

PERCEPTION  
*of* POWER

BRUCE THOMASON



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Printed in the United States of America (2015)

Published by BATJAK Publishing  
Jacksonville Beach, Florida

Contact the publisher at the following: [batjak\\_publishing@att.net](mailto:batjak_publishing@att.net).

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

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

Tradepaper ISBN: 978-0-9832203-3-6

Digital ISBN: 978-0-9832203-4-3

## DEDICATION

*There are fewer than one million law enforcement officers charged with protecting the more than 325 million people in the United States. Perception of Power is dedicated to all those brave men and women who serve on the thin blue line.*



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Perception of Power* would not be possible without the talented support of the following people:

**To Jen Zdunkiewicz:** You keep outdoing yourself in your insightful editing of my novels. You cheerfully skewered my use of slang terms more suitably rooted in the sixties and seventies, and your comments on communications officers' on-air terminology were helpful since I haven't sat in front of a dispatch console since 1967.

**To Commander Gene Paul Smith:** For sharing your knowledge of SWAT tactics and sniper rifle capabilities and techniques.

**To Tom Taylor:** For your technical advice on the operation of concrete trucks and what happens when they fail to stay upright.

**To my daughter, Holli Honchen (RN):** For educating me on degrees of traumatic brain injuries and the appropriate medical terminology.

**And, as always, to my lovely bride, Jackie:** *Perception of Power* is our third book to collaborate as author and editor, and the team effort has only gotten better. I value your judgments and insights even in those few instances when we have to agree to disagree on a plot point, character trait, or a particular piece of dialogue. Your goal is always to make the story better.

## OFFICIAL DISCLAIMER

It's possible, maybe even likely, that I have made mistakes in areas unrelated to my field of expertise. Those include plot points utilizing the Uniform Code of Military Justice as well as certain military sniper rules and techniques, autopsy routines and processes, and hostage negotiator practices and procedures. In every case, I take responsibility for any errors and beg consideration of leniency from those experts in the various fields.

## UNOFFICIAL DISCLAIMER

It's a novel. The characters are in charge. I blame them!





*A bullet has a certain, unsettling beauty. From the spherical base, with a silver-colored primer inserted at its center, to the business end containing the projectile, it reflects a muted sheen that belies its deadly purpose. It has no feelings. It never gets angry or jealous or perceives the lethal power it possesses. Whether punching through a paper target, knocking down a deer in full stride, or taking a human life, the bullet does only what it's directed to do. And if the directions are accurate, it achieves its objective.*





Clay Randall eased his bicycle into the parking lot of the convenience store, shivering from the cold rain that had pelted him for the past hour. Rolling to a stop under the store's awning, he dismounted with a groan. His back and legs ached from the fifty-mile ride. Most of it seemed to have been directly into the face of a stiff north wind, which was somewhat unusual for late March in Northeast Florida. Not for the first time, he wondered if his obsession with cycling was getting out of hand.

He pulled off his helmet, eyes reflexively scanning the interior of the store. Standing six feet and a solid one hundred, eighty pounds, Clay appeared younger than his forty-one years. He ran a hand through his sandy-blond hair, slight hints of gray just beginning to show at the temples.

A cop for almost twenty years in the Jacksonville Beach, Florida Police Department, it was second nature to watch everyone and everything around him. The store was empty of customers. The clerk sat behind the counter, a bored expression on her face as she flipped through the pages of a magazine.

He leaned his bike against the ice machine, briefly considering rolling it inside to ensure no one stole it. The sleek carbon-fiber bicycle had set him back four grand, an amount his wife argued could have been better spent on something more practical, like new dining room furniture.

Clay smiled as he thought of Dana. She was probably at her easel by now, creating another of her beautiful watercolor landscapes that generated an income several times greater than his salary as a public servant. Married seventeen years, he still felt like the geeky kid who somehow convinced the prettiest girl in school to fall in love with him.

