

## Prologue-

**A Look Back**, thankful for the times we lived in— Kuala-Lamour Airport was deserted. Why? I can't explain. It may have been because our economy flight from Australia arrived at an odd hour. Having to wait there for many hours for our connecting flight was not an issue, because we'd been flying around the world for a couple of weeks and time didn't matter anymore. I was with my wife and we were having a good time, eating food we'd never have the chance to eat again. Sitting comfortably and eating, we noticed a group of about fifty people being marched along, with a security guard in front and another in the back—in two rows, not exactly instep but keeping the shape.

"Prisoners being taken somewhere," I told my wife, although I didn't see any handcuffs or chains.

"They look Indian, Maybe Malaysian-Indians," remarked my wife. "Can't believe so many Indians can commit serious crimes."

Finally, noticing our gate for boarding was opening, we jumped up and stood in line. And within minutes we were inside at our boarding lounge. That was when my wife noticed the same bunch of criminals being allowed in, to board the same flight we were on. No guards. Let in free.

"Hope we don't have to sit close to them," my wife said, making me move away to a quiet corner.

What we saw next, sent chills down our spines. The group of criminals were also coming to the same corner, tightly packing all the

seats, either side and in front. No more guards, just the two of us and the group in the corner. They looked tired and sleepy--clothes full of sweat stains. The first thing they did was to spray something on themselves, passing the cans down to the whole group. Antiperspirant or scent? We were not sure. And then, much to our surprise, we heard them talk Tamil. Not Indian Tamil, not Malaysian Tamil, Jaffna Tamil.

Comfortable, they were speaking Tamil, "I asked where they were from?"

They said, "Sri Lanka."

When asked where in Sri Lanka, they said, "Jaffna...and were working as hired laborers, contracted for a period of time."

Noticing most of them were of the age I was when in my senior classes in school, I asked, "What school they went to."

"Jaffna Central," came the answer, from at least the guys I was talking to. That was when I dropped my guard and proudly announced, "I also studied there. A long time ago."

The guys studied me for a moment and asked, "Before independence?"

I said, "No, a little after." But that drove home the truth--how soon after independence, in 1948, we all went through the schools, a time so ancient these boys couldn't fathom. We were lucky to have gone to the school when we did. The school produced many professionals, Engineers, Doctors and Lawyers, and like me many went abroad for lucrative carriers. That was sixty years ago. It breaks my heart to see the same school can only claim to produce laborers now. Amazingly, these boys seemed as happy as we were at that age. They are resigned to the limitations of their times. How things have

changed in that time? Sixty years ago, I was reaping the fruits of what the British had left, a school system second to none.

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*Yes, lack of progress grows unnoticed until a catastrophe hits you between the eyes. I worry if the country was heading in the direction to a way of life and governance inherent in its culture and beliefs--throwing away all the good the British had left. I hope and pray for future generations, the trend can be reversed and better times will return.*

## CHAPTER 1

The distant ringing of the phone sounded like a dream. Disoriented and numb, Ben Shapiro turned over in bed, sinking one ear into the pillow and the other into the soft flesh of his inside arm. The ringing continued.

“This can’t be happening,” he growled, sticking his hand out. His groping hand knocked off a couple of items on the bedside table before he picked up the phone. “Hello,” he yelled in his croaky voice, ready to pounce on any lame excuse from the late-night caller.

But the phone was dead. Ben, now half-awake in that state of hallucinating, between sleep and wakefulness, wondered where he was. Images of places he’d been waking up in recent times, his platoon camp and the two hospitals, flashed by. His brain fog started to lift slowly, and he heard the crashing waves nearby. He was neither in Afghanistan, nor in the apartment in Niagara Falls; he was in Sri Lanka, half way across the globe.

Ben slammed the receiver back on the cradle, and buried his face into the pillow, determined to get a few more hours of sleep. But his half open eye had seen something glitter on the floor. He turned over and saw his cell phone glitter. That was his cell phone that had rung. Its light always lingered on long after the caller had cut off.

“I need to change that ring tone,” Ben mumbled and slid back under the bedsheet, determined to get some sleep. He needed

it after the two restless days in Jaffna, where he'd spent a sleepless night shrouded by the mosquito net in the cheap motel.

Fifteen minutes went by, and Ben, stripped down to his boxers, found himself wide awake, listening to the constant hum of the air conditioner, struggling to keep up with the heat coming through the patio door he'd left open. The green lights of the bedside clock showed ten minutes past eleven. That meant he'd had only three hours of sleep. There was no mistaking it, his sleep apnea had taken hold. Now it will be several hours before he'd feel that sleepy feeling again. 'Try sleep inducing thoughts,' the doctors have said, but he knew there wasn't going to be any tricking of his mind.

