

THE DOMINO EVENT

BRUCE
THOMASON
& JD HUNTER



Copyright © 2017 by Bruce Thomason & JD Hunter

Printed in the United States of America (2017)

Published by BATJAK Publishing
Jacksonville Beach, Florida

Contact the publisher at the following: batjak_publishing@att.net.

All Rights Reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or means, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. The literary perceptions and insights are based upon the authors' experiences. All non-historical names, places, characters, and incidents are products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously.

Cover & Book Design by: Summer Morris, Sumo Design Studio

Tradepaper ISBN: 978-0-9832203-5-0

Digital ISBN: 978-0-9832203-6-7

DEDICATION

*To all the brave men and women of law enforcement who
serve honorably on the Thin Blue Line.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Domino Event would not be possible without the talented support of the following people:

Jacksonville Beach Police Commander Mark Evans and Sergeant C. David Young, for allowing us to tap into your knowledge of current police practices and court procedures.

Jane Young Hill, LCSW, DCSW, Clinical Hypnosis, for your thoughtful guidance concerning forensic hypnosis techniques and terminology for purposes of memory retrieval.

Holli Honchen, RN, for your advice concerning the proper protocols when using patient monitors in hospitals.

Dr. Rosemarie Abad Johnson, MD, for sharing your knowledge of the effects on the human body from extended exposure to ocean waters in northeast Florida.

Jen Zdunkiewicz, for your insightful editing and courageous honesty. Even though it hurt sometimes, the pain produced a much better end result.

OFFICIAL DISCLAIMER

As always, we recognize the possibility that we have made technical errors in this novel. Those include, but probably are not limited to: Legal issues involving search warrants, wiretaps, and court proceedings; medical terms and conditions; and specific forensic hypnosis techniques used for memory retrieval. In every instance, we take responsibility for the errors and beg forgiveness from those experts in the various fields.

UNOFFICIAL DISCLAIMER

Sometimes, in spite of our dedicated efforts to prevent such errors, certain characters manage to sneak them in just to embarrass us. It's like they think they're in charge.

PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT OF
PRESS CONFERENCE WITH JACKSONVILLE
BEACH POLICE CHIEF MIKE WILSON

Sunday, May 28, 4:00 p.m.

Reporter: *“Chief Wilson, a moment ago, you used an unfamiliar term when you referred to the violent events that occurred in Jacksonville Beach over the past couple of weeks. Could you explain what you meant by that?”*

Wilson: *“Sure. First, imagine a line of dominoes, all standing on end, carefully arranged so that when the first one is tipped, it starts a chain reaction. However, as long as that first domino remains upright, untouched, unmoving, nothing happens. Now, imagine that each individual domino represents a criminal act. So, when the first crime was committed, the chain reaction was set in motion.*

*In other words, that first crime was the **Domino Event.**”*



Monday, May 15, 8:15 a.m.

“**A**re you sure you’re okay to go on this?” Sergeant Summer Hayes asked.

“I’m fine,” Detective Anthony Walker answered. “The shoulder hurts a little when I move certain ways, but the surgeon said that’s normal after rotator cuff surgery. It’s been three months, and I’m cleared for full duty. You have the paperwork?”

“Right here,” she said, holding up a folder.

“Let’s go get him.”

Summer drove while Anthony called on the radio to request that a uniformed officer meet them at the location.

“Be advised there are no available units at this time,” dispatch answered.

“Ten-four,” Anthony replied. “We’ll stand by in the area. Advise when someone can respond.”

He picked up the folder and flipped through the documents. “Beauregard Parrish. That’s an interesting first name.”

“The victim said he goes by Beau,” Summer said.

“I think I would, too,” he grinned. “His physical description says he’s like six-eight and a hundred and sixty pounds. Can that be right?”

“His driver’s license confirms the height, and the victim gave me the estimated weight.”

“Okay, I see the guy’s got two arrest warrants. One a second degree felony for computer fraud, and the other a third degree felony for aggravated domestic violence by strangulation. That’s one you don’t see very often.”

“Right. We’ve also got a search warrant for his residence. We’re looking for a computer and relevant bank records.”

Summer stopped the car half a block down the street from Parrish’s modest one-story house, its rear yard facing the blue-green waters of the Atlantic Ocean. “The white Honda in the driveway is registered to him,” she said.

“He lives there alone?”

Summer gave a short laugh devoid of humor. “He does now after he beat up his girlfriend. That’s the domestic violence warrant.”

Before Anthony could respond, Parrish’s garage door began rolling up. The deep rumble of dual exhausts was clearly audible as a red, low-slung sports car backed out.

“Crap,” Summer said. “Patrol still isn’t here.”

“Are we sure that’s him? I thought he drove the Honda.”

“I did, too,” she said, dropping the car into gear and racing forward.

As the car continued to back toward the street, Summer recognized the driver. “It’s Parrish,” she said. “Let’s take him.”

She pulled in and blocked the driveway with their car. Drawing their guns as they jumped out, Summer commanded in a loud voice, “Police! Step out of the car!”

Parrish slowly opened the door and looked back at the weapons pointed at him, his face etched in fear. “What’s going on?”

“Get out of the car now!” Summer repeated.

Parrish unwound his tall frame from the seat and turned toward the two detectives with his hands in the air.

“Turn around,” Anthony ordered. “Face the garage, and put your hands behind your head.”

Parrish did as directed, asking in a shaky voice, “What did I do?”

“Beauregard Parrish, we have a warrant for your arrest,” Summer said as she and Anthony moved toward him.

Parrish looked over his shoulder at them and bolted toward the back of the house.

Summer went after him, yelling at Anthony to go the other way to cut him off. They reached the back yard in time to see Parrish running flat out toward a five-foot-tall, split picket fence separating the property from the beach. Summer figured the fence would slow him down enough so they could overtake him without difficulty. She was wrong.

Parrish leaped into the air like a world-class high jumper, clearing the fence without touching it. When Summer reached the fence, she put her foot on the lower rail to boost herself up while Anthony mirrored her movements on the adjacent section. Their combined weight proved to be too much for the rotten fence. Both sections broke away, sending them toppling backward and bringing the fence crashing down on top of them.

Summer yelled, "Call for backup!" as they scrambled out from under the fence and sprinted through the opening.

"Radio's back in the car!" Anthony shouted.

By the time they made it through the soft dunes and onto the hard-packed sand, Parrish was a good fifty yards ahead. Summer shouted, "STOP! POLICE!"

Parrish showed no signs of slowing down. He began waving and shouting at two surfers coming out of the water carrying their boards. "HELP! THEY'RE TRYING TO KILL ME!"

The surfers stood wide-eyed, watching the chase unfold. Summer was still twenty feet behind Parrish when her partner tackled him. They fell together, with Parrish landing on top, shouting obscenities and raining blows on Anthony's head.

In full stride, Summer launched herself, slamming her forearm into the side of Parrish's neck. He grunted loudly, rolling off Anthony onto his back. As he started to rise, she delivered a hammerfist punch to his solar plexus, driving the wind from his lungs in a loud whoosh. Stunned, he fought desperately to catch his breath.

She flipped Parrish onto his stomach while Anthony struggled to his feet, gripping his left shoulder in obvious pain.

Keeping an eye on Parrish, Summer asked, "You okay?"

"Yes . . . No. My shoulder is killing me."

