

# **FEAR INSTINCT**

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**ONE**  
Almost invisible.

July 1991

Basic training, boot camp, officer's candidate school, and the service academies, to different degrees, all practice the same bunch of crap, hazing. Oh, I know, hazing is not a politically correct term. Call it training discipline, if you prefer. Is this type of discipline necessary? Possibly, but it's still crap. Who gets off on this domination syndrome anyhow, the drill instructors, the upper classmen? I don't know, but those who do need to take a long look at themselves or better yet, go talk to a shrink.

The military has programs to indoctrinate combat veterans back into the sane world of civilian life. Drill instructors need the same therapy just before they start working on their latest batch of recruits. They must keep in mind that they aren't God and that each trainee is a unique person, *just like everyone else*. Most people are not cut out for military life; in fact I'm not sure anyone is. The ones who seem to fit are probably just biding their time until it's their turn to dominate. Prison guards soon come to hate the inmates under their control, usually with good reasons. DI's do the same, but with no good reasons.

A Marine gunnery sergeant, on one hand, may have to send several of his grunts into dangerous places resulting in their deaths, so he can't afford close personal attachments. But DI's? I don't think so. They should be tough, but with compassion. Instead, they get off on tears from *momma's boys*. They choose one or two boys to work on. Most likely they can't even tell you why they make the choices they do, but anything that makes someone stand out makes them vulnerable to the drill instructor's perverse attacks. Except in rare cases, once you are singled out, your fate is set. Your days left in the military are few. Tactics vary, but POW interrogators could take lessons from DI's, and maybe they have: sleep deprivation, fatigue,

isolation, etc. They work on the chosen misfits until they quit. But occasionally a recruit takes a faster way out; he goes AWOL or in extreme cases, commits suicide. I'll bet some DI's even get off on that.

The worst thing that can happen to one of these masochistic nuts is to fail in breaking one of the *sissies* that they have chosen. That rarely happens, but when it does, the DI's are the ones who feel as if they have failed.

I enlisted in the Air Force for one reason, to learn something. My growing-up years were spent on a small farm in northern Michigan where the only thing I knew of the outside world, I learned from TV. I knew a lot about the wilds of the north: how to hunt, fish, how to shoot a gun and a bow. I was more at home following deer runs through the forest in the middle of the night than in downtown Lincoln City, a town of ten thousand in northern Michigan.

I loved going to movies, but even there I felt exposed until the lights dimmed and I could feel alone. My isolation was not self-inflicted. It was Sven Johanson's fault. He was the high school bully. I first met him when I was fourteen and started my freshman year at Lincoln City High. Sven was a senior and about as close to being a professional high school student as the law would allow. He was almost twenty, six-two and two hundred and thirty pounds. Few adults dared stand up to him. Although I was a wiry ninety-pound speedster, I couldn't come close to defending myself from this behemoth, and he developed a special vendetta for me when he found he couldn't make me cry.

For self-preservation, every one of my high school classmates shunned me to keep from attracting Sven's ire.

I know that Sven hated school almost as much as I did, so I never understood why he didn't just quit, but I came to the conclusion that he loved picking on little boys, gave him a feeling of superiority or something. God knows, except for his size, he was superior to no one. He'd have made a great drill instructor, but I doubt if he could pass the tests. DI's do have to know how to read, I think, although I'm not positive about that.

I moved from southern Michigan to live with my great-aunt and uncle after my parents were killed in a commercial plane crash in August of 1987. They had left an inheritance to be given to me on my

twenty-first birthday, most of which I decided to give to my aunt and uncle. We had had some difficult times, while I was living with them, though they never said anything to me about it. They argued against receiving a share of my inheritance, but the truth was, they needed it more than I did. After deducting their share, I knew there wouldn't be enough left for college, so I enlisted in the United States Air Force to work for the college bonus offered by the government, enough to make up the difference. Basic training was where I came to my conclusions about drill instructors. The Air Force called them TI's, Tactical Instructors.

We had three TI's assigned to our barracks. At first I didn't get the attention of any of them. I was quite average, around six feet tall, and one hundred and sixty-five pounds. I wasn't particularly ugly, handsome, or nerdy, so I stayed out of their scrutiny. I made one big mistake, though. I did very well on the series of aptitude tests given to all new recruits. I don't think I did all that well on the whole battery of tests, but there were some areas that I scored exceptionally high. That was my mistake. When one of the counselors asked the TI's about me, they didn't even know who I was. It embarrassed them that one of their *faggots* had escaped their attention, and to remedy that, they came right after me.

"Flint. Get your skinny ass in here, on the double," the ranking instructor screamed from his room at the end of the barracks.