Pushing through the door, he felt a welcome rush of warm air flow over his wet bike clothes. As the clerk looked up from her magazine, Clay said, "Morning. Got any fresh coffee?"

She smiled, "Just curious. Didn't you notice it's raining and fifty degrees outside?"

Gazing over his shoulder at the rain hitting the pavement, he said, "Really? Nope, didn't notice."

Laughing, she said, "The pot's fresh. Help yourself."

He poured a cup, savoring the aroma as the rising steam warmed his face. As he took his first tentative sip, a thump drew his attention to the entrance door. An old man in a wheelchair was trying unsuccessfully to push the door open. Clay quickly stepped over and held it open.

"I ain't helpless! Get the hell outta my way!" the man exclaimed. Hitting the power lever on the arm of the chair and motoring through the door, one of the wheels ran over Clay's foot as he passed.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" Clay exclaimed, dancing on one foot as he massaged his toes. He noted the man's filthy, disheveled clothing, wet, greasy hair plastered to his head, and a dirty, unshaved face. The wheels of the battery-powered chair were rusty, and the seat backing was cracked and torn in several places. Homeless, Clay suspected.

"Screw you," the man said, glaring over his shoulder as he rolled up to the counter.

The clerk studied the man with distaste. "What do you want?"

"Whataya want," the man mimicked, sarcastically. "I want food. What're you, stupid?"

"I've told you before. We don't give food away here. Go to a homeless shelter," the clerk replied.

"Naw, I don't think so. Shelter's too far away, and my battery's gettin' low. So I'll just get somethin' to eat and be on my way."

"Excuse me," Clay said, stepping up beside the man. "The lady made it clear she's not giving you food. So either buy something or pack it on out of here."

“Up yours. I ain’t talkin’ to you.” Spinning his chair around, the homeless man rolled to a nearby rack and began grabbing bags of chips and peanuts and dropping them into his lap.

“Ma’am, I’m a police officer,” he said, pulling his badge and identification from his pocket. “Do you want him to leave?”

“Please,” she said. “I have to put up with this all the time. He thinks just because he’s in a wheelchair he can do anything he wants.”

“No problem,” Clay said. Grabbing the chair handles and pulling the man away from the rack, he exclaimed, “Police officer! Stop what you’re doing!”

The man touched the chair’s joystick and spun around, his face contorted in fury. Pulling a large butcher knife from under his leg, he thrust it at Clay.

Leaping back, Clay stumbled. Before he could recover, the man charged forward, slamming the chair into his legs. Arms flailing, Clay staggered into a display rack that promptly collapsed, sending him to the floor amid dozens of candy bars, gum, and cookies.

The homeless man put his chair in high gear, banging into the door hard enough to knock it open. The clerk watched transfixed as Clay struggled to free himself from the rack. Scrambling to his feet, he bellowed, “CALL 9-1-1!”

He took two running steps, forgetting that his cleated shoes were designed for cycling and not running. Suddenly airborne, Clay landed flat on his back for the second time. Stunned, he sat up shaking his head, angry at letting a man in a wheelchair catch him off guard. Yanking his shoes off, he jumped to his feet and hit the exit door at full speed.

The rain came down hard as Clay raced across the parking lot. The wheelchair-bound man had already started across Beach Boulevard, one of the main arteries leading into downtown Jacksonville Beach. Clay reached the curb and started into the road after him. Suddenly, the shrill blast of an air horn brought him to an abrupt halt. His eyes widened in shock as a concrete truck roared past him only inches away, its huge tires splattering water over him in a cascade. *Damn, that was close!* he thought.

But he was lucky. The homeless man was not. As Clay stood at the curb watching helplessly, the truck driver locked down the brakes of the thirty-ton rig and yanked the steering wheel to the left. The homeless

man stared in horror at sixty thousand pounds of metal and concrete hurtling toward him. Mouth open in a silent scream, he thrust out his arms in a futile attempt to stop the inevitable. The massive truck slammed into the man, the impact launching his body airborne as wheelchair parts scattered across the lanes of traffic.