He reached over and grabbed his phone from the floor. It wasn't Malli, his trishaw driver who'd called. He was the only person he'd given his number to, other than the Hertz Car Rental People at the airport. But the rental agency had checked him out, saying everything was okay.

Three months ago, he didn't know where Sri Lanka was. And now he was in the middle of the island, befuddled and wondering what was next. Four days in Sri Lanka hadn't turned up anything in his search for Sanger. Now he had just one option left, call it a failed mission and head back home to Niagara.

'Story of my life,' Ben mused, looking back on his life. He'd never planned his life. 'This thing about having goals and planning is over rated,' he'd always thought. When at a fork, in life, he'd just looked around and opted for the best option available. It was that simple, and for the most part it had worked out well for him.

The phone rang, again.

There was no mistaking this time. His cell phone was slithering on the bed-side table. Whoever rang before wasn't letting up.

Ben grabbed the phone. "What do you want? Calling at midnight?" he yelled.

There was a brief silence, and then, "Ben?" a woman asked, her voice fluttering, doubting who she'd called. "Is this ..."

"Yes, this is him. Who is *this*?" Ben asked, just as he detected traces of the Up-State, New York Accent. He'd heard her voice somewhere. "It's midnight!"

"No, no, it's...sorry, Ben, this is Brenda at the front office," she said. "It's morning...Ben, are you okay?"

It was all sinking in now. Brenda was calling from Niagara, not Sri Lanka. The international calling plan he'd gotten didn't require anyone in America to dial a country code. "Look, Brenda, I am not in my condo," Ben said. "I am in Sri Lanka, and it's almost midnight...here."

"Selanka?" she asked. "Are you out of the country?"

He didn't expect her to know where Sri Lanka was, leave alone saying it right. "Yes, half way across the globe," he said, his jumpy mind racing to guess the reason for her call. One thing, he was sure--there was a money-making agenda in the call.

"Oh...I am so sorry," Brenda said. "I didn't know you were out of the country. I'll call you later, in--"

"I am up now, Brenda. What is it?" Ben cut her short, sitting up in bed and resting against the headboard, feeling somewhat sorry for the mix up that wasn't her fault.

“Oh! The Veteran’s Affairs Lady, called yesterday,” she said, “inquiring about a unit for another veteran. I said I’ll check and let her know. Well, we don’t have any right now. Then I was thinking, your lease expires in a few weeks. Will you be moving out?”

That was the reason for her call; she wanted to know if he was dying as he was supposed to. “Look! Brenda, I’m not dying anymore,” Ben said. “If that’s what you mean?”

There was a pause, and then, “Oh! no, no, not that...but you signed a contract for only the six-month lease.”

“I get it. Yes, that’s what I did,” Ben said, interrupting. “Brenda, miracles do happen. Look, I’m okay now.” Ben cut her short, not wanting to hear the beating around the bush and her loud squeaky voice in the middle of the night. “I’ll extend it...I’m cured now.”

A short silence followed. Brenda was obviously taken aback by the retort. “Why...this is wonderful news,” she said, but her voice failed her, missing any hint of genuine delight. “So, you’ll extend the lease?”

“That’s the plan...I thought I had time. Let me see, it’s almost Sunday, Saturday for you...I’ll sign the lease when I get back next week,” Ben said, but deep inside he’d yearned for a place of his own—to enjoy his new lease on life—but he knew he still had time to change his mind.

“That’ll be fine, then. Sorry to call you this late in the night...wherever you are.”

“And, Brenda, don’t forget my covered parking for the motorcycle,” Ben said. The covered parking for his new Harley was no less important.

“Yes, yes, I’ll make a note.” She said, hanging up.

Ben didn’t like Brenda from day one, when she aggressively tried to sell gimmicks like the trash pick-up-service and the shared wireless the apartment complex provided, all for a few extra bucks. She probably got a fat kickback from the extras she sold. Maybe in her line of business she had to be that way. He put the phone down and sat back in bed.

Before long, his mind drifted, to the day he met Brenda at the condo complex--

## CHAPTER 2

Spring in Niagara had that unique punch, like the water sprayed on a tiring marathon runner, but for Ben it was just another day in the count-down. The hospital had given up, and it didn't matter where he lived out the remaining days.

