

Ordered to make an impossible kill, Vic Flint was transported into the remote mountains of Afghanistan. His target, an American traitor training Al Qaeda rebels. Vic's weapon, an experimental laser aimed, single shot sniper rifle designed to hit targets at extreme distances. The trajectory of this impossible shot would cover one and a half miles. While preparing to make the shot, he found himself surrounded by mercenaries ordered to kill him at the mission's end.

SNIPER INSTINCT

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SNIPER INSTINCT

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CHAPTER ONE

Obviously, it was Friday.

September 13, 2002.

The dark forest loomed before me, silhouetted against a sky filled with stars of the Milky Way. The air was so clear not a star blinked. It was beautiful, but had I known what was to follow, I would have turned around.

For a moment, I stopped at the fence separating the farmer's hayfield from federal land gazing up at the breathtaking view. After a couple minutes, I climbed through the fence, and moved into the blanketing darkness beneath the trees, letting the solitude envelop me. It was like coming home.

I had moved a few hundred yards along a trail into the dense forest when I sensed something to my left and hesitated. A pinpoint of red light flashed across my left hand, a laser beam. Adrenaline shot through my veins as I twisted away from the light and dove for cover. I was too slow. I never heard the shot that slammed into my right buttock knocking me through the air as if gored by a runaway bull. Tumbling through ferns at the edge of the trail, I landed on my face and scrambled on hands and knee for shelter behind a huge beech tree. My right leg was numb and dragging along useless. No accident, someone had just tried to kill me, the laser gun sight, a *dead* giveaway.

I pulled a handgun from my belt and without aiming anywhere in particular, shot one round into the woods across the trail. Although I did not have any idea where my would-be assassin was, I wanted to

let him know that I was armed. Hit hard, I knew I was in trouble, and hoped my shot would keep him at bay.

Two more explosions from across the road slammed projectiles into the trees a few yards to my left, again proving the first had not been an accident. With the tree at my back between the shooter and me, I could not see the flashes from his gun, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw what was left of a large sapling quivering from the blast that had split it in two. Obviously, the shooter did not know exactly where I was and was shooting at shadows. The half-light of early morning and the thick brush under the trees were concealing me, *for now*.

For the first few seconds there was no feeling in my right butt-cheek and leg, but then the numbness wore off, feeling like someone was holding a blowtorch flaming against my ass. I rolled onto my left side, and grimaced as I looked down. The back pocket of my jeans was shredded and oozing blood. Reaching down to pull the material out of the wound, I nearly passed out from the pain.

After several minutes waiting for the burning pain to subside, I gave up, rolled back onto my stomach, and lifted my head to look for my assailant. Everything was blurry. I blinked several times until I could focus, but could see no one hiding in the dark forest. Good. Since I was having a hard time seeing him, the same should be true for my attacker. I lay prone behind the tree watching the woods, waiting for him to come and finish the job. Once I glimpsed a pinpoint of red light reflected from a bush a few feet to my right. He was still searching for me with his laser sight. Feeling dizzy, I fought to remain conscious. I was losing blood and possibly going into shock, couldn't let that happen.

Careful not to expose myself, I rolled onto my left side. With the movement, the woods spun around as if I was riding a tilt-a-whirl. I lay motionless until the trees settled down and replanted themselves.

Unfastening my belt, I pulled out my shirttails and cut a strip from the bottom of my undershirt with my pocketknife. With much effort and a lot of pain, while trying not to make any sound, I pushed down my jeans and under shorts to expose the wound. The sight of raw,

blood-covered flesh left me nauseated. A deep gash stretched across the side of my right buttock from back to front, exposed by a narrow flap of meat, ripped loose by the slug, and hanging on by a thin strip of skin. It looked like a bloody piece of strip steak. I folded it back in place over the open wound. Now it looked like a chunk of raw meat on a bed of congealing tomato sauce. *Much better.*

I tore off my underpants, folded them to form a bandage, and laid it across the wound, all the time listening for the approach of my assailant.

Using the strip torn from my shirt, I wrapped it around my leg and tied it in an attempt to hold the bottom of the bandage in place. I pulled up my pants tightening my belt across the top of the bandage at my waist, crude and painful, but it might work.

The makeshift bandage slowed the bleeding but not the pain. Based on the looks of the wound, I would have guessed that a shotgun slug had glanced off my butt, but the red laser beam belied that theory. I have never heard of shotguns using laser sights. Amateur hunters may buy a gimmick like that, but not a professional assassin. Of course, calling him a pro may be giving him the benefit of the doubt. So far, he had not done a thorough job, but then again, time was on his side. Glancing at the splintered sapling, I was glad that the slug had missed bone.

Several minutes passed. Facing the large tree, I leaned over until I could see around it looking for my attacker. At my back, the sun was rising and slowly driving away the shadows. Where was my would-be assassin? Was he still across the road waiting for daylight, or was he circling around to come up behind me? I had to assume the worst and figure that he was working his way around to get a shot at me as soon as there was enough light. The good thing, he was facing east squinting into the rising sun. In any case, I couldn't wait any longer. Regardless of the pain, I had to get away from here before daylight drove the rest of the camouflaging shadows away.

Keeping the tree between the two-track trail and me, I rolled over, sat up, and jammed the gun behind my belt. Favoring my right side to keep weight off the wound, I scooted backwards until I was leaning

against the tree. It took a couple minutes for the nausea to pass. I peeked behind me looking for the spot of red light, and listening. Nothing. I struggled to my knees. Once on all fours, I squeezed my eyes shut hoping that the pain would subside. It didn't.

Staying under cover as well as I could, I started crawling up the shallow hill toward a culvert I had used as a shelter five years ago. In my mind, I could feel the laser spot centering on my backside raising spine-clinching goose pimples from the top of my neck down to my butt, where it was doing some serious clinching on its own.

After several minutes creeping across the forest floor, I crested the small incline and believing I was into the forest far enough to be hidden, I stood up. My assumption must have been correct.

Stumbling from tree to tree, I moved erratically, making it difficult for a shooter to line up his sights. No shots rang out, so the assassin had not seen me. If I could make it to the culvert, I'd be okay for the rest of the day, probably. Well, *maybe*.

