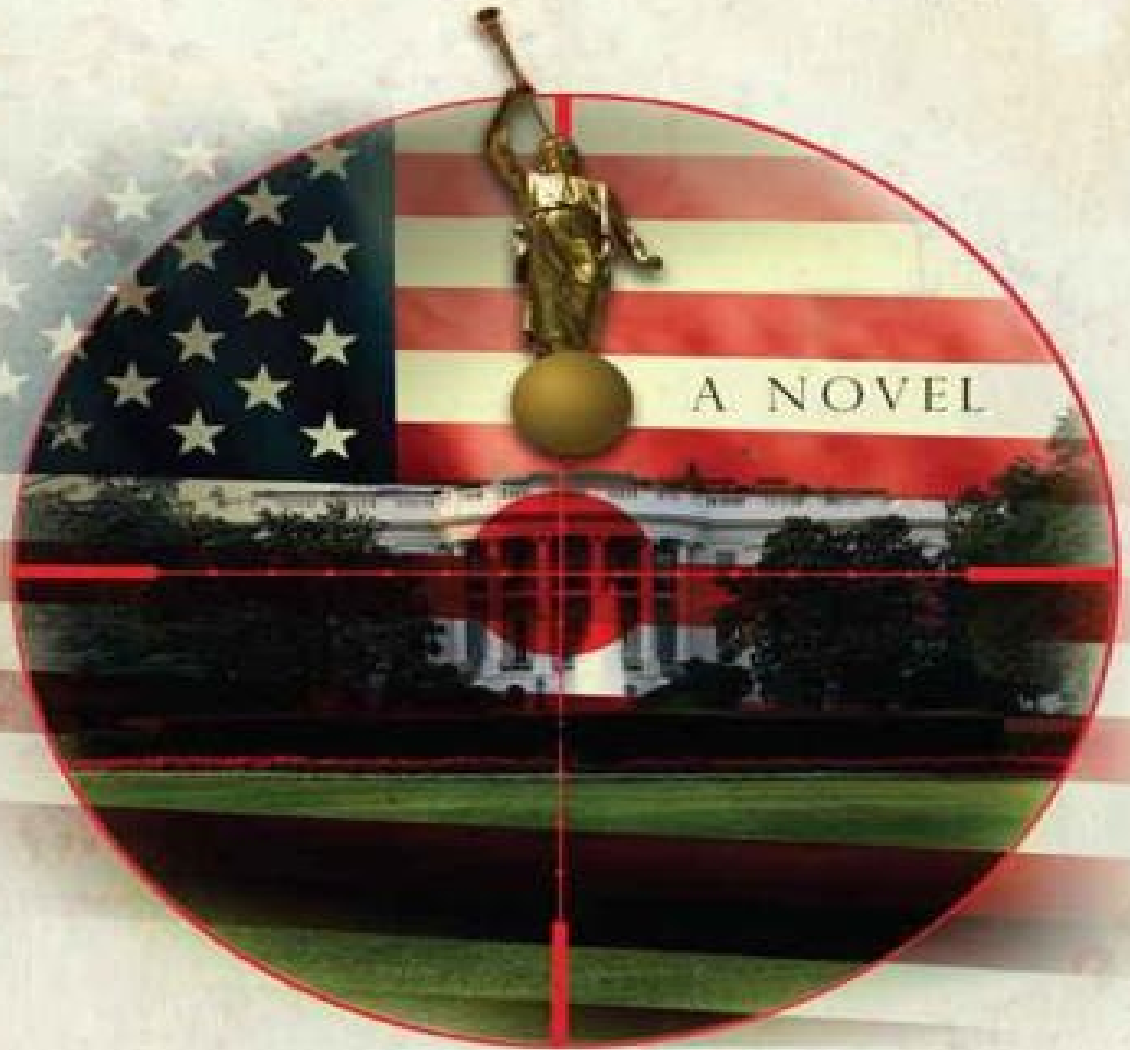


Why are they then baptized for the dead? And why stand we in jeopardy ever

hour? I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. -1 Corinthians 15, 29-31

THE MORMON CANDIDATE



AVRAHAM AZRIELI

Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not

The Mormon Candidate

A Novel

Fiction:

The Masada Complex – A Novel
The Jerusalem Inception – A Novel
The Jerusalem Assassin – A Novel
Christmas for Joshua – A Novel

Non-Fiction:

Your Lawyer on a Short Leash
One Step Ahead – A Mother of Seven Escaping Hitler

AUTHOR'S WEBSITE:

www.AzrieliBooks.com

The Mormon Candidate

A Novel

By Avraham Azrieli

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A Note to the Reader

As in every novel, the characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination. Other than historic events and figures, any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental, and statements of fact or opinion should be treated as fictional. However, as far as the factual background against which the story is told, every effort has been made to remain true to reality.

More specifically, while the political process of US presidential elections is familiar territory for most readers, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as the "Mormon Church," "Mormonism," or "LDS") is a mystery to most outsiders.

Therefore, especially with respect to the Mormon Church, including its theology, inner workings, and religious practices, this book is based on extensive research. The quotations from Mormon scriptures and materials are correct, and the descriptions of rituals, customs, and hierarchical structure are based on authentic documentary sources.

For readers interested in further exploration, a bibliography of primary research sources is offered at the end of this novel.