How quickly his life had changed? Ben thought, sitting opposite Brenda in the apartment complex. He should have been thrilled to get a place of his own, after the thirty-one years in the rough-and-tumble digs the army provided, but his outlook on life had become sour.

"Are you from Niagara?" Brenda asked, highlighting the areas in the contract he had to sign, after unsuccessfully trying to sell the extras the Veteran's Condo offered.

"Yes, this is where I grew up. All my worldly possessions are here, locked up in storage," Ben said, "and every time they flew me home, this is where I chose to come. Where I stayed here depended on the season and the price of motels. But it is a place to call home. I was adopted here."

"The VA lady said to work with you on the lease term...are you really?"

"Yes, true," Ben said, wishing the need to explain all this will go way soon. Just when he thinks he'd forgotten it, someone

somewhere asks it, and he's back to square one. "They've given me five months to live."

"VA Lady said you'll get a fat discharge check from the army and to give some slack now."

"Yeah, right!" Ben said, sarcasm written all over his tone. "What good is that, now. I'll have to think of a way of spending it all in the time I have left. That's if at all I get that check in time...five months now. Spent two weeks in Kabul Hospital and two weeks at the VA."

"Yes, as it turned out, it was an infection we picked up from the seasonal lake. It was close to our unit, and instead of using our rationed water, we'd used the seasonal lake at various times, washing hands and faces. We didn't know," Ben said. "We were on our guard against sniper attacks or roadside bombs in Afghanistan, never this."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Brenda said, her eyes giving Ben a suspicious once over, before filling out the lease contract documents-

"You are lucky, it's the last condo we have for rent." It sounded well-rehearsed, like a line used on everyone signing a contract. "For five months, it will be...only seven hundred a month," she said, not hiding the urgency to nail down a commitment then and there, in her tone. She turned the contract sheets around for Ben to read. "I've highlighted the places for you to sign."

Ben nodded; he wasn't going to quibble over the hundred-dollar jump in rate from what the Veteran's Affairs Lady had negotiated. He signed the documents in all the highlighted places.

“It’s block Nine, facing the court yard. Your unit is a nice one on the second floor,” she said. “Let me know if you change your mind on the garbage pickup and internet package.”

Ben left the rental office with the keys Brenda gave. The walk to his unit took him around the courtyard, passing half a dozen blocks, all two storied and similar. The garage parking in middle was the only single storied structure. He climbed the covered stairs to the second floor and opened the door.

Ben liked the condo, especially the view of the afternoon sun beating down on the green of the courtyard. ‘My own place at last,’ he mumbled and slumped into the sofa, resting his feet on the table and staring at the courtyard lawn. The sun would rise again tomorrow, like it had done for million years, he philosophized, but the sun would set on his life in a few months, never to rise again.

He didn’t know where he was born. He didn’t even know he was adopted, until a few days before his mother died. But now, at least he knew where he’ll die. Tired and unsure what was next, he slumped in the sofa.

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More than an hour had passed, and Ben found himself humming the song, “Green, Green Grass of Home,” a song about a condemned prisoner who was longing to escape to the green, green grass of home, when in fact he was facing execution and burial there. The song ends, “Yes, they’ll all come to see me in the shade of that old oak tree, as they lay me ‘neath the green, green grass of home.” An eerie moment, the song made popular by singer Tom Jones was also about a guy coming home to die.

Ben realized what was happening to him. He couldn’t let that depressing outlook take over his remaining days--he still had months to enjoy life. His friend from the unit had called him a few days before he died of the same decease. He’d said, he wished they had sent him home earlier, to enjoy the time left with his family, instead of trying new treatments and wasting his time. Ben had no family.

A light bulb went off inside him--it was a glorious spring-day outside, just like the kind of day when as a teenager, he would jump on his motorcycle and ride all over Niagara, days he’d be bouncy and full of life. That’s what would bring back the excitement, Ben thought. He decided to head to the storage unit, where his Old Harley was.

## CHAPTER 3

Ben Shapiro blinked a couple times, trying to clear his eyes, but what his clearing eyes saw sent chills down his spine. The stars in the night sky and the towering trees could only mean, he’d been hit by a roadside bomb. Or was it a sniper? Al-Qaeda had been active in the region, posting beheading-videos in recent days, and this could be him, next? Ben wondered. A blanket was covering him, and there was a cushion under his head. They’d spared him? A million questions flooded inside. Through the corner of his eyes, he could see a man sitting next to him, an Afghan looking man with a long beard, wearing baggy-trousers and with a shawl thrown over the shoulders. Without moving a muscle, Ben looked around him. There was no assault rifle next to him. That was comforting.