"Okay, I'll cover Parrish. Can you talk to those surfers? They witnessed the whole thing, and I don't want them leaving before we get their information."

“Sure,” he grimaced.

Pointing her gun at Parrish, she said, “Don’t move. In fact, breathe shallow unless I tell you otherwise. Got me?”

Parrish stared fearfully at the gun. “Yes,” he whispered.

Just then, several officers came running up. “Everything under control?” the patrol sergeant asked.

“My partner’s injured. Can you have someone cuff this guy?”

“What about those two?” the sergeant asked, pointing toward the surfers talking to Anthony.

“They’re witnesses to the battery on Detective Walker. We need them taken to HQ for statements.”

After the surfers left with an officer, Summer asked the sergeant, “How did you find us?”

“A neighbor was sitting on his patio. He saw the whole thing and called. How did you end up out here, anyway?”

“Parrish was about to leave, and we had to jump out on him fast. Then he took off running, and there was no time to get back in the car to grab a portable. Can you have someone get a statement from the neighbor?”

“You got it,” he said.

Summer and Anthony followed the officers escorting Parrish back to his house. Anthony held his left arm tightly to his side, his face twisted in pain.

“You have to go to the emergency room.”

“I can’t leave you to do all the work.”

“It’s okay. I’ll call Commander Randall if I need help. He’ll break someone loose.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. You need to get your shoulder checked.”

He asked, “Where the hell did you learn to do that?”

“Do what?”

“You know, that forearm strike to his neck and the punch to his solar plexus. That looked professional.”

Summer walked a few more steps before answering, a mischievous grin breaking across her face, “I play a lot of video games.”



Tuesday, May 16, 8:30 a.m.

Summer wore a dark gray jacket and a short-sleeved blue shirt tucked into black slacks, allowing easy access to the gun riding in a holster on her right hip. Plain black shoes with rubber soles completed her normal work outfit. While on the job, she kept her dark brown hair pulled back in a tight ponytail, normally wearing minimal makeup. People considered Summer extremely attractive. She was five-nine and maintained her weight at a trim one hundred, forty pounds. During her teens, she had briefly considered a modeling career but ultimately dismissed it as frivolous.

At thirty-one, she had been involved in several relationships, although none of them had developed into a deeper commitment. Her choice of men in recent years was exclusively fellow cops. Summer sometimes wondered if she was limiting her dating pool, but it seemed that cops were the only ones who really got her. There was just something about police work that was hard for those outside the job to understand.

She had spent four years in the U. S. Army before joining the police department, but nothing prepared her for what she would face as a rookie officer, getting into a gun battle with a killer and suffering a bullet wound. A couple of years later, now a seasoned officer, she faced another deadly force encounter, requiring her to employ her training and shooting skills

to survive. Summer was respected by her fellow officers as a dedicated supervisor and an all-around tough cop.

This morning, she was sitting in Duval County's J-1 courtroom observing the proceedings. Prisoners arrested overnight were making their first appearance before Judge Amanda Howell. Clad in orange jumpsuits, handcuffs, and leg shackles, more than three dozen detainees sat in rows near the judge's bench while they awaited their cases to be called. The judge's initial task was to review the charges against each prisoner, charges which ranged from non-violent crimes such as auto theft and burglary to more serious offenses like armed robbery, manslaughter, and aggravated battery. When each defendant's name was called, the prisoner would hobble over to stand before the judge. An assistant state attorney, or ASA, was there to speak on behalf of the state, while an assistant public defender represented the interests of the prisoners.

Summer watched each defendant closely as they waited for Judge Howell to speak. First time offenders were easy to identify. Fear of the unknown poured off them in waves. There were expressions of acute embarrassment and shame on some. A few couldn't stand still, and their leg chains clinked audibly each time they moved. Repeat offenders were equally easy to spot. Most remained without moving, staring and occasionally glaring at the judge as she read through their arrest docket and associated paperwork. A few were nonchalant, their gaze drifting around the courtroom, smiling and waving to a family member or friend.

The all-important question for each defendant was the bond amount the judge would set on their charges. If it was too high to post, or the defendant was ordered held without bond, he or she would be sent back to the county jail to wait, oftentimes months, occasionally years, for their case to be heard.

Summer only half listened to the proceedings as she watched Beau Parrish. They had locked eyes when he was escorted into the courtroom. He glared at her with an air of contempt until he reached the bench the bailiff indicated. It was the same demeanor he had exhibited toward her when she attempted to question him about the computer fraud charge. She got the impression that Parrish would have enjoyed attacking her just as he had done to his girlfriend. What he obviously hadn't known before the confrontation on the beach was that Summer could more than

hold her own in a violent encounter thanks to years of training in mixed martial arts.

Given Parrish's apparent antipathy toward women, she was surprised to see that attitude vanish when Judge Howell took the bench. He began squirming in his seat, drawing a whispered rebuke from the bailiff. When he looked around, the expression on his face revealed an unusual level of anxiety. Whenever the courtroom door swung open, his head instantly turned in that direction. Summer wondered who he was afraid of seeing come through the door.

Almost two hours after the first defendant shuffled out of the courtroom, Parrish's name was called. Summer watched him take several awkward steps to stand before the judge's bench. He waited, watching the judge anxiously as she scanned his arrest docket and associated paperwork.

When she asked Parrish if he had an attorney, he shook his head.

"Mr. Parrish, the court reporter cannot record physical movement. Please state whether you have an attorney."

"No, I don't," he answered in a low voice.

"If you're indigent, you may be appointed an attorney. Are you claiming indigent status?"

"Uh, I guess not. I have a job."

Looking over the top of her glasses, the judge nodded, "Mr. Parrish, you're here today because you're charged with a violation of the Florida Computer Crimes Act, a second degree felony. In addition, you're charged with one count of aggravated domestic violence by strangulation, a third degree felony. Lastly, you're charged with battery on a law enforcement officer, also a third degree felony. As you may have heard in the previous cases, this proceeding is an initial appearance. You're not here to offer a plea to the charges. Rather, the purpose of this proceeding is to determine whether there is sufficient probable cause to proceed with charges against you, and to determine whether you're eligible for bond. Do you understand what I've told you so far?"

"Yes, I understand," Parrish said softly.

"Addressing the charge of domestic violence, I see from the paperwork provided by the state attorney that you have no prior arrests or complaints for domestic violence. Is that correct?"

Parrish nodded, then, catching himself, said, "Yes."

“The reports state you assaulted a woman named Kylie Anderson. Is this person a family member?”

“No.”

“What is the nature of your relationship with Ms. Anderson?”

Parrish looked down at his hands, as if they held the answer to the judge’s question. Slowly, he raised his head. “She lives in the same house.”

“When you say she lives in the same house, do you mean she rents a room from you?”

“No, no, I mean she’s with me. I guess you could say we live together.”

“As in a relationship?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Is she still living with you since this incident occurred?”

“I don’t think so. I left the house after the, uh, the disagreement happened. When I came back later, she was gone, and her stuff was gone, too. I haven’t seen her since then, so I guess she’s moved out.”

Pointing to the ASA, Judge Howell asked, “Has the state’s attorney been in contact with the victim in this case?”

The ASA stood. “Yes, Your Honor. I spoke to the victim yesterday afternoon, and she confirmed she is no longer living in the residence and has no intention of moving back there.”