*How convenient it would be to many ...
who, whenever their origin was involved in obscurity,
modestly announce themselves descended from a god.*
– Washington Irving, *Knickerbocker's History of New York*

Part I:

The Victim

Chapter 1

The roar of engines bounced off the storefronts as hundreds of motorcycles rolled down Main Street in a slow-motion stampede. Most were Harley Davidsons, ranging from barebones Sportsters to speckled-out Road Kings, mixed in with Japanese-made cruisers that were chromed up to resemble the Harley. As far as he could tell, Ben Teller was the only one riding a BMW—a dual-purpose R1200GS in black and yellow that stuck out like a giant wasp.

He kept a steady pace, occasionally waving at the spectators along the sidewalks. Oversized American flags fluttered from light posts, and loudspeakers played the Marine Corps cadence. Ben sang inside his helmet, “*From the halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli, we fight our country’s battles...*”

Lined up on the front steps of the Thurmont Public Library, elderly veterans in wool caps and decorated chests saluted the passing motorcycles. Many of the riders responded by touching their helmets in quick salutes.

At the exit from town, two fire engines were positioned on opposite sides of the road, their lights rolling, sirens blaring, and ladders extended overhead with a banner tied across:

Marine Corps Veterans’ Annual Ride

The houses gradually spread out, fronted by manicured lawns and political signs. The Democratic and Republican parties, more than ever polarized by issues small and big, were fighting bitterly over every elected office in the country—school boards, state and federal legislators, and the biggest prize of all—the White House. With the elections only weeks away, voters’ passions ran high, evidenced by trampled signs and hostile graffiti.

The road cut across a valley of corn fields, bare and colorless with the early winter, and swept left toward the hills. The riders began to form a single column.

Ben slowed down to let another bike in. The passenger pillion was occupied by a boy, perhaps eight or nine, holding on to his father. Ben gave him a thumbs up, and the kid grinned ear-to-ear under his three-quarters Captain America helmet.

Higher into the hills, the turns became tighter, the trees thicker along the road. The riders gave each other more room.

Ben’s mind entered that special zone of riding, a combination of mental abandonment and total focus. His hands operated the levers on the handlebar, his feet pressed and tugged on the gear and brake pedals, his torso shifted left and right to force the massive BMW to lean into each corner. It was like a dance rhythm on a fast beat—a rush of action, then a slowdown, a deep bow into a turn, and sudden acceleration out of the turn with an eager roar from the exhaust, up another stretch of road, then an encore—tap the brakes, downshift, tilt into a graceful curve, and roll back the throttle, straighten up and accelerate. The sensation was simultaneously intense and tranquil, a feeling of both isolation and camaraderie. He was confident in his skill yet aware of the fragility of the balance between joy and catastrophe.

An angry snarl tore Ben out of his reverie. Headlights appeared in his side-view mirror. A second or two later, the full blast of an exhaust hit him as a Harley flew by, barely a foot from his elbow. It was painted stars and stripes, including the full fairing, backrest box, saddlebags, and even the eggshell helmet. The rider’s leather jacket wore the emblem of the Marine Corps, and Stephen Cochran

crooned “*Going down the back roads*” at full volume from the speakers.

—~~Passing the cruiser with the kid and four more motorcycles, the Harley cut back in just in time~~ to take a tight left curve. Riding a big hog like this required top skills, and as the rider leaned sharply into the turn, the chrome pipes scraped the blacktop, shooting off a spray of sparks.

By the time Ben followed the others through the turn, the stars-and-stripes Harley was well ahead, back in the left lane, blowing by a bunch of other bikes, its engine howling angrily.

Moments later, the road flattened out, passed by a modest church, and crossed a meadow whose green had turned dull and pale with the season. A few cows grazed behind a fence, and a lone farmhouse sat next to a muddy pond. The side of a wooden barn served as a makeshift billboard for a mural artist, who depicted the incumbent US president smoking a cigarette, grinning crookedly under a red beret marked with the Communist hammer-and-sickle symbol. A moment later, Ben caught a quick glimpse of the other side of the barn, where Joe Morgan, the GOP challenger for the White House, appeared in a checkered red-and-blue shirt, his smile pearly and his hair coifed, holding a book with a white cover.

The string of motorcycles disappeared into the next range of hills, and Ben downshifted in preparation for the tight twists ahead.

A challenging mountain road, with other vehicles to consider, demanded full concentration. The bike became part of him, or maybe it was the other way around. As they emerged from a tight turn, Ben twisted the throttle, and the GS leaped forward with the power of one hundred horses at the rear wheel. The rapid acceleration sent a rush of adrenaline through his veins and an involuntary grin to his face.

Farther up the hill, he came around another turn and began to speed up when he was startled by the sight of brake lights coming on one after the other in front of him.

Ben pressed hard on the foot pedal, which operated the rear calipers only. It was an old habit from the days of his small Yamaha, a precaution against locking the front wheel and entering an irreversible slide, which was unlikely on this ABS-equipped bike. Sure enough, the telling grind of rapid brake clasps indicated that the electronic system was preventing a slippage while the bike decelerated harshly.

But the ability to stop on a dime came with no assurance that those who followed close on his heels could do the same. A second later, he heard from behind the sound of rubber grating on the asphalt.

