

The background of the book cover is a dark, mottled brown and black texture. A horizontal band of gold or light brown color runs across the middle of the cover, serving as a background for the author's name and biographical text.

ABOVE THE LAW

J. F. FREEDMAN

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *THE DISAPPEARANCE*

ABOVE THE LAW

A NOVEL BY

J. F. FREEDMAN



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P A R T

ONE

SANDSTORM

The telephone rang. Riva answered it. "Luke," she called. "It's for you."

"You the fella looking t'buy a vintage Triumph motorcycle in decent to excellent running condition?" It was a man's voice, old-sounding, rheumy, wheezy. Decades of cigarettes and cheap whiskey had gone into fine-tuning that voice, which had a mocking tone on the "decent to excellent" part.

I felt a quick heartbeat skip, but I didn't want to get too worked up—I'd drilled this well a couple times already, but the holes had been dry.

My old ride had been trashed a few years back by someone who didn't like what I was doing, which was defending a very unpopular man on a murder charge. That my client ultimately wasn't guilty of the crime for which he was charged didn't bring my bike back to life. But what with getting married and having my son and all, I hadn't done anything about replacing it. Now, with my life settled into a comfortably predictable existence, I wanted to straddle two wheels again, if only on the weekends. I live in Santa Barbara, but nothing available here turned me on. So last week I placed ads in the *L.A. Times*, *Long Beach Telegram*, and the *San Fernando Valley Daily News*:

Wanted: Vintage Triumph Bonneville motorcycle. In decent to excellent running condition, or capable of being restored at a reasonable price.

I had some responses the first couple of days the ad ran, but either the price was too high or the motorcycles needed too much work. What I'd thought would be an easy transaction was becoming increasingly frustrating.

"Yes, that's me," I answered, probably too eagerly. The price just went up a couple hundred, I thought, but what the hell.

"Ain't got one." A kind of chuckle-wheeze-phlegmy cough. The connection wasn't great, so it was most likely not as bad as it sounded, but this was not a well man.

Ah, well. Life's full of little jokes.

"Thanks for calling," I told the prankster. Maybe he was an old shut-in, this could have been the high point of his day. Maybe even his week. I started to hang up.

"Got a Vincent."

The receiver was halfway to its cradle, but I heard that.

"Black Shadow, '53. She runs smooth, I ain't jerking yer chain."

I brought the receiver back to my ear. I didn't immediately reply, because now I was discombobulated. I was actually tingling, as if I'd stuck my finger in a light socket. Except for an ancient Harley I'd had as a kid, which threatened to snap my ankle every time I kick-started it, I've always owned British motorcycles, mostly Triumphs. It's the feel, I can't explain it. Like preferring blondes over brunettes, strawberry over butter pecan.

I'd been looking for a replacement for my old Triumph, a great old motorcycle for its time, but not the stuff of legends. This guy was talking about a legend. In its day this was the fastest, meanest, coolest motorcycle in the world, the motorcycle of every James Dean wanna-be's dreams. They were the most expensive bikes of their time, and there hadn't been many of them made, which made each one valuable and special.

I had only seen a few Black Shadows in my lifetime, in motorcycle museums. Now here's some old guy telling he's got one that runs, and he's willing to sell it?

"You still there?"

"Yes," I answered hurriedly, before he hung up. I had no phone number for this character, nothing. If I lost this connection, it could be lost forever.

"So you want to look at 'er, or what?" Spoken with an edge, a throwing down of the gauntlet: Are you man enough for a machine of this magnitude, both physically and spiritually?

I hitched a rental trailer to my old truck and headed southeast. End of September, early autumn, the beginning of the best time of year in California. Balmy, dry days, cool nights. When the weather's this good, it's hard to roust myself out of bed and go to the office in the morning; I want to lie on the beach with my wife, Riva, and Bucky, our two-year-old, hike up Figueroa Mountain, cruise the bookstores, in the shank of a twilight evening sit outside on the patio of one of the beachfront restaurants, drink margaritas with like-minded friends, and watch the melting sun die into the ocean.

