

CHAPTER 5

Daylight creeping through the blind-slats signaled the crack of dawn Ben, drifting in and out of sleep on the lumpy sofa, was waiting for. It was time to get out of the trailer, before his host woke up. He dropped his hand down below the sofa, feeling for his boots. A flickering picture on the wall caught his eyes. There was a man in the picture. His frizzy long hair and the twinkling eyes made him look demonic. That spooked Ben, making him lift his head and investigate. There was a flickering oil lamp below the picture, and facing it, was a dark shadow of a head--his host was praying, eyes glued to the picture. Chanting softly, he was totally immersed with a trance like stare on the picture, like he was in some spiritual connection.

Ben remained frozen, watching the man pray, legs crossed and sitting on the floor like a yogi. He'd learnt to respect prayers, of all types--something instilled in him as part of his training in Afghanistan, where the Muslims prayed five times a day.

More than ten minutes passed, and the soft chants finally stopped. The man remained still for several more moments, eyes glued to the picture. He then gently propped himself up and put out the burning wick of the oil lamp with a pinch of the fingers.

He picked the small rug from the floor and turned toward the sofa Ben was on. "You are up?"

"Sorry, did I wake you up?"

"No, just woke up when you were finishing the prayer," Ben said.

The man switched the lights on. "How do you feel?" He asked coming over and sitting opposite.

"I'm fine, just a dull ache here and there."

With the lights on, the man in picture was no longer demonic. It was the flickering light that had made it spooky. But his piercing eyes still looked through you, as if he read your every thought, yet he had that forgiving smile, that of parent to the child.

"Huh! Five months!" he said. His probing eyes stayed on Ben, but the facial expression was stoic, behind his long beard. "How's the family taking it?"

"No family," Ben said, settling back in the sofa. "That's the good part in all this. Marriage was never an option-

"My adoptive mother died many years ago, then, when her husband couldn't wait to bring his girlfriend home immediately after, I decided never to marry."

"Hmm...our stories are similar. Mine for different reasons, but I don't have the death sentence you have. No family and just five more months to live? Enjoy it, do whatever you like."

"For five months...I don't know what. I'll just do the little pleasures, eat, drink and ride it out."

"Riding? I saw the way you looked at your motorcycle."

“Yes,” Ben nodded. “It’s another world out there when you are riding. The world goes by you, lush green meadows and the lakes. No worries. You are just in the moment-

“Yes...shame, my Old Harley died before me.”

“Buy another,” the man said. “Enjoy, you have five months. That’s what I would do.”

Ben nodded. “Yes, I should...little strapped for cash now. Maybe when I get my fat discharge check. Still waiting after thirty-one years of service. The Army is so slow. I’m going to die waiting for it. Go figure.”

“Are they that expensive?” the man asked.

“Harleys? hell, yes. Easily thirty grands for a decent one.”

The man pondered, eyes slowly shifting to the picture on the wall. Whoever the man he prayed to was, he must mean a lot to him. Ben had heard of black magics, supernatural influences, and many witchcrafts, but this was first hand.

“I better be going, thanks for -”

“Hold on,” the man said. He gingerly walked over to the kitchen area, thoughtful and dazed. With his hands on a kitchen drawer, he stared at Ben, a scrutinizing look.

“There’s a reason...why you crashed into my trailer,” he said.

“Your name? How do you spell?” he asked.

“Ben Shapiro. S-H-A-P-I-R-O,” Ben replied, wondering why the man would care.

With a pen in hand, the man took his time writing. When he finished, he walked slowly back, holding something resembling a ticket in his hand. “For your Harley,” he said.

Ben couldn’t believe what he saw. He had to do a double take. There were two checks made out for fifteen thousand dollars each, and they were Canadian checks. Puzzled and confused, Ben studied the checks. Someone had signed for the treasurer.

“No way...” Ben stuttered. “I can live without the Harley. Its only five months.” He noted the shade of ink was different to the one that had his name and the amount. They were pre-signed blank checks for his use.

“Exactly!” The man smiled.

“You need to enjoy what time you have left. Yes, it’s Canadian dollars. Made two checks, to stay within the limits. Don’t deposit both the same day.”

“No,” Ben said, his tone crisp and firm. “No way.” He wasn’t going to take the money from a trailer guy living frugally.

The man stared for a moment. “You are a proud man.” He headed back to the kitchen. “Don’t see many like you,” he said, pulling something out of a kitchen drawer. He came back holding a pen in one hand and something else in the other. “Okay, you have money coming in, you said, and it may not arrive in time. Write me an IOU note.”

He sat opposite, holding a note pad and the pen in his outstretched hand. “I’ll come after my money, from whatever you get, from what you leave behind. Name is T. Sanger.”