The loaded truck slewed from side to side as the driver fought for control. For a second, Clay thought he would be successful. However, gravity finally won out, and the truck toppled onto its side with a deafening crash. The rig hit the pavement with such force that the concrete chute tore free from the drum, spilling wet concrete across the roadway. The truck, now fully on its side, spun around as it slid backward into the oncoming lanes.

Seconds before, a woman approaching Beach Boulevard from a side street answered her cell phone.

“Hey, Gina, it’s Dad.”

“Hi, Dad, what’s up?”

“Listen, I wanted to talk to you about your decision to go through with—”

“Dad, just stop,” she said with irritation. “I’ve heard your concerns already, and I’m not changing my mind. I’m divorcing Greg, and that’s final. And if that creates a problem for you, then I’m sorry. But it’s really not your decision, is it?”

“Listen here, young lady,” he responded angrily. “You don’t have any business talking to me like that.”

“No, *you* listen, Dad. You haven’t been on the receiving end of that man’s verbal abuse toward me and my daughter. I’m getting out before he turns violent. And if you can’t accept that, then maybe we need to stop talking!”

In her anger, Gina didn’t notice the stop sign. Turning onto Beach Boulevard, she had just enough time to scream before the sliding concrete truck slammed into her small SUV. The force of the impact crushed the front of the vehicle all the way back to the passenger compartment.

Clay splashed through puddles of concrete and water as he ran toward the crash. In the rush of adrenaline, he was oblivious to the broken glass from the truck’s windshield gouging his sock-clad feet. Running past the overturned truck, he saw the driver struggling to exit the cab, his face a mask of blood. The homeless man’s broken and lifeless body lay sprawled

in the street near the curb.

When Clay reached the SUV, he cringed. The windshield was gone, and the roof had bent upward in a V shape. The driver's window was shattered, leaving chips of tempered glass clinging to the warped window frame. Clay could see a woman pinned behind the steering wheel. The airbag had activated at the moment of impact, but it was clear the devastating force of the collision had rendered it useless.

A soft whimper drew his attention away from the woman to the back seat of the mangled car. Leaning down, he flinched at the sight of a little girl about five or six years old. Blood flowed down her face, the result of a four-inch shard of jagged metal protruding from her forehead. She was barely conscious, her head moving slowly side to side as her little hands fluttered in her lap.

He tried to reach the child, but the car's window frames had collapsed from the impact, jamming the doors shut. Hearing sirens in the distance, Clay said a silent prayer of thanks that help was on the way.

Turning his attention back to the woman, he reached into the car and pressed his fingers to her neck, hoping to find a pulse. After a minute of trying, he gave up. Although the woman's long dark hair partially covered her face, something about the angle of her jaw and chin seemed familiar to him. Gently brushing the hair aside, Clay suddenly got a clear view of her face.

He gasped in shock, "Oh, no!"



**I**t was Gina Starks, a close friend of his wife, Dana, since they were in high school. That meant the little girl had to be her daughter. Clay grimaced as he imagined his wife's reaction when she heard the news.

A faint voice from the front seat caught his attention. Leaning down, he saw a cell phone clutched loosely in the woman's hand. "Hello! Hello! Gina, what happened? Are you okay?" the voice asked, anxiety pouring from the tiny speaker.

Clay reached into the car and took the phone from the woman's lifeless hand. "Hello," he said.

"Who is this?" the voice demanded.

"Commander Clay Randall with the Jacksonville Beach Police Department. Who am I speaking to?"

"What's going on?!" the voice exclaimed. "I was talking to my daughter when she screamed, and then I heard a loud crash. Has she been in a wreck? Talk to me, officer!"

Clay thought about how he should respond. As a police officer, he had delivered death messages to parents, spouses, and children many times over the years. It was never easy. People reacted differently to the news that a loved one was never coming home again. Some were stoic, showing

no emotion. Others became hysterical to the point that Clay had to call rescue personnel to treat them.