Occasionally I'll take half a day off, jump on the golf course (my game is pathetic), or play with Riva and Bucky in the waves off Butterfly Beach. Once or twice a month, that's about all I'll allow myself. I can work as much or as little as I want, I'm a lawyer practicing solo, I answer to no one as far as my business is concerned; but I'm a lifer workaholic. Except for a brief hiatus when I left Santa Barbara under a cloud of immense funk and fucked off in the northern California forests, smoking weed, drinking good wine, and making love with the woman who would later grace me by becoming my wife, I've gone into the office and done the job. I'm reliable, you can set your watch by me. Everyone who knows me or knows of me (which is just about everyone in Santa Barbara who's in the loop), both from the years when I was the district attorney here, to now, as a lawyer specializing in criminal defense, knows they can count on me. Which can be a burden sometimes, but it's my burden, so I bear it. Generally with decent enough goodwill.

Over the last year and a half, though, pushing that metaphorical rock up the mountain's gotten harder. I've been losing passion. Not for the big picture—life's better than it's ever been. For my work. It's been a gradual thing, an erosion of faith in the law as it's happening in America today. It's not the people I represent. They're criminals, of course, almost all of them—that's a given. You don't hire a defense attorney and pay him good money unless you're in trouble, and if you're in trouble, it's usually because you've done something wrong. There aren't a lot of innocent people in jail, forget all those country-western songs. And I am a diamond-hard believer that a good defense for all is one of the best things about this country. But the line is becoming too blurred between what's right and what's wrong, to the point where almost nothing is "right" or "wrong." Things have become so "situational"—one of those words modern psychologists love to use—that people convince

not only themselves, but plenty of others, that virtually anything is justifiable, up to and including murder.

What started my feeling this way was a notorious incident that occurred here in Santa Barbara, three years ago. I defended a man accused of kidnapping and murdering the fourteen-year-old daughter of a prominent local family. I got the case by default; no decent criminal lawyer in the city would take it, because of the awfulness of it, and because the girl's parents were big movers and shakers and no one wanted to offend them or bring them any more pain. I was dragooned down from my retreat up north and talked into looking into this morass, then finally, with great reluctance, signed on, more because of personal demons I needed to exorcise than the specifics of the case, which were truly terrible.

The trial was sensational, a classic Roman circus. At one point all three major network anchormen, as well as senior reporters from CNN, CNBC, and Court TV, were in Santa Barbara, reporting on it live. One of those media mosh pits that wind up being more important than the trials themselves. It took a lot of focusing and discipline not to get sucked into the giddy maelstrom in which everyone involved—defendant, lawyers, family members—became an instant celebrity and lost all sense of proportion and reality. I managed to restrain my baser instincts in that regard; most of the time. Riva, a practical and forceful woman, is good about stopping me from stepping in my own shit.

It was touch and go until the end, but I got my client off. Since he was innocent of the crime of which he'd been accused, that was a good thing. But that was all he was innocent of; he'd done so many bad things around the periphery, that had made the young girl's death almost inevitable, that he was almost an accomplice. Morally and ethically he was; by my sense of morality, anyway. I'm old-fashioned that way. I'm forty-seven years old and in some ways I'm from another time. It's inconvenient for a lot of people, but it's a quality I hope I never lose.

The upshot was, I've been drifting away from straight criminal law, which had been my life's work on both sides of the aisle. Riva and I had long discussions about it. What did I really believe in, what did I want to do, where did I see my future heading? Where did I want to be in five years?

I didn't know those answers. I knew I needed to do something different, but not so different that I was throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Fortunately, I was in good shape financially. The father of

the murdered girl had sent me a huge check when the trial was over—he had offered a reward for finding out who had killed his daughter, and in defending my own client I had discovered who that was. I had qualms about taking his money, but he'd been so ugly in his conduct toward me before the truth was ultimately revealed that in the end I accepted the reward, as compensation for the grief he'd caused me. I'm no psychiatrist, but I think that my taking his money absolved him of some of his own guilt, in that his ex-wife, his child's mother, had turned out to be the murderer.