I was scared. What had I done? I had seen how almost everyone else had been yelled at and threatened, but so far I had stayed clean and had escaped his attention. I couldn't think of what to do except try to appear calm. Others talked back or cried, but neither approach worked. The first got you a trip out back after dark; the second got you never-ending ridicule in front of the whole troop. The trip out back was better, I thought.

All three TI's were waiting.

"Airman Basic Flint reporting as ordered, sir."

"Don't sir me, you asshole. I'm a real person, not a 90-day wonder."

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Who are you, Flint? Who do you think you are?"

I hesitated.

“Answer me boy. Can’t you talk? Are you dumb *and deaf*? We already know you’re dumb. What do you think you’re getting away with? Gonna just sneak through basic without proper discipline? Well, I’ll tell you something. We’re over half way through, but you’re not gonna make it. I’m gonna phase you back. You’ll have the pleasure of doing this all over again, and I’ll make sure you stay right here in my barracks. Well, say something. Don’t just stand there with your thumb up your ass.”

“Sergeant, what have I done?”

“Don’t come in here and start firing questions at me, you little bastard. I ask the questions, no one else. Understand? Well, do you?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Who do you think you are, some genius or something? One of the aptitude counselors wants to talk to you, said you did real good on the tests. I know you, Flint. The only way you could ever do good on a test would be by cheating. How did you cheat, Flint?”

“How can you cheat on an aptitude test, Sergeant?”

“Was that another question, Flint?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir? You mother frigging son of a bitch, what did I say about calling me sir, and about questions?”

I hesitated again.

“Airman Basic Flint, when I ask you a question, answer it. Don’t think, just answer. Now, get your ass in the latrine and get to work. I’ll be in there to inspect it in one hour. If it isn’t up to my standards, you’ll be on KP tomorrow morning. You’ll be there all week, and we’ll be waiting for you right here every night. Your ass is mine Airman, and I’m going to kick it every night for the rest of your stay here. I’m betting it won’t be for long.”

My fate was sealed. I would be heading to the mess hall at five AM the next morning, and they would kick my butt every night like they were threatening, but they won’t break me. I’d never quit. He was nothing compared to Sven, and I survived him. In a way, Sven was my basic training for this bullshit.

My day on KP went fast, too fast, an unusual feeling for someone pulling Kitchen Police duty. I had a good idea of what was waiting for me at the barracks, and the three TI’s had all day to plan my welcome back. They planned well.

They took turns working me over for half an hour and they knew what they were doing. When they were finished, though I was hurting from my little toe to the hair on top of my head, they had not left a mark.

As I dragged my body up the steps to the barracks, one of the TI's laughed and said, "Can't wait until tomorrow night, asshole. This was just a warm-up. Gonna get real serious."

The next day just before lunchtime, as I was painfully wiping off the tables with a mixture of vinegar and water, a staff sergeant approached me and said, "Airman Basic Flint? Come with me."

After last night, I was scared. "Where are we going, Sergeant? Did you see the mess sergeant?"

"It's okay, Airman, I already talked to him. You're done for the day. One of the counselors wants to talk to you."

Now I was really scared. What will the TI's do to me when they find out that I left the mess hall early? I guess appearing calm and collected was the worst option I could have chosen. I just hoped I could hold on for six evenings out back with the TI's. It was not going to be fun.

**TWO**  
The military two-step.

July to November 1991

The sergeant drove to the headquarters building and parked in a reserved spot.

“Major Hileman is waiting for you in his office. Go inside, and turn right, third office on the right. You know how to report. Don’t you?”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

“Good luck, Flint.”

Inside, I approached the major’s office and knocked once, a single sharp rap on the closed door. I was nervous. I had never reported to an officer before and didn’t know what to expect.

The major’s booming response rattled the door on its hinges.

“Enter.”

Trying to look calm, I stepped inside marched to the front of the desk and saluted, “Airman Basic Flint reporting as ordered, sir.”

The Army major was one of the largest and meanest looking men I had ever seen. Just looking at his scowling face had me shaking. Living in northern Michigan, with its ninety percent white and nine percent Indian population left me in awe of blacks. Our total exposure to black people came from the news out of Detroit depicting only the criminal element. Major Hileman was an awesome man regardless of his color, but he was black, and ferocious looking. I learned later, that looks can be deceiving, but in his regard, his looks were right on. Do not get on his bad side.

The major stood up returned the salute and said in a soft, resonating voice, “Have a seat, Airman. Is it Victor or Vic?”

“Vic, sir.”

“At ease, Vic. As you probably heard, you did very well on the aptitude tests and especially well on one set in particular.”

“My TI informed me, sir.”