I staggered on, and on, and on, every step more painful than the previous. I lost track of how many times the pain dropped me to my knees and although each time I wanted to just stretch out and lie there, I kept getting up. I knew I had to get to my hideout in a hurry regardless of the pain. My wound was bleeding again, running down my leg, and dripping onto the ground. Fear that my attacker was already following the blood trail provided motivation to keep me staggering from tree to tree.

I don't know how long it took, it seemed like hours, but I found the four-foot diameter culvert at last. It had not changed. Canvas tarps closed off both ends, the way I had left them a few years ago. I should be able to survive through the day and the night even if a heavy frost hits. Unless the person who shot me was an experienced hunter and knew how to follow a blood trail, I was safe. No one alive, with the exception of my best friend, Brenda, knew the location of this culvert.

I dropped to my knees and crawled inside, dragging an accumulation of spider webs with me. I stretched out on my stomach on top of the sand covering the floor, and fell asleep. Okay, okay, maybe I didn't fall asleep, maybe I passed out, *semantics*.

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The culvert was a four-foot diameter plastic tube used by a crew repairing a hiking/snowmobile trail deeper in the forest. It got here when it was accidentally dropped from a helicopter. The crew figured it would be cheaper and easier just to get another. I had found it while hunting in 1997.

After what I thought was a few minutes, I raised my head to look at my watch, but it was too dark to see. Leaning on one elbow, I pushed one corner of the tarp aside to let in some light, but all that came in was a rush of cold air. Shivering, I let the tarp fall back into place, and stretched out on top of the sand again. The sun had set. I had been sleeping for several hours. Okay, unconscious, *semantics*, again.

I reached down and felt the bandage on my butt. It had slid down, and was only partially covering the gash. The wound was crusty with dried blood, but the pain had lessened. I eased the bandage back in place. With thoughts of crawling out of the culvert, I rolled to my left side, but a shot of pain changed my mind. Besides, where was I going to go in the dark forest, and how was I going to get there, crawl on hands and knee? I lay back down on my stomach. As long as I remained stationary, the pain was manageable.

Trying to distract my thoughts from the pain, I recalled how I had gotten here.

* * *

For me the day had started just before sunrise when I drove to the Ericson's, left my car at their farmhouse, and headed toward the woods. The morning had been crisp, but above freezing. The sun, still below the horizon, had not yet begun to drive the darkness and the lingering haze from the edges of the woods. The nighttime temperatures, this time of year in the north woods of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, could be quite cold, but for now summer was hanging on. A few trees were showing signs of the upcoming season, but fall color was still a month away.

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For as long as I can remember, I have loved the wilderness encompassing these hills. Nothing duplicates its natural beauty and the feelings of contentment it inspires in me. In this section of the forest, the only signs of civilization are the two-track trail that winds through the hills on its way through the National Forest, and the fence marking the border between private and government lands. An abundance of wildlife thrived throughout these hills highlighted by deer, turkey, and coyotes, not to mention an occasional bear.

Without a doubt, fall was my favorite time of year in Michigan. Once the first heavy frost drove the hordes of black flies and mosquitoes away, the forest opened to my wanderlust.

I had been a bow and arrow hunter since I was old enough to pull a hunting bow. Although the hunting season was two weeks away, I was preparing for it by scouting the forest around my hunting zone, figuring out the habits of the Big Buck. This year I was going to be better prepared than ever. Maybe, I'd even get my first deer.

I crept along the edge of the trail for a few hundred yards hoping not to spook the deer. For some reason, I don't know if I heard something or what, I stopped, and then came the laser spot and the blow that knocked me spinning.

* * *

My name is Victor Allen Flint Vic. I'm due to hit thirty next March, if I don't bleed to death first. Although I moved to Florida after doing a hitch in the Air Force and finishing college, this would always be my home. On a farm near here, when I was fourteen, I moved in with an aunt and uncle after my parents died in a plane crash. I'm in these woods scouting out the deer movements, specifically the Big Buck's, preparing for the bow and arrow season starting the first day of October.

I work for a small company in South Florida called the Swamp Office with an unpublicized branch, the Northwood's Office, in Lincoln City, a city of 10,000, seventeen miles from here. For publication, our job is testing and perfecting new military hardware

for the government, and then training the military in its use. My previous military training and experience, under Colonel Samuel Hileman, qualified me for this job.

Okay, that was for publication. Not for publication, was the real reason for our secret office up here in northern Michigan, artificial intelligence software, or AI as we called it. Our version of artificial intelligence software is no more than a powerful search engine. What makes it so powerful is its ability to penetrate any firewall and get information hidden there.

Ten years ago, a computer programmer, Susan MacDonald, stumbled upon a solution to a glitch that had prevented programmers from building a functional artificial intelligence computer program. Oh, there are artificial intelligence programs around, but none as sophisticated as ours. She arrived at the solution strictly by accident, an accident so bizarre that she could never figure out how she had done it or how to duplicate it. In her opinion, no one will ever be able to build another like it. Although neither she nor I are religious, we pray that that is true.

Susan MacDonald is unique. My private name for her is SueMac, as in poison sumac, not to her face of course. She would *rip my* face off if I ever slipped up and said it aloud in front of her. Mentally, she is the toughest person I've ever met, and I've tangled with several strong-willed people.

Camouflaging her caustic personality, she is blonde, beautiful, busty, and brainy. Another couple of B-words often used in reference to her, once you get to know her, are *belligerent bitch*, again, never, never to her face. I don't really understand, but somewhere in this combination of B-word personality traits lies the secret to her abilities. AI software was the result.

Artificial intelligence means any software having the ability to learn on its own. Although very few people are even aware of a truly sophisticated AI program, ours is approximately ten years old. Still in its infancy, it scares the hell out of us.