Ben stared at the note pad and then at the checks. He shook his head and said, “No way. Can’t do it.”

The man leaned in, closer. “Call me crazy or call me stupid, but I know when I get the call,” he said, watching Ben closely. He then leaned back in his seat--he was giving up.

“I don’t know what your beliefs are,” he said, before leaning forward again. “Look, what happens to your money when you are gone? It goes back to the army! You don’t have anyone to leave the money to. This way, you enjoy the time left. I’ll come after my money, from whatever you get.” He thrust the pen into Ben’s hand.

It was beginning to make sense. And deep inside the thought of a new Harley was beginning to excite. Then it hit him, “The treasuries will have an uncashed check... after all of those thirty-one years. Ben had a change of heart. He saw nothing wrong. He took the pen and wrote the IOU.

‘I’m never going to forget this,’ he mumbled handing back the note and the pen, ‘I’m coming here, right from the bank, when I get my money.’

CHAPTER 6

Stripped down to his waist and sitting on the examination table, Ben asked the nurse, “Do you see anything peculiar on the tapes?” trying to get a preview of his heart health before the doctors had a chance to see it.

The nurse smiled and gave Ben a couple of paper towels to wipe off the grease on his body. “I don’t know enough to tell the difference. They all look the same, to me,” she said, wheeling out the electrocardiogram machine with one hand and holding the tape in the other. “Ask the doctors in the next room. They will be here soon.”

His own gut feeling said he wasn’t dying in a hurry, not in two months. His biceps were again filling the sleeves of his favorite T-shirt, and he’d even started bench-pressing 250 pounds, getting closer by the day to his best of 350 pounds. It was two weeks after he’d bought his new Harley, when he first felt he was not getting worse, in fact he thought he was getting better. That’s when he started to chart the progress of his gym regiment and how much he was lifting. Now, after nearly two months, he was sure there was some mysterious change going on in his body. Either he was recovering or this was the lull before the storm. He needed to know; that’s when he called Dr Black. If he was not dying, he

needed to plan his life differently, not spend every day like it was his last day.

An hour had passed since the X-Ray was taken and the blood drawn, and Ben was still waiting for Dr. Black and the two specialists from the Buffalo Teaching Hospital going over the results in the next room. It was the day after Independence Day, and he hoped he'd have reasons to celebrate. He had envied the older veterans celebrating independence-day the previous night without a care in the world, while he was sipping his beer alone in his condo, worrying about what he was going to learn at the hospital.

Ben wiped the sticky stuff the wires had left on his body and stared at the grease on the tissues. 'The pulse,' Ben muttered on seeing the wrist Sanger had held to take his pulse. Anxiety mounting, he grabbed his wrist and tried to feel his pulse, like Sanger had done. He felt nothing. He moved his fingers around and felt the tinniest of beats in a location, but as hard as he tried, he couldn't make head or tail of what he felt. He jumped over to the doctor's stool and dragged it closer to the wall, pressing his ear to the wall to make something of what he could hear of the doctors' conference. It was all just a mix of jumbled medical jargon he had never heard. Minutes passed, and then there was laughter. That was a good omen.

Within moments, a door opened and the voices of the doctors coming out got louder. Ben jumped back to the examination table, after pushing the doctor's stool back to where it was.

Dr. Black walked in first, watching the anxiety ridden face of his patient. The other two followed him into the patient room.

The pulmonary specialist from the teaching hospital came over and sat on the stool. "Let me check your pulse," he said, reaching out and taking his hand.

He must have felt the pulse no more than a minute, he turned to the other two doctors and nodded. "Gone!"

"What have you been taking? There may be something we can learn from," the other specialist asked.

"Nothing more than just the pills doctor Black prescribed," Ben said, suppressing the urge to jump up in joy.

The doctors looked at each other, their puzzled look said they were witnessing a miracle. Did you try any nontraditional stuff, like in Mexico or ...?" one of them inquired.

"No...but I've tried to enjoy every day like it was a gift from God. I wake up in the morning, have breakfast at McDonald's, and ride my Harley wherever. Finger Lakes, Adirondacks or Thousand Islands, enjoying them during the best months of the year."

"Enjoying life! Hmmm! That can do it," one of them said. "Your immune system did take a beating with all the steroids we have been pumping-

"Well, I don't believe in miracles, but your case is as close as any to prove me wrong."

"This indeed is a miracle," Dr. Black said, coming over. "Like they said, you are free of whatever affliction you had. "Everything checks out. You can go home and celebrate. We at VA don't get to celebrate turnarounds like yours too often. Put your shirt back on and enjoy. Pretend nothing ever happened to you."

"My medications?"