However, in all those death notifications, he had never encountered a situation quite like this. He knew not only the two victims but also the man on the phone. Referring to Gina Starks as his daughter was the giveaway. That meant the little girl was his granddaughter.

Clay said, "Mr. Barclay, your daughter and granddaughter have been in a traffic crash."

"OH, NO!" Barclay shouted. "How are they?! Are they hurt?!"

Speaking calmly, Clay said, "Mr. Barclay, I need you to come to Beach Boulevard and Sixth Street. Quickly. Can you do that?"

There was silence for what seemed to Clay like minutes but in reality was only a few seconds. "How do you know who I am?" the voice demanded harshly.

Ignoring the question, Clay said, "Mr. Barclay. I'll talk to you when you get here."

"I'm on my way," Barclay said, his voice cracking as he hung up.

Clay gently put the woman's phone on her lap, grabbed his cell, and dialed 9-1-1. "This is Randall. I'm at the crash scene on Beach," he said when the dispatcher answered. "Was the store clerk the one who called it in?"

"She was, Commander," the dispatcher replied. "Rescue is en route along with the fire department and all on-duty officers."

"Contact the fire department again. Make sure they've got their hydraulic can opener with them. An SUV was crushed by a loaded concrete truck, and there's a small child trapped inside. She's alive, but just barely. Also, contact Sergeant Crutchfield and have him call out the traffic homicide investigation team. This is a mess out here, so I need as many detectives as he can reach. Got all that?"

"Got it, Commander. Are you okay? We were told a homeless guy tried to stab you," the dispatcher said.

"I'm fine, but he's dead. He ran his wheelchair right into the path of the truck," he said. "Listen, a couple more things. Call the Chief and ask him to respond. And the police chaplain, too. I need them both out here ASAP."

“What do you want me to advise them?”

Clay paused, debating how much information to give at this point. “Just tell the chaplain there are two fatalities, and I need him at the scene. Nothing else. And ask the Chief to call me on my cell,” he said, hanging up.

Police officers and emergency personnel arrived within seconds and went to work. Clay directed the officers to set up barricades to protect the scene while fire personnel began the delicate process of cutting away the mangled roof to get to the injured child.

Clay’s cell phone rang. “Randall.”

“What’s going on?” Police Chief Mike Wilson asked in his usual, gruff voice.

“Mike, this is bad,” he said.

“Don’t keep me guessing. What is it?”

Clay recounted the confrontation at the convenience store and the death of the homeless man, pausing after explaining about the concrete truck overturning. “And that’s the easy part.”

“That was easy?”

“In comparison, anyway. After the truck overturned, it slid for a short distance on the wet road until it crashed into an SUV that had just turned onto Beach. It crushed the front of the car, killing the driver and seriously injuring a small child in the back seat.”

When Clay paused again, Mike said, “What are you not telling me?”

“The driver is Gina Starks, Thomas Barclay’s daughter, and the child is his granddaughter. Gina is dead, and I don’t know if the little girl will make it. She has a chunk of metal embedded in her forehead. The fire department is cutting the roof off the car to get to her.”

“Are you referring to *the* Thomas Barclay?”

“I am.”

Mike didn’t respond for so long that Clay said, “You still there, Chief?”

Wilson said, “I’m here. Has anyone contacted Barclay yet?”

“That’s an additional complication,” Clay said, relaying to Chief Wilson his phone conversation with Barclay on his daughter’s cell.

“Is he already there?” Wilson asked.

“Not yet. And I didn’t tell him his daughter was dead. I just said to get here as fast as he could, that there had been an accident.”

“Okay,” he replied. “I’ll be there in five.”

Clay clicked off as he watched the firemen continue their careful efforts to cut through the roof supports to reach the little girl. In the past few minutes, she had stopped moving, and rescue personnel were getting anxious.

Hearing his name called, Clay turned to see Detective Sergeant Joey Crutchfield approaching.