How it actually functions, is only a theory. We ask a question and AI, through the internet, grabs everything it can find on the subject,

borrowed memory from large computer systems to use in its calculations, determines the results, and then copies them to our little desk top computer. Large computer networks had firewalls designed to prevent invasions like this, but AI designed algorithms to find ways around them all, while leaving no sign of the intrusion. We were shocked to find proof of this when AI, although only two years old at the time in 1993, hacked its way into the sinister reaches of the FBI's computers, a task believed impossible by the experts.

Our software is not like the artificial intelligence software you read about in science fiction books. As I said before, it works like a search engine compiling data, using statistical analysis, analyzing it, and then answering the question asked by the operator. In the early stages of its development, the results were not very accurate, but as it learned, it improved. Now the results are precise.

While several people are aware of our AI software, only three people know the full extent of its abilities, SueMac, Colonel Hileman, and me. The colonel is our military liaison.

The most astounding talent of AI, and the one we fear, is its ability to predict the future. Originally, we thought this to be wonderful, and it *was* until we realized that along with this ability came the power to alter the future as well. With that knowledge, our real fears began. From that point on, we did everything we could to hide AI's power. Whoever controls AI can dictate the future of the world, the more encompassing the situation the more accurate the results.

The three of us had lengthy discussions about whom we could trust with this power: our politicians, the military, or the United Nations.

SueMac even posed the question to AI, and while it gave us a few names of truly honorable people, one of whom, unbelievably, was a politician, few of their cohorts could be trusted. We concluded that we could trust no one. The old adage, *absolute power corrupts absolutely*, applies here. The full responsibility rests with SueMac and me, and we have vowed to destroy AI rather than turn it over to anyone.

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It's very possible that my present situation has something to do with AI. It wouldn't be the first time.

* * *

I am safe for the moment, but I have to get medical help soon. Unfortunately, only my best friend, Brenda Moeller, knows about this hideout, but she is in Indiana visiting relatives. It will be a few days before she begins to worry. We talk often on the phone, but to miss a day or two will not alarm her. She knows how distracted I become when hunting season approaches. Actually, SueMac will be the first to miss me. Presently, she is in the Swamp Office near Boca Raton, Florida. I was supposed to call her before noon tomorrow. When I don't, she'll be angry, and since she doesn't have any idea where I am, she'll call Brenda. Once Brenda realizes that I'm missing she'll call the sheriff and ask him to look for me.

Giving him directions to this hideout will not work; she knows this culvert is impossible to find. Years ago, one of the best hunters in the area, Sven Johanson, had looked for me with vengeance on his mind for two weeks, but never even got close. At the time, knowing he was on my trail, I camped at this culvert between hunting forays for the Big Buck.

With thoughts of Sven, I felt for the handgun. It was still jammed into my belt. I know Sven isn't the one who shot me. He would much prefer to crush me with his bare hands, and put me in the hospital. He has the size and strength to do just that.

A few weeks ago, Colonel Hileman insisted that I start carrying a gun at all times. He was calling from his office at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and wouldn't or couldn't go into detail. Insisting that I start carrying a concealed weapon, strictly against the law, meant something serious was going on, and I'm sure that having the gun and firing it into the woods had kept the assailant away from me, saving my life.

While I was in the military, Hileman had supervised my training founded on his Special Forces' experience. With that training in my

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background, I should have been more aware and not walked blindly into this ambush.

I shook my canteen. It was full. For food, all I had was a small quantity of hikers' trail mix, made up of M&M's, nuts, and raisins. I popped a handful of the trail mix into my mouth and chewed it up, and followed that with a swallow of water.

For now, I needed a plan, and I came up with a brilliant one. Do nothing. Stay put. That was playing to my strength. I have always been exceptionally good at nothing.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood trail.

September 14, 2002.

At the Swamp Office, west of Boca Raton in South Florida, Susan MacDonald dropped the phone on its base, and turned to Carl Moeller, Brenda's brother.

"Where the hell is Vic? It's after noon; I'm tired of listening to his answering machines. He should have called a long time ago."

"He's out in the woods. His mind gets set on hunting this time of year," Carl answered, "and not much distracts him from that."

"Yeah but, it isn't like him to ignore *me*," Sue said. "I just left a message on both the home phone and the one in the office. All I need him to do is run a quick inquiry on AI, but it has to be done right away. We can't wait."

"Have you called the Ericson's?"

"The farmers? No."

"Life or death, I suppose?"

Sue turned and looked directly into his eyes. "Are you being facetious with me, Carl?"

"Not really, Sue. I just know Vic. When he gets his mind set on hunting, only something very serious would distract him."

"Well, as a matter of fact, it is a matter of life or death . . . his. I just deciphered an old printout from AI. It indicated that a senator has contracted someone to murder him."

“Murder him? That’s pretty far out, Sue. I don’t understand how you can trust a computer program that much. You believe it can predict something so extreme?”

“You bet I do,” Sue said as she opened her address book on her computer, looked up the Ericsons’ phone number, and dialed. “What I don’t understand, Carl, is why you remain so skeptical. You saw a real demonstration once.”

He shrugged his shoulders as she turned back to the phone.

The Ericsons, retired dairy farmers, had been neighbors of Vic’s relatives for decades. When their answering machine picked up she left a short message asking them to have Vic return her call. She slammed the phone down and turned to scowl at Carl.

“Damned answering machines! Doesn’t anyone stay at home?”

Holding up his hand to quiet her, Carl said, “I’ll call my old friend, the sheriff in Lincoln City, and see if he can find him. I’ll tell him it’s a dire emergency, but I’ll bet Vic’s in the woods and just lost track of time.”

“He’ll need a better excuse than that,” Sue grumbled.

Carl picked up the phone and called the sheriff in Michigan. The phone was answered on the first ring.

“Hey Sheriff, this is Carl. I’m down in Florida, and I need a favor. Would you try to locate my friend Vic Flint for me? You remember him, don’t you? He was supposed to call us down here this morning, but he didn’t, and it’s very important that we talk to him, matter of life or death. We left messages for him all over the place, but no luck.”

Carl listened to the sheriff’s response, and then said, “Thanks, and check the Ericsons’ farm, too. If his car is there, then he’s out in the woods getting ready for hunting season.

“Thanks again, Sheriff. I’ll be waiting for your call.”