My compromise regarding my work was to branch out into less stressful areas—environmental law, personal injury, class action, things that came across my desk that seemed reasonable, not boilerplate boring, and covered my nut. Still good cases, but the kind you can leave on your desk at the end of the day. Because of my new notoriety, a fair amount of work was coming from out of town, L.A. and San Francisco. Those cases pay really good money, so finances weren't an issue. But practicing law wasn't my life anymore. It was part of my life, but it wasn't my life.

Which is the long and short of why I was going to the desert to buy another motorcycle.

The owner of the Vincent lived in the high desert outside of Joshua Tree, half a day's drive from Santa Barbara. He'd sent me a Polaroid; it looked okay, but who could tell for sure? The picture could be ten years old. But it was good enough to send me out on the road.

I cruised down Highway 101, the ocean on my right, surfers out in force at Rincon and around the piers south of Mussel Shoals. When I'd first come back to this area, I'd surf those spots as well as up north at Hollister Ranch, a real surfing mecca, but during that trial I mentioned, someone tried to kill me while I was out on the water. It was scary, the most frightened I've ever been in my life—the closest to dying. You don't forget something like that, it's indelible in the deepest levels of your unconscious, even though rationally you know it will never happen again. But rationality and what's in your gut are two different things, entirely.

What happened that night turned me off surfing, which is too bad, it's one of the greatest pleasures in the world, but the painful memories got in the way. I tried it once, some months afterward. I stood at the water's edge, and I couldn't go out. I was anchored to the shore, no wind in my sails. So I had to let it go. Now I swim inside the buoys, with my boy.

At Ventura I cut inland, through Santa Paula, Fillmore, Piru, at Valencia dropping down on Interstate 5 past Magic Mountain for a short run, then east again, Highway 14 to Highway 18, the signposts along the way flashing by through my grimy windshield, then it was dry, open country, cactus and sagebrush, the two-lane blacktop leading me into the shimmering distance, my companions on the road eighteen-wheelers, Highway Patrol Dodges, locals making their way from one small town to another, Canadian snowbirds in their blocky motor homes coming south for the winter. About the time the sun peaked, it was beginning to blow hard, a hot, dry wind, swirling dust against my windows and tumbleweeds into my bumper and radiator. The Santa Ana season had started the week before all over southern and central California, hot, strong gusts coming at forty or more miles an hour out of the northeast. Fire season. At home we'd had two bad fires already this summer, and the prediction was for several more weeks of the same risky situation. Out here, there's nothing to burn, so it's more an irritation than a life-threatening situation. I drove through it, the windows in the truck rolled up tight, the aftermarket air conditioner I'd installed huffing and puffing like an asthmatic.

Riva had laid on water and snacks in the truck, so my pit stops were a fill-up and a piss. I was motoring as fast as I felt comfortable pushing the old truck—my goal was to get there by noon, spend an hour or so checking out the Vincent (or a few minutes, if it turned out to be a wild-goose chase), work out the deal, load the motorcycle in the trailer, and be home at night. It would be late getting back, but it would be easy driving, no heavy traffic.

I made good time, but then I got lost and had to backtrack thirty miles, so it was almost two in the afternoon by the time I located his place, which was three miles of bad road off the highway. I felt like I was riding a washboard, driving up that road. A steady diet of coming and going would blow your kidneys, if it didn't blow your vehicle's suspension first. Finally, I rounded one last corner, and his place came into sight.

The house was a desert rat's enclave—an old double-wide on cinder blocks that had been in one place for so long it was almost petrified at the base. The paint job was original, in some places the metal worn so thin you could almost see through it to the inside. Twenty paces to the rear of the dwelling a corrugated metal shed, which would be the garage and all-around storage barn, listed ten degrees to the side. Unless I was

badly mistaken, there would be a mountain of junk in that shed, decades of useless crap tossed in there. And if I was lucky, one real special vintage British motorcycle.

I drove up in a cloud of dust and jumped out. He was a dark, shadowy figure, sitting in an old, springy metal chair in front of the trailer, the one place that had shade.

"You're late." A stream of dark brown tobacco juice pocked the dust at his feet.

