2018

Dr. Mengelt

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CHAPTER 1

Juanita Ricks panicked when she rolled over at 3:30 and Jimmy wasn’t in bed. There were few things she could count on in her life, but her husband was clockwork. He left the apartment at 4 in the afternoon, right after she got home from teaching the fourth-graders at P.S. 193. Took the subway into the city, got to the Midtown Victor’s, “home of the famous $9.99 steak,” at 4:45. Cooked till midnight, scrubbed a layer of grease off the restaurant, and home. A little TV, in bed by 3.

She squinted toward the bathroom, but the door was open, the light out. She grabbed her robe and headed into the kitchen. Nothing. There was nowhere else for him to be in the 650 square feet they shared.

Juanita called Jimmy’s cell. Straight to voicemail. Called the restaurant. No answer. Called the manager. Nothing. Her next call went to the police, where a disinterested dispatcher agreed, after several minutes of cajoling and then begging, to send a car to check the restaurant. Juanita put on some coffee and waited, convinced of the worst.

Officers Frank Sampedro and Andy Hill had been patrolling around Broadway and 45th when the call came in. Sampedro wanted to respond that they were out of service. He’d been a street cop for 26 years now, and he just knew that anytime you take a call right before your shift ends, you’re going to be stuck at work for a lot longer. It was 3:51 a.m., nine minutes before their shift was scheduled to end.
“Nine effing minutes, Andy,” Sampedro said. “Nine. I am so ready for sleep.” They arrived at Victor’s four minutes later.

“Don’t worry about it,” Hill said. “If it’s anything, it’s all OT from here on.” He and Sampedro had been paired for three years, and they couldn’t have been a more perfect fit. Hill, a 13-year vet, was the calm to Sampedro’s mania. Good cop, bad cop, they averaged out.

Sampedro looked through the window and saw no light. He checked the door. It was unlocked. He walked in first, gun drawn, with Hill right behind.

What they found on this September 5, 2007, morning was horrifying, even by New York standards. Three bodies, first shot, then hacked to pieces. Fingers strewn across the floor, arms and legs separate from torsos, a layer of blood coating the tiles, used meat cleavers nearby. They made their way through the violence to the refrigerator. Two more bodies, brutalized.

“Aw, Christ, what is the matter with people?” Sampedro said. He got on his radio and said: “This is Sampedro. Send homicide now.”

Hill averted his eyes and shook his head. His approach to police work was always the same: If I don’t look at it, it doesn’t exist. He’d seen carnage before—they arrested a cannibal once—but nothing like this.

“How long you think before Edna shows up?” Hill checked his watch. “It’s just after 4—4:12, to be exact. I’m betting 4:19.”

“I’ll take 4:18,” Sampedro said.

“You’re on.”
Hill and Sampedro had plenty of experience at murder scenes, and they knew the quickest way to get things over with was to go by the manual, even though the assignment for street cops was dull. Sampedro went back to the car to get the crime-scene tape. Hill braced himself for a long morning of holding the scene for detectives as he logged their comings and goings.

“Edna” showed up at 4:14. Edna’s real name was Danny Cartwright. He was a reporter for the Daily News and had been for 30 years, at least. He’d started in the police beat, as so many reporters do, and just never left. He loved it. Danny was a cop at heart, but he could write. He always found the angle to make even routine news thrilling. Or better yet, funny. When a guy named Sam Platt drove his car through a display window of the old B. Altman’s department store, Danny was the only reporter to note the car’s license plate: SPLAT. “He can write the shit out of anything,” his colleagues would say with a mixture of praise and envy.

Two mass murderers turned themselves in to him. He once talked a jumper off a ledge. People called in crime tips to him, and one time he was cashing his check at the Chemical Bank in Midtown when a guy pulled a gun. Danny slipped behind the gunman and wrestled him to the ground. Danny was maybe 5-foot-8, probably 190 pounds, with a body by Entenmann’s. He ate terribly, never exercised, and slept irregularly. He had no family. The night cops beat was his life. He carried a police scanner everywhere.

Danny always found his way to crime scenes in minutes after the police. On a couple of occasions, legend had it that he arrived before the police. They used to say about the baseball player Cool Papa Bell that he was so fast, he could turn out the light and be in bed before the room got dark. In Danny’s early days at the paper, the cops and editors who didn’t call him “Columbo” because of the dirty trench coat he wore occasionally called him “Cool Papa Cartwright.”
But about a year into the job, Danny was playing cards with the homicide guys, and they got to talking about crime books. Danny said his favorite was “The Corpse Had a Familiar Face” by the famed Miami Herald reporter Edna Buchanan. From that day on, he was Edna. They hung that name on him to see if he’d wilt. Not only didn’t he, but he wore it with honor.

The cops loved Edna, and they hated Edna. He could make them look good, but he wrote some series over the years about police ineptitude that made him a pariah among certain cops. Not the good ones, though. The good cops liked him. Like him or not, they all knew him. And unlike other New York reporters, who were kept sequestered from crime scenes like a pack of wildebeests, Danny came and went as he pleased. The police trusted him.

Every time Hill and Sampedro had a call that merited a newspaper story, they bet a dollar on when Edna would get to the scene. They alternated who chose the time first. Almost invariably, the earlier time won.

When Edna arrived at Victor’s, Sampedro pumped his fist in victory and took a buck from Hill.

“Thanks, Edna,” Sampedro said.

“How the hell do you do that?” Hill asked.

“I follow you guys around,” Edna said. “You two are crime magnets.”

The department had a rule against street cops talking to the media, but the unwritten rule was that you could tell Edna the basics. He knew instinctively what information to release and not to release. And even in the age of social media, you didn’t find him tweeting anything until he knew the details. Edna didn’t make mistakes. Certainly not in print, and not tactical ones, either. He let the cops do their job. In turn, they shared the information.

“Stay there, Edna,” Hill told. “Homicide will fill you in.”
Danny knew that if the cops weren’t talking, they were all going to be here awhile. He leaned against a parked car and waited.

*

Homicide detective Ronald C. Greene arrived at the scene shortly before 5. So did the on-call prosecutor and crime lab. Hill and Sampedro escorted them inside and gave them all the lowdown. No sign of forced entry, no one inside, the scene is exactly as they found it. The three male victims had IDs on them, in their wallets. The two female victims had their purses in the back room, and the officers who arrived first used the pictures from their licenses to make positive identification.

Greene’s first thought was a robbery gone wrong. He checked the cash register. Victor’s sold a lot of steaks that night, but it looked like every dollar was still there. Greene checked the victims’ clothes. Jimmy Ricks’s wallet was still in his right rear pocket. His coworkers’ valuables were all in place. If the person or people who did this wanted money, they could have walked away with thousands. Whatever they were after, money wasn’t it.

In the manager’s office, Greene found the safe and noted that it was locked. The room was bare except for a desk and a file cabinet. Neither looked like it had been disturbed. He opened the top desk drawer and found an “In Case of Emergency” card. No name, just a number. He dialed the number.

Victor Diaz, the owner of the restaurant and that phone number, had been sleeping since 9:30 p.m. on Tuesday. He almost never missed a night of work, but he ached. His throat was scratchy, and he had a fever. He’d taken a double shot of Nyquil, which he hoped would knock him out till the morning and make him well enough to work the next night. So far, it had. When his phone buzzed, he stirred for the first time all night. He had a taste in his mouth like a used sweat sock, and a fire in his sinuses. His initial instinct was to ignore the call and roll over. But he squinted and saw the number. He answered.
“I’m calling from Victor’s in Midtown,” Greene said. “This is the emergency number.”

“I’m aware of that,” Diaz said. “I’m the owner. Who are you?”

“Detective R.C. Greene, NYPD.”

“Not another robbery?”