Staring absently at the computer on her desk and shaking her head, Sue said, “Keeping the only working copy of AI up there in Michigan is inconvenient as hell.”

Three swear words in the matter of a few minutes. This thing has her really worked up. Then Carl said aloud, “That was your idea,

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remember?” He sighed and added, “I don’t understand how you can put so much faith in a computer program’s speculations on the future. I know, I saw a demonstration once, but I always thought it was just a coincidence.”

Shifting her eyes toward him, she said, “Someday, I’ll explain everything about AI in detail to you, Carl. Once you learn, you’ll understand why it’s so important to Vic and me, and why we must keep its full abilities hidden.”

“I know nothing about computers, Sue. I won’t understand a thing.”

* * *

Two hours later Sue’s phone at the Swamp Office rang.

“Susan MacDonald,” she said into the phone.

After listening for a few seconds, she said, “Hello, Sheriff. I can give Carl the message. Actually, I’m the one who has to talk to Vic.” She listened for a minute and then repeated his words aloud so Carl could hear, “No one in the office or at home, and you found his car at the farm, but he wasn’t around. No one at the farm either.”

She listened for another few seconds and then said, “Thank you, Sheriff. Carl predicted that he would be hunting. Would you leave a note on his car to call me right away? As Carl said, it’s extremely important. Sorry to put you to this much trouble, I appreciate it very much. Thank you.”

She hung up and scowled, “What is it with you men; acting like kids, running around the woods playing Indian Scout? Hunting is such a big waste of time, anyway.”

Suppressing a sigh, Carl said, “He’ll be back right after dark, unless he broke a leg or something.”

* * *

Hours later, Sue was back at her desk.

"I can't wait any longer, Carl," she said as she picked up the phone. "It's after ten, been dark for hours. He should have been back long ago. Maybe Brenda has some idea where he is."

"Something has to be wrong, Sue," Carl said shaking his head. "I know Vic can get carried away when it comes to wandering the woods this time of year, but not like this. He must be in trouble."

"If I had kept Al down here, I wouldn't need him right now. I could have run the inquiry myself."

Sue turned to the phone, and dialed the number of Brenda's relatives in Indiana.

"Hello, this is Susan MacDonald. May I speak to Brenda, please?"

"Just a minute," a woman said and then, with the phone held away from her mouth, called out, "Brenda..., Susan MacDonald on the phone for you."

Brenda came on the line and said, "Hi Sue. What's going on, everything okay?"

"No, it isn't. I have to talk to Vic, but we can't find him."

Brenda chuckled, "He's probably out at the farm. Call the Ericsons'. They'll know where he is."

"They aren't home. We asked the sheriff to look for him, and he found Vic's car abandoned at their farm. He should have been back hours ago. Carl thinks he may be out in the woods, hurt. I'm going to ask the sheriff to organize a search party; I need you to tell me where they should look. Do you know where he hunts?"

"Yes, I do, but it's possible he spent the night in the woods. He's done that before, but we had better make sure. Tell the sheriff to go directly north from the Ericsons' farm cross their hayfield into the national forest. There's a dirt two-track trail just beyond the fence. Tell them to follow it and make lots of noise. They won't find him, but if he hears them, he'll either come or call out to them."

"I hope he's not hurt," Sue said.

Brenda was silent for a few seconds and then added, "If they don't find him, give me a call right away."

Sue agreed, "Don't worry, I'll call you regardless." She hung up, and then pushed the phone toward Carl. "Call the sheriff at home."

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Brenda thinks he may have stayed overnight in the woods, but I don't think so. He knew I wanted to talk to him, and he wouldn't just blow me off. I think he is in trouble, maybe badly hurt. We need the sheriff to organize a search party right away." When Carl looked hesitant, she added, "I don't care what time it is, just call him. AI's predictions may have come true, already."

Carl took the phone and dialed the sheriff's home phone. Once the sheriff was on the line, Carl said, "Sheriff, we've come to the conclusion that Vic is missing, possibly in the woods, hurt. Would you get a couple men to look for him?"

"Will do," the sheriff answered, "but I can't do much till morning. I'll take as many men as I can spare. Where do we look?"

Carl repeated the directions Brenda had detailed.

"I'll get on it. I'll even get Sven Johanson to lead us. He's the best woodsman around. If anyone can find him, he can."

* * *

It was nearing noon the next day before the sheriff and a party of five men arrived at the Ericson's farm.

"According to Brenda Moeller, Flint hunts somewhere in the woods on the other side of this alfalfa field," the sheriff said pointing across the road. "He scouts it out every year before the season opens."

Being hunters themselves, none of the men questioned Vic's reasons to be in the woods looking for deer at this time of year.

Keeping to the edge of the field along a fencerow, they started out, the sheriff continuing to give instructions as they trudged along.

"She says there's a dirt road on the other side of the fence on federal land. We'll follow it and look for his tracks."

One of the deputies said, "Oh, forgot to tell you Sheriff, I got hold of Sven. He's gonna join us in a couple hours. Said he knows where Flint hunts. Said to stay off the road or we'd wipe out his tracks."

"You all hear that?" the sheriff called out.

A chorus of uh-huhs with one duh-uh, answered.

The deputy continued, "Said he hopes he broke a leg or something, wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Sven's an asshole," the sheriff said shaking his head, "but he's the best tracker around. Where is he?"

"At his cousin's down near Tustin, sounded hung-over."

"He knows better than to show up here drunk," the sheriff growled.

"Probably why he ain't coming right away."

The group reached the fence and one at a time, climbed through, and started following the two-track trail, three men stretched out fifty feet apart on each side of the road.

After twenty minutes, one of the men yelled, "Nothing but a few animal tracks, you sure he came this way? Don't see nothing."

"That's what his girlfriend said," the sheriff answered. "We'll have to assume she knows what she's talking about."

Another man added, "Anybody but Brenda Moeller and I'd think we was wasting our time."

"I'd sure like to waste some time with her," the first deputy laughed.

"Not with her big brother around, you wouldn't," another deputy countered. "Hell, she don't need no protection, can take care of herself. Just ask ol' Sweeny. Couple years ago, said to everyone he was gonna nail her, but when he made some moves on her he ended up head first in a garbage can."