“Alright, Mr. Parrish, after reviewing the paperwork, I find there is probable cause to proceed with a charge of violation of the Florida Computer Crimes Act, or the FCCA, for purposes of brevity,” the judge said. “In addition, I find there is probable cause to proceed with a charge of aggravated felony domestic violence by strangulation. Further, I find sufficient probable cause to proceed with a charge of battery on a law enforcement officer.”

Addressing the ASA again, she said, “The judge issuing the arrest warrant for violation of the FCCA authorized a bond in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars. Do you have a substitute bond recommendation on this charge?”

“No, Your Honor,” he responded. “The state’s attorney concurs with that amount.”

Judge Howell made a notation and then continued. “As to the charge of aggravated domestic violence by strangulation, the judge issuing the

arrest warrant for that charge noted a bond of twenty-five thousand dollars. Do you concur?"

"No objection to that bond amount, Your Honor."

"The standard bond for battery on a law enforcement officer is fifteen thousand dollars. Do you concur?"

"Again, Your Honor, the state's attorney concurs with that bond amount."

Shifting her attention to the assistant public defender, the judge asked, "Does the public defender's office have any objection to the recommended bond for each of the charges?"

"We do, Your Honor," the attorney responded. "Mr. Parrish is an established resident of Jacksonville Beach. In addition, he has gainful employment with a local computer company. He has no prior arrests. In fact, he has never even received a traffic citation. It's an accepted fact that the purpose of a bond is to ensure the likelihood that a person charged with an alleged crime will appear before the Court at any and all proceedings. Taking those facts into consideration, we feel the amounts recommended by the state's attorney are excessive and request that the Court reduce the bonds accordingly."

Judge Howell stared at the young public defender so long that he dropped his head and began randomly rearranging the documents in front of him.

In a voice tinged with sarcasm, she asked, "How long have you been practicing law?"

The attorney rose with a panic-stricken look on his face. "I passed the bar a year ago and was hired by the public defender's office shortly after that."

The judge shook her head in irritation. "While I appreciate your attempt to instruct the Court concerning the purpose of setting a bond, I can assure you that I am well versed in that area. I strongly suggest that you avoid such actions in your future dealings before this Court. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Your Honor," he said, his face flaming red.

"At this time, does the public defender's office have any specific recommendation for bonds?"

The attorney dug frantically through the stack of papers in front of him while the judge drummed her fingers on the bench.

Eventually locating a document, he stood and spoke in a hesitant voice, “Your Honor, considering Mr. Parrish’s strong ties to the community, the public defender recommends a bond of ten thousand on the charge of violating the Florida Computer Crimes Act. Regarding the domestic violence by strangulation, it is our understanding that the complainant, Ms. Anderson, suffered no serious injury. In fact, although she went to the emergency room, she was treated for relatively minor injuries and released.”

“Excuse me, Counselor. Have you examined the photographs of the injuries to the victim, including multiple bruises on her face and neck?” the judge asked.

After a slight hesitation, the attorney said, “Yes, Your Honor.”

“And it is your position that the injuries depicted in these photos are relatively minor?”

“That’s possibly a slight exaggeration, but she didn’t require surgery or hospitalization or even stitches, so . . .”

Her impatience growing, Judge Howell gestured for him to continue.

“So, your Honor, we recommend a bond of two thousand dollars on that charge. As to the charge of battery on a law enforcement officer, it is our understanding that the police officer suffered an injury to his shoulder in the attempt to take Mr. Parrish into custody. We believe the record will show that the officer was not fully recovered from a recent surgery to that same shoulder. Consequently, it is our position that the police department was negligent in allowing him to return to duty before fully recovering. Had he remained on injury leave, he would not have suffered the damage to his shoulder. On this charge, we recommend Mr. Parrish be released on his own recognizance.”

“Your Honor!” the ASA exclaimed. “The assertions by the public defender are—”

The judge cut him off. “Sit down. I’ll handle this.”

Focusing on the assistant public defender, she said, “Bond will remain at one hundred thousand dollars on the charge of violation of the FCCA and twenty-five thousand for the domestic violence charge. Lastly, the Court sets bond at fifteen thousand on the charge of battery on a law—”

“Can I say something?” Parrish blurted out.

The judge stared at him, then said curtly, “Go ahead, Mr. Parrish. But make it quick.”

“I don’t want to get out.”

“Excuse me?”

The handcuff chain rattled as Parrish attempted to raise his hands in a pleading gesture. “I want to stay here. In jail.”

“Whatever for?”

“I just don’t want to get out. That’s all.”

Checking the clock on the back wall, she said, “Mr. Parrish, I don’t have time to argue with you. If someone posts your bonds, the sheriff will boot you out the door to make room for another inmate. If no one posts the bonds, you’ll get your wish and continue to be a guest in the Duval County jail. Next case,” she said, dismissing Parrish with a wave of her hand as she pulled a new file in front of her.

Summer watched Parrish being led away. She wondered why the man was so resistant to being released from jail. Then she thought about how he had closely watched the courtroom doors every time they opened. As if concerned that someone in particular was going to come walking through them. Someone he didn’t want to see.



Wednesday, May 17, 10:10 a.m.

Jason Bell was irritated. He had arrived five minutes early for his ten o'clock appointment with Commander Clay Randall.

Checking his watch, he saw it was now ten after ten, and he was still waiting. He told himself to relax. Remain calm. He wouldn't accomplish anything if he lost his cool.

Bell was dressed in slim-fit khakis, leather sneakers, and a screen-printed tee shirt depicting an abacus with the inscription, "Still the Best Computer". Nothing about his appearance hinted that he was one of the best computer programmers and software designers in the business or that he headed his own successful company.

He was seated in a tiny waiting area, essentially two chairs in an alcove across from a row of offices. A woman sat at a desk in the office directly across from him. She had given him a brief smile when the administrative assistant directed him to the waiting area. He barely nodded and immediately began scrolling through messages on his cell phone.

Checking the time again, he let out a long sigh as a uniformed police officer came strolling into the administrative area. The officer was short, probably no more than five-five or -six, Bell guessed, but he was stout. He figured the man's muscular build enabled him to hold his own against much bigger guys.

He watched as the officer stopped at the woman's door directly across the hall, saying, "Sergeant, you got a minute?"

"Sure, come on in," she answered.

Bell couldn't help overhearing the conversation that followed.

"I finally found my redheaded mermaid," the officer said.

Bell kept his head angled downward but shifted his gaze up just enough to see the woman glance his way.

"Did you now?" he heard her ask in a skeptical tone. "And where was that? In a dream?"

"C'mon, Sarge. You know I wouldn't kid about something that important. I've been searching for her for years."

"Okay, I'll bite. Tell me where you found this mermaid."

"Right here on my arm," the officer answered.

Bell saw her lean toward where the officer was sitting.

"Not bad, huh?" he said.

"No, not bad," she answered. "I'll have to admit it's really . . . uh, large? Are you sure that's within department policy?"

"Oh, yeah. I had it checked out beforehand. Anyway, I wanted you to be the first to see her since you've always been so insistent that they don't exist."

"Phil, this is such bull—"

"Sorry, Sarge. Dispatch is calling me. You have a good day," the cop said, leaving the office with a big grin. He nodded to Bell as he passed, pulling the sleeve down on his uniform shirt.