Victor’s had been a target for drug addicts a few times over the years. As robberies go, the place was a relatively easy mark. It was a couple of blocks from Grand Central Station, sequestered just enough so there wasn’t a lot of activity after 1 in the morning. Back in the day, any lucid thief could be in and out in a minute. Just wait till someone was behind the register and had the drawer open. Then make your move. At $9.99, Victor’s insisted on cash. Victor Diaz didn’t like paying credit card fees. On a typical night in good weather, the restaurant took in $16,000. Last night had been a beaut.

Diaz scuttled a couple of robbery attempts over the years, one time slamming the robber’s hand in the till and holding it there until the police came. Diaz used the guy as a punching bag too. He loved to tell that story. “Yeah, the speed bag!” he would say.

But Victor made Victor’s less friendly to thieves by taking a couple of simple steps. He moved the register deeper inside the restaurant so it wasn’t near the door. He’d originally situated the register by the door to stop the dine-and-dash crowd, but figured he’d rather lose $9.99 once or twice a night than thousands a couple of times a year.

Victor also made it a point to move cash from the register to a safe several times each night. But he was the only one to handle the money, and the only one who knew the combination to the safe. His instructions to his assistant manager that night: Leave the money where it is. The assistant manager had done just that.

“No, it wasn’t a robbery,” Greene said.
“Good.”

“Sir, what is your name?”

“Victor Diaz.”

“Mr. Diaz, you’d better get down here.”

Diaz asked no questions. He slipped on his pants, jacket, and shoes, brushed his teeth and got in his car.

*

Greene stepped out of the restaurant and went over to Danny to share the preliminary details. Greene had always liked Danny. They used each other well. Greene planted stories with him, and Danny allowed that. If Greene had a case that went cold after a couple of days, he would tell Danny that he was closing in, and he’d give Danny just enough details to make the public think an arrest was imminent. No one expected killers to read the Daily News—and most of them didn’t—but every media outlet did, and they all followed Danny’s leads. Almost everything he wrote got disseminated every 15 minutes on all-news radio, on TV, and now through social media. If you committed a crime in New York City and cared to know how close police were to solving it, you could easily find out.

In exchange for being used, Danny exacted two concessions from Greene. One: no outright lies, ever. No reporter wants to write a correction. In the eyes of editors, one correction negated a million accurate facts. Two: Edna gets the scoops.

Danny wanted killers off the street as much as the cops did. And he wanted scoops more than anyone. Scoops? That was so 20th century. Now he wanted clicks. That’s what it was all about anymore. How many people are reading your stories, and for how long. Danny led all news reporters at the Daily News by a wide margin. Except sports, of course.
This case was just what he needed. New York’s homicide rate had been going down steadily over the years, but a good brutal crime still fascinated the public. Danny took down just what Greene wanted him to know: five victims, no sign of a struggle, nothing taken, some telltale clues had been left behind, but police weren’t saying what just yet. They expected to have suspects in custody before the end of the day. They didn’t, really, but Greene wanted the public to feel secure.

Off the record, Greene told Danny he was shaken by the violence. It was more than the quarts of blood seeping along the green-and-white tiles. It was the lack of any obvious motive. Who leaves a cash register full of money behind? Who shoots people, then severs their limbs? And those clues Greene talked about? They didn’t actually exist.

Danny tapped out a preliminary story on his phone, and the overnight editor—one of the few people in the newsroom at that hour—gave it a screaming headline: SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE.

* 

The city was getting its first glimpses of daylight when Victor Diaz pulled his Camaro into his spot behind the restaurant. He felt like garbage, and knowing bad news was ahead only compounded the feeling. Sampedro had been waiting by the spot, mentally counting the OT and cursing the lack of sleep. He met Diaz at the car and walked with him to the front.

“How bad?”

“Bad.”

The uniformed cop introduced the restaurant owner to Greene, who started by offering condolences for his loss.

“How much loss?” Diaz asked. He didn’t mean receipts.
They ducked under the yellow caution tape and Greene delivered the news. Diaz leaned against the front window. His knees buckled.

“Before we go inside, Mr. Diaz, can you tell me who was working last night?”

Diaz started thinking. Marty Clemmons was the assistant manager. He’d called in Marty to sub for him. Jimmy Ricks was cooking. Jack Wright was helping in the kitchen. So was Dave, the new guy. Couldn’t remember his last name. Dawes, Dawson, something like that. He’d just started five days ago. There’d be paperwork in the filing cabinet. Four waitresses worked the room, but only two would have stayed after midnight—Clara Fuentes and Gina Bellacino.

Greene checked the list of the names the uniformed officer had given him. Marty, Jimmy, Jack, Clara, Gina—they all matched. No Dave Dawes, Dawson, whatever, though.

Greene escorted Diaz inside and suggested that maybe he shield his eyes. Diaz complied as best as possible. Greene asked for Dave’s paperwork, and Diaz scurried into his office, his head down. He returned a minute or so late with Dave’s application. Dave Driesen. 81-15 Queens Boulevard, Elmhurst.

“It’s a copy,” Diaz said. “Keep it.”

“Do your employees punch a time clock?” Greene asked.

“Yes.” Diaz walked the police into the cramped room where the employees had their lockers. A copy of the month’s schedule was posted next to the clock. Dave Driesen was scheduled to work till midnight. Diaz riffled through the timecards. Driesen had punched out at 12:12 a.m.

Greene called Hill and Sampedro and asked them to head out to Queens to bring Dave Driesen in for questioning. He’s not a suspect at this time, Greene told them. Normally, he wouldn’t have sent them out to Queens, but in his experience, the fewer cops on a case tromping through a crime scene, the better.
Dave Driesen lived alone in a first-floor apartment not far from where he had grown up. His life had been a series of bad decisions since flunking out of high school in the tenth grade. He was now twenty-six and in probably his twelfth job. He first eleven were dead ends—dishwashing, busing tables, and the like. He’d already fathered two kids that he knew of, but thanks to this new job and the hiring bonus Diaz paid him, Driesen had caught up on his child support payments to both mothers. When he got hired at Victor’s, Diaz assured him that advancement was possible. Assistant manager. Maybe manager someday.

Driesen was asleep on his couch, still wearing his work clothes, when Hill and Sampedro pulled up in front of his apartment. Hill banged on his door. When he heard “Mr. Driesen, police,” Dave Driesen had no reason to run. But he did. It was instinct. No encounter with the police ever turned out positively. He headed out a back window and into an alley. Hill and Sampedro waited by the front door, then Hill went around back. He noticed the window open.

“Shit,” he yelled. “He took off.”

Sampedro came around the back, and he and Hill spent the next 20 minutes scouring the alley.

“This is the worst goddamn part of the job,” Sampedro said. “We don’t know where this fucker is. We don’t know if he’s armed, and we don’t even know what he looks like.”

“If we find him, he’ll look like a guy who’s hiding,” Hill said.

Wherever Driesen was, he wasn’t in the dumpsters or hiding in any of the garages. Hill radioed to Greene that Driesen had fled. Until that moment, Greene had no reason to suspect Driesen. Now he did. He called Danny, who was standing outside the restaurant, several feet away from the growing throng of reporters awaiting a briefing. “We have a person of interest,” he said and hung up.
Greene ordered the officers to stay put. They’d get a warrant to search the apartment. So Hill and Sampedro sat in their car. It was after 7 already, and Driesen wasn’t coming back anytime soon. He was about 10 blocks away, hiding next to a dumpster that was wedged cattycorner behind Tim’s Diner. When Driesen was a kid, this was his favorite hiding spot. He hid there when he and his friends played hide-and-seek, and he hid there when his parents would get into violent fights. No one ever found him. This was his secret space.

From there, Dave could also see his buddy Jerry’s house. Dave knew Jerry was off to work any minute. As soon as Jerry left, Dave would get the spare key Jerry kept at the bottom of his mailbox and have at least eight safe hours to hide from the cops. As soon as he saw Jerry walk out and get on the bus, Dave slipped into the house and closed the curtains. Dave was disoriented, partly from lack of sleep but also because he couldn’t understand why the cops were coming after him.