"She's some kind of Judo expert," another man volunteered. "Her brother's an ex-Navy SEAL. Must've taught her a few things."

The group trudged on following the trail that wound around the hills and through the hardwood forest, while trading hunting stories, each one more ridiculous than the previous. Their occasional calls echoed through the trees. Although, the temperature was a cool fifty degrees they were soon soaked in perspiration.

Three hours later the sheriff stopped, removed his hat, wiped the top of his bald head with his shirtsleeve, and said, "Missed him. Only tracks were from a large pickup."

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The group had followed the two-track until it intersected the main road cutting through the national forest.

"This is far enough. Let's turn around and go back. Keep a lookout; we must've missed something," the sheriff added.

"Sven should be here by now. If Flint's anywhere around, he'll find him," a deputy said.

The sheriff kept everyone at the same slow pace as they headed back into the woods.

A while later one of the deputies called out, "There's Sven now, Sheriff."

A six-foot-three, 260-pound man with a scruffy beard and wearing grease-stained coveralls was standing beside the trail, leaning against a tree.

"Hey, Sven," the sheriff called. "Only tracks we saw were a mile back. Someone parked a pickup and walked this way. No telling when, a couple days ago, maybe. Not Flint, though."

With a smirk, Sven answered, "Nice day for a hike. Ya'll walked right past it." He pointed toward a tree several yards from the trail. "Most bled out right there."

The sheriff motioned for everyone to stay back while he and Sven moved to the tree.

"That's a lot of blood, Sven," the sheriff said as he squatted next to the tree.

"No body, though. Nuts. Should be, with all this blood."

"What's the matter with you, Sven? You want him dead?"

Sven shrugged, "Naw, wanna put him in the horsepital myself."

The sheriff squatted next to the tree studying the blood-covered ground. "Don't see how anybody could walk away after losing so much blood."

Sven motioned up the grade into the woods. "On hands and knees, went that way. Dead by now, probly." Sven took a step around the beech tree and pointed to a shredded sapling. "Shotgun."

"You sure?" The sheriff asked. "He was shot with a shotgun?"

Sven nodded, "Twelve-gauge slug looks like."

"That's not good. A twelve-gauge slug can kill a grizzly." The sheriff stood and said, "Let's get back to town, too late to keep looking today. Don't have the gear to run a trail after dark, anyway. We'll come back at daylight and start from here," the sheriff said.

Both men headed back to the rest of the search party lingering on the two-track trail.

"Shooter hid there," Sven, said as he stopped at the road and pointed toward a tight group of saplings across the road. "Long shot."

"Looks way too far for a shotgun," the sheriff commented.

Sven nodded and turned around, "Lucky shot. Blood trail end up there," Sven said as he pointed beyond the beech tree into the woods.

The sheriff looked and saw a few strips of toilet paper tied to the brush where Sven was pointing.

"Marked the blood trail," Sven explained. "Followed it a ways, but lost it, find it in the morning. Don't need nobody ta help."

"You're probably right, Sven, but I'll have a couple of my deputies tag along. It might take three of you to get him out."

Sven grinned, "Don't need no help. Drag big deer all the time. Drag Flint out myself. Gut'm out first."

"You're not being funny, Johanson. Remember Carl Moeller is his best friend."

"Carl don't scare me, none."

"Uh huh, you just wait for my deputies. They'll be here first thing in the morning. Wait for them. Got that?"

"Sunup, too late. Find blood trail better with a lantern. They not here one hour before sunup, I go alone."

* * *

The next morning, after waiting two hours for Sven, the deputies went back to their patrol car and called the sheriff.

"Sven didn't show up, sir."

"Damn it, I'll call his house. Call you right back."

Two minutes later, the radio in the police car squawked.

SNIPER INSTINCT

“Got Sven out of bed, said it’s a waste of time,” the sheriff explained. “It rained last night and washed away the blood trail. He said he’s going to wait two days and then go smell him out. In his words, his body will be *pretty ripe* by then.”

“What do you want us to do, Sheriff?”

“Take a quick look around; make sure the blood trail has been washed away, like Sven says. If you don’t find anything, come on back to the office. We can’t afford any more time away from work. I’ll let Carl know we couldn’t find him, and then if Flint doesn’t show up in a couple days, I’ll organize a full-scale search party.”

“You gonna start a murder investigation, Sheriff?”

“Got to find a body first, let’s hope he’s still alive. Who knows? Maybe that blood was from a deer.”

After the connection was broken, one deputy turned to the other and said, “Whatever that blood came from has to be dead, must have been a gallon of it on the ground.”

Back at the office, the sheriff called Florida; Carl answered.

“We couldn’t find him, Carl, but we found blood, a lot of it, and signs of gunfire, too.”

“What are you going to do now, Sheriff?”

“Don’t know. Sven was going to follow the blood trail this morning, but it rained last night. He said it would be a waste of time.”

“That sounds like Sven. If I remember correctly, Vic has a shelter back there somewhere, and maybe that’s where he went if he’s hurt. I think Brenda knows where it is. I’ll get directions from her.”

“As soon as you do, let me know and I’ll send a couple men to check it out. He might be okay if he made it to a shelter,” the sheriff commented. “And who knows, Carl? Maybe that’s blood from a deer that a poacher shot.”

“Let’s hope so,” Carl said as hung up the phone and turned to Sue who had been listening on the extension, “This is not going to be fun. Brenda is going to take this very hard.”

Grabbing the phone again, he dialed, and as soon as it was picked up, he said, “This is Carl. Can I speak to my sister?”

LARRY NIXON

He listened for a minute and then said, "No, Vic is still missing. That's why I want to talk to Brenda. I think she knows where he might be."

A few more seconds passed and then he said into the phone, "No, Brenda, he hasn't shown up yet, and we think he's been hurt. They found blood, and Sven found a blood trail heading into the woods, but they had to wait until morning, it was too dark. To make things worse, it rained last night, and they couldn't find the trail this morning."