The sharp decrease in speed matched the hard pushback of the handlebar on his arms. Momentarily paralyzed by the certainty of impending disaster, Ben’s mind flashed visions of last winter’s deadly pileup on I-95, especially a photo he had snapped of a bloody hand sticking out from a wrecked Honda. The photo had won him a three-figure fee from *NewZonLine.com* and a second-place Lifeline News Photography Award from the Maryland Association of Freelance Journalists. All this went through his head as he forced his foot off the brake pedal and maneuvered onto the gravel shoulder. Passing the others on the right, his ears filled with the sounds of rubber squealing, followed by banging, metal scraping, and cursing.

Meanwhile, the GS went off the paved asphalt, lurched sideways, descended into the drainage ditch, and leaped over the opposite bank toward a cluster of young trees. Ben rose to stand up on the pegs, which separated his own weight from the bike’s center of gravity, and defied every natural instinct by twisting the throttle and sending power to the rear wheel while focusing his gaze back on the road, where he wanted to return. The massive motorcycle responded by straightening up and obeying Ben’s leftward tilt enough to avoid the woods. The momentum helped the tires keep traction

while plowing the dirt and weeds on the way back to the gravel shoulder.

— He didn't stop, though, but kept going at low speed, standing on the pegs to maintain control. He passed by everyone else and reached all the way to the top of the hill, where he finally stopped, set down the kickstand, and killed the engine.

Pulling his Canon Rebel from the backpack, Ben snapped a bunch of photos of this rare traffic jam, hundreds of motorcycles on a mountainous road.

The cause, he found out, was a tragic accident at the highest point, where the road twisted left to begin its descent on the other side of the hill. A sign directed to a dirt parking area on the right. *Camp David Scenic Overlook*

A group of bikers stood at the edge. Ben joined them.

Panoramic views of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Maryland surrounded the overlook. Closer in, nestled among the trees five or six miles away, a few red roofs indicated the location of the presidential retreat at Camp David.

But no one was looking at the views because, down below, at the bottom of the steep, rocky precipice, rested a stars-and-stripes Harley, smoke rising from its motor. The rider was sprawled on a boulder near the bike, his helmet askew yet still strapped on.

A couple of riders ran to a trailhead at the far end of the overlook while someone phoned the police.

Ben gazed through the viewfinder, zooming in on the rider's face.

The man's eyes were open and his lips moved.

Ben took a rapid series of photos.

Suddenly the man's mouth opened wide and his chest heaved as if trying to rise. But the brief effort was cut short, his body slumped, as if deflated, and his head fell sideways.

Stepping aside, Ben used a USB cable and an adaptor to save the photos to his iPhone. With the last photo opened in an editing application, he blurred the rider's face, saved it again, and attached it to a text message to Ray Burr, the editor at *NewZonLine.com*, who was paying him \$1,000 per month for being first to be offered anything Ben reported:

Ray, do you want this for \$250? (You have 60 seconds.) Follow-up updates at the usual rate of \$50 apiece. Here's the text for the news flash:

Ben Teller reporting live: It's 1:28 PM at the Camp David Scenic Overlook near Thurmond, MD. A participant in the annual Marine Corps Veterans' Annual Ride lost control of his Harley Davidson and fell over a steep hillside. Other riders are climbing down to perform CPR. This is breaking news. Watch for updates.

Back at the edge of the overlook, Ben watched the men reach the body below. They pulled him off the boulder to a flat clearing and removed the riding jacket, revealing a khaki, military-style undershirt. One of them began pressing the chest while the other did mouth to mouth. Ben snapped more photos.

His iPhone pinged.

There was a reply text from Ray: *I accept. But where's the face?*

Ben typed quickly. *Where's your heart?*

The answer was typical Ray: *My heart is in driving online traffic to NewZonLine.com. This is hot stuff. I'll give you an extra \$250 for the face.*

After a brief hesitation, Ben replied: *The guy's still warm. His family doesn't know. How about one hour?*

Ray's retort was: *How about one dollar?*

—It was painful to let go of the extra \$250, but publicizing victims' faces, while not illegal, was beyond his boundaries. Ben groaned and typed: *You're a vulture. Watch for updates.*

Chapter 2

First on the scene was a Ford sedan with dark windows and a few antennas—an unmarked police cruiser that was as easy to spot as if it had a bar of rolling lights on the roof. It arrived from the opposite direction, where the road wasn't blocked. The driver, a state trooper in uniform, stepped to the edge of the overlook and glanced over the side. Ben did the same. Down below, one of the men looked up from the body and shook his head.

The trooper returned to his car and used the radio to report. Ben trailed him and caught the last few words: "...lost control. Not surprising. We had reports of drinking at the launch site."

"Excuse me," Ben said, "I was there. Didn't see any drinking."

The trooper put away the radio. "Thank you, sir."

Ben made a point of gazing at his nametag. *O. Porter – Inspector*. "I thought you'd want to know."

"I'll put it in the report." The trooper got into his Ford and shut the door.

By now the area was crowded with bikers who had left their stranded machines and walked up the hill to find out what had happened. A few congregated around a heavysset woman with bleached hair and pink boots. "He was flying," she said. "We were leading the ride, but he passed us real fast like a bat out of hell."

Ben elbowed his way closer.

"Must have lost it on the turn," someone said.

"There was another bike," she said, "a little one, right?"

"Yup." Her partner was a burly man with a bushy beard and a beer belly that filled a tight red shirt with crosshairs over the words *Battle for the soul of America!* "Some piece of shit sport bike," he added. "One of them Italian lawnmowers."

Ben asked, "Ducati?"

"That's it." He spat on the ground by his woman's boots. "Her son got one of those. Always in the shop."