*

Over his 25-year career, R.C. Greene had given a number of media briefings, enduring what he thought of as mostly idiotic questions. Talking to the media was a necessary evil, but also a good way to solicit the public’s help. But he went into situations like this with a rule: The briefing ends with the first stupid question.

He opened the door of Victor’s to find a gaggle of cameras and mics. The minute the reporters saw him, the shouts of “Detective, Detective” ricocheted through the air. Greene stepped in front of them and gave them a bland, safe description of what he’d seen. He didn’t want to unnecessarily alarm the public. Yes, this was a brutal crime. No, the victims’ names would not be released until the next of kin had all been notified. No, the next of kin have not all been notified.

“We’re asking for the public’s help,” Greene said straight into the cameras. “If you have any information about this crime, please call NYPD at 212-477-9218.”
“Can you tell us what the motive was?” shouted a TV reporter.

“No."

“Do you have a suspect?”

“We have a person of interest. Uniformed officers are looking for him now."

“Can you tell us his name?”

“No at this time.” He’s only a person of interest, not a suspect, Greene pointed out. There’s no evidence to suggest that he’s done anything wrong, and no reason to damage someone’s reputation before he’s been questioned.

“Is there security footage?”

There wasn’t—Diaz had cameras, but they were expensive to monitor. On weeknights, he programmed them to have the red lights on so everyone would think they were working. But they weren’t.

Greene didn’t want the public to know that. “We’re looking now to see what is available.”

“Will the restaurant be open tonight?”

“No more questions,” Greene said.

Greene went back inside Victor’s and exhaled.

“Can you believe someone asked if the restaurant was open tonight?” he said to no one in particular.

“Maybe they had a reservation,” one of the crime scene investigators said.

Finally, a reason to laugh.
Outside, the reporters went to work. New Yorkers flipped on their radios and televisions and turned on their phones for multiple variations of the same story:

“A shocking crime in Midtown overnight.”

“New York is waking up to its worst multiple murder in years.”

“Five dead at a well-known discount steakhouse.”

Juanita Ricks had already called in sick to school when she heard that headline on WINS, the all-news radio station. She had not been notified yet. She started sobbing. She was 28 years old, and she sensed that she was about to find out that she was a widow.

*

Forensics made a meticulous pass through Victor’s, gathering up anything that could potentially be used in court later. Police canvased door to door in the neighborhood, hoping someone had seen or heard something or maybe had a camera that caught something. All that proved to be a waste of time. Whatever happened in Victor’s early that morning was staying in Victor’s, at least for now.

Then Hill and Sampedro called in to say that Dave Driesen was nowhere to be found.

“Leave him a note,” Greene told them. “Leave him a phone message. Tell him he’d better turn his ass in before he becomes the most wanted man in the city.”

Police loved to use that threat. New York has a great reputation for liberalism, and that’s generally true in the way the city votes. But New York also has a mean streak.Fuck with New York, and there’s a few thousand Liam Neeson wannabe vigilantes ready to hunt you down and tear you apart. The innocent and the smart criminals knew better than to have their picture flashed on TV all day and night. When that happened, it was open hunting season.
Hill and Sampedro did as they were told and headed home. Victor Diaz asked what he could do, and Greene told him to go home. The police were notifying the next of kin. The victims’ belongings would be returned to the families after they had been thoroughly examined. Greene told Diaz he’d be able to reopen in another day or two, but he wondered who the hell would come in there to eat ever again. It’s almost impossible to sell a house where a murder has taken place, Greene thought. Who’d want to eat bloody red meat on the site of a multiple homicide?

Greene spent till almost noon inside Victor’s, supervising and thinking. He’d been scheduled to work 4 to 1, but there was no going home now. He called his wife to deliver that news. She’d heard the reports, and she was already planning dinners for one for the next few days. Homicide cops don’t go home when they’ve got a live case. They certainly don’t go home when five people have been hacked apart on their watch.

Greene got back to the homicide office right around 12:30. His fellow detective averted their eyes. He took murder personally, and rule one was you don’t talk to R.C. when he’s investigating a live case unless he talks to you first. Most cops appreciated a little gallows humor—anything to lighten the mood. Green usually had a good sense of humor, but he had no sense of anything except rage when he was working. Sixteen years ago, a new homicide detective dared to joke about a gay man who was beaten to death by a mob. The detective had asked Greene if he’d solved the “Freddie Fudgepacker” killing. Greene cold-cocked the guy.

Greene was good—methodical, careful, smart. He was the first guy everyone in the department wanted to have a beer with, and he could be irreverent as hell when he wasn’t working. But don’t mess with him when he’s concentrating.

His first thought when he sat down was that maybe surveillance cameras in the street had caught the killer or killers on tape. He hoped his officers on the street would find that. He called
narcotics and robbery, hoping someone there might have an idea about anyone who would target
Victor’s. He looked through databases for potential suspects and for crimes that had occurred nearby.
Zeroes across the board. Greene was so pissed, his blood pressure could have rung the bell.

*

In Queens shortly after 2 in the afternoon, Dave Driesen extricated himself from hiding. He was
sweaty and dirty and damn tired after more than two hours behind the dumpster and a couple more
flopping on his friend Jerry’s couch. It had been about seven hours since the cops banged on his door,
and he figured they probably called off the search. He slinked back to his house, head down, hoping he
could get inside without suspicion. Driesen’s landlord knew he’d gotten a job at Victor’s, but the
landlord worked a day job, so he wouldn’t be around.

Driesen made a quick pass by the house and didn’t see anyone waiting. What he did see was a
note taped to the front door, so he walked up, tore it off, and headed inside. He was relieved when no
one followed him in, and doubly happy that no one was inside.

He read the note – “Call Detective R.C. Greene at 212-477-9822.” Oh shit, Driesen thought. A
detective? This isn’t about child support.

Driesen found his cellphone in the pocket of the pants he’d worn to work the night before.
There were three messages, all from an Officer Hill, all telling him to call Greene.

He hit call back.

“Yeah, Greene.”

“Detective, my name is Dave Driesen. I have messages to call you.”

Greene perked up. The call was the first good thing to happen on this case.
“Mr. Driesen, I’d like you to come in to talk about what happened at Victor’s last night.”

“What happened at Victor’s last night?”

“Would you please come in here right away? I’ll send a car for you.”

“OK. Can I ask what this is about?”

“We’ll talk when you get in.”

Greene hung up. Driesen barely had enough time to scarf down some corn flakes and brush his teeth before a patrol car pulled up. Driesen stepped into the car for a quick 25-minute ride into the city. He tried to ask the patrolman what Greene wanted. No answer other than “Detective Greene just wants to see you.”

Driesen sat back and thought about what had happened the previous night at work. Nothing came to mind. Was there money missing from the register? Did someone take some meat? Driesen felt pretty good. For one of the rare times in his life, he was not guilty.

The cop walked Driesen into the station and escorted him to the second floor. Greene was waiting with a smug smile, ready to put this case in the books.

“Mr. Driesen,” he said, “how’s your day going so far?”

“I’ve had worse days,” Driesen said.

“Maybe not,” Greene said. “Let’s go in here.”

He motioned toward an interrogation room that was a blank canvas except for pale pink walls and a table with chairs on either side. Pink was supposed to be calming. At least, that’s what the consultant who designed the room had said. Greene had never seen any evidence to prove that. Once,
he saw a suspect crack his own head against the table to prove his fearlessness. That was one bloody mess.

“You know why you’re here, right?” Greene said.

“Your message said something about Victor’s. What about Victor’s?”

“Mr. Driesen, what time did you leave work last night?”

“A little after 12.”

“What was the situation in the restaurant?”

“The last customers had left, and everyone was about to start cleaning up.”

“I understand you’ve only been working there for a few days. Everything going all right? You getting along with your coworkers?”

“They seem like good dudes and dudettes, yeah.”

“Any reason you’d …”

Another detective rapped on the door, interrupting Greene’s chain of questions. “Sorry, R.C., but there’s a guy on the tip line, and he says it’s urgent.”