"Excuse me, Mr. Bell, Commander Randall will see you now," the administrative assistant advised.

Finally, Jason thought as he followed her down the hall to the last office.

Clay stood, extending his hand. "Jason, it's been a while. How's it going?"

He returned Clay's handshake and sat down. "Very busy. Hackers are always trying to get through our customers' firewalls."

"From what I hear, very few of them are successful. That must mean you have a great product. Dana and I are happy for you. And speaking of your sister, have you talked to her lately?"

"It's been a couple of months. We've been going crazy trying to finish

a big install for a major client. Tell her I'll call her as soon as I finish this project."

"I will. So, let's get to why you're here."

"As I explained when I made the appointment, I want to talk to you about the arrest of my employee and the beating he got from one of your officers."

Clay pulled a notepad in front of him and picked up a pen. "I read the reports at the time, but I don't recall your employee's name."

"It's Beau Parrish. He's my top programmer."

"I remember now, and the arresting detectives were Sergeant Summer Hayes and Anthony Walker."

"Beau didn't mention anybody named Anthony Walker. Hayes is the one he said beat him up and then arrested him for no reason. She also took his computer and a backup hard drive and carted them off to God knows where. To be clear, it's actually my property. I own the company and all of the equipment."

"Is it common practice for one of your employees to have a work computer at his residence?"

"Under normal circumstances, the answer would be not just no, but hell, no. However, I've had Beau working on that project I mentioned before. Sometimes it helps programmers think better when they're not in the office. They can work whenever the inspiration hits."

Clay scanned what he had written before continuing. "I'll come back to the excessive force complaint. First, though, what do you know about the computer charge?"

"Beau said it was bullshit."

"That one's not in the Florida statutes, Jason."

"Good one," he laughed halfheartedly.

Clay smiled. "So, are you aware of the specific charges against him?"

"All I was told was that it involved some kind of extortion, which sounds completely crazy to me, considering what I know about Beau. And then there was a charge for domestic violence. Again, that doesn't sound like the guy I know. The idea of him doing either of those things just seems impossible to believe."

"You've obviously talked to him. Did he give you any specifics about his arrest and what he claims Sergeant Hayes did to him?"

“He said this man and woman he didn’t know showed up at his house just as he was backing out of his garage, and they blocked him in with their car. He said they jumped out with guns in their hands and were yelling at him, and he thought he was being robbed. He got scared and took off. They chased him down onto the beach, and the guy tackled him. Then the woman jumped on him and beat him unconscious. When he woke up, he was handcuffed, and that’s when they told him they were cops.

“They dragged him back to his house and took his keys and went in and turned the place upside down. Looking for what, he said they never told him. They just kept saying something about domestic violence and computer fraud. They even dug through his desk and took his bank records, which neither one of us understands what that’s about. But the biggest problem was them taking my computer and external drive. And while we’re on that topic, Clay, no one, and I mean no one is authorized to access the files on it. Everything on there, every folder, every document, every picture is proprietary information that’s highly confidential.”

When Bell paused, Clay continued, “Did the detectives show him a search warrant?”

“He said they showed him some papers, but he was still groggy from getting beaten up and didn’t understand what was going on. All I know is that I need him out of jail and my computer equipment returned to me. I really need you to make this happen. Like today.”

Clay put his pen down and clasped his hands on top of the notepad. “Jason, I understand your concerns, and I’ll help if I can. But you have to be patient. I need all this information to be clear on exactly what happened from your employee’s perspective.”

“Alright. What else do you need?”

“Let’s go back. You said Parrish claimed Sergeant Hayes physically attacked him.”

“Absolutely. First, she hit him in the head while he was down on the ground. Then, while he was only half conscious, and not struggling in any way, she punched him so hard in the gut that he couldn’t catch his breath. He said he thought he was going to die of asphyxiation.”

“And it’s his contention that he didn’t know Sergeant Hayes and Detective Walker were police officers?”

“That’s what he said.”

“Strange,” Clay said softly.

Bell sat forward. “What’s strange?”

“It’s odd that two veteran detectives with arrest warrants for Mr. Parrish would never identify themselves as police officers. I have to tell you I find that extremely unlikely.”

Bell spread his hands. “Unlikely or not. If he said they didn’t, I believe him.”

“Jason, there’s something you’re apparently not aware of. Two surfers on the beach witnessed Sergeant Hayes and Detective Walker chasing him, and they’ve given sworn statements saying they heard Hayes identifying herself as a police officer during the foot chase. They also said Parrish attacked Detective Walker after he tackled him. In fact, they specifically stated Parrish was on top of Detective Walker beating him when Sergeant Hayes struck him to get him off her partner.”

Bell didn’t respond, staring at Clay in disbelief. When he remained silent, Clay continued, “So, I’m confused about what you want me to do.”

“What I want you to do is to remember that we’re family, and families take care of each other.”

“What exactly do you mean about families taking care of each other?”

“It’s simple. I’m asking that you, my brother-in-law, pull whatever strings you need to pull so these ridiculous charges are dropped and my equipment is returned immediately.”

Clay gazed at Bell in silence, then asked in a monotone, “And if I don’t make this happen?”

“This has to happen. As I’ve said repeatedly, we’re working on something extremely important. I can’t afford to lose this contract, and I need Beau and my computer to complete the work. I can’t stress enough how important this is to me. Important enough that, if I lose this contract, you leave me no option but to file a lawsuit.”

“You certainly have that option if you believe your company has been damaged.”

“But in the meantime, you’ve still got my property. There has to be a way we can both get what we want. I want my equipment, and you want to avoid the negative publicity a police brutality complaint would bring.

So, give me what I want, and I'll make sure Parrish drops his complaint against your Sergeant Hayes. How does that sound?"

"Jason, I've been a police officer here more than twenty years. The laws we enforce are the same laws we follow ourselves. And I'm sorry, but what you're asking me to do is unethical. As for Parrish's allegations of police brutality, he has to come in here and file a formal complaint and give a statement about what he claims happened."

"Why does he have to do that? He works for me. Why can't I file it on his behalf?"

Trying to be patient, Clay explained, "First, you weren't present when the arrest took place, so you have no firsthand knowledge of the incident. Second, he's an adult, and clearly mentally competent. And third, when he files a complaint, he has to give a statement swearing that his allegations are true. Sometimes, when people realize they're subject to perjury charges for lying on a sworn statement, their stories tend to change."

Clay held up a hand as Bell started to object. "Let me finish. As for the criminal charges against him, if there's a problem with any of them, I'll discuss that with the state attorney, who will ultimately decide about the charges and what will be done with your property. Also, I can't tell you right now how much time this will take. Everything that was seized at Parrish's house will potentially be used as evidence in his trial. So, nothing can be released at this point."

His anger rising, Bell snapped, "I see what's happening. This whole thing is about your cop beating up Parrish for no reason, so you file these bogus charges against him and keep my computer all to cover her ass. And in the process, I get screwed. You're all a bunch of corrupt assholes that think you're above the law just because you wear a badge!"

Clay stood abruptly, his eyes blazing. Pointing at the door, he said in a voice that grew louder as he spoke, "That's enough. I'm not going to sit here another second and listen to you attack the integrity of one of my officers without any evidence whatsoever. Someone will contact you when the internal review is complete. Until then, I want you out of my office and out of this building! NOW!"