“TI? Oh yeah, TI. What barracks is that?”

“3404, sir.”

“Well, no matter. You are out of there as of now. Come on, Vic, relax, this meeting is a good thing.”

“Thank you, sir,” I answered trying not to grin.

“How was it Vic, living there I mean?”

“I was handling it, sir.”

“Yes, I studied your psychological profile. I’m sure you were, but I doubt if your drill instructor could handle it.”

“Sir?”

“Not going to get into that right now. I’m here to inform you of your next assignment, and to ask you to take some more tests. Is that okay with you, more tests I mean?”

Shocked at the major’s polite demeanor, I hesitated and then answered, “Yes, sir.”

“To start with, you will be reassigned to your permanent station, Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, where you will take the next battery of aptitude tests and start training to become a survival instructor. After you graduate, your responsibilities will be to train military personnel how to live under extreme conditions from the frigid wastes of Greenland to the jungles along the equator. You’re not supposed to finish basic training for another four weeks, but the day you finish these tests you will officially graduate from basic training and be promoted to Airman Third Class. I’m pretty sure that’s the correct designation, though I’m not up on the Air Force enlisted ranks, one stripe anyway. After you complete the survival training, in about three months, you will be promoted to Airman Second Class, two stripes.”

“Now comes the voluntary part. By the end of your training we will have determined if you qualify for the next step. As soon as you accept, you will be promoted to Airman First Class for the next training period and then to the rank of Staff Sergeant at the end of that. That’s Airman Basic to Staff Sergeant in about a year. That alone should scare you.

“I have to tell you, Vic, the goal of this training is confidential, and as you take these tests you may be able to figure it all out. My advice to you is to stick with survival, and tell me to shove it if I ever

call you back. I can't say any more, but keep an open mind as you progress through the testing. Just do your best, even if you don't like the way the tests are pointing. You are required to finish them, but after that, you're on your own, and then forget you even took the tests. Even the identity of people taking these tests is classified."

"Yes sir, how long before I get the results?"

"You may never get them, but if you do well, I will contact you in about three months. We are pushing your security clearance through, should be complete by then. If you don't hear from me at that time, you will never hear from me. There's another benefit I almost forgot to mention. You will have time to attend college classes, if you're interested. We can arrange your training to work around any academic schedule you may need."

"Thank you, sir."

The major stood up and reached across the desk to shake my hand. His huge hand swallowed mine like a bass taking a minnow.

"Go back to your barracks, son. You will find your gear all packed. I have ordered a room for you at the visitor's quarters where your travel orders are waiting. Incidentally, your DI, I'm sorry, your TI believes that you have asked for a discharge. He jumped to that conclusion on his own and I didn't correct him."

"I'm not sure I like that, sir. He'll think he's won."

"Hmmm, you're right. Tell him whatever you want. If he gets belligerent, have him call me. I'll take it from there. Okay, Airman, head out and good luck. You'll need it."

"Sir, may I ask a question?"

He nodded to me.

"Why an Army officer and not an Air Force officer?"

"No more questions. On your way, recruit."

I saluted and left.

Back at barracks 3404, with the rest of the troop at the dining hall, the TI's were anxiously awaiting the opportunity to get in their parting shots at me.

"Well, I see the pussy has returned. Got the major to have us pack your duffle bag for you so you wouldn't have to face us for long. Kind of an insult from a quitter like you. Did you cry real tears for him?"

“*Quitter?* I didn’t quit. I’m getting transferred that’s all. Going to finish my basic training elsewhere, at my next base.”

“Not what I heard, you stinking liar. I heard you asked for a discharge, so you could go home to mommy. Oh that’s right, your mommy croaked didn’t she? I mean your auntie, then. Didn’t surprise me none. Always knew you’d quit from your first day here. You just couldn’t hack it, could you? I’ll bet the major didn’t believe you when you tried to tell him that we beat you up last night.”

“Beat me up? Huh, that’s what that was? Next time, Sergeant, tell me ahead of time so I’ll know what’s going on. I remember you three acting all queer around me. I did tell him about that. He said not to worry; it’s already on your records.”

“What? Get the hell out of here, you little jerk-off. The next time I see your civilian ass, I’ll show you what a beating really is. You’ll know from the broken bones.”

“I told you, I’m not getting a discharge. It would take someone a lot tougher than you three to get me to quit. You guys are amateurs.”

“Feel pretty tough you lying little twerp? The next time I see you, the major won’t be around to save your ass.”

“There you go, acting all gay again. You have a real fixation on that. You know you should keep that to yourself.”