Greene snarled. He hated being interrupted. “Excuse me a minute, Mr. Driesen.”

Greene walked out to his desk and picked up the line.

Greene looked at the readout on his phone. It said “111-000-0000.” A private caller, an untraceable line.

“Greene here. What?” A voice with a slight accent—Greene couldn’t quite figure out from where—said: “You will find Le’André Stephenson and his running mate, Shabazz Hakim, at ...” The man
gave a Brooklyn address, complete with apartment number. “They are the ones responsible for the murders at Victor’s.” He hung up as quickly as he spoke, leaving Greene on the other end of the phone with a whole lot of silence.

Under normal circumstances, Greene would have engaged the guy, tried to keep him on the line, figure out what he knew and how he knew it. But the caller gave him no opportunity.

Greene held his breath. He remembered the cops who’d gotten anonymous tips and walked into dead ends. Or shooting galleries. He didn’t want to put his fellow officers in harm’s way. On the other hand, he wanted to solve this crime quickly. Murderers always walk among us, but slayings like this put the city on edge.

In his experience, tips sometimes came in with names attached, but less often with the whereabouts of the suspects too. The tipster spoke with such authority that Greene considered it genuine enough to check out. He sat back and thought for a second, then went to the computer. He looked up the address and confirmed that, yes, Stephenson lived there. He looked up Stephenson and Hakim and found that both had done some short time at Rikers. Mostly drugs, nothing terribly violent, but each had a weapons charge that had been reduced to a misdemeanor.

That was enough for Greene to give the go-ahead. He phoned Jerry Stokes, a captain he knew in Brooklyn homicide, and asked him to send a couple of cars to pick up the suspects the caller named.

“You want me to send my guys into a shooting gallery?” Stokes asked.

“I want them to get two murderers off the street,” Greene said. “Or would you rather have them walking around your precinct?”

“We got a warrant?”
“Fuck the warrant. We’re getting two dangerous motherfuckers off the street. And your guys will know what to do.”

Greene hung up and walked back into the interrogation room.

“Mr. Driesen, do the names”—he looked at his notes—“Shabazz Hakim and Le’Andre Stephenson mean anything to you?”

“No. Nothing. Why?”

“They weren’t in the restaurant when you left last night?”

“If they were, I wouldn’t know. Were they customers? There were just two customers left when I finished my shift. A guy and a girl.”

“Mr. Driesen, when you left work last night, what did you do?”

“Got on the subway and went home.”

“OK. That’s enough for now. You can go.”

Driesen got up, confused.

“Why did you bring me in here?”

“You really don’t know? You better turn on the news. And one more thing: Were you scheduled to work tonight?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Better make other plans.”
Stokes called in six officers and briefed them on the situation. “I want you to roll up quietly,” he said. “No sirens. No nothing. We don’t know what we’re getting into, but the quicker we get in and out, the safer we’ll be.” He pointed to veteran officer Rick Burkhardt, one of the steadiest hands on the force. “You lead ‘em, Burkhardt. And bring back some evidence.”

“You got it,” Burkhardt said. “Me and Terry will go in. Jones and James, take the rear. Alejandro and Kubik, you wait out front.”

It was the kind of action street cops love and fear. If it turns out well, they’re heroes, and they have a story they’ll tell the rest of their lives. If it turns out badly, someone’s collecting their life insurance.

Three police cars—six officers in all—took off from the station in silence. They rolled up in front of the Cortelyou Road address Stokes gave them. As he instructed, they kept their sirens off to avoid suspicion, and the first two walked into the building as if they were delivering mail. The idea was to surprise Hakim and Stephenson. If they had no time to react, they had no time to pick up their weapons.

The squalid building reeked of fried okra, but there was almost no noise in the halls and no sign of any people. Burkhardt and his partner, Jason Terry, slipped inside. They said nothing. They walked up the stairs, stepping around a couple of used condoms and past graffiti-covered walls. Outside Apt. 213,
they drew their guns and prepared for Burkhardt to enter first. He raised a beefy leg and crashed through the door.

He and Terry rushed in and found the suspects they were looking for nodded out on a couch that was more stain than color. A couple of sets of works and a baggie of heroin sat on a wooden coffee table. Whatever noise the police had made hadn’t disturbed Stephenson and Hakim in the least. The officers kept their weapons trained on the two suspects, Burkhardt and Terry quickly put them in handcuffs. From the looks of it, they’d be halfway to the city before these two stirred.

When the cuffs were on, the officers searched the place, though they didn’t need to look far. They found drugs and syringes, two Glocks, both used, and blood all over the clothes they were wearing. If ever a criminal case had been gift-wrapped for the police, this was it.

“Best bust ever,” Burkhardt said amid laughter and even more relief. If you’d given him and Terry truth serum five minutes ago, they would have admitted to being scared out of their minds. Instead, they earned bragging rights for capturing two cold-blooded killers.

Burkhardt called Stokes, who called Greene to let him know they would be delivering Stephenson and Hakim to him within the hour. Greene said thanks and hung up. He exhaled, finally.

Greene had said nothing to anyone in his office about the tip. He went into his captain’s office to deliver the good news. That began a game of telephone. The captain called his boss, the deputy chief, who called the chief, who called the mayor.

The mayor had always considered the police department to be a drag on his administration. As far as he was concerned, when the police were doing good, they were doing what they were supposed to be doing. When they were shooting unarmed civilians or racially profiling someone who turned out to be a bigwig in political circles, he found himself answering for cops he didn’t hire, assign, or even know.
The police were a necessary evil in a city that outwardly was too cool to care but lived in a perpetual state of fear. Crime was its lowest in 25 years, but you’d never know it from the media coverage and the jittery citizenry.

The police, on the other hand, saw the mayor as a credit-hogging annoyance who did them more harm than good. Even when he said something nice about the force—which wasn’t often—it was never enough, as far as the rank-and-file were concerned.

It was now 4:35 p.m. The mayor’s press secretary rushed to plan a 5 o’clock news conference to announce that suspects were in custody. The mayor would speak first, followed by the deputy chief, then Greene. He’d notify the participants to be ready, then contact the media.

While he was doing that, two things happened. First, Burkhardt and his partner arrived at the station house. They escorted the still-doped-up Hakim and Stephenson into separate interrogation rooms. “No sense talking to them now,” Burkhardt told Greene. “Better let ‘em sleep for a while longer.”

The other was that Greene’s phone rang. It was Danny.

“I hear you have suspects,” he said.

“Jesus, Edna, did the mayor’s office call you already?”

“No.”

“Then how the hell could you possibly know that?” Greene said. He looked around the room. Barely anyone was in the office, and no one had come or gone in the past hour. If Danny had an inside source, it wasn’t in the Homicide Division.

“I got a tip,” Danny said.
“You’re good,” Greene said grudgingly. “Someday you’ll have to tell me how you do that.”

“OK to report?”

“Go ahead,” Greene said. “They’re planning a 5 o’clock news conference. You’ll scoop the mayor by 15 minutes, and that won’t break my heart.”

Greene gave him a few details—suspects picked up in Brooklyn based on an anonymous tip, no struggle in the arrest, no known motive at this time, interrogation to come. Danny hung up and dashed off a few paragraphs for the website.

GOT ‘EM! screamed the headline. A little over the top, Danny thought, given that there hadn’t been any questioning yet. But he’d fix it later. He had a news conference to get to.

At 4:55, Greene, the deputy chief, and the mayor sat at a conference table to discuss the details. The mayor seemed to be barely paying attention, and Greene was sure he was going to screw up something in the retelling. But once the mayor got in front of the cameras, he was a different man. Alive, awake, alert, engaged. He congratulated the deputy chief, who congratulated Greene, who took the bulk of the questions.

Greene gave the media what he could, but he didn’t identify the suspects. Unlike so many cops and politicians, he never liked the idea of naming names before charges were filed. In his heart of hearts, Greene knew that the police have presumed many people guilty who were later proved innocent. As guilty as he presumed the two junkies in custody to be, he had no idea whether they committed the murders.