"I know, I'm sorry. I took a wrong turn coming out of Paradise Valley and wound up in the middle of nowhere," I apologized. I didn't want to mess up the deal before we'd even started trying to make one.

"I reckoned that's what happened. You ain't the first one. Not that I get a shitload of company." A sound wheezed out of his throat, the closest he could come to a laugh. "Most people think this sorry piece of dirt you're standing on is the original middle of nowhere."

I'd had that thought, but I wasn't about to voice it. I walked closer to him, close enough that I could make out his features. He wasn't that old, mid-fifties probably, but he had the weathered face of someone who'd been out in the sun all his life, leather and lines. It made him look decades older than his true age. His hands fit his face—bone-dry claws. What you'd imagine a mummy would look like. Except he was talking, breathing, moving. Moving slowly; he hadn't gotten out of his chair.

So much for the amenities. "Can I look at the motorcycle?"

"That's what you came for, ain't it?"

He reached behind him for a pair of crutches, and that's when I saw he was missing his right foot, above the ankle. The stump was wrapped all around with elastic bandages, bulging out under his pants leg. He hove to his one good foot with great effort, fighting for balance.

"Gangrene. Lost it four months ago. Circulation went bad from too much drinkin', but I didn't take care of it till it was too late. 'Cause I was drinking too much to notice." He lifted one crutch and pointed toward the shed. "Which is why I'm selling my pride and joy, instead of riding it."

The Vincent was a bit dusty under the protective drop cloth, some rust spots on the chassis—but it looked damn fine for a forty-five-year-old machine. I fired her up—she roared to life on my first attempt.

I nursed the old motorcycle down to the highway, but once I got to the public blacktop, I opened it up and let it sing. It needed work:

shocks, brakes, clutch, new chain, tires; but it was a running machine—not fast off the blocks like a new BMW, Kawasaki, or Yamaha. But fast enough. The handling was heavy but comfortable. And it had that great pedigree. The old desert rat hadn't been jerking my chain.

I was going to ride it for fifteen, twenty minutes, long enough to get a feel for it, what was right and wrong, and if it was worth buying. I wound up riding it an hour. I couldn't stop. I was having too much fun, even though the wind was howling. By the time I got back to his place, it was going on four o'clock. Time to make the deal, load up, and head for home. I'd phone Riva from the road, let her know I'd be late. She worries otherwise.

We haggled over the price. Gentle Ben Loomis, my motorcycle guru in Santa Barbara had instructed me that if the bike was a piece of shit but salvageable, try to get it for under fifteen thousand; in decent shape, twenty thousand, but be prepared to go to twenty-five. I didn't want to spend that much, but I would if I couldn't resist it.

This one was in the middle tier of the decent-shape category. He started at thirty-five, I countered at fifteen, he came back at twenty-five, I raised to twenty. We settled on twenty-two thousand five hundred. Much more than I wanted to spend, but this was irresistible, a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

It was five o'clock by the time we finished the deal. I counted out the cash, 225 crisp hundred-dollar bills, and he signed over the papers. We had a beer to celebrate. His suggestion, I didn't want to offend him. I was the only company he was going to see for weeks, except for the boy who delivered his groceries. He watched as I ramped the classic motorcycle into the U-Haul, strapped it down, and secured the doors. He wasn't happy, but he was philosophical about it.

"Ride 'er good."

"I will. Thanks."

We shook hands. It felt like I was shaking a rattlesnake, his skin was so dry and tough. I climbed into the truck and started driving home.

If I had been smart and checked the weather before heading back to Santa Barbara, I'd have known I was heading for trouble. But I didn't. I was like a kid on Christmas morning, so flush with excitement over his newest possession that he's oblivious to everything else. With images swimming in my mind of a man and his motorcycle, which would be the envy of every biker he knew, navigating back-country roads, I slipped a

Coltrane CD into the truck's stereo and motored along, grinning like a madman.

The sandstorm came up without warning. All of a sudden the wind arose with the force of a tornado, sweeping up the entire terrain and sending it into the air in a monstrous cloud that was extending clear to the horizon on all sides.