“Nah, you don’t need those now. They were only anti-anxiety meds,” Dr. Black said, smiling and joining the others near the door. “Your sleep apnea also should go away with time.”

Stunned, Ben watched the doctors leave. The pent-up emotions inside wanted him to scream a yell of joy. He held back—he was in a hospital.

He sat still, letting it all soak in. It’s been a while since he had anything to celebrate. ‘This, changes everything,’ he said to himself.

‘Sanger! what have you done?’ he mumbled and reached out for his shirt. Was it some divine intervention? he wondered, as scenes of Sanger’s stair at the picture came flashing by. As bizarre as it was, he *was* the beneficiary of all the mysteries. Ben was convinced his accidental meeting with Sanger was the turning point. He wanted to head directly to Sanger’s trailer and break the news, but he hadn’t gotten the check from the army yet. It had been more than three months of waiting since he was discharged.

Having the money to settle with Sanger, would be more fitting, he thought. Two things he was sure of: the army wasn’t going to take his money, and Sanger would not have to produce the IOU in a probate court to claim his money.

The door opened and a nurse came rushing in. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I thought they were done with you.” She was the same nurse who’d used the electrocardiogram machine on him.

“Yes, I’m done,” Ben said, breaking away from the daydreams. “Just a little slow to put my shirt back on.”

He slipped the shirt back on and got up from the examination table

CHAPTER 7

The envelope with the money pressed tightly against his thigh, and the pounding beat of his Harley thundered down route 13. The villages, with thriving businesses once, had now become ghost towns. Potholes peppered the road, and knee-high weeds sprang up through cracks in the sidewalks. Abandoned gas pumps, U-Haul trailers, and cars outside body shops were left to decay in the harsh winters of Niagara. As if they’d anticipated all this decay in this section, the planners of the new thruway had not even provided an access ramp from route 13.

This was the day Ben had been waiting for, the day he could settle the money with Sanger and show him his new Harley that had brought about his miraculous recovery. It was a pleasant surprise when the bank teller had said the money from the army-check didn’t have a holding period. That was all it took, Ben didn’t waste a second, he cashed out thirty-three thousand dollars—the extra dollars to show his gratitude—and headed out.

Ben rode his Harley under the elevated thruway and toward the house with trailer park. The pebbles washed clean by the April Showers were easy to see in the broad day light, but in the night, with no street lights, it would be hard to see for anyone not familiar with the area.

There was a car parked near sanger’s trailer, just where Ben was lying after the accident. Sanger didn’t have a car. A girlfriend? Ben wondered, pulling up alongside the car. Sanger had said he wasn’t married, and it was clear he wasn’t living with anyone in the trailer.

Seated on his bike, Ben checked the car. It was a Black Honda with a Canadian license plate. Someone from Canada had come to see him. Seeing cars with Ontario license plates were commonplace in the area, but that was before the thruway was built, not now. He decided to wait until the car left.

There were about a dozen trailers, all in what was a large back yard of a dilapidated house with a junk-yard like look. Old window-AC units, wash basins, and microwaves were strewn across next to the back wall of the house.

There was no sign of life anywhere in the trailer park, even on this great spring day. No adults sitting out. No children playing. The faded sidings of varying shades of mildew and the moldy plastic chairs on decks said those living there were not exactly spending their retirement here.

Ten minutes had passed, and no one was coming out of Sanger's trailer. Ben made his mind up. He took out the envelope he'd squeezed into his pocket and climbed the steps to the trailer. The trailer door opened even before he could knock.

"Yes?" someone answered, poking his head out through the half open door. It wasn't Sanger, but he too was an Indian, many years younger.

"Sanger here?" Ben asked, relieved it wasn't his girlfriend. It was obvious, whoever this guy was, he'd been working hard inside the trailer; his T-shirt was soaking wet.

The man looked inside the trailer, to the other end toward the bedroom and shouted, "Sanger! someone for you," his tone that of addressing one he had a lot of respect for.

Within moments, Sanger poked his head through, holding the door half open. "Oh, it's you," he said, stepping out. He closed

the door behind him and looked around the trailer, dazed and lost for words, clearly taken aback by the unexpected visit. "Ugh...sort of a bad time now...a little rushed."

Ben was not prepared for this. "...okay, sorry...maybe later. Here's your money," he said, thrusting the envelope toward him.

"And, and...I'm not dying anymore! Got the Army-check." Ben rushed to get the words out.

Sanger just held his hand out, without even bothering to look at the envelope, as if it was more of an annoyance and a waste of his time. If it wasn't for the fact that the money in there was tightly packed, the hundred-dollar bills in it would have fallen right through the open envelope. "Sorry...meet you another time," he said, looking expressionless and dazed, before closing the door behind.