I couldn’t help the big grin on my face as I picked up my duffle bag, hefted it to my shoulder, and stepped around the red-faced sergeants. As I veered around them, the TI nearest me grabbed the heavy bag and spun me around with it almost throwing me to the floor.

As I regained my balance, I saw a shadow fill and blacken the doorway.

I yelled, “Atten-hut.”

The major walked in. Although the three TI’s were standing rigidly at attention, they seemed to shrivel as the huge major stopped directly in front of them, dwarfing them all.

In his soft, bass voice, he said, “Airman Flint, get out of here. Don’t want witnesses.”

I walked out of the barracks, and headed toward the visitor’s quarters. As I walked away, I could hear the sergeant’s voices, but not the major’s. He was still speaking softly. I couldn’t quite understand

what the TI's were yelling, but when I glanced back, the building seemed to be shaking on its foundation, TI therapy in action.

My orders gave me five days travel time from San Antonio, Texas, to Fort Walton Beach, Florida. I only needed one. The beaches in Florida were as white as the snow on the farm in January, beautiful, and the three days I spent on the beach were a welcome break from basic training, not to mention the nice lady I met. She was wearing the tiniest bikini I had ever imagined, and she was a big girl, but not fat at all. Just under six feet with the longest and whitest legs I had ever seen. I am nineteen, but look older, and she was almost twice my age, but at the restaurants, she was always carded, me never. How are they going to get me back on the farm?

She did not talk about herself much, but she had been divorced for almost a year and had a three year old staying with her ex up north somewhere, my guess, from her accent, and natural blond hair, Minnesota. Her name was Heidi. I was destined to run into her again, but it did not turn out well.

Once I reported in, it took a week to get settled, complete the tests, and start my survival classes. The major was wrong. Although I thought a lot about the tests I had taken, I couldn't figure out where they were going. They were all psychological in nature with a theme revolving around killing, murder, assassination, and war. What did that have to do with anything? Our country wasn't at war. We don't condone assassinations, and even if we did, what did that have to do with an Air Force flunky like me? There are thousands of men in the other branches of the military trained to kill. Special Forces, Marines, and Navy SEALs just to mention a few. The Air Force kills from long distance with missiles, fighters, and bombers, never up close and personal.

I finally came to the decision that I was being trained to escort snipers into remote areas to kill the bad guys, when we go to war again. I guess they want to make sure I don't have any qualms about killing the enemy. I don't know if I could actually squeeze the trigger, but I could certainly help a sniper get into position. But still, why an airman and especially, why all the secrecy?

Just before our Thanksgiving break, I was sitting in class taking my final exam when the instructor got a call.

He said, "Hey Flint, this is for you."

I took the phone from him. Before I could identify myself I heard Major Hileman say, "Vic, report to the NCO club, now. Don't excuse yourself just leave. That's an order." He hung up without waiting for a response.

As I left the classroom the instructor said, "You don't finish this test, Flint, you fail, and you leave this building you're AWOL."

I shrugged. Picturing him telling that to the major made me smile.

Why the Non-Commissioned Officer's Club? He was an officer and I wasn't a NCO.

When I arrived, I found him sitting on the patio drinking a beer. Another beer was sitting on the opposite side of the table.

He said, "Sit down, Flint. That beer is yours. You like beer, don't you?"

"Yes sir, I do."

The major nodded and added, "Well, *Sergeant*, as you no doubt have surmised, you passed the tests, and the promotion is yours whether you accept your next assignment or not."

"Thank you, sir, but I just made Airman First a month ago."

"Got a problem with that? Before I go into too much detail, I have just two questions to ask. They are general in nature, but they will determine the full cross section of your responsibilities, if you choose to accept this assignment. Take a minute before answering. I don't want snap judgments."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, you are in the field, the United States is not at war, but you get an order to kill a man from ambush. He is unarmed, but has several armed bodyguards. Would you carry out the order?"

"Sir, what is? ? ?"

"No questions, Sergeant. Just answer: yes or no."

After a slight hesitation, I answered, "No."

"Okay, the next question, why wouldn't you follow a direct order? You are in the military. Sometimes killing is part of the job. You knew that when you signed up."

"Sir, I suppose there are situations where I could pull the trigger, but this sounds more like murder to me than a war situation. I would need a lot more justification than just an order from a superior."

With no hesitation the major said, “Vic, you’re my man. I told you to tell me to shove it if I ever offered you the job, but that was before I saw the results of these tests. I’m taking it all back. I want you, no, I need you to accept this assignment. No one approaches your qualifications. You were made for this, and it could turn out to be one of the most critical jobs of anyone in the military. To tell you the truth, I did not want an *airman* for this job. I would have taken anyone who scored anywhere near your score. It did not happen. When I saw the results of the aptitude tests you took in Texas, I thought it was a mistake. The latest tests prove otherwise.”