"He's your son too," she said.

Everyone laughed.

Ben asked, "What color was it?"

"White." She pointed downhill in the direction they had come from. "Came out of nowhere like a ghost. Must've freaked out the Harley speeder, made him lose control."

"That's bull," another rider said. "That idiot was an accident waiting to happen, the way he was going."

There was a round of approving grunts from the riders.

"Whatever." She made a rolling motion with her hands toward the overlook. "Poor bastard."

Sirens sounded in the distance. A few minutes later, an ambulance arrived, followed by a fire engine and several police cruisers. The officers sent everyone back to their bikes and set up a perimeter with red flares.

Ben sent off a news update to Ray, reporting that the injured veteran was presumed dead, and attached photos of the emergency vehicles and the covered body at the bottom of the precipice.

He stepped aside and stood by the GS to watch the ride get back underway. The roar of engines shook the air. After a while, among the column of slow-moving bikes, he recognized the boy in the

Captain America helmet, who wasn't smiling anymore. Neither was his father, whose motorcycle seemed to have suffered nasty scrapes and a broken signal light. He veered toward Ben and stopped.

The father reached to shake Ben's hand. "Thanks!"

Ben shook his hand. "What for?"

"For getting out of the way. I expected you to slam into us like the mother of rear-enders."

"No sweat."

His eyes scanned Ben's motorcycle. "A twelve-hundred GS, right?"

"Yes."

"Sweet."

"Thanks." Ben looked at the boy. "Hey, pal. How're you holding up?"

"We fell," he said in a thin voice, struggling not to cry.

"Captain America doesn't get scared easy, true?"

The boy nodded and sniffled.

Ben reached into the pouch mounted atop his gas tank, fished out a replica of a Marine Humvee, and handed it to him. "Here, that's for you."

The boy took it and tried the wheels on an open hand. The inner springs made the wheels spin back, generating sounds of popping gunfire. "Cool!"

"Appreciate it," the father said. "You a Marine?"

"My dad was," Ben said. "He sent it to me from Kuwait, back when I was a kid."

The father's eyes widened. He reached to take the Humvee from his son. "We can't accept this."

"Don't worry about it," Ben said. "It's no longer age appropriate for me."

"Thank you, mister," the boy said.

"Ride safely, buddy."

They rejoined the moving line of motorcycles, and the boy raised his new toy in a farewell greeting. He was smiling again.

Ben watched Inspector Porter make his way down and start a search of the crash site. At one point, he glanced up and saw Ben snap a photo.

A moment later, a uniformed officer approached, signaling him to move aside.

Ben walked off to the end of the ledge and over a pile of rocks that were held together with concrete to prevent mudslides. From there, he resumed his observation, snapping an occasional photo.

Porter glanced upward every once in a while but failed to see Ben among the bushes far to the side. He kept turning over rocks and pushing aside shrubs around the crashed stars-and-stripes Harley as if searching for something specific. Turning to the victim, he removed the man's wallet and watch. He went through every pocket, ending with the boots, which he pulled off and felt inside with his hands before slipping each one back onto the dead feet. He even turned the body over and ran his hands over the back, buttocks, and thighs the way an officer would search a detained criminal. His efforts were rewarded with an item stashed under the victim's belt behind his back. It was a perfect place to hide a gun, but Porter pulled out a square object that looked like a piece of cardboard, about the size of a DVD case, which he examined closely before putting it in the pocket of his jacket just as Ben took a photo.

When Porter was done, the body was strapped to a stretcher. A group of firefighters and police officers used a fair amount of muscle work to bring the body up. They set it on the ground near the ambulance.

An EMT pulled on latex gloves and removed the wool blanket, except for the face, which he

left covered. Ben snapped a few photos discreetly and stepped closer.

—There was little blood, but when the EMT lifted the khaki undershirt, the victim's chest had an unnatural color, as if the skin had been painted in livid purple on the inside. He was lean, with a muscular chest and a flat stomach, over six feet, about forty years old. The black boots could have been army surplus, but it was hard to tell.

The EMT checked for a pulse in the small of the neck, listened with a stethoscope over the chest and ribs, glanced at his wrist watch, and scribbled on a writing board. Ben looked over his shoulder. *Patient's Name: Zachariah Hinckley.*

Pulling the undershirt back over the victim's chest, the EMT tried to tuck it in as much as possible.

Ben leaned closer and peered at the undershirt. Above each nipple was an insignia, about the size of a pinky. The one over the left breast was V-shaped and the one over the right breast was a reversed L. A third insignia marked the navel with a horizontal line that seemed almost like a silkworm embedded in the garment.

The EMT replaced the wool blanket over the body and turned to beckon one of the officers to help him load it. Ben got his camera ready, bent over, pulled the blanket off, and photographed the undershirt.

"What are you doing?" Porter was still panting heavily from the climb up. "This is a restricted area!"

Ben raised the camera and snapped another photo of the stretcher. "Freedom of the press. Everyone has heard of it?"

Porter covered the body and gestured at the EMT to take it away. "Interfering with the scene of an accident is a crime."

"Who's interfering?" Ben looked around.

"Hand over your camera!"

Taking a step back, Ben said, "Do you know Fran DeLacourt in Hate Crimes? I have her on my speed dial."

Already on the move to grab the camera, Porter paused, his hand outstretched in midair. Like Francine DeLacourt was the type of a woman men didn't mess with, and Porter's reaction revealed that he not only knew her, but wasn't an exception to the rule.

