

**PHONE CALL**

**THE**



# FROM HELL



BY VINCE BEISER



Afghanistan combat veteran Jared Johns found out too late that swapping messages with the pretty girl from a dating site would mean serious trouble.

If only he had known who she really was.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLYN DRAKE





# IT REALLY WASN'T

much of an exchange. Jared Johns had met a young woman on a dating site, swapped messages, and sent her a photo of himself in a baseball cap. She'd responded with one of herself, lying down in a lacy bra. Jared grinned as he typed out a message on his iPhone's scuffed screen.

"I'm a us army veteran I'm a father of two.. 3 if you count my dog," Jared wrote. "I just got out of a relationship with my youngest sons mother and I'm looking for friends to hang out and chat with and maybe more later."

"Sound interesting well I'm originally from Myrtle Beach and now live in Greenville with my parents. I'll be 18 in a few weeks," replied the girl.

They swapped a few more messages; she asked Jared how old he was and he told her he was 24. Then he pocketed his phone and got on with his day. That brief conversation turned out to be the worst mistake of Jared's life.

← In their exchange, Jared sent a photo of himself in a baseball cap; in return, he got a photo of an attractive young woman. Previous page: Jacob Johns, in the window of his mom's house.

Jared had wanted to be a soldier ever since he was 7. That's how old he was on September 11, 2001, when he saw the Twin Towers collapse in smoke and fire on television and heard President George W. Bush declare that America was under attack. That day, Jared turned to his family and announced that he was going to join the Army when he grew up, just like his grandpa and his uncles.

That wasn't an unusual ambition in Jared's hometown of Greenville, a river-side manufacturing city in the foothills of western South Carolina. Still, Jared wasn't exactly the most macho type by the time he hit high school. He loved chorus, and many of his friends were gay. "We can be manly, but also we have a feminine side," says his twin brother Jacob. "We got bullied because of that."

While Jared was still a lean, mop-topped high school junior, a friend joined the Army and was sent to Afghanistan. Just 19 days into his deployment, the friend was killed by a roadside bomb. Half the town turned out for the funeral.

"Please don't go!" Jared's mother, Kathy Bowling, begged him. "This is why I don't want you to go!"

"This is why I *have* to go," he told her.

Two months after he graduated, in May 2012, Jared packed his bags to join the Army. In his spare time during training, he recorded videos of himself in his camouflage uniform, singing pop songs and Christian hymns, which he uploaded to his YouTube channel. He was deployed to Afghanistan less than a year later, manning a .50-caliber gun atop a Buffalo, a moving-truck-sized armored vehicle.

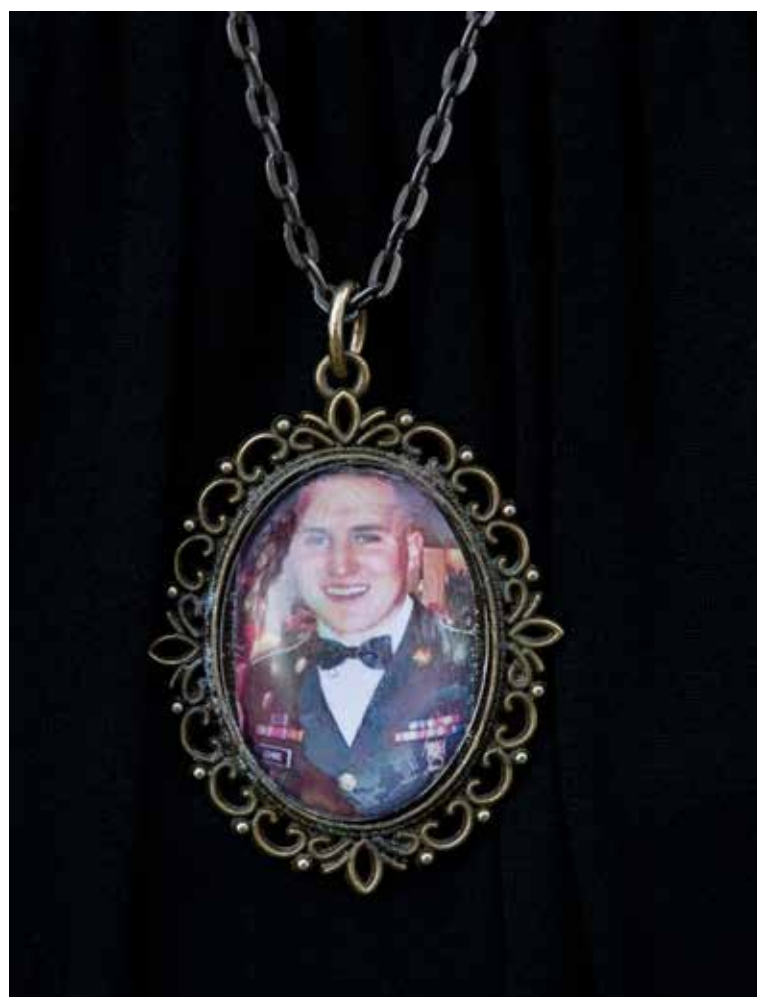
Jared had wanted to see combat, but the reality of it hit him harder than he'd imagined. He was terrified one night when his base came under rocket fire. Two of his buddies were blown up in a truck. But that wasn't the worst of it. Jared told his brother about one particular firefight where he was blasting away with the .50-caliber gun. "I don't know for sure, but I might have killed a child," he told Jacob. He didn't want to say much more about it.