Bell stood, opening his mouth to retort. Clay pointed at him, saying, "Leave or I'll have you arrested for trespassing. Even if we are family."

Fists clenched, Bell stormed out of the office.

Clay came out in time to see him brush past a patrol officer standing at the administrative assistant's desk. He pointed at Bell's retreating back. "Make sure he leaves."

"My pleasure, Commander," the officer said.



Wednesday, May 17, 10:30 a.m.

Clay went back to his office and dropped into the chair, rubbing his face. In his early forties, he was extremely fit from competing in triathlons, swimming, running, and cycling hundreds of miles each year. His sandy-blond hair was beginning to show streaks of gray, a look his wife, Dana, said made him appear distinguished. He didn't agree.

He liked to say that he was shopping for fishing equipment when he got "hooked" on law enforcement. Still in college, uncertain what he wanted to do with his life, he encountered a police officer being attacked by a huge man armed with a knife. With no hesitation, Clay jumped in and helped subdue the attacker, and his career path was set.

Reflecting on the confrontation with his brother-in-law, he muttered, "Jason clearly hasn't mellowed since I last saw him. He can't accept the possibility that he might be wrong about anything."

"It's never a good sign to sit in your office talking to yourself," Summer said as she came in and sat in the chair Bell had just vacated.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just bitching about Dana's brother. He's one of those people who thinks the world revolves around him. The man has a genius IQ accompanied by a single mindedness that has made him very successful. Unfortunately, when he's focused on something he wants, he expects everyone else to get out of his way. I've tried over the years to avoid him as much as possible."

“So that was Jason Bell?”

“The one and only. At first, our discussion was friendly, or at least polite, until I wouldn’t give him what he wanted. It ended with him claiming you committed police brutality and that we’re all corrupt. That’s when I told him to get out.”

“Clay, you know me well enough to—”

“Stop. I do know you,” he interrupted. “I told him about the surfers seeing the whole thing, but he ignored it because it didn’t fit his narrative.”

“So what happens now?”

“I need you to bring me up to date on the investigation. But first, has anyone told you the latest on Anthony?”

“I know he went to the ER, and they scheduled an MRI, but I haven’t heard the results.”

“It’s not as bad as we thought,” Clay said. “The rotator cuff wasn’t torn in the fight with Parrish. It’s just strained, but he’s going back on light duty for a while. In the meantime, this puts us in a real bind. We’re already working shorthanded with retirements and officers leaving for better-paying departments.”

“As well as half a dozen young cops in the past six months who quit police work altogether after deciding it wasn’t for them,” Summer added. “With all the negative publicity directed at law enforcement, I guess I can understand their reasons for leaving the job. It can really be depressing sometimes.”

“It’s human nature,” Clay said. “We tend to judge the group by the actions of the few. But, we can’t control other people’s attitudes about us. We just need to make sure we always do the right thing. And speaking of that, the right thing now is to figure out how we’re going to keep our heads above water with these personnel shortages.”

“Anything you need from me?”

“I’d say you need a new partner.”

“That’s not necessary. I can pick up more cases to help take up the slack.”

“I appreciate that, but I’m talking about this case. You’re going to need help, and I don’t have anyone available considering the case load everyone else is carrying.”

“I understand. I’ll just work harder.”

“I have a better idea. I’ve already talked to Chief Wilson about it. I’m

going to be your partner on this investigation.”

“Really?”

“Sure. I haven’t had the chance to work a case at ground level since Mayor Adams and our former senator.”

Summer grinned, “That’s great!”

“Good. Then let’s get started with you bringing me up to speed on the case.”

“I’ll go get my file.”

She was back within seconds with a thick case folder. She opened it and scanned the cover page before speaking. “You mentioned you did a brief review of the case. How much background do you want?”

“Let’s go through it from the start.”

“Okay, I made a case on Parrish for Internet fraud. He was using a scam the tech geeks call ransomware.”

“How does it work?”

“He hacks into a company’s computer network and sends an email with a link to what seems to be an authentic site. However, when the person clicks on the link, a virus is unleashed that locks up their computer so they can’t access any of their files. Then he sends them an email demanding money to release their computer with the threat that he’ll start deleting their files in one hour if they don’t pay.”

“Who is our victim?”

“A lawn service and landscaping company called Power’s Lawn Care.”

“Did the owner pay the ransom?”

“He did.”

“But why? I thought everyone nowadays backs up their files automatically in case they have a computer crash.”

Shaking her head, Summer said, “Unfortunately, he didn’t. His company is only a few months old. He said he was so busy trying to get the business off the ground that he hadn’t gotten around to it. He’s now got everything backed up to multiple drives as well as offsite storage.”

“Sounds like a case of too little, too late. I imagine identifying these guys is next to impossible, so how did you get onto Parrish?”

“With a little help from a friend.”

“Okay, tell me more.”

“First, some background. Parrish was hired as a programmer by Bell’s company just over a year ago. At some point, although he doesn’t admit it,

he started running his computer extortion scheme on the side.”

“Have you found any evidence Jason knew about this? That he might have put Parrish up to it?”

“No. From the records we seized, it’s clear Parrish was doing this on his own.”

“That’s good to know. My brother-in-law has an irritating personality, but I’m glad he’s not a criminal. Go ahead.”

“Shortly after Parrish took the job,” she said, “he hooked up with a woman named Kylie Anderson, age twenty-five.”

Flipping to another tab, she removed a photograph and passed it across the desk.

Clay studied the photo of a man and woman in bathing suits standing at the entrance to the Jacksonville Beach pier. The man Clay assumed was Parrish towered over the much shorter Kylie Anderson. He stood with his arm draped possessively over the woman’s bare shoulder, his hand resting along the side of her bikini-topped breast.

“What else do you have?”

She passed Clay a series of eight-by-ten photos. He flipped through front and side views of the victim’s injuries, showing in graphic detail a black eye, swollen nose, split lip, and a chipped front tooth. Severe redness and bruising covered her neck. The remaining photos showed large bruises on her chest and stomach.

“This is Parrish’s handiwork?”

“Right, and it’s not the first time, according to Kylie.”

“Did she report any of the prior assaults?”

“No. There was only one previous incident, although it was minor compared to this one.”

“Why did she stay with him?”

“She believed him when he told her it would never happen again.”

“Yeah, and here’s the evidence of how well that worked out. She finally found the courage to make a complaint because of this beating?”

“Yes, she called me.”

Clay looked up from the photos. “You know her?”

“She’s the friend I referred to. I met her a while back at one of my MMA classes. She had just joined and seemed a little intimidated, so I introduced myself and started working with her on some of the basic techniques.”

“With that kind of training, couldn’t she have kicked Parrish’s butt?”

“Probably, with more experience, but she didn’t stick with it. She dropped out after a few weeks because she couldn’t devote the time needed to attend the classes as well as practice the techniques in between each session.”

“Why did she call you directly? Did she know you were a cop?”

“When we first started training together, we shared things like what we did for a living, where we went to school. That sort of stuff.”

“Is that when she told you about Parrish?”

“Not at that point. She just said she was living with a guy. The last night she attended, she told me she was dropping out and asked to exchange cell numbers. We agreed to get together sometime for a drink, but it never happened. Then I got the call from her wanting advice. She said her boyfriend had assaulted her. I asked where it happened to make sure it was in our jurisdiction, and she said it was at their place here in Jax Beach. I told her to meet me at HQ, and she came right in. You can imagine my shock when I saw all of the injuries.”