"Say hello to her from Ben Teller, will you?"

After a hard glare, Porter turned and went to his Ford.

Ben returned to his motorcycle and used the iPhone to send all the photos to himself by e-mail, followed by an update to Ray:

Ben Teller reporting live: It's 2:39 PM at the Camp David Scenic Overlook near Thurmond, MD. The annual Marine Corps Veterans' Ride has resumed following a tragic interruption earlier when Z.H, a male participant, age estimated at 45, lost control of his Harley and crashed over a cliff. CPR efforts were unsuccessful, and his death was confirmed dead at the scene.

He attached photos of the stretcher, covered in a blanket, first at the bottom of the hill, then being carried up, examined by the medic, and loaded into the ambulance. He didn't send the photos of the symbols on the undershirt. There was a story here, and he wanted to investigate further before tipping his hand to Ray.

Before putting away the iPhone, he checked the *NewZonLine.com* homepage. His first report was midway down the list of Top-Ten news pieces, with his name as the source. He clicked on it, and

his own photo came up—a headshot that Keera had taken on the balcony at their townhome last year shortly after he started freelancing for Ray. It clearly wasn't a professional portrait—his longish hair was still damp from the shower, his eyes seemed even darker against his pale face, and his cheeks were smooth shaven, which happened at most once a month. Basically he looked like a kid who was too happy about having his picture taken.

Ben rode the twisty road downhill in complete solitude. Ten minutes later, he pulled into a Shell gas station at the intersection. The attendant, a bearded man wearing a turban, looked up from a pocket-sized religious book. "Hello," he said in a singsong accent. "Many motorcycles today."

"Yes," Ben said. "It's the annual Marine Corps ride."

"Very nice." He collected Ben's money and turned on the pump.

Outside, while filling up, Ben noticed the security cameras mounted high under the flat roof sheltering the pumps. One of them covered the exit from the gas station, presumably to catch the license plates of any wrongdoers.

Picking up the receipt inside, Ben peeked over the counter. A TV monitor showed the feed from the cameras, rotating among the four. One view was of a man with longish black hair standing behind the cashier, and it took Ben a second to realize it was him. He rubbed the week-old fuzz on his cheeks and the man on the TV did the same. Then the view switched to the camera pointed at the exit. It had a wide enough scope to capture a section of the road coming down from the Camp David Scenic Overlook, just before the stop sign at the intersection.

Ben asked, "Do you record the feed from the security cameras?"

The attendant nodded.

Ben handed him a \$20 bill. "I'm a freelance journalist for *NewZonLine.com*. Can I look at it?"

"You have ID?"

Ben handed over his press card.

He showed him to an office. The system was old, combining a VCR and a bulky TV. He handed the remote control to Ben and returned to the counter.

The TV screen was divided into squares, each showing the feed from an individual camera. Ben turned off the recording and rewound the tape while peering at the square that showed the exit and the section of the road.

The camera had captured several cars, vans, and a Coke truck exiting the gas station and turning onto the main road. Finally he saw a dark sedan pass by. He stopped and rewound the tape. Playing forward, Ben watched carefully.

The Ford sedan crossed the screen from right to left in front of the exit, heading in the direction of the overlook. The recording quality was poor, typical for a slow cycle of twenty-four hours with the same tape being recorded over and over. But the driver was visible though the window with enough clarity to resemble Porter.

For the next few minutes, with the system replaying at regular speed, several more vehicles appeared on the screen, leaving the station. Then, very briefly, something passed from right to left.

Ben played it again. Now that he was expecting it, he could see a motorcycle at a speed much higher than anyone would expect to see on the approach to a stop sign at an intersection. The rider must have reached the intersection without stopping and taken the turn quickly.

Watching it a third time, he paused every second or two, until he had the image on the screen. He snapped a few photos of the hazy image with his Canon. It would take some effort to improve the image, but the essentials were there—a white Ducati and a rider dressed in white leathers and a white helmet.

As the woman back at the accident site had said, it looked like a ghost.

The confirmation of the white Ducati's existence changed everything. Furthermore, it had come downhill immediately after the accident, yet no other bike had passed through for nearly an hour afterwards. These facts eliminated any remaining doubts in Ben's mind. There was a story here!

He rode back uphill.

Red flares still lined the road to block off the overlook area, leaving a single lane. He continued down the other side. Slowing down to a crawl, he scanned the road for clues. The hundreds of stranded riders had left surprisingly little trash—a few snack wrappings, cigarette butts, and a Ravens baseball cap. The only evidence that the road had served as a parking lot for over two hours was plenty of oil spots, a typical byproduct of aging Harleys even when well maintained.

But what Ben really sought was evidence to support the proposition that the white Ducati had waited here earlier.

A plausible scenario was forming in Ben's mind: A guy with a Ducati, who's too cheap to pay the modest entry fee to participate in the Marine Corps Veterans' Annual Ride, instead skips the starting point near I-70 and waits somewhere along the route to join the ride midway. When the roar of engines approaches from downhill, he starts up the Ducati and gets going. But rather than a slow-moving hoard of slogging bikes, bunched together in the camaraderie of veterans, an out-of-control stars-and-stripes hog races around a blind curve. Zachariah Hinckley, totally unprepared for the Ducati's sudden appearance on the road, weaves to avoid a collision, struggles to regain control just as the road reaches the top of the hill and turns sharply. Failing to make the turn, he flies over the edge of the Camp David Scenic Overlook. The Ducati rider, not realizing the severity of the accident, keeps going, secure in the knowledge that other riders will help the embarrassed patriot get back in the saddle. Or maybe he does see Zachariah's calamitous spectacle but is too scared to stop, adding himself to a long tradition of hit-and-run instigators of roadway accidents.