Ben ambled back to his motorcycle, trying to make sense of the strange turnaround in Sanger. That wasn't the Sanger he'd met a couple of months ago-- self-assurance had gone, and panic and fear had taken over. Whatever was going on in the trailer was something, both Sanger and his friend, didn't wasn't anyone to see—they made sure the door was closed before they talked.

Sanger's demeanor and the dismissive reception he gave had ruined the for day for Ben—an anticlimax to his planned celebrations at the trailer park. Getting the cash from the bank to settle with Sanger was the only saving grace.

Seated on his Harley, Ben surveyed the black Honda. Its's tinted glasses made it difficult to see inside the car, but the fact it had been reversed and parked said they were ready to load stuff into the trunk or bring stuff from the car.

It was time to get away from the trailer park. Ben started the Harley and rode off, aware there was at least one pair of eyes watching him through the trailer window.

CHAPTER 8

The flowering dog-wood trees formed a silvery frame around the manicured lawn, giving it a picture postcard-like look of spring in Niagara. This was as good as it gets before the temperatures rise and the flowers wither and die. Summers in Niagara were precious, if you didn't plan well, it would be gone in a flash. So would his new lease of life, Ben mused, can of beer in hand and looking out through his patio door. He'd had a few days of celebration since he was cured, and now it was time for planning the rest of his life, before time ran out. The army check was large, bigger than what he'd expected--probably intentionally so, to make those dying in service live their remaining days comfortably. And to add to that, Ben still had the monthly half salary, as long as he lived. He now could splash on some luxury for himself.

A car moving across the courtyard caught Ben's attention. It was slicing through the long shadows of the trees falling on the lawn. It wasn't one that belonged to a veteran living there. In the two months of sitting there and looking out, Ben had come to know the cars belonging to the Veterans', mostly old trucks and Cadillacs that once belonged in the family. The black car slowed down at each block as it passed, obviously their first time in the

Veteran's Apartment, and they were checking the numbering schemes used.

They must have figured out the numbering scheme, the car gathered speed and moved on. It passed the parking garage and approached Ben's block, and then it went out of sight, cut off by the roof line of the enclosed stairs. The engine sound died down to an idling tone as the car stopped at the stairway. A car door opened and shut, like someone was being dropped off. But the engine continued to idle.

Someone was coming up the stairs. The clomps up the stairs clearly belonged a pair of tired feet landing heavily on the steps. Before long, the clomps changed to squeaks, of dragging shoes that got louder with every step. It stopped opposite Ben's unit. Brenda's dropping something off? Ben thought, turning around and watching the bottom of the door. She'd often dropped off leaflets before going home, sliding them under the door—mostly warning tenants of impending repairs or inspections in the unit. Nothing was coming through, under the door.

'Knock, knock,' someone was out there, at the door.

Ben got up from the sofa and headed to the door, wondering who'd come to see him at six in the evening.

It was Sanger, holding something in his hand. "Oh...you're in...," Sanger mumbled. Numb and lost for words, he shut his eyes and sighed, before pinching the bridge of his nose with the fingers—a sure sign he'd forgotten what to do next.

"Sanger! are you okay?" Ben asked, noticing the still drying sweat ring around the shirt-collar.

"Ben..." Sanger said, stone faced and glancing down the corridor. "Don't have much time...I know I wasn't myself when

you stopped by this morning." He paused to catch his breath, coughing a couple of times.

"There's a...lot going on. I'll explain all this another time...I need a favor. I don't know many people around here...but I know I can trust you."

"Sure...what d'you want?" Ben asked, happy he could help in some way.

"Please keep this, the money you gave me this morning. I will ask for it, when I need it," Sanger said, handing over the envelope. "And this too." He gave another envelope, thicker and heavier.

"I'll explain when I call. Sorry...I have to run now." With that he turned around and headed back toward the stairwell.

Dumbfounded and unsure of what to make of what was happening, Ben stepped out into the corridor and watched. Sanger walked tentatively back to the stairs, where he grabbed the handrail and disappeared into the stair enclosure.

Within moments the car door slammed shut, and they were off, retracing the path they came. That's when Ben realized, it was the Black Honda, he'd seen earlier at the trailer park.

Ben stared at the two envelopes he was holding. He recognized the enveloped the bank had given the money in. He looked inside the other. The heavy padded envelope had a bunch of coins. They were Canadian Maple-Leaf-Coins. He rushed back inside the condo and spread the coins out on the table. There were fifty coins of pure gold. Ben was never into gold coins, but he knew each coin was worth more than the value of an ounce of gold, at least one thousand one hundred dollars. Sanger had given him fifty-five thousand dollars in gold coins.

Sanger clearly had Canadian connections. The license plate of the Honda and the checks he gave were both Canadian.