“Just how high did I score?”

“There is no scoring system, just pass or fail. That way no one knows how he scored in relation to his partner. In your case, most of the time, you won’t have a partner, so I can tell you. You scored perfect in every category. Someday I’ll tell you exactly what that means. Survival training was a good start for the next phase in your training. In fact it’s a prerequisite. You have gone through jungle, arctic, and desert training. The next phase will be jump school.”

“Jump as in high-jump training or long-jump training, not as in parachute-jump training. Right, sir?”

“I mean jump training as in fly high in the sky, several thousand feet up and then jump training. The parachute is optional, but I’d advise using one.”

“I have a cousin who is an ex-Marine. When he found out I had enlisted, he advised me never to volunteer for anything. I respect that advice. Sir, I am not volunteering for jump training.”

“Very good decision, Sergeant Flint. Now, if your chute doesn’t open, you won’t have to blame yourself for volunteering. Jump school starts next week.”

The major smiled and said, “Your cousin was a Marine, huh? There’s one thing you can learn from a Marine son, and that is how to salute. That’s all they do well.”

## **THREE**

Perfection impossible.

December 1991

After his meeting with Vic, Major Hileman went to a nearby hotel to defend his decision on choosing Vic over all of the other contenders.

“He’s in the Air Force, Samuel. Why him? Pick a guy from the Army or the Marines, not an Airman, for Christ’s sake.”

Major Hileman answered, “I don’t like it either, sir, but I can’t justify picking anyone else. He’s perfect, not just close to perfection, but perfect. The AI program selected eleven men, but this boy fits so well it’s like the profile was written just for him.”

“AI, huh, you mean artificial intelligence software? Still early in AI development, Samuel. Are you sure it’s that good?”

“Yes, sir, after I studied his file, I decided that AI was right on.”

“I’m not convinced. Tell me about him, your *Miracle Boy*.”

“Yes sir, I’ll start with his background.”

The major opened his briefcase and removed a folder. He opened the folder and sorted through several sheets of paper.

He summarized: “Victor Allen Flint was born in Jackson, Michigan, on March 12, 1973. He was John and Allison’s only child. Vic was staying with John’s aunt and uncle when the plane his parents were in crashed on takeoff from Detroit’s Metropolitan Airport on August 16, 1987.

The aunt and uncle became Vic’s legal guardians. In an interview, they said Vic never shed a tear when told of the accident. His only reaction was to run to the top of a hill behind the farmhouse and spend the day by himself staring off into the distance. He came back to the house just after dark, ate some dinner, and went to his room.

“He was by himself all day on top of the hill. If he cried, no one saw. Vic started ninth grade that fall. He was a friendly kid, but he

never made any friends at this school. His classmates shunned him, not because of anything Vic did, but because of the town bully.

“This bully was a two-hundred-and-thirty-pound terror. Everyone was terrified of him, even most of the parents. From his first day at school, Vic received special attention from this man/boy, scaring his classmates to the point that they were afraid to associate with Vic, afraid of incurring the ire of the bully.

“Being ostracized had two profound effects on him. He became an excellent student and an expert outdoorsman. No one knew the north woods and its wildlife as well as Vic, and while he never killed an animal, his hunting blunders became legendary throughout his family.

“Personally, I think Vic prided himself on the humor of these goof-ups. When interviewed, every one of his relatives laughed aloud as they recounted his stories. I wonder how many of these stories he manufactured. Oh, basically they happened, alright, but I think he embellished them. Completely made-up stories always lack credibility.”

“Never shot an animal, huh? Could he kill a man?”

“His profile, says he could, under the right circumstances, but that remains to be seen.”

“So you say he’s perfect, hypothetically.”

“Sorry, sir, not just hypothetically. Back to the facts: The tests indicate a man with no fear of torture or death. I think his personal involvement with death at a young age removed that fear, and his daily run-ins with the bully removed his fear of pain. He remembers his parents as they were, and they are still alive in his memory. As far as torture is concerned, he accepts the fact that fear is worse than the actual pain of torture. He was mentally and physically tortured all through high school and he never caved.

“The real surprising thing about his profile is that he is normal, unmarred by the trauma of his childhood.”

“Okay, Samuel, but what about his physical attributes? Obviously he never competed in sports, and coordination is important here.”

“Yes sir, very important, but he never joined Little League or played in the basketball or football leagues. While other children his age were competing in organized sports, he was wandering the wilds of the north woods, or shooting a gun and a bow, becoming an expert marksman with both.”

“Now *that*, I can understand, but why did he join the Air Force, not the Army?”