It was a plausible scenario, but for it to be true, the Ducati rider must have been waiting for the rally to catch up. Where had he waited?

Ben kept going, his eyes shifting left and right, scanning both sides of the road. The stranded riders had left too many tire tracks on the gravel shoulders, making it impossible to see any evidence of a single Ducati that might, or might not, have waited here earlier.

Half a mile down the road, Ben gave up, twisted the throttle, and accelerated away.

But a moment later a trailhead flew by, barely registering in his peripheral vision.

He hit the brakes, slowed down, and made a U-turn. Back a short distance uphill, he stopped on the side of the road and dismounted the GS.

It was an unmarked fire trail. Judging by the weeds, it was getting little use, which made it easier for Ben to notice the fresh tire marks.

Out of habit, he used his camera to scan the ground, taking photos as he proceeded.

A single track went in from the main road. He walked beside it to avoid disturbing the evidence. It stopped after ten feet or so, the weeds growing evenly across the trail.

He noticed a depression where the motorcycle's kickstand had rested on the ground. Because the kickstand was always on the left side, Ben realized that the rider had backed in off the main road and had waited here, ready to ride out easily.

Up close, the imprint left by the kickstand—about the size of a toddler's foot—was uneven. Ben's own bike, like most others, had a small plate welded to the bottom of the kickstand, and it usually left a flat depression in the ground. This one was mostly flat, but with a wiggly line along the middle, which must have been sharp as it had sliced the weed stems and pushed down on the ground with the weight of the bike. He traced the line. It was about the length of a finger, but its shape

resembled his favorite road sign—*Sharp Turns Ahead*. He figured it could be a welding line, perhaps the plate at the bottom of the kickstand was cracked, which would be unlikely with steel but possible if the Ducati manufacturer had cut costs by using plastic plates.

After snapping a few photos of the odd kickstand depression, he retreated toward the road slowly while searching around for additional clues. A light-colored speck in the bushes attracted his attention. He reached in and picked it out. It was a cigarette butt. Up close, the brand was unfamiliar to him: *Prince*. The tiny logo was some kind of a royal crest with the word *Denmark*.

Was this a trace left by the Ducati rider? There was no way to know. He chucked it.

The tire track itself provided little information because the dirt was packed and the flattened weeds had not acquired the form of the exact tire thread. Back near the road, the dirt was dug in where the Ducati's rear wheel must have spun freely before connecting with the blacktop.

Ben returned to the site of the accident. An oversized tow truck equipped with a massive hitch and crane had backed up to the edge of the overlook. Long chains dangled down to the stars-and-stripes Harley at the bottom. A few police officers were watching the process, but the unmarked Ford was gone. Ben parked the GS, removed his helmet and jacket, and took photos of the Harley slowly rising through the air.

The truck driver maneuvered the crane to position the motorcycle on the flatbed, unhooked the chains, and began to tie down his sad-looking cargo. The police officers, meanwhile, put out the flares and cleared the road.

Ben approached the truck and snapped a few photos up close. The Harley was equipped with large stereo speakers front and back. A built-in Sony music system in the center of the dashboard had a docking bay for an iPod or another type of a player. But the bay was vacant, and as Ben walked back to his motorcycle, he recalled Stephen Cochran blaring from the Harley when it had sped by him earlier.

He noticed the blinking light on his iPhone and found three missed calls from Keera. His girlfriend, in the midst of her fourth year in medical school, didn't have time to follow the news. But she must have overheard the TV at the nurses' station or in a patient's room, reporting the fatal accident at the veterans' ride.

Before Ben had a chance to call Keera back, his iPhone rang and her photo popped up on the screen, her teeth glistening white against her dark-chocolate skin.

He answered, "Hey, Beautiful."

"Are you okay?"

"Sure. And you?"

"I got worried. What happened?"

"One of the guys was going too fast, lost control on a turn. Did you see my reports on *NewZonLine*?"

"I saw the photo. It's awful!"

"Could have been worse," Ben said. "Ray wanted me to un-blur the face."

"I'm not surprised. She's a pimp."

"What does it make me?"

Keera sighed. "A cute guy with potential."

"Where are you?"

"Still at the hospital. Just finished rounding in the ICU with Professor Lichtenwalt. The patients are so complicated—everything's going wrong at the same time, all systems crashing, and he's totally calm." She imitated him. "We'll adjust oxygen to X, change med Y to Z, and watch for A

B, and C.”

—“Sounds simple. Child’s play.”

“He’s such a god. I’ll never be able to handle—”

“You will. There’s still residency and fellowship and—”

“Board exams.”

“Which you’ll ace. Listen, every cocky professor was once an anxious student like you.”

“Sorry, coach.” Keera laughed. “Must’ve left my self-confidence in the locker room. Where are you?”

“Still at the site. Poking around a little.”

“Why? Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know. Probably nothing. See you later, okay?”

The last police car drove off, and Ben was finally alone. He strapped on his camera bag and made his way downhill. His riding boots were the wrong footwear for the rocky, steep path, and he slipped a few times.