Crutchfield asked, “You okay?”

“No, definitely not okay.”

Clay spent the next few minutes bringing him up to speed. As he explained, Mike Wilson arrived, standing by silently listening. Just as Clay finished, Thomas Barclay drove up, leaping from his car and running toward the chaos.

“Here we go,” Wilson muttered, moving quickly to intercept Barclay before he could reach the car. “Wait,” he called out, waving at Barclay. “Don’t go there.”

Barclay ignored Wilson, never wavering from his direct and determined path to reach his daughter’s car. When he drew near, his eyes bulged at the sight. Falling to his knees, Barclay cried, “OH, MY GOD! SHE’S DEAD!”

The firemen had succeeded in peeling away a section of the roof to allow access to the little girl. Rescue personnel immediately began checking her vital signs. Clay raised his eyebrows questioningly at the EMT hovering over the child. The man held his thumb and forefinger a hair’s breadth apart, saying, “An air unit’s coming to transport her to the trauma center, but I’m not confident she’ll make it. Her GCS is three.”

Seeing Clay’s confusion at the medical terminology, the EMT explained, “Vital signs are almost non-existent.”

Gesturing toward Barclay, who was still swept up in an emotional storm, Clay said, “That’s the dead woman’s father, and this is his granddaughter. Do you know who he is?”

The EMT observed the sobbing man, shaking his head at first. Then recognition dawned, and his eyes widened. “Is that Thomas Barclay?”

Clay said, “The one and only.”

“Aw, man, that sucks,” he said, shaking his head. “Listen, considering

who he is, I can get him on the flight if he wants to go. You know, just in case . . ." he said, his voice trailing off.

Clay said, "I'll get back to you."

Kneeling in front of Barclay, he spoke softly, "Mr. Barclay, I need you to listen to me for a second."

Barclay slowly raised his head, his face a mask of grief. "What?"

"Your granddaughter is being life-flighted to the trauma center downtown, and she needs you to go with her," Clay explained.

Confusion crossed Barclay's face, and then he wailed, "I forgot about her! Where is she?!" he demanded in a loud voice, lunging to his feet.

He gasped as he saw the paramedics gently strapping her small body onto a gurney in preparation for the helicopter flight. Rushing over to the closest EMT, he yelled, "IS SHE ALIVE? IS SHE GOING TO BE OKAY?"

Clay stepped in front of the distraught man, grabbing him by the shoulders. "Mr. Barclay, it's important that you stay focused. You can't do anything for Gina, but you can for your granddaughter."

Barclay glared at Clay, his fists doubled up. Suddenly, his shoulders slumped, his head dropped onto his chest, and tears flowed once again. Clay took his arm and led him without resistance to the area patrol officers had cordoned off for the helicopter to land.

The air unit arrived, and the EMTs hustled to get the little girl aboard and strapped down. As Clay shepherded Barclay to the helicopter, the police chaplain arrived and received approval to go along for support.

Clay watched as the helicopter lifted off for the twenty-minute flight to the hospital, profound sadness on his face. He had seen death many times in his career. It was an occupational hazard. Cops trained themselves to keep their emotions tightly under control to do the job effectively. However, the deaths of two police officers several years before, one of whom had been Clay's best friend, still weighed on him in times like this.

Mike Wilson watched the emotions playing out on Clay's face. He gripped his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Clay. This is tough, I know."

Clay shook his head, "If I hadn't decided to chase that guy, maybe none of this would have happened."

"Stop right there. Nobody forced him to steal food or to attack you. You were doing your job. You can't blame yourself for this." Glancing at

Clay's feet, the chief said, "You're bleeding. Go see the paramedics."

Clay looked down in surprise at his bloody socks. In all the turmoil, he hadn't realized he was injured. Head still down, he walked slowly over to the rescue unit.

Wilson turned to Crutchfield. "Joey, you're in charge."

"I'll take care of it, Chief."