After a patrol in Kandahar Province one day, Jared injured his back while getting off the Buffalo. He was flown to a hospital on a

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base in Germany. There, the doctors put him on painkillers and told him he couldn't go back into combat. After barely six months in the field, he was done as war-fighter.

Stuck on base, his ambitions crushed, Jared started coming unglued. He hit the bars every night, drinking heavily. He got a local woman pregnant. He was caught driving drunk and confined to barracks. He made a clumsy suicide attempt with pills, which got him placed in psychiatric care for a few days. By October 2015 he was discharged and back home in Greenville.

Though his parents, sister, and two brothers gave him a hero's welcome, Jared was lost. "All my life I wanted to be a soldier, and now I can't do that," he told Jacob. "I just feel worthless." He bounced from job to job and between his divorced parents' houses. As the months went by, his once muscular physique turned soft. Jared had nightmares and occasional panic attacks and got into bar fights. He was diagnosed with PTSD and prescribed antidepressants. Stuck for a job, he bought a Jeep and started driving for Uber. Over Kathy's objections, he also bought a stubby black 9-mm pistol to keep in the car, for protection.

By mid-2018, though, things were looking up. He was dating a local girl. He had a dog, a lively German shepherd he called Tex. He'd landed a great job for a chatterbox like him, selling phones and internet service plans at the local AT&T store, and he and Jacob had moved into an apartment with a balcony overlooking the complex's pool. The brothers would cook, watch football games, stream Netflix with their girlfriends. Once a week they'd have dinner with their mom and then go into town to drink tequila and sing at DT's, their favorite karaoke bar. Just about every time, Jared would wail through his three signature songs—"Drops of Jupiter," "Bohemian Rhapsody," and "No Diggity."

Though he and his girlfriend didn't mean to get pregnant, Jared was overjoyed when his son Jaxon was born. He stopped taking the antidepressants; he wanted to keep his head clear to be a good dad to the baby.

Before long, however, Jared split with Jaxon's mom. Suddenly he was a part-time single dad, fighting regularly with his ex. He turned to Tinder and soon started seeing a young woman whom I'll call Lisa—she doesn't want her real name published.



When the twins were small, Jared (left) was the outgoing, talkative one; Jacob (above, wearing Jared's Superman shirt) was more quiet, subdued.

But from time to time, he still cruised dating sites, and in early September he came across the pretty blonde who said her name was Caroline Harris. The two chatted on the dating app. When she said, "I'll be 18 in a few weeks," he replied, "Oh that's cool when will you be 18?"

"On the 15th."

"Of September" he asked.

"Yea," she replied. "How old are you?"

"Oh ok are you still in high school? And I'm 24."

That was the end of the conversation.

On September 10, Jared had the day off, so he washed his dog, then ran some errands with Lisa. A little after 6 pm, the two were settling into his Jeep Cherokee, making their way back from Walmart, when Jared's phone rang. He didn't recognize the number. Puzzled, Jared stuck an AirPod in his ear and answered.

The caller identified himself as a police detective. He'd been contacted, he said, by Caroline's parents, who were outraged that Jared had sexually propositioned their underage daughter. They wanted Jared arrested, but the detective suggested he try to work things out with the parents directly. The man on the phone gave him a number to call. Jared was bewildered and shaken. He told Lisa about the girl, and about the caller. He said he didn't think he'd done anything wrong—but if he hadn't, why the hell had a cop just called him? He thought it had to be some kind of misunderstanding.