“Who took the pictures?”

“I did. I asked her if she wanted to file charges on Parrish, and she said yes. She was adamant that she wanted him punished for what he’d done. After I got all the information for the domestic violence report, the Internet extortion stuff came out.”

“What made her bring that up?”

“I believe Kylie is an honest person. It was clear once she described what she had found that it had nothing to do with wanting revenge for the assault.”

Just then, Police Chief Mike Wilson came to the door. “Morning. What are you two working on?” he asked as he sat beside Summer.

“She’s been briefing me on the Beauregard Parrish arrest,” Clay said.

“What’s the latest?”

Over the next few minutes, Summer repeated the information she had covered to that point, after which Clay informed the chief about his meeting with Jason Bell, including his unfounded complaint against Summer.

“That brings you up to where Summer was explaining how she developed probable cause to arrest Parrish and seize his computer. Any questions so far?”

“No, but it sounds like this guy is a real piece of work,” Wilson said.

“Without a doubt, Chief. Go, Summer,” Clay prompted.

“During the attack, Parrish choked her until she lost consciousness.

When she came to, he was gone. She knew she had to get out of there before he came back, so she threw some clothes and personal items into a bag and headed for the door. As she went past the study, she saw his computer standing open on the desk. That surprised her since he had never wanted her to see what he was doing. But then she realized he had been so out of control that he must have forgotten about it when he stormed out the door.”

“Why didn’t he want her to see what was on his computer?” the chief asked.

“She said from the day she moved in, Parrish was always careful to keep her from seeing anything on it. He told her his work involved writing proprietary software; consequently, she wasn’t authorized to see it. Kylie said she happened to walk up behind Parrish one day while he was on his computer and saw an article on the screen about ransomware. When she asked him what he was doing, he said it was work related, that because he programmed anti-virus software, he needed to know about that kind of stuff.”

“I read an article about ransomware recently,” the chief said. “It talked about this scam originating in Russia as well as some EU countries, but it’s now starting to happen here in the U.S.”

“You’re right, Chief. So, at first, Kylie accepted Parrish’s explanation about the ransomware article. But then she started thinking about how secretive he was, and it began to arouse her suspicions about what he was really doing.”

Clay asked, “Did she say what he was being secretive about?”

“Yes. When she moved in, he insisted they keep their bank accounts separate. That was fine with her since they weren’t married. She offered once to balance his bank statement when she did her own, but he refused. He said his finances were his private business, and she was never to open his statements. She thought it was weird that a computer geek wanted paper copies rather than doing online banking, but she wrote it off as just a quirk that wasn’t worth arguing about.”

“But it wasn’t just a quirk, I take it,” the chief said.

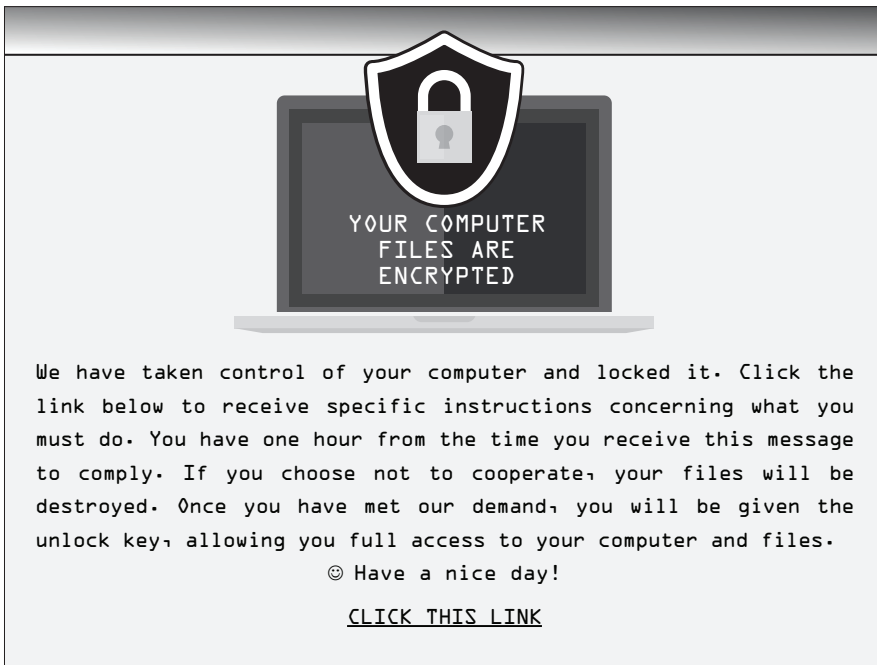
“No, it wasn’t. So, standing at the door that night, her body still aching from the beating, Kylie was torn between wanting to get out before he returned and yet feeling a compulsion to find out what he was doing. She

locked the front door and shoved a chair under the knob and then went to inspect his computer. She scrolled through several screens and was shocked at what she found. Before I show you a screen shot, though, I need to give you a little more background. After reading the message, she thought she understood why Parrish didn't want her to see his bank records. She knew he kept them in the desk, so she rooted through the drawers until she found the file containing his statements for the past year."

Clay and Mike watched with anticipation as Summer pulled more documents out of the folder and held them up.

"These are copies of the statements we seized with the search warrant, and they make for very interesting reading. Starting with the first one a year ago, the only deposits are his bi-weekly paychecks. However, three months ago, that changed. Not counting the paychecks, which were direct deposited, there were forty-eight cash deposits of exactly five hundred dollars each, which adds up to twenty-four thousand dollars. Here's the screen shot of the message she printed out," Summer said, handing copies to Clay and Mike.

Clay read it aloud:



The chief read it through twice before handing the document back to Summer.

“Just to be clear,” he said, “when a person clicks on the link, is that where they see the demand to pay five hundred dollars to get their computer unlocked?”

“Right.”

“How did our local lawn company pay the ransom? Surely, he didn’t write a check or use a company like PayPal. The article I read said a scammer typically demands virtual money, not actual cash. The purpose is to avoid giving the victim any information that could be tracked by law enforcement. So, how did Parrish get the cash to deposit?”

“When our victim clicked on the link, he was redirected to a site that required him to wire the money to a specific bank routing number.”

“Can’t that be traced?”

“It can. I talked to the local FBI office, and the agent said these scammers will skip a wire transfer like this through as many as a dozen banking institutions, some legitimate, some not, before the money lands in an untraceable account only he can access. After Power’s Lawn Care wired the money, Parrish sent the unlock key two days later. I’m keeping the FBI informed on the case so they can decide about bringing federal charges at some point.”

“Do we know what companies he sent these messages to?”

Summer said, “Maybe we should offer Kylie a job as an investigator. After copying this message, she started searching the document files on Parrish’s computer and found a list of companies that we believe are linked to the extortion message.”

“Linked as in victims of extortion?”

“Victims or potential victims, I believe,” she said, handing them copies of the document.

“Does the list of deposits match up with the number of victims?” the chief asked as he viewed the company names.

“Not quite, but fairly close. It shows a total of seventy-four companies in Florida. As you can see, beside the name of each business, there’s a plus or minus along with a date. The plus beside a company’s name coincides exactly with the date of a cash deposit into Parrish’s account.”