I was trapped. Worse, I was imperiled. I couldn't see ten feet in front of me. Driving was going to be nearly impossible, but I couldn't simply park here and wait it out. Some eighteen-wheeler on a schedule and a mission could come barreling out of the gloom and flatten me, and there was no shoulder to pull onto; on either side of the road there were steep ditches, four or five feet deep, built to catch runoff during heavy rains. I'd seen those movies about sandstorms, *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The English Patient*. I don't know if California sandstorms are that brutal, but the thought of being buried under forty feet of sand and suffocating to death was extremely frightening.

Even with the windows rolled up as tight as I could get them, the sand sifted in, pinprick needles biting at my face and hands. It's an old truck, the rubber weather-stripping is cracked and brittle. The wind was howling, it felt as strong as those pictures you see of the Gulf Coast being flattened by hurricanes. And it was deafening, a banshee-singing, the sound almost human-like; now I know why people in the Sahara think storms like these are accompanied by demons, shaitans, the devil in the wind.

My only option was to inch forward, headlights on high beam and flashing lights blinking, until I found a safe haven. I started off, inching along at five miles an hour, guiding by the yellow line in the middle of the road. I ejected Coltrane and fiddled with the radio, trying to get some news of what was going on, but there was only static. All I could hope for was that somewhere up ahead, close, there'd be an oasis. Filling station, motel, restaurant, any port in this storm.

I'd driven about ten minutes when I saw the car off to the side, nose down in the drainage ditch. It was a small car, a Honda or a Toyota—with the almost zero visibility, I couldn't tell. Whoever had been driving it had lost control of the steering and been blown off the road. It would be easy to do; the gale-force wind was coming every which way. My truck is heavy and solid, but steering it was really hard, partly because the trailer I was towing was fishtailing back and forth like a bullwhip. I, at least, had lots of ballast; still, just fighting the wheel for ten min-

utes had my forearms burning. And I'm in shape. A small car like that, one extra-strong gust would pick it up and drop it anywhere it wanted to. Already, sand was drifting over it, starting to cover it. In ten or fifteen minutes it would be buried under a mound of sand, invisible from the road.

Stopping was suicide. Every minute I dawdled out there lessened my chances of surviving. But if there were occupants stuck in that car, not stopping was tantamount to being an accessory to murder.

I pulled as far off to the side of the road as I could without risking losing traction and going over. I keep flares under my seat. I reached down and grabbed a handful, and a box of matches with them. Still sitting in the relative safety of the truck's cab, I put on my full-face helmet. (For some quirky reason that I didn't even remember, but was thankful for now, I'd brought both my helmets, the brain-bucket and the sensible one, which has a full visor.) I pulled my jacket collar as tight as I could up against it. Lastly, I pulled on my motorcycle gloves. Holding the flares in one fist, I lit them simultaneously. As soon as they caught, I jammed open my door and jumped out.

One step out of the truck and I was blown back ten feet. It was like I was in a wind tunnel. I'd never encountered weather this hostile before. Holding onto the side of the truck and bracing myself against the wind, I fought my way to the back, where I jammed my flares against the back tires. I didn't know if anyone coming my way would see them, but at least I'd given them a chance.

I worked my way to the front of the truck and rested for a minute. The wind was blowing dead down the road from behind me, so while I was in this position, I had some protection. Pulling my jacket tighter around me, I looked over at the car in the ditch. Already, in just a few minutes, it was almost invisible from the coating of sand that was cocooning it. If I had come by five minutes later, I would have driven right by it.

Taking a deep breath, I broke for the stranded car. As soon as I left my cover, the wind picked me up and lifted me clean off my feet, flipping me onto my side, hard, and I felt the rough tarmac as I scraped along it. I'd have a strawberry tomorrow from my shoulder to my hip. It's the same kind of roadburn you get when you go down on your motorcycle. I've had them, they're painful as hell.

Staying low seemed to work marginally better, so I crawled the rest of the way across to the car. Sliding down the embankment, I brushed some sand off the side window, enough to look inside.