After 15 minutes of sorting through the minutia, the media had enough to go on. The briefing room was a sea of noise, with TV reporters doing their standups live.

“Relief!” one breathless TV reporter said.
“Caught!” declared another.

“Two dangerous criminals are off the street tonight,” reported a third, apparently oblivious to a little bit of law called innocent until proven guilty.

Danny hadn’t learned all he wanted to. That an anonymous tipster had led police to the suspects was enough for everyone else, but not for him. In all the years he’d covered crime, he never knew anyone to give up significant criminals without a reward. This case was so fresh that police hadn’t had time to offer any incentives. So either these weren’t the murderers, or there was more to the case.

He buttonholed Greene after the news conference.

“So, an anonymous tipster?”

“Yep,” Greene said. This was a conversation he didn’t want to have. He didn’t want Danny reporting on this, mostly because it was embarrassing to know nothing about the tipster. And even though it had worked out all right so far, he also was a little dismayed that he sent six officers into a building based on a tip and a hunch. The situation could have gone horribly wrong.

“What do you know about the tipster?”

Greene laid it out for Danny, but off the record. He said he’d tell him more as soon as he knew more.

“All I can say on the record right now,” Greene said, “is this: It was like having Superman on your side.”

Greene knew he’d just given Danny his next headline. And he had. The Daily News headline tomorrow morning would scream:
But tonight, Greene had questioning to take care of. It was about 5:45 p.m., and in adjacent rooms Hakim and Stephenson were coming out of their stupors and finding themselves handcuffed to tables. Stephenson said to himself, “Aw, shit, not again,” and Hakim just shook his head.

Greene went into each room and brought his suspects water. He hated when cops tormented the people they were questioning. He had among the best conviction rates in the department, and he succeeded, he felt, by being fair. He sized up both and decided that Stephenson was the more awake of the two. He told Hakim to continue sleeping it off. He’d be back when he finished with Stephenson.

“You know why you’re here?” Greene asked.

“I don’t even know where I am,” Stephenson said.

“You’re at the police station, Greene said. “I’m Detective Greene, and I want to ask you a few questions.”

“I don’t know nothin’,” Stephenson said.

“I haven’t asked you anything yet.”

“You can ask, but I don’t know nothin’. You wanna know something, call my lawyer.”

“Who’s that?”

“Whoever the public defender’s office sends.”

“Ever been to Victor’s?”

“I don’t know. My lawyer would know.”
Greene had heard all the bullshit he wanted to hear. He got up and left the room.

“When the hell am I gettin’ out of here?” Stephenson screamed as the door slammed shut.

In the next room, Greene told Hakim that his buddy was getting ready to give him up. Talk now, or it’s the electric chair for you. New York doesn’t have the death penalty, but Greene wasn’t dealing with a genius here. All Hakim had to hear was “electric chair” for him to run his mouth.

“What you wanna know?” he said.

“What happened last night at Victor’s?”

Hakim went through it meticulously, blaming as much as he could on Stephenson. Stephenson walked in pissed, got increasingly riled when the staff told them the restaurant was closed.

“Look around,” one of the Victor’s staffers said, according to Hakim. “You see anyone here?”

“Then why the door open?” Stephenson yelled.

“Early guy left, guess he forgot to lock it behind him.”

Stephenson asked for food to go. They said no. Stephenson and Hakim had started the night smoking crack, but they’d switched to weed for the past couple of hours. Stephenson was as aggressive as he was paranoid. He whipped out a Glock and forced the five workers toward the fridge. One of the guys—it turned out to be Marty Clemmons, the manager Victor had called in—reached for something in his pocket. Stephenson capped him.

When the other four workers were inside the refrigerator, Hakim suggested they leave. Stephenson wouldn’t hear of it.

“Fuck that,” he said. “Motherfuckers won’t serve us, ain’t gonna get to serve no one else.”
Stephenson picked up a meat cleaver and chopped Clemmons’ hands off. Then he went finger by finger.

“I didn’t wanna do nothin’,” Hakim said. “I just wanted something to eat.”

When Stephenson finished, he opened the refrigerator and emptied his gun into the Victor’s staffers. Three died instantly. Hakim recalled with horror that one of the workers was still alive when Stephenson took the cleaver to him.

Hakim cried.

“What happened next?” Greene asked.

“Le’Andre cooked us some steaks.”

“You ate? Five people died, hacked to pieces, and you ate?”

“I was sick to my stomach,” Hakim said. “But I was hungry too. And when Le’Andre say you eat, you eat.”

Greene had heard a lot of insane things in his career on the force. This one was as ugly as any.

“You gonna say I cooperated, right?” Hakim said. “You gonna tell them I didn’t have nothin’ to do with this, right?”

“You ate,” Greene said. “Jesus Christ.”

Greene finished recording Hakim’s confession sometime around 8 p.m. He walked back into the room where Stephenson was still sitting, his head on the table.

“How long I been in here?” he asked.

“Long enough for your buddy to give you up.”
“I don’t know nothin’ about that,” Stephenson said. “My lawyer might know.”

“Talking to you is like talking to a parrot,” Greene said.

“I don’t …”

“Yeah, you don’t know nothin’ about that,” Greene said. “I know.”

“How about some food?” Stephenson asked.

“You’ll get fed at Rikers.”

*

Greene went back to his desk and plunked himself in his chair. It had been a long damn day, and he was about to go home to the woman he lovingly called “Mrs. Greene.” He hoped she’d left him some dinner. Before he went, he had some paperwork to take care of and a couple of phone calls to make to let the brass know what had happened.

Just then, the phone rang. Danny. Again.

“Jesus, Edna, don’t you ever go home?”

“Jesus, Greene, don’t you ever go home?”

“I’m going.”

“Me too. I just want an update.”

Greene went through the case with Danny. He told them he was filling out the paperwork to charge Stephenson with the murders and Hakim as an accomplice. He told Danny as much as he wanted him to know about the crime and the evidence found.

“What about the tipster?” Danny asked.
“What about him?”

“You know any more?”

“Nothing. But I won’t be surprised if I hear from him again.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Just a hunch.”

“Anything else?”

“Give me 10 minutes to share the news in here. Then you can post.”

Danny sat in the nearly deserted Daily News newsroom and cranked out 800 words, starting with:

An anonymous tipster led police to arrest two Brooklyn men for the slaughter of five employees at the Victor’s steakhouse in midtown Manhattan.

Le’Andre Stephenson, 18, will be charged with shooting and then carving up the five restaurant employees, police said. His running mate, 18-year-old Shabazz Hakim, will be charged as an accomplice.

Police found guns used in the crime and bloody clothes at the apartment where Stephenson lived.

The story went on to detail the crime and the criminal history of the alleged criminals. Danny tracked down Victor Diaz, who thanked the police for their work. He also reached several of the victims’ family members. No one wanted to talk. Juanita Ricks just sobbed into the phone as Danny apologized profusely.

If there was anything Danny had learned in all his years, it was how to say he was sorry and mean it. He used to tell a story about a woman who lost her husband and son in a small-plane crash. He called the woman and, by the time he was done apologizing, she said, “I wouldn’t want to have your job.” The story always ended the same way: “I had that woman feeling sorry for me. I almost gave up the beat right then.”
That story usually quieted any room he was in. And it was all true except for the lie at the end. Danny would never give up the police beat for anything.

Danny’s write-up about the Victor’s murders ended with a nod to the tipster and how grateful the police are when citizens step forward and help them solve crimes.

“We know nothing about this man,” Danny quoted a police source as saying. “But whoever he is, we thank him.”

Danny didn’t know who the man was either, but he vowed to find out.

In addition to Danny’s front-page story, his newspaper weighed in with a brief editorial:

*Hundreds of crimes in New York are solved each year thanks to tips from anonymous citizens, and few were bigger than yesterday’s call from someone who led police to the accused killers of five restaurant employees in midtown Manhattan.*

As first reported by our own Danny Cartwright, police said the tipster told them the names and whereabouts of the men accused in this case. Picking them up turned out to be relatively simple, and within 24 hours both were in Rikers Island, awaiting trial.