The large boulder where Zachariah Hinckley had landed bore no physical scars. Ben gave it a thorough search, just in case. He noticed moisture in one area and bent down to sniff it.

Urine.

Scanning the boulder, Ben didn’t find anything else to indicate that a man had died here only a short time earlier.

It wasn’t hard to locate the spot where the Harley had hit the ground. It was a shallow gully where soft soil had accumulated. The dirt was imprinted with depressions left by the handlebar, footpegs, and saddlebag. Dark blotches showed where engine oil and brake fluid had soaked in. Red and blue paint had scraped onto small rocks, and a few pieces of broken plastic dotted the area.

Ben used rocks to mark a square of about ten steps across. He went down on all fours and began his search. Moving methodically from one end to the other, back and forth, he peered at the ground. Wherever he saw any manmade debris, he checked it carefully and put it away outside the search area. He passed dirt through his fingers, feeling for anything that could have come from the accident.

After an hour-long search, with half the area covered, he had collected a handful of plastic shards, three bolts, and part of the Harley Davidson insignia.

A wet area, about the size of an open book, smelled of gasoline. Next to it was a flattened bush with tiny red berries, which caused Ben to almost miss the sand-colored item, mostly covered in dirt. At first he thought it was a dry leaf or a piece of wood, but when he touched it with his finger, it felt too hard and smooth to be a product of nature.

He cleared off the dirt, uncovering a rectangular piece of plastic. Digging it up with his fingers, Ben found himself holding an iPod Touch, colloquially called iTouch. It was identical to an iPhone but without the phone function. This one was encased in a protective shell of the same color as Zachariah Hinckley’s military-style undershirt.

Blowing on it, Ben delicately cleaned the screen and the sides, where tiny buttons were encased in small grains of dirt.

The iTouch was off, but otherwise seemed undamaged.

He glanced up toward the road. No one was watching.

With a finger pressing down on the power button, Ben held his breath.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, an iTunes logo appeared, followed by Stephen Cochran’s song, which had been playing just before the crash.

Back uphill at the scenic overlook, the sun was already halfway down to the horizon. Ben put on his helmet and jacket, mounted his motorcycle, and took off just as the familiar gray Ford arrived, its tires screeching.

As they passed opposite each other, Ben caught a glimpse of Porter's face in the driver's window. Had he realized the victim's iPod was missing and rushed back to look for it?

Whatever it was, Ben had no intention of waiting to find out. He accelerated downhill, grinning at the thought of the fastidious Porter hiking down the hillside once more and digging around for an iPod that was already secure in Ben's camera bag. The inspector didn't seem like someone who enjoyed being one with nature.

Chapter 4

On the second floor of the townhouse, Keera felt the rattle of the garage door rising in its tracks. She wrapped herself in a towel, went downstairs to the kitchen, and opened the connecting door.

Ben rode into the garage and turned off the engine. He was clad in a black-and-yellow riding suit, with a matching helmet and gloves, and black boots that could have come right out of a World War II film, except that they were made of Kevlar—or so Ben claimed.

She waited at the door, leaning against the frame, watching his methodical disrobing. First the helmet came off, setting free his dark hair, which framed his face. His eyes were dark too, and serious but with a naughty glint that often kept her on the verge of laughter. The riding suit came off, revealing a t-shirt with the iconic image of James Dean and the words: *Cars Suck!* Under his boxers and shorts, his legs, which rarely saw the sun, looked like long sticks of chalk.

He bowed.

She clapped. “You should be on stage. They’ll tip you like crazy.”

He took her in his arms. “It’s not good for couples to compete.”

“Different clientele.” She kissed him on the lips. “Mine are going to laugh at your puny white ass.”

His hands descended, feeling her through the towel. “I see your point.”

“Not now.” She pulled away. “No time.”

Inside, he dropped his camera bag on the kitchen table, unzipped it, and pulled out the Canon. “You have to see these photos. I couldn’t ask for a luckier break—the guy literally died on camera for me.”

Keera gave him an angry look.

“What?”

“You feel lucky the guy died in front of you, and I would have killed myself to keep him alive had he made it to the hospital. We’re some match...”

“It’s my job. I don’t want people to die, but catching disasters on camera is how I make money.”

“Blood money.”

“Doctors also live off people’s suffering. Would anyone go to the doctor if they weren’t afraid of dying?”

“Afraid of dying in front of your camera!”

“I provide an essential social service.”

“For voyeurs and necrophiles.”

“You have a dirty mind. Don’t you think that regular folks who see my gruesome photos become more careful on the roads? Or you’d rather have them end up in your hospital?”

“Aren’t we clever?” She started on the few dishes in the sink. “Think of his wife, or girlfriend getting a call from the police. Sorry to tell you, but your guy fell off his bike and died. Check out the Internet for his last photo. Have a nice day.”

Ben chuckled.

“It’s not funny. I don’t want to get a call like that, you know? I don’t want to!”

“Accidents can happen to car drivers too. Or to elevator passengers. Remember that woman at Tyson’s Corner? Got her head stuck—”

“I’m serious!” She shut off the water and used a towel to dry the dishes in rapid motion. “Why do you have to ride a motorcycle, with all these cars and trucks speeding by, all these idiots

texting or yakking on the phone or doing their makeup? And anyway, that BMW beast costs as much as a new Toyota Camry!”

“I’m not a Camry kind of guy.” Hugging her from behind, Ben snuggled his nose in her w hair. “And you’re not a Camry kind of a girlfriend.”