He called the number and got a man who said he was James Harris, Caroline's dad. Caroline's mother, the man said, was furious and wanted to press charges.

Jared started to panic. Had he written something explicit while on the dating app and forgotten about it? If he had Caroline's picture on his phone, would that be enough to be charged with soliciting a minor or possessing child porn or something? If he were convicted, could he be barred from seeing his two sons—the one in Greenville and the one in Germany? Could he go to jail?

As soon as they got back to his apartment, Lisa watched as Jared Googled the number for the call he got in the car; sure enough, it was a number for the local police department. Leaving Lisa in the living room with Jaxon, Jared retreated to his bedroom and texted the Harris' number. A

person who said she was Caroline's mother wrote back. At a minimum, she told Jared, he would need to reimburse them for the cost of canceling Caroline's cell phone contract, which they had done to punish her. Jared could either pay them \$1,189 or take his chance with the police. When he came back to the living room, he was distraught. "There's nothing they can charge you with," Lisa assured him. "You didn't say anything sexual." But Jared was badly rattled. He told her that he wasn't feeling up to the game night they had planned.

Throughout the evening, Jared called and texted back and forth with Caroline's parents, trying to talk them down or at least figure out what evidence they had. "Mam I really don't remember talking to your daughter and I'm really sorry for all the trouble and if I knew she was under age I would never willing ask for explicit photos. Of a minor. I have two kids of my own ... I understand where you are coming from," he wrote to Mrs. Harris. "Is there a text where I asked for a explicit photo?"

"Son you plainly read where she said she wasn't of age ... so you can't say you didn't know," came the reply. She added: "I'm not going to sit here and bicker about this ... I'd rather let the police take care of it."

Jared couldn't sleep that night. By the morning of September 11, he was terrified. "I won't be able to go to my kid's soccer games, because I'll be a registered pedophile," he whimpered to Lisa, tears in his eyes. Lisa was sympathetic but had to leave to get to her job. "Don't go to work today," she told him. "Take Jax to his mom's place. I'll come back. We'll ask somebody for help."

Jared took her advice. Partly. He called in sick, dropped off Jaxon, and drove back home. On the way, he called his mother and told her he was feeling unwell. Lie down and take it easy, she said. He parked the Jeep, took out the pistol, and climbed the two flights to his apartment.

Jared had texted the Harris', asking if they could talk. At 11:59 am, he got a response from James. "I don't see where we have anything to talk about," it read. "You know what you did you saw the picture of yourself the picture of my daughter." The text continued: "You know I really don't hate it for you because you knew what you was doing I hate it for your two kids."

"So what are you saying?" wrote Jared.

"She is going to the police and you are going to jail."

**D**oug Fodeman could have reassured Jared. For years, Fodeman has been hearing about calls just like the ones that had been terrifying Jared. Along with a friend, the 64-year-old Massachusetts grade school educator started a website called TheDailyScam.com in 2015, after Fodeman's son and mother were both hit up by con artists. His son was pressured to fork over thousands of dollars, ostensibly to help a recently widowed woman get a wheelchair for her disabled son. Fodeman's mother was suckered out of \$900 by a caller who said he was her handyman, and then claimed he had been arrested and needed bail money. Fodeman, who teaches internet safety to his students, figured even if the police couldn't do much, he could at least try to warn other people. So he set about building a simple, text-heavy WordPress site where he details the seemingly infinite abundance of online rip-offs, along with advice on how to detect and avoid them. (The site is basically a labor of love. "We hoped it would become a business, but we found that no one would pay!" Fodeman says. "But I get lots of heartfelt thanks, so I figure it's the right thing to do.")

Since late 2016, more than 800 men—some of them service members—have contacted him, each with a story of an "underage girl" shakedown. Sometimes a fake cop would call first, sometimes a fake parent. The "parents" would say they wanted to be compensated because they had damaged a computer fighting with their daughter (or son—some scam victims were gay men) or had smashed her phone. Or to cover therapy because the whole incident was so traumatic. Often one payment led to another: If a victim handed over a few hundred bucks to cover, say, a broken cell phone, the scammers would soon call again to say the girl now needed expensive medical treatment because she had tried to kill herself. In at least one case, the scammers squeezed about \$1,000 out of a mark to pay for a non-existent girl's funeral.