“He was under the impression that the Air Force training was better.”

“So he ended up in survival school, where he probably knew as much as the instructors.”

“Yes sir. More than anything else, he wants a college degree, so when his enlistment is up, he will be gone.”

“Samuel, if he turns out to be as good as AI says, we don’t want to lose him. You’ll have to convince him to reenlist.”

“I have three years, sir. I’ll do what I can. You know, this stuff gets in your blood. I’ll have a good chance of keeping him once he gets a taste of action.”

“Worked on you, Major.”

“Yes sir, but I have another idea about this. It may be better to let him get his education and get him back after he graduates.”

“Get him a commission?”

“Either that or hire him as a contractor.”

“A mercenary, you mean.”

“Not exactly, sir.”

“What do you have slated for him?”

“A couple minor deals, but I’m not telling him about AI, not yet anyhow. That will come later. In the meantime, I’ll wait until he has a few minor skirmishes behind him, proves himself under hostile conditions, and then I’ll set up something more taxing. In spite of the test results, he has to prove things to me, first. In the future, I’m hoping to turn him loose, unencumbered by controls. You know yourself, missions have failed because of bad or lost communications. The people controlling these missions are more interested in covering their asses than success or failure of the job. I’ll have none of that here, sir.”

“I agree, but it is your ass on the line, Major. Keep me informed on his progress. The Air Force is not too happy with this, you know. They have a real shortage of good survival instructors, especially ones with Flint’s temperament. It takes a tactful man to handle those aircraft crews and their idiosyncrasies. They aren’t happy about his early promotions, either.”

“If you don’t mind my saying, I don’t give a good f . . . sorry sir. I don’t give a damn about their happiness. This man belongs with us, doing some good, not playing nursemaid to a bunch of spoiled pansies.”

“Major Hileman, you’ve almost convinced me. I’ll get back to you on this, but let me caution you. If he turns out as good as you think he will, hide both him and AI from the spooks, or they’ll snag them.”

“The CIA may try, sir, but it won’t happen. I won’t let it.”

“Speaking of that, how is AI coming along, Major.”

“Okay sir. Of course you know AI stands for Artificial Intelligence. The big thing about AI is it will be able to learn, to teach itself from data it compiles in a huge database. The uses are endless. People have been working on it for years, with no success. Apparently there was a huge roadblock that no one could get around, until six months ago when a programmer, working for a small company in South Florida, solved the problem. After it was demonstrated to us, we placed a top-secret label on it and transferred the software and the programmer up here to finish the program.”

“Have you talked to him? Computer geeks can be weird.”

“No, sir, I haven’t met him yet, but I have an office set up for him just down the hall from mine. I’ll keep him in line.”

“Well, don’t be too tough on him, Samuel. I don’t want him too scared to work. I want him in good working order. You know some of these geeks have trouble taking a piss in a public restroom and if someone knocks on the stall door while they’re inside, forget it.”

“I’ll try not to scare him, sir.”

“One last thing, Major, no one, not even Flint, is to know of my involvement with this AI thing. You play the game as if your interest is strictly from the military point of view”

“Yes, sir.”

“I expect it’ll take years to prove AI’s reliability. When I’m convinced it’s ready, I’ll start using it in my research.”

“Yes, sir, let’s hope it doesn’t take too long.”

“Major, be careful. AI could be dangerous.”

## **FOUR**

Expendable.

January to April 1992

I did not take kindly to jump school. They had to literally throw me out of the plane the first three jumps. Actually, I enjoyed the rush of my first jump, but the instructors had such a great time throwing me out that I hated to deprive them of their pleasure. The third time two of them almost got into a fight over which one was going to push me out. After that I jumped on my own. I can't tell you how disappointed they were.

They missed throwing me out of the plane so much that they spent all of their spare time trying to put the fear back, saying things like, "All of the chutes are on recall from the manufacturer, but not to worry, we gave out sewing merit badges to Boy Scouts for sewing up the rips and tears."

One instructor swore to me that when a chute didn't open the jumper kept falling faster and faster until the air friction got so hot that it actually started to burn his clothes and then his skin. You could tell it was the truth by the smoke seen trailing behind the falling man. The good thing was, you were in so much pain that you welcomed the *splat* at the end of your fall putting you out of your misery. Of course, their sense of humor fell far short of the sense of humor practiced by the hand-to-hand combat instructors.

Between jump classes, I had the privilege of learning hand-to-hand combat from the most sadistic instructors in the United States military, and they had special feelings for an Air Force weenie trying to make it in the world of real fighting men. They could have given Sven Johanson lessons. The good thing was, when they threw you, you only had about six feet to fall not thousands, but the *splat* was never pleasant. They had a standing bet on who could throw me the

highest. Bonus points were given if I landed directly on my head. The more direct, the more points awarded. I hold the record for the most points given out on one fall not requiring hospitalization.