Clay hesitated as he did the math in his head, “That means twenty-six

companies apparently didn't pay."

"That's correct. From my research, I've found that not all the victims agreed to pay the ransom. In every one of those cases, they kept a complete backup file not connected to their network. They simply reformatted the infected computer and loaded all their programs and files from the backup."

"Is someone contacting these companies to see if they still have the message?" Chief Wilson asked.

"Alex Molina's the IT expert, and he took care of it. The companies have already reformatted their computers, but he found six where they took a picture of the message on the screen before they wiped them clean. They emailed him the JPEGs, and it's the same message. He also compiled a list of those that notified their local law enforcement agency and requested copies of the reports for the case file."

Clay asked, "How many of the companies are around here?"

"Except for Power's Lawn Care, none. They're all in South Florida. Places like Tampa, St. Pete, West Palm, even a couple in the Keys."

"Why would Parrish choose a business here in Jax Beach when all the others are so far away? Did he hit that company within the same time frame as the others?"

Summer checked her paperwork. "The lawn care company was one of the last ones, according to the bank deposit date. And to answer your question, I don't know why he chose it when all the others are down south."

"Were you able to access his computer when you seized it?"

"That was the easy part. After we arrested Parrish and read him his rights, a patrol officer escorted him back to his house. When I showed him the search warrants, he acted nervous but didn't say anything. But when I went over to his computer, he freaked, demanding that I not touch it. The screen was dark, but I could tell it was on. I hit the space bar, and it came out of sleep mode. And guess what was on the screen."

"His ransomware message?" Clay suggested.

"I guess that's why you're the detective commander," she laughed. "I asked Parrish what the message was about, and he mumbled a few curse words in response. What really surprised me was that he didn't have the computer set to require a password."

“You’d think with the guy doing something illegal, he’d have been more careful. Once more proving there’s never a shortage of stupid criminals, which makes our job easier. Anyway, what else, Summer?” Clay asked.

She explained Parrish’s request to stay in jail and his apprehension every time the courtroom doors opened.

“Maybe he’s afraid Jason Bell is going to do something to him for getting the company’s computer seized,” Clay speculated.

“Clay, is there any reason to delay telling Bell there’s no validity to his complaint against Summer?” Chief Wilson asked.

“None at all from a factual basis, but we need to give Parrish the opportunity to file a formal complaint if he wants to.”

“Sounds good,” said the chief. “About your brother-in-law, I’m sorry you and Dana are having to deal with this. And Summer? Great job. Keep it up.”



Wednesday, May 17, 10:35 a.m.

A frustrated Jason Bell sat in his car on the police parking lot as he replayed the confrontation with Clay. He had been confident he could convince his brother-in-law to release his equipment, even if he refused to get Parrish out of jail.

He thought about Dana and wondered how she could have married a guy like Randall. In his opinion, Clay's years as a cop had rendered him incapable of seeing the world in shades other than black and white. But Dana was Clay's exact opposite. She was a talented artist, passionate and creative, everything he saw in himself and believed Clay was not.

He glanced in the mirror and saw green eyes in a handsome face staring back at him. At twenty-five years old, he kept his hair cut in the latest style, a mid-fade and medium long on top. He seldom bothered to comb it, preferring instead to run his fingers through it a time or two after washing. In his opinion, it looked cool.

Jason had grown up in a one-parent home. His father was Marty Cappella, Dana's father. After Dana's parents divorced, Cappella had a relationship with Jason's mother that ended in a bitter breakup during her pregnancy. When Jason was born, his mom gave him her last name, vowed never to see Marty Cappella again, and refused his repeated offers of financial help. Jason grew up believing his father had abandoned them. Consequently, he had no interest in ever meeting him.

Early on, Jason tested at a genius level, uttering his first words at seven months and solving algebraic equations before turning four. Once he started school, he found himself frequently in trouble due to his difficulty paying attention during lessons that didn't challenge him intellectually. Eventually, his mother, possessing a near-genius IQ herself, decided to homeschool him, and that proved to be his salvation. He passed all requirements for a high school diploma by the time he turned fourteen. He earned a perfect score on his SAT and enrolled in Florida State University's computer science program the following year.

Being homeschooled, Jason seldom had the opportunity to interact with other students. That all changed when he started college. His mother arranged for him to live with a faculty professor who had a seventeen-year-old son also entering the computer science program. Much to his mother's delight, the two teens immediately hit it off.

Jason found he loved interacting with other students. At his friend's urging, he began participating in a variety of social functions on campus, gravitating to those activities involving the opposite sex. Already approaching six feet, his good looks and mature way of acting attracted coeds who were more than willing to assist in furthering that neglected aspect of his education.

Two years later, he received his BS, graduating with a 4.0 GPA. He moved back home to Jacksonville Beach, intent on pursuing his gaming passion. By the time he turned eighteen, Jason was designing, writing, and selling computer game software that was earning him close to sixty thousand dollars a year.

Then, shortly after turning twenty-one, something happened that totally changed the direction of his professional life. He struck up an online friendship with a fellow geek in a chat room. Over time, his propensity to state his opinion, even when it wasn't asked for, angered the guy to the point that he hacked into Jason's computer and planted a virus that wiped out his hard drive. This caused the loss of thousands of files as well as a promising new game program he was writing. Although he was never able to get revenge on the hacker, he became obsessed with creating an anti-virus program so powerful no one could get past it.

For the next year, while still designing game programs to keep his bank balance healthy, Jason worked on his new passion. He bought a

computer and installed the latest version of his software, then tried to bypass the program with a powerful virus he wrote. He worked for more than six months before his program defeated the virus for the first time. He began marketing his software locally, undercutting the competition with a less expensive, yet superior product. At twenty-two, Jason formed his own company, Bell Anti-Virus, or Bell AV, as it was eventually called.

It was during this time that his mother told him about his half-sister, Dana Randall, who also lived in Jacksonville Beach. Upset that she had never shared this with him before, he insisted she give him Dana's address. She reluctantly told him, and he immediately jumped in his car and went to her house, although it was after nine o'clock at night.

Jason didn't hesitate when he pulled into their driveway, boldly going to the door and ringing the bell. When Clay checked the exterior security camera and saw a strange young man standing there, he slipped his handgun into his waistband before answering. By now questioning the wisdom of showing up unannounced, Jason stammered his way through an explanation of who he was and why he was there.

Dana joined Clay at the door when she heard Jason say they were related. Eyeing each other closely, they recognized a shared resemblance. They invited Jason in and spent the next two hours getting to know each other. When he left, he had a huge grin on his face. He had thought he was alone, an only child with a single parent. He now knew he was part of a larger family. And he was blown away by Dana's intelligence and her talent as a landscape artist. He also thought his brother-in-law was pretty cool, being a cop. After that first meeting, Jason visited often and was fascinated by Clay's stories of the crazy stuff that had happened to him in his law enforcement career.

One evening, after enjoying a meal at their home, Jason shared with Clay and Dana the frustration he felt that Bell AV was essentially reacting to computer viruses and hackers. He told them he wanted to create a proactive software program that would use artificial intelligence to defeat viruses. It would constantly monitor code worldwide and neutralize malicious programs before they could launch. He envisioned a thinking anti-virus program that would essentially maintain and adapt itself to combat threats without the need for human intervention. If it worked like he believed it would, it had the potential to revolutionize the whole industry.