Many targets realized it was all a con,

but plenty of others didn't—or were suspicious but paid anyway because they were so scared. They followed orders to send the money via Western Union, PayPal, Walmart, and other cash transfer services.

Fodeman began collecting all the material he could from everyone who contacted him and posted much of it—text messages, photos, even recordings of the scam calls—on his website, to help other potential victims. He also passed everything along to a sympathetic FBI agent he eventually connected with.

Meanwhile, a number of service members were also reporting shakedown calls to military investigators and police. Taken individually, each case probably would have been too trivial to motivate law enforcement to do much. But eventually, their sheer numbers started to get the attention of authorities. According to documents I obtained from the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, a variety of federal agencies, including the NCIS and its counterparts with the Army and Air Force, began investigating reports of the underage girl scam in 2015. The FBI eventually ceded their investigation to the NCIS, handing over the information it had gathered from Fodeman and other sources.

It's easy to write off online scams as penny-ante crimes, small-time rip-offs that infuriate and embarrass victims but don't do them serious harm. But the pain they inflict can be devastating. On December 12, 2016, Douglas Ross, a 31-year-old warehouse worker in Delaware, sent his mother a text saying, "The site said you had to be 18 to be on. Their profile said they were 22, there was an incident parent's got involved said she was only 15. I can't go to prison. I'm sorry I didn't know." Then he lit a charcoal grill on the back seat of his car and suffocated on carbon monoxide fumes.

Doug Fodeman estimates he's heard from at least 40 victims who have contemplated suicide. "I've talked several off the ledge," he says. Fodeman put me in touch with one of them, a 29-year-old man in Tennessee who doesn't want his name published. "I've never been in any trouble with the law besides a speeding ticket," he told me. "I was thinking, 'If the police come, I'll end it.' I was terrified of going to jail."

**By the morning of September 11, Jared was terrified. "I won't be able to go to my kid's soccer games, because I'll be a registered pedophile," he whimpered.**

**J**acob got home from work about 6 o'clock on September 11. Jared hadn't called him all day, which was weird; they usually talked to each other constantly. Tex, Jared's German shepherd, came running up to him as soon as he walked in, barking furiously. Also weird. "Hey bro, you home?" Jacob called. There was no response. Then he saw the note on the whiteboard in the entryway. "I'm sorry," it said. "I've messed up I love you all this isn't what I wanted Tell my sons I was a Good man love Jared."

Jacob bolted to Jared's door; it was locked. He fumbled a key from his pocket and burst into the room. Jared lay on his bed, wearing a mint-green T-shirt, propped up by a pillow, his face gray. For a second Jacob thought he was taking a nap. Then he saw the gun in Jared's right hand and the blood all over the wall.

Jared had shot himself within minutes of the final text from James Harris. *She is going to the police and you are going to jail.* He died at noon.

Dozens of Jared's friends and family—siblings, parents, nieces, nephews, and Jaxon—came out for his funeral a few days later, filling the local church where Jared's body lay in a flag-draped open casket. Jacob, his voice hoarse, sang "Drops of Jupiter." A squadron of local veterans on motorcycles bedecked with the Stars and Stripes escorted his hearse to the cemetery.





Jared's extended family in Greenville, South Carolina, includes, from left, his brother Bryan, young stepbrother Evan with Kathy's husband Gary, Kathy (his mom, in pink) with stepsister Evie, Jacob, Kevin (his dad), and sister Kimilee.









I'm sorry  
I've messed up  
I love you all  
This isn't what  
I wanted to tell  
my sons I was  
A Good man  
Love Jared



If Lisa hadn't been with Jared on his last night, it's quite possible no one would ever have realized what had helped pushed him over the edge. Jacob called her about an hour after he'd found Jared's body. She rushed over to their apartment. Cops and coroners were scouring the place. Jared's relatives were wandering around in shock. Kathy, his mother, was hysterical. Jacob had retreated to the pool outside. Lisa found him and said, "I have to tell you something." She explained about the calls and texts. Jacob told the police and, the next day, his parents.

It was only a couple of weeks later, when the cops returned Jared's phone, that the family saw the suicide video Jared had recorded. The phone shook in his hand as he pointed it at his weeping face. "I love you so much, Mom. I love you so much, Dad," he says. "I messed up, and I'm so sorry. I can't live my life the way it's gonna be if I keep living."

