness for me so he could keep a grip on me at all times. I slid down underneath the rock with no problems, but I could see why the kid was having trouble getting out. Grey dropped another rope to pull Keith out.

I slid down the tidal passage a few feet and found Keith huddling on top of rock just out of the water. It looked like his foot was caught. I tried moving his foot out, but it was pretty securely stuck. I pulled my knife and cut his laces and pulled his foot out of the boot. It looked pretty battered, as if he'd fought a while to get it free on his own. When I looked up, he had tears in his eyes, but he didn't say a word. Apparently he'd been

yelling for quite a while, but all the noise we were making and the sound of the tidal pool itself drowned him out.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered, his voice sounding more like a croak than anything else. He watched as I was able to pull his boot from the crevice.

“Let’s just get out of here. I’m sure the Sergeant will have plenty to say then, so I’m not wasting any time now.” I helped him to his feet and slipped the tie-less boot onto his swollen foot.

I watched him tie the rope I gave him into a harness and then double-checked it. Then I pulled the rope hard, and yelled up “ON BELAY”

“BELAY ON” I heard Grey repeat back.

I looked at Keith and he nodded his readiness. “CLIMBING”

“CLIMB ON” I heard from above.

I gave Keith a boost to start grabbing at the rocks to help himself up. Within minutes, Devil had his hand and had snaked him up topside. The boys shifted him aside and changed positions to get me out of there.

I felt Devil pull at the rope and yelled up again. “ON BELAY”

“BELAY ON”

“CLIMBING”

“CLIMB ON” There were no hand- or foot- holds immediately reachable. So I jumped up and grabbed the closest handhold. I could feel the momentary flex of my line and then started feeling the tug from Devil’s tow.

I felt totally confident in my safety, Devil and I had worked together enough to have complete faith in each others abilities. I kept reaching up for higher handholds until I could finally find a place to put my feet down, then I was at the narrow rock ledge trying to slide back through. The difficulty with that is I needed too much leverage to pull myself up. Grey was ready for me though; he grabbed my forearms, and I let go of my handhold allowing him to slide me up through the crevice. I could feel the rock scraping against my skin, but it was only a moment before I was lying by Devil’s side where he was resting after the strain.

“You’ve got to lose some weight, Deal.” He grinned over at me, tongue-in-cheek.

“You’re getting positively fat! It never used to take two of us to pick you up!”

I could see Grey’s dimples showing through the serious look he was trying to give.

“Let’s get out of here.” I suggested as I bounced back to my feet. Grey and I grabbed arms and lifted Keith between us, as Devil lead us back to group, calling for an EVAC lift for Keith.

When we reached the final ascent, there were three belay lines pulling up the last couple kids. Green Bean and Casper were already top side to take command of the unit. There was an EVAC gurney ready for us when we got there. Pete rode up with Keith to keep the tray from hitting any bumps or rocks on the way up. I wouldn’t be surprised if he gave Keith a piece of his mind on the way.

Mike was last man out and I was happy to have some assistance on the lift, my arms were starting to feel like lead weights. I was wondering how this little disaster would be seen and whether I'd have another pin for my hat or not. Honestly, I think that we did pretty well...but Keith may have blown it for us. We'd just have to wait and see what Sgt. Miller has to say in debriefing.

It didn't take long for things to happen. Mike finished up the summer with us, but he was scheduled for transfer. Apparently Sgt. Miller agreed with my assessment that he wasn't meant for command. Everyone in the unit, except Keith, graduated. Devil and I received commendations for outstanding performance and for sticking to our guns when we knew we were right.

Devil and I had an aside with Sgt. Miller when he told us what was happening. We told him what our original thoughts were. He agreed that a real mission probably would have worked that way, but the goal was to include everyone. However, he did believe it would have been wise to have the smaller group make the dive and to have started sending the kids up, or even wiser, not have them come all the way down once we realized how slick the path was because of the rain. A good leader needs to take into consideration such things and revise plans based on it. The sergeant said he thought we both had a future in command if we kept it up, and "stayed out of trouble". We'll see.

When it was time to leave, it was hard to say goodbye to Devil, Grey, Casper, Green Bean and even TJ. Devil was headed back to Quantico and Grey to Parris Island. Casper and Green Bean were both from LA and were headed back there. TJ laughed when she told me she was headed to Jersey.

"If you're ever in Jersey, look me up." She laughed as she handed me a small package.

"What's this?" I asked curious at the idea of a gift from her.

"Just a little something to remember me by..." She grinned as I gave her that puzzled look. I opened the brown paper wrapped package. Inside was a little black dress, and I do mean little, made of some stretchy material. I looked back with an eyebrow raised. "Just in case, you ever decide to let people know you are a girl." She laughed as she jumped into the waiting vehicle.

Funny, I've never worn it, but I still have it in the back of one of my drawers. It helps me remember TJ and all the others from Camp Barstow.

I can't remember any time before that I'd managed to befriend so many people. I guess it's true, you live and learn. Maybe I'd finally learned how to be myself without stepping on anyone else...nah!