He listened and then answered, "That's why I called. How do we get to his shelter?"

Carl hung up and turned to Sue. "She's on her way to Lincoln, said no one will be able to find his shelter."

* * *

At 3:30 in the afternoon, Brenda rushed into the sheriff's office.

"Have you found him, Sheriff?"

"No, we haven't. It rained last night, wiping out any trail."

Fighting to hold back her anger, and tears she asked, "Why did you stop looking? Why didn't you organize a search party? You don't give up like that. Just because you found blood doesn't mean anything only that he's hurt. Where did you find the blood? Was there much?"

"A couple hundred yards into the woods, on the east side of the trail, behind a big beech tree. We found a lot of blood, I'm afraid. Sven's the one who found it. He said that the shot came from a twelve-gauge shotgun."

"I know where he is. He's in his shelter," Brenda said. "Have someone meet me at the farm. If he's hurt, I'll need someone to help in getting him out."

The sheriff accompanied her to the door.

He said, "Brenda, we're hoping it's only deer blood, but in case it isn't, I'll have one of my deputies get Sven, and head out to the farm."

SNIPER INSTINCT

“I’m not waiting for them. Tell them to wait for me about half a mile into the woods on the two-track trail.”

Without another word, she ran to her car.

CHAPTER THREE

Deermeat to the rescue.

September 16, 2002.

Brenda turned into the driveway of the Ericson's farm, jammed the transmission into park, and jumped out while the car was still skidding on the gravel. Dressed in jeans, sweatshirt, and hiking boots, she took off across the road heading into the alfalfa field trotting along the fencerow toward the forest. At the end of the hayfield, she climbed between the strands of the barbed wire fence and continued jogging down the dirt road. Five minutes later, she slowed and turned east into a washout that angled up the hill away from the two-track trail. The washed out gully, strewn with rocks and boulders of various sizes, forced her to move with care to prevent injury.

"Almost there," she thought as she continued up the hill. "He's been out here three days, suffering."

A hundred yards up the hill, just past a fallen tree, Brenda turned into a small clearing and stopped. She had been here a couple of times a few years ago, but nothing looked familiar. In the past, the culvert had been difficult to see, but now it was impossible. When she had last seen Vic's shelter, it had been partially covered with dirt, and the tarp-covered end facing the clearing had been hidden by a bush. There was a bush in what seemed to be the right location, but it was much larger than she remembered. From where she was standing, the only things she could see beyond the bush were grass and weeds. If the culvert was there, it was completely covered with earth and undergrowth.

SNIPER INSTINCT

Brenda moved to the bush and looked behind it. She sighed with relief as she looked at the tarp covering the end of the culvert. This was the right place, after all, but her relief was momentary. With a glance toward the heavens and a silent prayer, she pulled the tarp aside.

* * *

Fifty miles away, a black, four door, pickup exited US 55 and turned north onto US 127. Looking like a man suffering from a severe attack of vertigo, the driver kept swiveling his eyes from the windshield to a side view mirror to the rearview mirror and then back, looking for cops. He was keeping just below the speed limit.

“Never killed anyone before. Hope he was dead. Had to be though with all that blood behind the tree,” he said aloud.

The driver shook his head trying to rid his head of negative thoughts and turned on the radio. He hunted for a station with music he liked, but gave up and started a C/D. That lasted five minutes before he turned it off, as well. Fear of capture had him on edge.

“I should have waited until daylight to take the shot,” he said. “What was the guy doing in the woods that early anyway? The sun wasn’t even up. If I had known, I’d have brought along a night vision scope.”

He glanced into his rearview mirror at a group of cars catching up to him. Something caught his eye and he looked closely to study the cars. A rectangular bar of lights on the roof of one of the cars caused him to catch his breath. A state police patrol car was hiding in the middle of the pack.

“Crap.” he squawked as he looked at his speedometer and slowed to 55 well below the posted speed limit. He glanced over his shoulder at the case holding the sniper rifle lying on the rear seat. “If I get stopped, he’ll see that for sure. Wish I had brought a handgun; be able to shoot the bastard if he pulled me over,” he said aloud, stating bravado he really didn’t feel.

With his eyes jumping back and forth from the windshield to the rearview mirror, he croaked, "Should have taken off right away instead of hanging around town waiting for someone to find the body. If I'm lucky they won't find it for a month, or ever, for that matter."

The cars began to speed by, but not the cop car. It slowed and pulled in behind him.

"Son-of-a-bitch is running my Texas plates."

After a couple of nervous miles, the cop pulled out and sped away. Surviving the state cop's brief scrutiny, he felt relief.

"What an idiot I am," he mumbled as he wiped sweat from his forehead. "Driving slow draws as much attention as speeding."

Soon the truck was traveling along with the cruise control set at seventy-two, just over the posted speed limit.

"Once I get over the bridge into Michigan's Upper Peninsula, it'll be safer, and then once in my partner Bill's cabin near the town of Ralph, I'll be home free. Hell of a name for a town, Ralph. Had a dog named Ralph, when I was a kid. Killed the little bitch with my bare hands. She sure squirmed."

Enjoying the memory he smiled, "Too bad I didn't get to watch that asshole back there die. I know it had to hurt like hell. Hope he died real slow. That slug knocked him ten yards into the weeds. Looked like a kid doing cartwheels. Surprised me when he crawled away. Bet he died with his eyes wide open. Get a tingle when they show that in movies."

The grin slowly faded as he remembered his plight.

"How far is that damn bridge? Once into the U.P. my worries will almost be over. Good thing no one knows about that cabin; be there in five hours."

An hour later, on I-75 just beyond Grayling, to distract his thoughts, he started talking to himself again.

"I think the hunting season has started for bear up here," he said, "No matter, not buying a license anyway, staying incognito. I'll try out the gun on some deer and a bear or two. With the laser system, I can't miss."

SNIPER INSTINCT

After a few minutes of silence, the man smirked, "Wait till my buddies hear about this. Not one of them ever thought that old Ed Zager had enough guts to kill a man, and an armed man at that, make it sound like it was no big deal, piece of cake. Scared hell out of me when he shot back, though."