Alone the next day, Kathy dug through Jared's phone and found the texts from James Harris and his wife with their demands for money. Kathy's grief mutated into rage. She fired off a couple of her own. "This is Jared Johns' mother. I need to speak to you," she wrote. "He can't speak to you anymore because he's dead. He took his own life. Did you have a clue that you were dealing with a 24-year-old veteran that had fought Afghanistan and was very much dealing with PTSD? So your threats of him going to jail and how much he messed up really freaked him out ... I hope [your daughter] knows what she's done in her part here too because I'll find out who she is ... Shame on you and your wife and your daughter for doing this to him. I hope he haunts you."

Within half an hour, she got a reply. "I'm sorry for your lose ... plainly he should not have been texting my underage daughter. I spoke with a detective today and explained what was going on so please don't have me contact him tomorrow about your threats."

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**"I went down on my knees and started screaming," Kathy says. "It was so unbelievable."**

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Kathy responded with pictures of Jared in his coffin and 17-month-old Jaxon at his funeral. She got no reply.

In early October, the *Greenville News* ran a heart-wrenching piece about Jared's life and early death. Kathy texted the link to "James Harris" and added a PS: "I hope you feel like shit."

Again there was no reply. But a few days later, Kathy received a Facebook message from someone calling herself Angel Amongus. "You don't know me, but I know you are grieving," the message said. "Someone who knows why Jared took his life has asked me to contact you for them because they are unable to do so ... He doesn't know you or your son, but the people who caused Jared to do what he did told him all about it. He is willing to help you to prosecute these people but will need protection from them."

Kathy was frightened, but she wrote back. She had already begun to suspect things were not as they appeared—why else all the insistence on money? Sure enough, over a series of messages, Angel Amongus revealed that there was no Mr. and Mrs. Harris. But this was no garden-variety con job, Angel explained. The scammers, like the anonymous informant himself, were prisoners in South Carolina's Lee Correctional Institution.

"I went down on my knees and started screaming," Kathy says. "It was so unbeliev-

← When Jacob got home from work, he saw the whiteboard with Jared's note and ran to his brother's bedroom door.



able.” She immediately called Jared’s dad, Kevin. “Our son was scammed by fucking prisoners!” she howled.

**J**ared could never have been prosecuted for propositioning Caroline, for the simple reason that she didn’t exist. The pretty teenage girl Jared thought he was flirting with was, according to charges later filed by local authorities, two thickset, middle-aged, male inmates working contraband cell phones. Jared, it turns out, was just one of hundreds of US military service members and veterans suckered by a massive wave of catfishing scams launched from South Carolina correctional facilities over the past few years.

From fake Nigerian princes to fake bank security messages, scams often have long histories. They are passed along by word of mouth, propagating through time and space like viruses, mutating in response to new conditions. Prisoners have been catfishing people into an “illicit” relationship with a nonexistent lover, and then blackmailing them, since at least the 1990s. Back then, inmates would post personal ads in gay magazines, strike up a sexy snail-mail correspondence with men who responded, and then extort the ones who admitted they were closeted. (John Grisham reprised this idea in his 2000 potboiler *The Brethren*.)

In the digital age, the “underage girl” version of this ruse has popped up many times—as Fodeman’s archives show—in many parts of the country. It isn’t clear how it started spreading among South Carolina prisoners, but what is clear is that since at least 2015, lots of inmates have tried it on lots and lots of people on the outside, especially vets and active military members. Victims have posted their stories about how they almost fell for the scam on Reddit, YouTube, and elsewhere.

Military investigators have caught a number of scammers by following the money. They’ve tracked victims’ payments to Walmarts and other pickup spots, then used surveillance footage and cash receipts to identify and interrogate the people who collected the money. Under questioning, some of them admitted they were working with inmates. Investigators also ran money mules’ names against JPay records, a service

## **At least 442 service members across almost every branch of the armed forces had been conned—by prisoners—out of a total of more than half a million dollars.**

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that provides financial transfers to prisoners. When they found prisoners who were receiving large contributions from those civilians, they had their answer.

The investigations led to a few minor indictments. But none drew much attention until November 2018, when federal prosecutors charged five men locked up in South Carolina prisons, along with 10 outside accomplices, with running the scam on an astonishing scale. At least 442 service members across almost every branch of the armed forces had been conned out of a total of more than half a million dollars. (Three of the prisoners pleaded guilty; the other two are awaiting trial.)