Was he injured? He checked for broken bones, twirling his toes and shoulders. Nothing seemed to be broken. But he felt a warm sensation on his wrist--the man was taking his pulse. That set off the panic button again. Was he dying?

Ben tried to get a closer look, raising his head slightly. The man's face could not be seen, but the clothes he wore were just baggy pajamas and a towel thrown over the shoulder. He was sitting on the steps to a trailer home that had its outside light on. Other than the dim trailer light, the only other lights in the area belonged to the moving vehicles on a distant elevated-highway.

The man must have seen him move, he said, "You'd passed out." His calm monotone voice was clearly American.

"You are going to be okay," the man said, letting go of the wrist and leaning back against the wooden post behind him.

"Where am I?" Ben asked, just as his head cleared and images of his admission to Niagara Hospital flashed by.

"The Old-Falls section. You've been in a motorcycle accident," he said, lazily nodding toward a tree nearby.

Ben looked behind him and saw two dying lights filtering through the grass under a large tree. His Harley had come to rest there after hitting the tree. Disjointed images came flashing in, the Harley's brakes failing, hitting the loose gravel, and losing control-like scenes from an action-packed movie. He was being tossed around, the sky above him one moment and under him the next, until the trailer skirt hit him, the last thing he remembered. Ben did what every rider wishes he'd do in that dreaded moment, when you jump off in the right direction, or otherwise the heavy machine would drag you with it.

"I thought a tree had fallen. When I came out and saw you, all curled up and not moving, I thought you were surely dead," the man said.

"Thanks," Ben said, elbow on the ground and trying to get up.

"Oops! Don't move yet," the man screamed, holding his hand up. "Not yet...lie down for a bit and get a feel for where it may be hurting. What you don't see is the worst injury...head, chest, and whatever." He removed the blanket and watched closely for a few moments.

"I'll get you something hot to drink. That would give an idea if all's well inside." He got up, climbed the steps, and went inside the trailer.

It was all coming back to Ben now—He tried all afternoon to get his Old Harley going, using all the tricks he'd learned as a teenager, cleaning the plugs and using fresh gas. When after many hours of trying the Old Harley fired, he wasn't going to turn it off without giving it a good run. The two-hour ride around the scenic roads of Upstate New York, around the Finger Lakes and Thousand Islands, was just the tonic the Old Harley needed. The more he rode, the better the Harley performed, and the clonks and squeaks finally smoothed out. It was on his way back to his condo, when he stopped at the gas station, a place he'd stopped many times. The bar next door to the gas station was popular with bikers of the area, where with one stop they could get the gas and a drink. It was Friday, and in the crowded bar Ben made friends in no time, narrating stories of his three tours in Afghanistan and the Old Harley he'd gotten going. It was when he left the bar, one of them pointed to the expired license plate. The Harley wasn't road-legal. It was late in the night, and he wasn't going to take the direct route to his condo, that too on a Friday, when the cops would be out in

full force. There was not much he could do but take Route 13, a road through the village he'd driven through as a youngster.

But things had changed in this old section of the falls. Route 13 didn't have much traffic anymore. The new interstate had killed all traffic, and along with it, all the revenue the city received from the thousands of visitors who used the route to see the falls. The crowd now preferred the Canadian side just across the border. The city for their part had let this section of the route fall into a state of disrepair. Crumbling rooftops and dilapidated houses filled the roadsides, and a few large backyards had become trailer-parks.

## CHAPTER 4

The trailer door creaked as it opened, and the man came out holding a steaming cup of something. Under the light outside the trailer, his features were clearer. Although his accent had a slight Indian trace, his appearance resembled Bin Laden, wiry with a beard and moustache.

“Sip this slowly,” the man said, handing the concoction and sitting down on the same step as before. “Not sure if you'll like the taste, but this will show if everything is going down okay. It's not exactly an X-ray of the internals, but believe me, this has revealed many internal injuries.”

Ben let the sips of the concoction soak his palate slowly before rolling down. The sting and an aroma as it went down reminded him of Texas Single Barrel Bourbon. “Hmmm...I'm glad you made me sip it. It's like whisky mixed with spicy hot coffee.”

It was a concoction of spices and juices from a part of the world he'd never visited. There were many such concoctions the locals in Afghanistan had sworn by and made him taste, but the aroma-filled steam coming out of this cup was totally different.

“What is this? Never had the stuff before, tangy, but good...goes down with a tingling sensation.”