Oh, my training wasn't all bad. I got to spend many hours on the gun range. My weapon was a .308 caliber, M40A1 sniper rifle. In comparison to jump and hand-to-hand, this was a holiday. And here I found a way to get back at instructors. Not the jump instructors, or the hand-to-hand instructors, damn it. For some reason, they stayed away from me when I had a gun in my hands.

The standing bet on the range was, low score for the week bought drinks at the NCO club on Friday night, and a couple of these guys could really down the booze. After the first two weeks, I was broke, but from then on, no one came close to me. They didn't mind losing to me since I was not a heavy drinker; one or two was enough for me.

When I finished training, my true classification was hidden for security reasons. I was given the title of Staff Sergeant Victor Allen Flint, Survival Instructor.

Actually, the whole time I was in the service my training never ended. Every assignment was so unique that I had to train for each one. My first assignment was to be in the mountains of Montana near the Idaho border. I trained for this assignment in the San Juan Mountains of southern Colorado near the New Mexico border. It was April 6, 1992, at midnight, and I was supposed to bail out from an altitude high enough to carry a secret classification. Intrigued? Don't be. I was just scared, and there's nothing intriguing about being scared.

As I jumped into the black void and the minus thirty-five degree air hit me like an igloo wall, I wondered what the hell I was doing? I was an Air Force weenie not some macho Navy SEAL or British Commando.

This was pure bullshit. My boss, the major, ordered me to jump out of a perfectly good airplane from an altitude nearly high enough to boil my blood. Not only did I have to endure this fall, but also I had to live for a month surviving on what I was carrying or what I could scrounge out of the wilderness. And the equipment they gave me to carry was lacking, to say the least. Not enough rations to last more than three days and to top that, I was only allowed to carry one weapon, a bow with six arrows.

With all that weaponry, it was a wonder I didn't get fat and lazy. Well, I sorta did, but not because of the firepower I carried.

This was a really stupid idea. The mountains topped out between 12,000 and 14,000 feet. That's what they told me, but they wouldn't say how high I would be when I bailed out. It was classified secret because of some food supplement I had been taking that was supposed to protect me against the bends. My blood didn't boil, so it must have worked. But then, how could anything boil at minus thirty-five degrees? The whole thing about blood boiling at high altitudes was probably just another story made up on my behalf by my jump instructors to get me in the right frame of mind. Actually, the real purpose of the pill was to compensate for the lack of oxygen at this altitude.

The major claimed that the main reason I was selected for survival school was that I grew up in the wilds of northern Michigan, but what about the follow-up training? How was I selected for that? The fact that I had no immediate family made more sense. I was more expendable than the average guy, no family to make inquiries if I disappeared or something. Not a comforting thought.

Your mind does strange things at moments of fear and stress, especially when you're jumping from a plane into the mountains at midnight. You've heard of "Killer Instinct?" Well, I call this phenomenon, "Fear Instinct."

I coined that phrase when I was a kid. Except for the beatings Sven gave me, I never got into many fights, but when I did, the results were always the same. I lost to little kids and beat up the big ones. I credited it to Fear Instinct. The little kids were not a real threat so I couldn't get scared enough or angry enough, but out of fear I fought like a savage when I tangled with the bigger kids. If I had possessed Killer Instinct, I'd have beaten the little kids, too.

An unusual form of insight enlightens you when you are really frightened, unless you panic, that is. Everything snaps into slow motion. Your body relaxes and your eyes open wide seeing everything, but focusing on nothing. Maybe even countries experience a similar phenomenon. How else could some small, backward country kick out the strongest country in the world?

Well, jumping under these conditions had triggered this enlightenment and I didn't like it. Going the rest of my life unenlightened is my ambition.

Another qualification that got the attention of the major was my ability to shoot a rifle and a bow accurately. I had learned to shoot as a teenager, not that I ever killed anything.

After freefalling for a few seconds, my chute opened, and I began looking for the ground, hoping to see a soft landing zone, but I knew I was more likely to find nothing but boulders this high up in the mountains. Finally, I could see dark shapes on the ground.

They had dropped me on a clear night, probably disappointing to them. They'd have preferred a thunderstorm with a lightning blast every second or two to give me a real test.

Oh, oh, I'm falling into trees, and too fast. I'm going to break both my ankles, or get impaled on a tree or one of my own arrows. I closed my eyes and missed a stand of ponderosa pines by forty yards, crashing into a boggy meadow, a nice, soft, gooey landing.