Service members and recent vets are often young and subject to military discipline, both of which can make them especially vulnerable to scammers. “They targeted military members because they could threaten them with getting kicked out of the service,” says Rhett DeHart, one of the assistant US attorneys prosecuting the South Carolina prisoners. “They’d play on the idea—‘I’ll talk to your commanding officer, you’re going to be in a lot of trouble.’”

These scams are just the latest manifestation of a major threat that authorities just can’t seem to get a handle on. Prisoners, of course, are forbidden from having private cell phones—but there is a booming trade in black-market mobiles behind bars. Phones are smuggled in food shipments, with med-

ical supplies, and in the pockets of corrupt prison staff. Ten years ago, I wrote a feature for this magazine about how prisoners were using cell phones for everything from taunting their victims to ordering murders. Since then, the problem has only grown worse. Authorities confiscate tens of thousands of phones every year—and those are just the ones they find.

Inmates do use phones to report abuses and human rights violations to journalists and others on the outside. More often they just want to call their families and friends without prison officials listening in. But they can also put the devices to terrifying use. In Alabama, prison extortionists have sent menacing texts and photos to other inmates' relatives, threatening to rape or murder their fellow prisoners unless the family pays a ransom. In Georgia, a baby was killed in a shooting allegedly ordered by an incarcerated gang leader via phone. In California, 16 members and associates of the white supremacist Aryan Brotherhood prison gang have been charged with using phones to direct murders and drug trafficking throughout the state.

"Cell phones in prisons are the number one public safety problem in America," says Bryan Stirling, director of the South Carolina Department of Corrections. He can be forgiven for sounding a tad hyperbolic, given the history of phone-related mayhem in his state. The catfishing scams are just the tip of the iceberg. In 2010 a correctional officer was shot six times in his home in an attack directed by a prisoner via a cell phone. In 2018, a massive prison riot partly sparked by, spread with, and filmed via cell phones left seven dead.

Stirling took me on a tour of the Broad River Correctional Institution, a maximum security prison in Columbia, to show me the lengths to which his department is going to combat contraband cell phones. The entire sprawling facility is surrounded with 50-foot-high wire nets, the kind you see at golf course driving ranges, to prevent people from throwing phones over the old barbed-wire-topped fences. Trucks patrol the perimeter equipped with hardware to detect drones, which have been used to air-drop mobiles. Airport-style metal detectors are in place at all entrances. In the corridors and common areas inside, 6-foot

metal-detecting poles are scattered around. Despite all that, just a month after my visit, a child rapist locked up at Broad River was caught harassing a young woman on Facebook. A few days after that, a sweep of the prison turned up 36 contraband mobiles.

"We're spending millions to control the problem," Stirling says. "But it's like water. They'll find a way to get phones in."

Stirling is one of many correctional officials who have argued loud and long that the solution is to simply jam the signals of unauthorized phones inside state and local prisons. That seems like an obvious move, but it's actually illegal. The Communications Act of 1934 stipulates that only the federal government is permitted to interfere with radio communications—which includes cellular traffic. For years, correctional and law enforcement officials and members of Congress have been pushing to get the rule changed. The telecom industry, however, has successfully lobbied against all such attempts to interfere with their business. "Jammers are very imprecise," says Patrick Donovan, until recently the senior director of regulatory affairs for the Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association. Deploying them in prisons could interfere with calls and GPS service to legitimate customers as well as police and firefighters, he says. (Recent research, however, casts doubt on that notion.)

Last year, the cellular association set up a task force to assess jamming options and explore other technological solutions. Some prisons are now experimenting with technologies known as managed-access systems, which are supposed to allow only signals from preapproved mobile numbers to reach the cellular network. They perform well in tests for the most part, but less so in the real world. In fact, a \$1.5 million managed-access system was up and running at Lee Correctional in 2018. And yet the men who conned Jared apparently had no trouble getting through to him.

**A**fter Kathy told Jared's dad about Angel and the Facebook messages, the two agreed that he should be the one to talk to the inmate. Kathy sent Kevin's number to Angel and, pretty soon, he got a call from a prisoner.

"Tell her to quit texting these guys. They don't play," he said. He then offered to provide the scammers' names—in exchange for getting his own case reopened. Kevin called the Greenville police and the Army's Criminal Investigation Division and told them about the proposition.