He turned on his C/D player and said, "I guess I showed him. Doesn't make up for all the money I lost on that gun contract, but it helps."

"Someone bought off that son of a bitch, I just know it, but I'll get my money back one way or another. Sell the guns to one of the cartels in Columbia, or to that senator's mercenaries. Speaking of the senator, I wonder why she wanted that asshole killed? I had reason enough myself, but I don't think I'd have even considered it if the senator hadn't suggested it, first. I'll bet she even wants that bitch, MacDonald, taken care of, too. Maybe one of his hired guns will do it. That'd be cool with me. Let one of them stick their neck out for a change." His eyes glazed over while he thought, "They'll probably kidnap her and take turns using her before they put one between her eyes. I wouldn't mind being in on that. That bitch is hot."

It was late afternoon when he turned onto a dirt trail five miles north of the tiny town of Ralph. A hundred yards off the blacktop, he stopped at a padlocked gate and climbed out of the truck to unlock it. After driving the truck through, he went back, wiped out the tire tracks, and relocked the gate. A quarter mile, further along the twisting driveway, was the site of an ancient homestead.

Standing in the middle of a large clearing stood a new log cabin surrounded by several rundown outbuildings. He stopped in front of the cabin, got out, and began unloading his gear. Once everything was inside the building, he stood on the porch and looked at his surroundings.

Fifty yards to one side of the cabin were the remains of an ancient apple orchard. The field, making up the clearing, was over two hundred yards in diameter, surrounded by a dense mixture of pines and hardwoods, just beginning to show the bright colors of fall.

LARRY NIXON

“Bill says, this time of year the deer and the bear love that old orchard. Says, I’ll be able to sit in the cabin and pick them off as they come in for the apples. Said not to kill them all, though. Save a few for him.”

After gazing at the surroundings for several minutes, he got back in his truck and parked it out of sight inside one of the outbuildings. A smile creased his face as he walked back to the new cabin. He was home free.

* * *

A noise startled me out of my stupor, and I grabbed for my gun, but it was jammed too tightly behind my belt. I tried to crawl deeper into my cavern, but someone had my feet.

A voice said, “Vic, you’re hurt, blood everywhere, oh my God.”

I was still groggy as I was dragged into the open. The pain forced me to fight back and yell, “Stop.”

Opening my eyes to a squint, not entirely sure what was going on, I blinked and gasped, “Leg hurts.”

“I’m sorry, Honey, didn’t mean to hurt you. Just lay still,” the voice said. “We’re going to wait right here until I get someone to help me carry you down the hill.”

“Brenda?” I think I smiled, “Glad it’s you. I’m okay, a little help, that’s all. I’ll make it.”

I struggled to stand, but gave up as the pain intensified, but it cleared my head.

“I’m not bleeding anymore. I can handle this,” I said trying to put up a brave front.

“Here, take a drink from your canteen, first,” Brenda said. “Then we’ll see if we can make it down the hill.”

Lying on my side, I took several small sips of water before attempting to stand. With Brenda’s help, I managed to get up, but descending the boulder-strewn hill was painful. I willed myself to ignore it. A couple inches below six feet, with an aerobic instructor’s

build, Brenda practically carried me. Once on the level, we hobbled a few steps at a time toward the farm.

"This is stupid," she said. "A deputy and Sven will be here soon. Sit down right here; we'll wait for them. They can carry you."

"Sven's coming?" I smiled in spite of the pain. "Glad I'm armed. Let's keep going. Uh, maybe you better carry this," I said as I handed her my handgun. "I may be tempted to shoot *his* ass off."

Brenda took my gun, checked the safety, and put it into her coat pocket. "You don't think Sven shot you, do you?"

I shook my head.

"Why are you carrying a handgun?"

"Don't remember, something the colonel said."

Somewhere along the trail, possibly half way to the fence, I began to feel lightheaded and stopped to get control. With the trees whirling around, I felt like I was going to pass out. I dropped to a squat to get my balance, but the strain on my wounded butt sent pain screaming up and down my leg. I lurched forward and landed on my stomach. It took several seconds for the dizziness and intense pain to subside.

Brenda squatted next to me, put her hand on my back, and looked at my leg. "You're bleeding again."

"I'll make it," I said as I put my arms around her waist and struggled to my feet. Once I got my balance, I tried to take a step, but stumbled instead, and would have fallen if Brenda hadn't grabbed me.

"This is ridiculous," she said as she put her arm around my shoulders, pulled me back to the center of the trail, and forced me down. "We're going to sit right here on the ground and wait for them."

With all my weight on my left butt cheek, I leaned against her. She felt good. She opened my canteen and gave me another drink. Later, it could have been five minutes or five hours for all I knew, we heard someone coming. It was Sven and a deputy sheriff.

Sven was laughing when he said, "Glad you din't kick the bucket, asshole, gotta kick your butt first."

"Deputy, go get your car and drive it across the field to the fence. Sven and I will get him that far."

The cop turned and took off at a jog.

Sven said to Brenda, "Grab a leg, I grab t'other, drag him to the fence."

"We are not going to drag him, Sven. I'll get on one side, and you get on the other. We'll carry him."

"Easier if I gut'm out first," Sven laughed. "G'me room. I'll lug him."

I started to object, but before I could say anything, Sven had picked me up and tossed me over his shoulder as easily as if I had been a little kid. With my wounded hip jammed against the side of his jaw, he took off at a fast walk. I bit back a groan, the pain pounded with every step.

While bouncing on Sven's shoulder, the throbbing kept me more or less coherent, but nauseous. In spite of that, I kept silent.

Humiliating, but not going to let him know how much it hurts.

Every ten paces, or so, Sven stopped and bounced me tighter against his neck to get a more secure hold. At the same time, he ground his jaw against my wound. He was enjoying this.

"Sven," Brenda said. "Take it easy. You're hurting him."

"Naw, he'cn take it."

It was quite a ways to the fence, and by the time we reached it, Sven was laboring. He dropped me to the ground with a thud next to the fence. My head bounced off the hard packed earth, but my butt hurt too much to even notice.