On that day, I discovered that I love goo. I'll take goo over trees or boulders anytime. I checked for blood and broken bones, but found none, piece of cake, nothing to this mountain jumping.

I slogged out of the bog and looked into the gloom. Okay, now what? I don't have a map. I'm somewhere in southwestern Colorado or northwestern New Mexico, but that's all I know.

I gathered my chute and moved through the shadows to the edge of the trees, removed my cumbersome gear and stretched out on the chute with my back against a tree to wait for sunrise, six hours away.

As the darkness faded, I was astounded at my surroundings. A narrow meadow, dotted with tiny purple and white flowers, stretched away from me winding between thick stands of pines. The serenity was unbelievable. Not too much to worry about here. Mountain lions, black bears, and coyotes were the only predators to be concerned about. The altitude was too high for them. All I had to do was find food. Like I said, "Not too much to worry about." Actually, food proved to be the least of my problems.

The first day, as I was constructing a shelter, I heard a commotion at the other end of the meadow. I grabbed my bow and went to investigate. Two coyotes had a domestic sheep down and were in the process of killing it. The largest coyote had the sheep by its throat

while the other was dodging the sheep's hooves and tearing at its belly.

I could see that it was too late for the sheep, but I placed an arrow on my bow and ran toward the melee anyway. The coyotes heard me charging across the meadow and turned to flee, but stopped and faced me with bared fangs. The normally timid coyotes edged apart. They seemed to know I did not have a gun. I drew my bow and aimed at the male, but before I could release the arrow, a shot exploded from behind, the bullet whistling past my right ear.

The coyotes disappeared into the pines. Two dogs, charging out of the woods, sped around me and followed the coyotes into the gloom of the forest. The fastest dog was a forty-pound border-collie type and the other was an ugly hundred-pound brute. Though the brute looked capable of handling both of the coyotes at the same time, it was a hopeless chase. The coyotes were too fast.

A short, gnarled man following the dogs trotted up to me, his rifle roughly aimed in my direction.

"Why you here?"

"Just camping out," I answered. "Where are you coming from?"

"Stay away from my sheep."

"Okay, but where is your camp so I can stay away?"

"I hear noises, I shoot."

"Can't argue with that, but where is it?"

The bow-legged shepherd, looking as old as the boulders lining the surrounding canyons, pointed back in the direction he had come from.

"Big meadow, twenty minutes." He looked me up and down and then added, "You, thirty."

He turned to his dying sheep and cut its throat. I couldn't be sure but I thought I saw tears gleaming in the old man's eyes as he started to skin the now dead animal.

Raised in the wilds of northern Michigan, where everyone slaughtered their own meat, I recognized a skillful skinning job when I saw one and this man was an expert. He performed the job with the talent of a surgeon. Not one globule of fat remained on the hide. By the time he finished, the two dogs had returned, inspected me, and were panting in the shade waiting for their master.

The man stood up, all five-foot-four of him, looked at his dogs, pointed back toward his camp to the east, and said, "Go." Both dogs loped into the trees and were gone. He turned to me and said, "Protect flock."

"Smart dogs. Do you need help carrying that back to your camp?"

The shepherd shook his head as he sliced off a hindquarter and gave it to me. He said, "Wrap and hang from tree. Bears, wolves will come. Rub salt or cook, spoil in four days."

The old man stood and looked me up and down again. He pointed to my bow and arrows and asked, "No gun?"

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Nope. Just this." I held up my bow.

"Bears."

"They won't bother me. Will they?"

"If hungry," the old man answered.

The shepherd appeared to be in his eighties. His face and neck looked to be formed leather, cracked and sun-dried. He tossed the hide to me, hefted the carcass on one shoulder, and headed into the trees, strolling along as if he was out for a leisurely walk.

This man was so bow-legged he'd be six-feet tall if his legs were straight. As it was, he looked like a walking, twin-trunked bonsai tree.

Two days later, I was returning to camp after exploring a series of meadows to the west. Practicing my normally diligent sense of caution, I stopped at the edge of my home meadow to inspect things before stepping into the open. Although I was over a hundred yards from my shelter and still hidden by the pines, the shepherd and the collie were watching me from the edge of my camp, so much for stealth.

As soon as I joined them, the old man pointed into the woods and said, "Go home." I looked at the dog, but it did not move. I was surprised until I figured out that the man was talking to me not the dog.

"Too many wolves. Come."

The old man and his dog stalked away. Before they disappeared into the trees, he turned and called to me, "Now."

I stood looking into the woods where they had disappeared, shook my head in bewilderment at the audacity of the old man, and then said out loud, “Why the hell not.”

I started to pack.