Crutchfield watched Clay as he sat on the bumper of the rescue unit and removed his bloody socks so the EMTs could treat him. He had great respect for the man. As Clay's first field training officer, Joey had quickly recognized the young cop's drive and intelligence. The fact that Clay was now his boss was neither a surprise nor a problem for him. Joey liked to brag that Clay's rise through the ranks was because of the outstanding mentoring and training he had given him.

Joey had been a cop for more than thirty years. In his early fifties, he still had a full head of hair with little gray. Although standing an even five-eight, Joey always swore he was five-nine, a discrepancy he declined repeatedly to resolve by submitting to a tape measure.

After ten years as a patrol officer, he decided it was time to test for a supervisory rank. Scoring first in the process, he received a promotion to sergeant and moved into the detective division. There, he quickly established himself as a tenacious investigator who treated every crime as if it had been committed against a member of his family.

Shortly after his promotion, Joey had an encounter that earned him both a nickname and a reputation as a gutsy cop. One afternoon, a man armed with a handgun robbed a bank of several thousand dollars in cash. As he fled, the dispatcher notified officers of the suspect's physical description and the car he was driving.

Joey heard the call dispatched as he was coming back from a court hearing in downtown Jacksonville. Crossing the Intracoastal Waterway, known by locals as the ICW, into Jacksonville Beach, he saw a car fitting the general description of the suspect's vehicle approaching the bridge from the opposite direction.

As soon as the car passed, he made a quick U-turn and activated the lights and siren on his unmarked unit. The driver immediately pulled into the breakdown lane near the top of the bridge. Non-stop radio traffic by officers responding to the bank robbery prevented Joey from calling out on the possible suspect.

While he waited for airtime, he saw a clean-cut young man get out of the car, smiling and waving as he strolled slowly toward Joey's vehicle. His reaction was so unlike that of a man who had just robbed a bank that Joey made a dangerous assumption; he had stopped an innocent citizen. Taking his eyes off the man, he leaned over to switch to another radio channel.

Turning back just as the man arrived at his window, Joey saw a gun pointed directly at his head.

In a conversational tone, the bank robber said, "Sir, please put down that microphone right now."

Keeping his eyes on the gun, Joey dropped the mic onto the seat.

"Thanks. Very carefully now, turn your engine off and hand me the keys."

Not saying a word, Joey did as commanded.

"Good. I want you to take out the gun I know you're carrying, using your thumb and forefinger only. Don't try anything cute, or you'll force me to shoot you, which is something I don't want to do."

Still not speaking, Joey slowly pulled his weapon from its holster and handed it across.

"One more thing, and I'll be on my way," the robber said. "Every cop carries handcuffs, including you. Am I right?"

Joey pulled the cuffs from his belt and starting to hand them to the man.

"No, no. Those are for you. I want you to handcuff yourself to the steering wheel."

Joey complied, locking the other end of the cuff to his left wrist.

The robber examined Joey's keys, asking, "Is this your handcuff key?"

Joey shrugged and then nodded.

"Good, I think we're done here. Have a nice day, officer," he said turning and starting back toward his car as he slipped both pistols into

his pants and pulled his shirt over it.

Joey swiftly reached into his coat pocket and then called out, "Hey, I need to show you something."

The young man stopped and peered at Joey, who smiled at him. He looked toward his car, then turned and came back.

He leaned down, the gun back in his hand, and said, "I'm in a hurry. What?"

Joey responded, "Meet Little Heat," as he pointed a small, five-shot, twenty-two caliber revolver at the man's chest and pulled the trigger.

Later, after EMTs transported the robber to the hospital, Joey had the embarrassing task of explaining to the chief how he had allowed himself to be handcuffed to his steering wheel. As he recounted the story, his chief was puzzled. "What's Little Heat?"

"That's my backup piece," he explained. "You know, it's little, but it packs a lot of heat."

From that day forward, Joey was enshrined in the folklore of the police department, affectionately and respectfully christened with the nickname, "Little Heat."