I scowled up at him through my pain, "You're a jerk, Johanson."

He smiled down at me as he wiped my blood from his neck and shoulder with a greasy rag he had pulled from his pocket. The deputy was waiting inside his patrol car talking on the radio.

He called out, "We taking him to the hospital?"

"Of course," Brenda answered.

Sven climbed through the fence, reached under the bottom strand, and grabbed my legs. Before Brenda could object, he dragged me to the other side.

"Sven," Brenda yelled. "You're being brutal. He's bleeding again."

SNIPER INSTINCT

With the deputy on one side and Sven on the other, they picked me up, carried me to the car, and put me into the back seat, not too gently, I might add. Brenda slid in next to me.

“Thanks Sven, I owe you,” I said through gritting teeth.

He answered, “Don’t ya worry, li’l man. I’ll get even.”

“You missed your chance, pal. I was helpless back there, but I’ll try to remember not to hurt you so badly the next time you take a swing at me.”

Sven had a personal vendetta against me, going back years, and had attacked me several times, but my hand-to-hand combat training had allowed me to stay out of his reach and get the better of him. Lord knows, if he ever got his hands on me, I’d be a goner. At six feet and 180 pounds, I would be no match for him. He outweighed me by at least 80 pounds, mostly muscle, and was as strong as a weight lifter.

“Always wanted ta put ya in the horsepital,” he grinned. “This’ll haff ta do fer now. Next time, I do it right.”

Sven slid into the front passenger seat, looked at all the gadgets and said, “First time ever been up front.”

At the hospital emergency ward, they cleaned my wound, connected an IV to my arm, and stitched me up. The doctor wanted to check me in for the night, but I refused, infuriating Brenda.

The doctor said, “Wounds like this are not much more then flesh wounds, but have been fatal from profuse bleeding and shock, plus you’ve lost a lot of blood, Victor. It’s a wonder you’re even conscious. So far, you’ve been very lucky.”

“He doesn’t look lucky,” Brenda said, “but he’s staying overnight.”

The doctor nodded.

“A meal, a couple aspirin, and a good night’s sleep, all I need, Sweetie.”

“Don’t Sweetie me. This macho baloney pains me.”

“Come on, Brenda, like the doctor says, it’s not much more than a big scratch.”

LARRY NIXON

An hour later after the IV had finished, a nurse moved me into a private room. Brenda's logic had won me over. Actually, I just got tired of arguing, plus the fact that the shot of Demerol the doctor had given me was making me feel good, not to mention sleepy.

* * *

The next day, before they loaded me into a wheelchair to release me, my doctor said, "I want to see you in ten days. I'll take out those stitches and have a close look at the wound. It may require surgery."

"It feels okay to me, so why more surgery?"

"It only feels okay because of the pain killers, but we have to be very careful or you may end up with a severe limp. A minor operation should prevent that."

"Sounds good to me, Doc. Can I exercise it?"

"Keep it simple, and don't overdo it until the stitches come out. If it hurts don't do it."

A nurse pushed me in the wheelchair to the front entrance and she and Brenda helped me inside Brenda's car. Even after taking painkillers, sitting flat on my butt was out of the question so I rode *sidesaddle*, cocked onto my left butt cheek.

I managed to keep Brenda from yelling at me all the way home by telling her everything I could remember about the attack. At the Moeller's house, although Brenda wanted to give me a sponge bath, I insisted that she just fill the tub and let me bathe on my own. Trying to keep my wound above the water, I settled into the tub on my left side. The warm water felt great, and I fell asleep. Those pills worked well.

Pounding on the bathroom door woke me.

"Are you all right, Vic?" Brenda called.

"Just dozing, Sweetie," I answered.

"What did I tell you about that Sweetie crap? You know I don't like that especially when I'm mad at you."

"Sorry, Sweetie. Why are you mad at me?"

The door slammed open. "I ought to drown you," she said.

“Where’s Carl?” I stammered, looking beyond her. Carl was her big brother, with emphasis on big.

“He’s in Florida, remember? I just hung up from talking to the sheriff. He’s planning to come out and ask you some questions.”

“I’d like to ask Colonel Hileman some questions,” I said. “He knew something like this was going to happen.”

“Ask your wonderful AI about it,” she said. “I’m sure it will come up with answers.” She paused. “I’ll bet your wonderful AI is the cause of it all, anyway. You’ve been a target ever since you and Sue designed it. How many times have you been shot?”

“Well, I was in the military you know. This is only the second time since I became a civilian.”

“What do you mean, the second time? You were shot four times when we were hiking in Colorado, when that woman tried to kill you. I was there, remember?”

“Yeah, but that only counts as one.”

“Sara said you showed up once with a deep gash on your leg and then another time with three wounds on the back of your shoulder. She said you claimed they were boils.”

“The gash was from a parachuting accident when I was in the Air Force, and the others were boils, just like I said.”

“I don’t believe you, Victor. You have scars all over your body.”

“What you’re saying Sweetie, is that all the time you were looking over my body, you were really looking for scars, and I thought you just found me sexy. Don’t you think the scars make me look sexy?”

“I’ll give you sexy. You call me Sweetie one more time and I’ll add another scar, in a more private place.”

I decided to shut up and get out of the tub. Not wanting her to see my less than graceful attempt, struggling to stand up, I shooed her out of the bathroom. With some effort, I dried off, pulled on a pair of shorts, hobbled into my bedroom, and collapsed face first onto the bed. Brenda followed with some antiseptic, gauze, and adhesive tape to bind my wound again.

LARRY NIXON

I went to bed early that evening, but my butt was too sore to let me fall sleep. Finally, at about two in the morning, I took a couple more of the pain pills. They worked.

Ordered to make an impossible kill, Vic Flint was transported into the remote mountains of Afghanistan. His target, an American traitor training Al Qaeda rebels. Vic's weapon, an experimental laser aimed, single shot sniper rifle designed to hit targets at extreme distances. The trajectory of this impossible shot would cover one and a half miles. While preparing to make the shot, he found himself surrounded by mercenaries ordered to kill him at the mission's end.

SNIPER INSTINCT

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