What’s especially impressive about this call is that no reward had yet been offered. This person—this “Superman”—got two potentially dangerous criminals off our streets because it was the right thing to do.

People say New Yorkers are detached and unwilling to get involved. This case proves that stereotype wrong. We hope it’s the rule, rather than the exception.

We don’t know who this good Samaritan—this Superman—is or what his motivation was, but we salute him and hope there are many more out there like him.

*

Later that night, Stephenson and Hakim were booked, fingerprinted, photographed, and sent to Rikers separately. Hakim walked through the process in a daze. The previous night started out for him like so many others—with plans to smoke a little weed and head into the city to see what was up. But then Stephenson pulled out a couple of rocks of crack. Hakim hated that shit. The few times he’d used, he ended up aggressively violent and with a serious bout of diarrhea.
But you didn’t say no to Stephenson. He was one scary motherfucker. They’d known each other since they were little kids, and Stephenson always had the power to pull Hakim into whatever stupid thing he was doing—throwing rocks at trains, ripping off old ladies’ handbags, whatever.

Hakim wasn’t afraid, exactly—he’d spent a week in Rikers before on a charge that was dismissed when the cop didn’t show up for the hearing—but now he figured he was looking at 25 years minimum. That scared him.

Hakim wasn’t the hard-time kind. He’d grown up poor in Brooklyn, but with both parents in the picture. His parents separated when he was eight. He lived with his mother during the week and his father two weekends a month. He’d been an OK kid whose one flaw was that he was easily talked into doing things he knew he shouldn’t. And it wasn’t just with Stephenson.

When he was 12, Hakim’s father gave him the sex talk. The talk went like this: Use a condom. Don’t get her pregnant. Don’t get a disease. When he was 13, the girl in the apartment next door invited him over. She was 15 and fine. She took him into the bedroom and climbed on top of him. “What about a condom?” he said. “Don’t worry about it,” she said. He didn’t. What 13-year-old boy would?

Six weeks later, he found out she was pregnant when her mother beat on their door and threatened to kill him. Hakim took whatever odd jobs he could find after school and paid for the abortion.

Over the years, he knew, he’d made a lot of stupid decisions. If there was any chance that he could beat this charge, if the public defender he would get could help him out of this, Hakim vowed to himself that this would be the last mistake. It turned out, indeed, to be his last mistake, but not in the way he envisioned. On the way to breakfast his first morning in Rikers, a guy he didn’t know, who didn’t know him, stuck a shiv in his throat, apparently for the hell of it. As Hakim bled to death, spurring blood as if he’d been born with a blowhole, guards watched and did nothing. “That’s a shame,” one said.
Hakim’s testimony would have convicted Stephenson easily, and it would have been better to keep him alive. But the guards knew nothing of that. To them, he was just another scumbag they wouldn’t have to deal with.

In another part of the jail, Stephenson was being kept in isolation. Police knew he was the brains behind the crime—as if there were any brainpower in what had occurred—and they didn’t want to lose him. Though it would have been easier to have both of them dead, there was something more satisfying about watching a dirt bag like Stephenson spend the rest of his life in prison. You ask the average cop: They don’t believe in hell. They want to see justice dispensed here. To most of them, death is the easy way out. Spend 50 years in prison—that’s hell on earth. That’s justice.

So they kept Stephenson isolated from the other prisoners and on 24-hour suicide watch. And they tormented him. They took his clothes and bedsheets. They replaced the bologna in his lunch with a turd. They doused him with urine as he slept. “Where my lawyer?” Stephenson demanded. “Where my lawyer?” The only words he heard from the guards were “fuck you, motherfucker,” which were the same words he said to them.

Stephenson continued to affect a don’t-give-a-shit attitude. Inside, outside—it was all same to him. He had as many friends in here as he did on the outside. Ever since he was a kid, Stephenson was always in trouble. Sometimes he got into it just because of his looks. The first cop who ever picked him up—this was on a petty-theft charge for stealing a pack of Drake’s cakes from a convenience store—said Stephenson had the deadest eyes he’d ever seen. “You know how people’s eyes look a little wet, and you can see a bit of reflection in them?” the cop observed. “Nothing. There was no shine in those eyes.”

Stephenson had grown up almost entirely on his own. He didn’t know his father, and his mother left him alone and isolated as much as possible. When he was two, he would get up before she did to play with whatever he could find. One morning, his toys of choice were their one cooking pot and a dirty
spoon. She got up, took out a roll of duct tape, and fastened him to the wall. Some nights she did the same thing when she went out. He got used to sleeping standing up, to eating infrequently if at all, to whatever abuse anyone could throw at him.

By the time he was 10, he’d done his first stint in juvie for stealing a motor scooter. At 13, he was ripping off old ladies’ grocery bags. At 15, he was sentenced as an adult for beating a girl who refused to go out with him.

So he’d seen the inside of Rikers many times before.

But this time, after minimal food, constant abuse, and no appearance by his public defender, something in him snapped. Around 10 p.m. of his first night in Rikers, the guards monitoring him watched through a video feed as Stephenson jumped out of bed and rammed his head and body repeatedly into the concrete walls. The three guards rushed into his cell and stopped him, but Stephenson had done serious damage – a broken shoulder and three significant gashes to his skull. They grabbed him, cuffed him, and rushed him to the hospital.

Shortly after they put Stephenson in the ambulance, Amy Diamond, his public defender, showed up and asked to see him. They told her what had happened, and suggested that she come back tomorrow. She reluctantly agreed. Even if she could get in to see him now, he’d be in no condition to talk. She turned around and went home, an 18-hour day finally over.

* 

Dr. Lewis Fehrman was working the night shift at the prison hospital. Unlike so many in the prison system, Fehrman gave a damn. For some of the prisoners who passed through Rikers, Fehrman was the first doctor they’d ever seen.
When the guards brought in Stephenson, the doctor stitched his head and gave him something for the pain. Fehrman would later tell investigators that Stephenson was lucky to be alive. He was malnourished and mumbling incoherently. “He may have been psychotic before he came in, but he almost certainly was now due to the brutality he suffered at his own hands and at the hands of others,” Fehrman said in his report, which went ignored within the system.

Fehrman talked to Stephenson, both to keep him calm and find out what had happened. “I know who you are,” Fehrman said, “but I want you to understand: I am here to take care of you. What you did doesn’t matter to me. That’s for the courts to worry about. My job is to keep you healthy and make sure you’re safe.”

Stephenson, who had moaned from the pain but said nothing otherwise, calmed down after that. Fehrman reached inside a bedside table and pulled out a Clark bar. He gave half to Stephenson, who devoured it. It may have been the nicest thing anyone had ever done for him, though he wasn’t the type to say thank you.

Fehrman talked to him. He apologized for the way the system worked and made small talk about the Knicks. “Ain’t been the same since Ewing retired,” Stephenson said. “For sure,” Fehrman said.

There wasn’t a lot going on in the prison hospital that night, so Fehrman had time to give his patient a good going over. As he went to set Stephenson’s broken right shoulder, he ran his hand along the prisoner’s arm to see if he had sustained any other damage. On the underside of the bicep, Fehrman felt a peculiar lump. He asked Stephenson if he’d ever noticed it before.

“I knowed about it, yeah. Been there since I was a baby is what my mama said.”

“And she didn’t do anything about it?” Fehrman said.

“She said, ‘Ain’t causin’ you no problem, so don’t worry.’”
Fehrman shook his head in sympathy. He saw so many people every day who were badly damaged emotionally as well as physically. He asked Stephenson if he could take a closer look.

“Knock yourself out, doc. Better bein’ in here than in there.”

“I’m going to give you a shot to numb the area,” Fehrman said. “It’s just a local anesthetic.”

“Do what you gotta.”