The man just smiled, white teeth shining between the mustache and beard. "It's called *Rasam*," he said, watching carefully like a doctor looking for telltale signs. "It's a cure for anything stomach related, my old folks would say. It's from South India-

"Ayurvedic Medicine. A special mix of spices. You can't buy it here. I get it from Canada."

What he heard about the concoction confirmed he was Indian. He wasn't sure if it was the hot drink or the stuff in it, but within a few sips, Ben felt good.

He gulped down what was left in the cup and looked in the direction of his Harley under the tree. He knew he had to find a way of going home. "Good, I think I'm fine, just some dull pain here and there."

"I was praying you'll be okay. I would have had to...call 911," he said, looking around.

"Not something I like doing...all the police in the area would have descended here, if I did. It's this place, abandoned by the city. It doesn't have the best of reputations. It's had more than its share of serial killers, pedophiles and felons. They come in one day and are gone the next.

"I better find a taxi. My bike is done...I think."

"It's past midnight and you are not going to get any rides from around here. The nearest taxi will be at the Seven Eleven Store on the other side of the through way. There'll be nothing before six...you can get some sleep and leave when ever."

"The sofa is big. Let's go inside," the man said, grabbing the blanket, and at the same time, watching Ben get up and steady himself.

The fate of his Old Harley was bothering him. He followed his heart and ambled toward the dying lights. What he saw under the tree broke his heart. His old Harley was a mess of twisted metal and smashed-in gas tank. Memories flashed by as he stood there—the happy hours of riding, hours of escape from the miseries at home. The arguments between his parents were getting unbearable, and his Harley was his only out, until he joined the army when his mother died.

The man was patiently waiting with the trailer door open. Ben leaned over, switched the dying lights of the Harley, and climbed the steps to the trailer.

"Well, it's not four-star," the man said, letting Ben in and pointing to a large three-seater sofa.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said, placing the cushion back on the sofa and throwing the blanket through the door, onto a bed in the only room the trailer had.

The trailer was clean, no beer cans or piles of junk. Every item was neatly in place. A desk and a chair placed facing the window gave a view of the outside, a direct view of route 13 and the house the trailer belonged to. Two large-screen monitors on the desk stood out like they were in an office in Wall Street, high-end, slim and shiny, positioned to provide continuous views of both, like the investment pundits on TV had. The man obviously wasn't the typical 'Trailer-Guy'.

The bright lights inside the trailer confirmed the man was an Indian. His lean body was camouflaged well by his baggy

clothes and the long beard. His accent, chiseled to Near-American now, said he'd lived in America many years.

"How's the motorcycle?" the man asked, sitting in the chair opposite.

"Not good...the Old Harley is done," Ben said. "I'll call the scrap yard people to have it removed, might even get a couple of bucks for it."

"That bad? You were looking at it like your pet had died," the man said.

"Yes, it has a lot of sentimental value," Ben said. "Picked it up from someone who was ready to send it to the scrap yard. Spent all the money from my first evening job at McDonalds fixing it. Sort of sorry to see it finally go."

Many things about the man were intriguing, reading the pulse, the Rasam Concoction, and now the high-end computer--all from a man living in a trailer. "Are you...a nurse?" Ben asked.

"No, why do you ask?" the man asked, smiling and tugging the end of his beard.

"The way you sat there taking my pulse, like it was routine stuff."

The man smiled as he pondered. "You could say I've had some survival training, sort of," he said. "Had people die on me while I was taking their pulse. Yes, it was in a remote village and Rasam wasn't what you'd use under those circumstances in a place without a nearby-hospital."

"That reminds me," the man continued, "there was something in your pulse, steady but with a peculiar pattern. May mean something to a real doctor."

That startled Ben. "You're kidding me!" He wasn't ready for that, coming from a trailer guy.

"You felt what?"

"Just something about it...may be worth having it checked," he said. "But the pulse was steady and strong, like you were not in any immediate danger."

"This is something! Yes, I have seen many doctors."

"I was just shocked you picked up on that." Ben tried to explain his reactions. "And, they have given me six months."

"For?" the man asked.

"To live, of course," Ben said.

"True! That was a month ago, down to five months now. Something I picked up in Afghanistan on my last tour."

The man just kept staring for a moment. "Huh! you nearly lost even that tonight," he said.

"Yes, almost lost," he said. "Life is funny...you never know. You think you have time, but you are never sure."

The man's stare turned to the sofa. "You should be okay, here...let me get you a pillow and a sheet," he said, as he got up and headed to the bedroom.