In February, under the guise of a fake medical appointment, an Army agent had the informant moved from prison to a police office, where he could be interviewed without tipping off other inmates that an investigation was underway. The scam, the informant told the agent, was known as "johnning." Spoofing the phone number was easy, he explained; scammers just needed to download Caller ID Faker or one of several easily available apps.

The culprits in Jared's death, he said, were John William Dobbins and Carl Richard Smith. Dobbins, a 59-year-old, 5'6", 185-pound high school dropout with a graying goatee and blue eyes, was serving time for his third meth conviction. Smith, 43, is a little taller and a little heavier, with a stubbly brown mustache. He has several drug offenses on his record but is currently locked up on an assault and battery charge for shooting his girlfriend in the face. Neither were among the five prisoners already facing federal charges for running the same scam.

Since Jared wasn't an active-duty soldier at the time of his death, the Army agent kicked the case back to the Greenville PD. A detective, James Lee-Wood, went to talk with Dobbins and Smith, who were cellmates at the time. According to police records, both said they had heard of "johnning" but insisted they weren't involved with any scams. Dobbins told Lee-Wood he had "nothing to do with" Jared's death, cautioning the detective that he was messing with the wrong people.

The evidence Lee-Wood and his colleagues slowly pieced together, however, seemed to tell another story. Phone company records showed that at least one of the mobile numbers used to contact Jared was pinging off a cell tower near Lee Correctional. Thousands of text messages and phone calls to and from both numbers that had called Jared showed they had also been used to contact family members and associates of Dobbins and Smith on the out-

side. There were also texts instructing other apparent scam victims to send money via Western Union and other services to people connected with Dobbins. One of the cops remarked that Dobbins appeared to be running new scams even after police had interviewed him about Jared's death.

In May, Greenville's chief of police convened a press conference to announce they had cracked the case: They were charging Dobbins and Smith with the blackmail and extortion of Jared Johns. Those charges could get each of them an additional 10 years behind bars. In a video posted to Facebook later that day, Kathy said through tears, "He may have been holding the gun, but it feels like they were the ones who took his life."

Smith and Dobbins are still awaiting trial as of this writing. Smith did not respond to several letters I sent him in prison, but has pleaded not guilty. "My client feels terrible for the family," his lawyer said. Dobbins is currently out on parole, and I reached him on his phone. After asking me if he could get paid for an interview (no, he couldn't), he said, "I didn't even know about it until the police came and started talking to me." The man who fingered him and Smith, he speculated, was just looking to get his own sentence reduced by helping the cops. Dobbins said he might have used a contraband cell phone once or twice while he was locked up—everyone does, he said—but as for the catfish scam, he said, "I didn't have anything to do with that. Hell, I'm 60 years old. That sounds like some shit kids would do." Having two sons and four grandchildren of his own, he said, the accusation that he contributed to the death of someone else's son pains him. "I can only imagine what [Jared's mother] is going through," he said. "Lord have mercy. I mean, she lost a son."

**W**hatever happens to Smith and Dobbins, Jared's family will never fully recover. Jacob lost his job after Jared's death because he was too distraught to function at work. He has nightmares every night and has had suicidal thoughts of his own. It's especially rough when Jaxon mistakes Jacob for his daddy. Kathy is so consumed with grief at times, she says, she can't cope with the basics of

**"Those men were behind bars, but they were able to bully and shame and scare my son to death."**

everyday life. She has developed ulcers she blames on the stress. She's so afraid of the scammers that she's started carrying a Taser. Kevin keeps a gun on his nightstand.

One thing that does keep both Kathy and Kevin going is advocating for prisons to be allowed to block cell signals. "Those jammers should have been put in a long time ago," Kathy says. "Those men were behind bars, but they were able to bully and shame and scare my son to death." In March, several members of Congress introduced twin bills that would allow correctional facilities to jam cell phones. Kevin and Kathy are hoping to join Bryan Stirling in testifying in support of it. Neither bill has made much progress.

Meanwhile, in November, South Carolina authorities indicted more than 50 people for involvement in a drug trafficking ring run from state prisons via contraband cell phones. And around 10 times a month, Doug Fodeman at TheDailyScam.com gets contacted by frightened men, asking for help because they seem to have gotten into serious trouble with a pretty young woman they met online. ■

*Vince Beiser (@vincelb) is the author of The World in a Grain: The Story of Sand and How it Transformed Civilization. His last story for WIRED, in issue 26.05, was about the robots that are cleaning up the Fukushima nuclear facility.*



Kathy with Jared's military uniform.