Fehrman numbed Stephenson’s arm and took a small scalpel to the area around the lump. He pulled out a small glass cylinder about the size of a grain of rice.

“What you got, doc?”

“I don’t know. Let me get back to you.”
John Josef Mengelt carried himself like a rich kid—a pretentious fucking rich kid. His father, Josef, was a doctor, just as his grandfather has been, and there was no doubt that John would follow in their footsteps. While other kids carried a backpack to high school, Joe, as he was known, toted a briefcase. His parents expected A’s, and Joe never disappointed. He grew up in a New York suburb called Garden City, living in a stately Tudor and surrounded almost entirely by white Catholics and Protestants. There were no blacks and only a handful of Jews in his graduating class. The Jews kept their religion to themselves.

Joe’s parents had come to the United States from Germany to escape the Allied bombings in World War II that had killed their parents. Neither his father, Josef, nor his mother, Irene, had been Nazi sympathizers, but Josef believed—as his father had—that Hitler was on the right track when it came to ridding society of undesirables. Joe’s mother was silent on the matter.

Josef and Irene both worked full time—Joe’s mother handled the scheduling and finances for his father’s medical practice—and they were always working. The family never took a vacation and, although they lived 45 minutes from New York City, Joe had rarely been there. He was an only child, and his exposure to the wider world was limited.
“Just stick to yourself,” his father would say. “You will be better off. Even in a wealthy town like this, the people are rabble.” His mother was not overt in her dislike of any particular race, but his father was vehement. He turned on the TV news each night before dinner and yelled at the screen.

“We live here to be with white people,” Dr. Mengelt said one night over dinner while Joe and his mother listened. “You look at what’s happening in the world, and you realize that we are the last hope. We are educated. We are civilized. I don’t know what is going to happen when we are overrun with niggers and spics.”

Joe didn’t look up from his dinner. He listened and wondered: How bad could other people be? He did not question his father, though. What his father said was the law.

Joe’s father’s words remained in his mind. Every time Joe thought about trying to converse with someone else, he backed off. He knew few people in his class, few people knew him, and that was fine with all concerned. He answered questions in class when called on, but never said much other than to correct a fact here and there that he felt his teachers had gotten wrong. In one instance, Joe felt he knew more than his history teacher about the Sudetenland, where his family originated, and he had no problem saying so. His teacher checked Joe’s fact and discovered that, yes, Joe was correct.

To the extent that Joe thought about it, he divided his classmates into two groups—jocks and stoners. A few were both. He fit in with neither, and he didn’t care. He went to school, did his work, kept to himself, and went home. No one ever saw him outside of school except at cross country practice. He ran distance, which allowed him to be alone with his thoughts. He did not socialize with the team except on rare occasions, and even then he was given to one-word answers: “yes,” when asked if he felt good today; “no,” when asked if he needed anything; “thanks,” for congratulations on his success. Joe would have preferred to walk long distances by himself rather than run—walking was what he would do when
something was on his mind—but he knew that an extracurricular activity would help him get into college. Cross-country was the closest thing to something he could stand.

He graduated from the local high school in 1976 and used glowing if vague letters of reference and nearly perfect SAT scores to get a full-ride scholarship to the University of New York City on a pre-med track. A typical letter said:

*Joe is an exceptional student, maybe the brightest I’ve ever encountered. He will say as little as possible, but he will turn in perfect work every time. I wish I knew him better, but I cannot recall a single personal conversation.*

Irene Mengelt was thrilled when her son delivered the news. Josef Mengelt held his tongue except to say that New York City was a pit filled with vermin, but he approved of the UNYC medical school. “You can go,” Dr. Mengelt told his son, “but you must be diligent. Stay away from the scum.”

That fall, Joe moved into his UNYC dorm, where he found himself a fish out of water. Students of all races, nationalities, and colors lived together, socialized together, and slept together. Having spent his life around Catholics and WASPs, Joe didn’t know how to react to people who, to his mind, were louder and more aggressive than they had a right to be. We are here at a prestigious school, he thought. If the food is less than perfect or the professors a bit disorganized, that is a small price to pay.

The university housing office matched him with a particularly boisterous young Jewish man named Dick Goldsmith, who introduced himself to Joe by declaring that his major was New York City. He was going into finance, but his objective was to enjoy everything New York had to offer. Joe rarely saw Dick, but many nights he heard him stumble in at 4 a.m. Joe didn’t mind. He had nights free to study in quiet.
One Saturday evening in early October, with the dorm seemingly empty, Joe chose to leave his door open while he studied to let the air flow through the room. A girl named Natalie Parker, who lived down the hall, stuck her head in.

“Hi!” she said.

“Hello,” he said, not looking up.

“I’m Natalie.”

“Joe.”

“I was thinking of heading out to the coffeehouse around the corner to study, Joe. Want to join me?”

Joe had skipped all the welcome week festivities, preferring to stay in and read. This was the first social invitation he’d been offered in college—maybe in his life.

“No,” he said.

“Come on, Joe. You’ll like me. I’m a lot of fun to be around.”

He looked up at her. She smiled at him in a way that made him feel something. The short floral dress and long legs didn’t hurt her cause, either. Girls at his high school never asked him anything except homework questions, so female attention was something new and surprisingly wonderful. In Natalie’s presence, he felt warm and exhilarated in a way he’d never experienced. She grabbed his hand and pulled him up, and, for the first time in his life really, Joe Mengelt went out.

Natalie Parker was what you might call a social butterfly, flitting from group to group and party to party. The only reason she was in the dorm that night was because she’d misplaced her room key. It
took her two hours to find it—it had fallen into one of her shoes—and she couldn’t leave the room until she knew how she was going to get back in. By the time she found the key, everyone was gone.

She talked to Joe, and Joe talked back as much as he could. She was able to drag out of him his major, his family situation, and his plans. In return, Joe learned all about her. Her dad was in business, her mom stayed home, she’d broken up with a longtime boyfriend before she came to school, and she was hoping to meet someone more responsible in college. She’d seen Joe in the dorm and sitting by himself at meals, and she noticed him in the Western Civilization lecture, situated in the back row, right corner of the room.

“You seem responsible,” she said. “You seem serious.”

Joe didn’t know what to say to that.

“I think my parents would like you,” she said. “How about coming home with me some weekend? I live in Delaware.”

Joe could process the information he was taught in school faster than anyone. He had no idea what was happening here or why. This girl. This girl. What was going on?

“Maybe.”

Natalie reached across the table and kissed him. And just like that, Joe Mengelt had a friend. Maybe even a girlfriend.

*

Over the next three weeks, Joe found Natalie hanging on his arm and on his words, even though they were few. They lay together in his twin bed and read Western Civ. She quizzed him on his biology,
continually surprised that she could not stump him. They ate together and shared pizza. She called him her boyfriend, and he did not object.

Joe found the entire situation confusing. Here he was, 18, a virgin to a ridiculous degree, a stranger in a crowded, loud city, in an unfamiliar school. And now, he had a girl paying attention to him. Not just any girl. A pretty girl, a popular girl, a girl who had him questioning himself. Joe found himself disarmed by the circumstances, so he did what he always did in these situations: He took a walk to try to figure things out.

She'd gone to the university library to get a couple of books, and he left a note taped to her door. "Went for a walk. Back in a little while." He debated how to sign it and decided on, "I'll miss you, Joe."

Joe started up Seventh Avenue at 4 in the afternoon, past crowded coffeehouses where people laughed and argued and caffeinated themselves so they could be ready for the night. Past bodegas and flower shops and restaurants and apartments and the occasional chain store. He noticed almost none of it, his mind so preoccupied with this turn of events. Who is this girl? Why does she want me? Do I want a girlfriend? What do I do? This rolled around like his head, and it roiled him.

After the first mile, he stopped into a little diner and got himself a plain bagel and a small cup of coffee. This was another weird thing--his sudden obsession with coffee. Everyone at school drinks coffee. Why am I drinking coffee? Some sugar, a little milk, and he was off.