Three pairs of eyes stared back at me. Women's eyes, wide with astonishment, fear, and relief. I'm sure they had figured this was it, they were going to die out here in this godforsaken place.

Between their pushing and my pulling, we pried the driver's-side door open. They were young, dressed skimpily, tank tops and jeans. Not enough clothes for out here this time of year. They had all been crying, their faces were smeared with makeup and dirt. But thanks to the Good Samaritan, they were alive.

"Grab hold of each other arm to arm," I yelled into the wind.

They grabbed their wallets and backpacks and we formed a human chain and worked our way up the ditch to my truck. They all piled into the cab along with me, slamming the doors against the biting sand. We were all scrunched together, two of them jammed up against me and each other, the third sitting on the shotgun sitter's lap. You couldn't have shoehorned another body into the little cab.

I pulled off my helmet, and we took a look at each other. Then they were all trying to hug me at the same time, almost hysterical in their gratitude.

I waited a minute for them to calm down, then we exchanged stories. They were college students, UC Riverside. They had been in Phoenix, visiting the sister of one of them, and had decided to take the scenic route home, stopping at the Spa in Twentynine Palms for a night. They had heard that a Santa Ana might be coming, but no one could imagine anything like this. It was like driving in a whiteout combined with a tornado.

They had been in the ditch for almost an hour. Initially, they had debated about getting out and walking, but that seemed more suicidal than staying where they were and hoping help would come. As time passed, their hopes faded, slowly at first, then faster. They thought they heard a few cars and trucks passing—in the howl of this wind you couldn't be sure of hearing anything—but as far as they knew, mine was the only car who had seen them.

"Or stopped to see if there was anyone inside." Said with anger by Marilyn (from "you know who"—she smiled—"my mother's idea"). She was sitting next to me, in the middle. Pretty, a voluptuous cheerleader's body topped by a classic Irish face and a full head of dark auburn hair.

They were all pretty. Which meant nothing to me, particularly at this moment.

“If you hadn’t stopped, we would have died.” This from Pauline, the lapsitter.

I didn’t know what answer to give them. There was none, because it was true.

“You’re not going to die now,” I assured them (and myself). “We’re going to find someplace where we can wait this out.”

I started the truck and put it in gear. We inched forward. The needle on the speedometer was barely registering, but we were moving, that was the important thing. I hoped nobody coming upon where I had stopped would be spooked by the flares I’d left behind. I wasn’t about to go back and get them.

We lucked out. The Brigadoon Bar & Grill was less than a mile up the highway from where I’d rescued the girls. We were almost by it before we saw it, but, man, what a welcome sight! I jerked the truck against the wind and skidded into the gravel lot, pulling into an empty parking spot. Several vehicles parked along the front—a few cars and pickups that looked local, a Dodge minivan with bumper stickers advertising every attraction west of the Mississippi, a Lincoln Navigator, and two boxy motor homes with Utah plates. Bracing ourselves against the storm, the girls and I ran for the entrance and staggered in.

The place was one big, barnlike rectangle. Dark wood, rough-paneled walls, black-and-white-checked linoleum floor that rippled from years of seepage. Opposite the entrance was a long bar, with an impressive old back-bar behind it against the wall. This was a serious drinking place, judging by the quantity of the bottles stacked on the shelves. Lots of bourbons, blended whiskeys, and vodkas. A few token bottles of wine, the corks stuck in them for God knows how long, sat in a corner. Several beer taps adorned the bar, in front of which were a row of red Naugahyde-covered stools. High-backed booths, covered in the same Naugahyde, aligned the front and side walls, with freestanding tables in the center. In one corner sat a classic Wurlitzer jukebox circa 1955, and a TV, tuned to a local station, was mounted halfway up the wall. Like a few other old bars I’d come across in my travels—Barney’s Beanery in Los Angeles being one well-known example—old California license plates going back to the 1930s had been hammered onto all the walls, wherever there was an inch of free space. Your basic roadside tavern.

In the short moment it took to get from my truck to the entrance, the storm had blown a coating of fine sand over all of us. We looked like pieces