“Then buy a Porsche.”

“I like my bike. It gets me where I need to be no matter what traffic is like.”

“It’ll look funny with a baby seat strapped on.”

Ben stepped back, almost falling over. “Are you...?”

“What if?”

He faced her, peering at her face for a clue.

“Why does it scare you so much? Is it the responsibility? The...what do you call it? *Commit*—

“I’m not afraid of commitment,” he said. “I’m committed to you.”

She held up her hands, turning them around. “Do you see a ring?”

“You’re not pregnant,” he concluded, sinking into a chair. “Wow, you really got me.”

“Chicken.”

“I don’t see myself as a dad, that’s all.”

“I wonder why. How’re you going to change if you’re avoiding—”

“Please, I’m not in the mood for a therapy session.” He turned on the camera and showed h the LCD screen in the back. “Look at these. He’s saying something.”

“It’s too small. I can’t see.” Keera walked to the stairs. “I need to get dressed and ready.”

“You look totally ready to me.” He followed her. “Wait up.”

“Why?” She stopped halfway up the stairs, looking down at him. “You want to make a baby?”

When Keera came back downstairs, Ben was standing in front of the TV in the living room. He had connected the Canon so that the photos appeared on the large screen and was scanning through them like a fast slide show. “This is good stuff,” he said. “But something stinks—”

“I’m late,” she said. “Let’s go.”

He turned to her. “Mama Mia!”

She posed with a hand on her hip, her coal-black, curly mane cascading over half her face down to her chest. The red dress wrapped her from chest to knees without shoulder straps or buttons anything else to disturb the smoothness of the cloth clinging to her feminine contours.

Ben raised the Canon and snapped a few photos.

“Don’t you have enough of those?”

It was true. He never tired of photographing Keera, something she found either flattering or annoying, depending on her mood and the state of their relationship. She had teased him that his compulsive photo taking was due to his subconscious expectation of her walking out on him one day leaving him with only digital images and deep regrets.

Keera put on hot water to boil. “What’s bothering you?”

He pulled up the first series of photos he had taken from the overlook. “You see the guy lying there. He’s trying to say something.”

“How do you know? Maybe he’s just moaning in pain.”

Ben focused on the man’s face, which filled the TV screen. “Look at his lips! He’s speaking pronouncing something with a great effort.”

She watched.

“What’s he saying?” Ben paused the slideshow. “At first the lips are closed. What letters could that?” He counted on his fingers. “B, F, M, P, V, or W.”

“He could be praying.”

—Ben ran the photos quickly forward. “He only said one word before—”

“Oh, Jesus!” Keera turned away as the man in the photo twisted and slumped, never to move again. “I don’t want to see this!”

“Don’t you see people dying in the hospital?”

“It’s not the same!”

“Look again. Here. He’s saying something.” Ben played it slowly. “It’s a message. Or a name. Could be that he knew the guy on the Ducati and was trying to name him. What do you think?”

“His wife,” Keera said. “I think he’s saying the name of his wife, the person he loves most.”

“How do you know he’s married?”

“You can tell when a guy is married. He’s groomed, well-dressed, clean. I mean, look at him. He’s like...together.”

“I’m not married and I’m like...together. Am I not?”

“No.” Keera combed his hair with her hand, clearing his face, tacking it behind his ears. With the back of her hand she felt his cheek. “How long since you’ve shaved?”

“Okay. He’s married.” Ben flipped through the photos quickly. They were taken in quarter-second intervals, which turned the rapid slideshow into a virtual video clip. “The guy knows he’s dying. The last thing he can say should be an important message.”

“You’re really clueless,” Keera said. “I’ll bet you it’s the wife’s name.”

Ben ran through the photos back and forth. “His lips close twice, so the word has two of the letters B, F, M, P, V, or W.”

“Barbara,” Keera said. “Or...Mirabelle.”

“Pamela,” Ben said.

“Could be something more exotic: Villanova?”

“That’s a university, not a girl’s name.”

“Wilhelmina?”

“Come on,” Ben said. “Even if he’s married, the guy rides a Harley. He can’t be with Wilhelmina. It doesn’t jive. How about Barbie?”

“You wish.” Keera thought for a moment. “Could also be two names, like Mary-Beth.”

Peering at the Canon’s feed on the TV screen, Ben was unconvinced. “Look at his face. I can’t believe he made that kind of effort to stay alive another minute just to say someone’s name.”

“Don’t you believe in true love?” Keera dropped a tea bag in a cup and filled it with hot water. “Wouldn’t you call my name—”

“Wait a minute!” Ben grabbed his iPhone and got on the Internet. “I can Google him. *Zachariah Hinckley Maryland.*” He typed the search and waited a minute. “I’ll be damned. Here they are, in Silver Springs. Zachariah and Palmyra Hinckley.”

“See? Pal...my...ra.” Keera pointed at the man’s lips in the slideshow on the TV. “P, then M.”

“Maybe.”

Ben drove Keera’s twelve-year-old Mustang while she used the vanity mirror to put the finishing touches on her makeup. “Your mom called,” she said. “We had a nice chat.”

“Yeah? What about?”

“About you. What else?”

He downshifted and went faster. “And?”

Keera flipped back the visor and sat back, wrapping the winter coat tightly around herself. She grabbed the door handle as he took a turn without slowing down, tires screeching, and sped up on the

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