But to realize his new dream, he would need to hire additional employees, purchase more powerful computers, and lease a larger space to house the operation. He asked Clay and Dana for their financial help. While they were supportive of his efforts, they declined to offer the assistance he needed, citing their daughter's college fund and their retirement goals as taking priority.

At first, Jason said he understood and dropped it. However, during the next few months, as his efforts to gain financial backing stalled, he grew resentful. Things came to a head when he asked for their help and once again was told they couldn't afford it. In total frustration, he became verbally abusive, and Clay told him to leave. Since that evening two years ago, he had managed to keep a cordial relationship with Dana but had spoken to Clay only sporadically. Until today.



Wednesday, May 17, 10:45 a.m.

His reverie ended, Jason peeled out of the police department parking lot, leaving dual streaks of rubber as he accelerated. He was still angry over the way Clay had talked to him. Family clearly meant nothing to his brother-in-law.

Ten minutes later, he wheeled into the driveway of his modest two-story home in Ponte Vedra Beach, coming to an abrupt stop at the sight of a black Mercedes with two men inside. His hands tightened on the steering wheel when they got out.

“Damn,” he muttered. “Not this. Not now.”

The men were dressed alike in dark charcoal suits with white dress shirts and no ties. They stood watching Jason as he sat behind the wheel watching them. He briefly considered backing out and taking off before concluding it would do nothing but delay the inevitable. Resigned, he took his foot off the brake and eased up the driveway.

He climbed out of the car with a fake grin plastered on his face. “Dmitry! Erik!” he exclaimed. “How the hell are you?”

The older of the two men, Dmitry Volkov, spoke in a deep voice, “Jason, we must talk.”

Trying to keep his nerves from showing, he answered, “Sure. Come in the house and have something cold to drink.”

He ushered the men inside, leading the way into a study off the great room. He went to a small bar tucked into an alcove. "I guess it's a little early for alcohol," he said. "What would you like? I've got soft drinks and sparkling water. Either of those work for you?"

Volkov said, "I will have vodka."

"I know you usually drink Tovaritch, but all I've got is Stoli. Will that work?"

"Is it chilled?"

Jason's grin disappeared. "No, but I can put it over ice."

"Never mind. I will take one of your soft drinks instead."

Erik Knight said, "Water for me."

Jason busied himself with the drinks as he debated possible reasons for their unannounced visit. No doubt Knight was there because he took care of problems for Volkov. But he also suspected he knew why Dmitry Volkov was there.

Turning with the drinks in hand, he gestured toward a couch that faced the windows. "Gentlemen, make yourselves comfortable."

Jason popped the tab on a soda just as Volkov pulled a cigarette from an ornate silver case and lit up with a matching silver lighter.

Volkov looked around as he took a drag. "Where is the ashtray?"

"I, uh, don't have any," Jason said, hiding his distaste at the man smoking in his house.

"Please give me something so I do not drop ashes on your floor."

Jason put his soda on a side table and retrieved a small plate from the bar. Accepting it without comment, he flicked the ash onto the plate. Dmitry Volkov had light brown hair, peppered with streaks of gray. Although only forty-seven, years of heavy drinking and rich foods had done their damage, his expensive, tailored suit failing to hide a bulging midsection. His nose was covered with spider veins, and his cheeks and forehead were dotted with splotches of rosacea.

Jason glanced at Erik Knight, the physical opposite of Volkov. His blond hair and dark blue eyes complimented a ruggedly handsome face, coupled with a trim waist and heavily muscled upper body that stretched the fabric of his suit coat. Knight was a competent man who got things done.

Jason could feel the tension rising as he sat in a club chair across from the two men. "This is the first time either of you has been in my home. So, welcome," he said. "And I'm glad you stopped by. I was planning to give you a call today."

"About what?" Volkov asked in a voice that, despite living in the United States since his early twenties, still retained a slight Russian accent.

"Beau Parrish got arrested."

"I know. That is why we are here."

Surprised, Jason said, "How did you hear about it?"

"I have my sources. Tell me why you have not already called me about Beauregard."

"I've been busy trying to get him out of jail. I just came from the police department where I had a meeting with the guy who is second in command. I have to tell you, he's a real jerk."

"Why do you say that?"

"He told me to get out of his office just because I refused to see things his way. What makes it so unbelievable is that he's my brother-in-law."

"Your brother-in-law?"

"Yeah, his wife is my sister. I expected him to show me a little courtesy, but he doesn't think that way. It's cops first, and family second."

"What is his name?"

"Clay Randall. He's a commander."

Volkov nodded. "Okay, Commander Clay Randall is a real jerk. I will remember that. In the meantime, when will Beauregard be released?"

"That's still up in the air."

"Explain."

Jason took a swallow of his soda before responding. "Dmitry, it's like this. You've been in this country long enough to know that things don't always move as fast as we would like. Certainly not like where you grew up, especially when it was the U.S.S.R."

"In the former Soviet Union," Volkov said, "a person arrested for a crime often simply disappeared. No bail. No trial."

"Right," Jason said. "But, of course, that doesn't happen here. Parrish will stay in jail until his bond is posted or he goes to trial. That is, unless the charges are dropped."

"What has he been charged with?"

“There are three things. One is for Internet extortion, and one for assaulting a police officer. Then there’s a domestic violence charge.”

“How do you know this?” Volkov asked.

“I went online to the jail website. While I was reading stuff about how the place operates, my cell phone rang. It was Beau. He wanted to tell me everything that happened, but I told him not to say anything about his arrest.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because I read on the site that all telephone calls made from the jail are recorded. I wanted to make sure he didn’t say anything that would get him into more trouble than he’s already in.”

“That was good advice. So, were you able to talk to him?”

“I went down there during visiting hours and saw him.”

“Did he explain what this Internet extortion is about?”

“Yeah, the idiot was running a ransomware scam.”

“What is that?”

When Jason explained, Volkov said, “He told you he was doing this?”

“Not at first. He claimed he didn’t have any idea why he was arrested or why the police took the computer. The only thing he admitted doing was pushing his girlfriend. And he denied assaulting a cop. He said they beat him up for no reason.”

“The extortion charge. Did he deny doing that?”

“Like I said, at first he did. But when I threatened to walk out, he told me everything.”

Volkov shot a look at Knight. “What does everything mean?”

“Everything about the scam he was running.”

“What is the punishment for that?”

“If he gets convicted, he’ll probably go to prison.”

“For how long?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe years.”

“This is unacceptable, Jason. This is your fault.”

Jason frowned. “How do you figure that? I didn’t put him up to running an illegal scam. He was doing it on his own time at his house.”

“Using his computer?”

“No, it was a company computer.”

“Did you give him permission to take it to his home?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“That was irresponsible. Why would you do that?”

“Dmitry, of course you’re aware of our commitment to install the new software at the client’s site.”

Volkov gave a slight nod.

“Several months ago, Parrish asked me if he could take a company computer home so he could work on the program at any time, even in the middle of the night if an idea came to him. I understand that because I’ve done it myself. I gave him permission as long as he checked with me each time he wanted to take it home.”

“I understand what you are saying, Jason, but it does not solve the problem of your computer being taken by the police. You see, Beauregard has . . . information that must not be exposed.”

“I know. This new software is so cutting edge that, if development details were accessed by an unauthorized person, it would be disastrous.”