At 33rd Street, he noticed Madison Square Garden, which he'd been to once as a kid to see the circus. "The World's Most Famous Arena" it may be, but Joe didn't care. He kept moving. Thirty-Fourth Street, Thirty-Fifth, and so on. There might have been a million people on the streets, or there might have been none--which was closer to correct. New York is funny on a Sunday. Some streets are packed, some entirely empty. Joe reached Times Square and still had no answers.
He started down Broadway, then realized his mistake and cut across 40th. As Joe walked along the deserted street, a man popped out from a doorway.

"Hey, my brother," he said.

The noise startled Joe, who looked up and saw a tall, lean, black man.

"Hey," Joe said.

"You got a cigarette?" the man said.

"I don't smoke."

"Then do me a favor, brother. Can you point me to Madison Square Garden?" The man was in front of him now, blocking his way.

"I just saw it," said Joe, who didn't realize that another man had slipped out from the doorway and knelt behind him. As Joe started to point, the first man pushed him—a solid thrust—and Joe fell backward over the kneeling man. He hit his head on the pavement.

The first man whipped out a knife and sliced Joe's right front pants pocket, where Joe's wallet bulged from his pants. The second man stepped on Joe's face, like he was trying to put out a Marlboro. He grabbed Joe's watch off his wrist and reached into Joe's other pocket for his keys. He dropped those down a sewer grate as they took off. Joe lay there in agony for at least a half hour before someone came by and called 911.

Joe drifted in and out of consciousness before the paramedics arrived. They tended to the large lump on the back of his head and the cuts on his face. Police came, and Joe did the best he could to describe what had happened. He was so stunned, so shaken, so angry, that he sputtered as he spoke.
The patrolman who took the report, a rookie officer named Frank Sampedro, offered equal parts sympathy and mockery.

"I'm sorry this happened, Mr. Mengelt, but didn't anyone ever tell you not to walk alone down an empty street in New York City?"

"In the afternoon?" Joe asked.

"Any time," Sampedro said. "Any time."

When the paramedics finished cleaning Joe's wounds, Sampedro and his partner drove Joe back to his dorm.

"Be careful, kid," Sampedro told Joe. "This is a dangerous city."

Joe limped inside to find Natalie camped outside his door, reading a book.

"Oh, my God, Joe, what happened?" she shouted. Her shriek startled the few people who were home enough that they opened their doors and came into the hall. Joe collapsed to the floor as a group of about a dozen of his fellow freshmen crowded around to hear the story.

After he finished, a couple of his classmates expressed sympathy and congratulated him on his bravery. The most common reaction was shellshock. New York City was their playground, and now something had upset their equilibrium.

Natalie helped Joe off the hallway floor and into his room. It was his room, but she thought of it as their room. When she slept in there and he would leave first, she lingered inside and pretended that they lived together. It was the 1980s, post-women’s liberation, but Natalie approached college like a girl from 30 years prior. Ostensibly, she was here to study English literature, but her goal was to meet a guy she could take care of.
She kissed Joe’s hands, his arms, the bruises on his face. He sat back and took it. Almost enjoyed it, in fact, except for the residual pain.

“This city!” Natalie declared. “It can be so dangerous. I’m so glad you’re OK.”

“Me too,” Joe said. All the time, he was thinking of revenge, and all the time he was coming to the realization that revenge was unlikely. He would never see those two again. They had no distinguishing features that he could recall. And what was he going to do—go back to 40th Street with a gun to settle the score? Of course not. He wasn’t going to ruin his life over this.

As he sat there, Joe remembered what his father told him about blacks, about New York. He liked the black people he’d met at school. They seemed nice enough. But now Joe started thinking of them as atypical. This feeling of uncertainty was new to Joe, and deeply unsettling.

He wasn’t going to tell his parents about this, but it would forever be in the back of his mind. This jumble of anger and introspection continued to roll around in his head when Natalie said, “Maybe this isn’t the time to bring it up, but we’ve been together for about a month now. I was telling my parents about you, and they’d like to meet you.”

Joe looked at her and nodded. “Can we wait till I heal a little? I don’t want your parents’ first impression of me to be black eyes and bruises.”

“Of course,” she said, and she cuddled next to him, knowing she had everything she wanted.

*

Three weeks later, Joe Mengelt and Natalie Parker left their dorm and headed for the Port Authority to catch a Greyhound bus that would take them to Dover, Delaware. Natalie offered to pay for Joe’s ticket—“You’re my guest,” she told him—but Joe say he would rather pay for his own. He offered to pay for Natalie’s, and she let him. “That’s so sweet of you,” she said.
They settled into seats for the two-hour ride. Joe had his biology textbook in his lap and Natalie wrapped around his arm. He loved the sensation he felt every time she touched him.

“You’re going to love my parents,” she said, “and they’re going to love you.”

Joe had no idea what to expect. He’d never met anyone’s parents before. Make that any girl’s parents. He wondered about Natalie’s house. Natalie had a little sister who was 11. What was that going to be like?

Traffic getting out of New York was miserable, as always, and the ride ended up being more like three hours. Natalie’s father met them at the bus station in a Camaro. “My dad’s midlife crisis car,” she whispered.

“Rob Parker,” he said, sticking out his hand to Joe. “Nice to meet you, Joe. Welcome to Dover. Natalie has told us so much about you.”

Joe couldn’t imagine what. “Nice to meet you too, sir.”

“Call me Rob.”

“Would it be OK if I called you Mr. Parker?”

“I like to think of Mr. Parker as my dad,” Rob Parker said with a smile that reminded Joe of Natalie’s.

“OK ... Rob,” Joe said.

They made small talk back to the house, a two-story stucco-and-brick colonial that would have fit perfectly in several neighborhoods in Joe’s hometown of Garden City. Natalie’s mother, Rose, was waiting at the door in a lavender dress protected by an apron.

“Joe, it is so nice to finally meet you!” she declared.
Joe hung on the word “finally.” If he were the kind of person who talked much, he would have said, “What do you mean, ‘finally’? We’ve been dating for maybe six weeks.”

Instead, he returned the pleasantries and listened as Natalie’s mom outlined the weekend. “Joe, you’ll sleep in the guest room downstairs. You’ll have your own bathroom. We’re having a roast tonight—I hope you’re hungry—and tomorrow night we’re having a little party. I hope that’s OK. Jessica—that’s Natalie’s sister—is spending the night at a friend’s, but she’ll be home tomorrow.”

Wait. A party? That sounded daunting to Joe, but he said OK. At least he could ease into the weekend.

“That sounds great, Mom,” Natalie said. To Joe, she said, “Let me show you my room,” and she grabbed his hand and yanked him up the stairs.

“Dinner’s in 15 minutes,” Rose said.

When they got into Natalie’s room, she shut the door and gave Joe a lingering kiss. “Thanks for doing this,” she said. “Thanks for being a good sport. You’ll like my parents’ friends. They’re really nice.”

Over dinner, the Parkers gave Joe only a mild interrogation. Once Joe had reinforced that he was indeed pre-med, they relaxed. It looked like their daughter had snagged a doctor. Natalie retold the story of the night she first popped into Joe’s room, and her parents “oohed” and “aahed” at the couple’s good fortune.

Meeting parents, having dinner at someone’s house, having a sleepover—all this was new to Joe, and a bit overwhelming. But on some level he understood that he needed to learn how to exchange pleasantries.

“Natalie tells me that you are in business, sir.”
Rob and Rose looked at each other and laughed. “In a manner of speaking, yes,” Rob said. “I run a company that invests in businesses that are introducing new products. Businesses that need financing come to us, and we decide whether we think the product has potential. If it does, we invest.”

The natural next question from Joe would have been, “What products have you found so far?” But Joe just said, “That sounds interesting.”

“It is!” Rose exclaimed. “One of the new products …”

“Oh, don’t bore the boy with this, Rose,” Rob said, smiling. “Let him enjoy his dinner. He’ll meet some of the people we’ve invested in at the party tomorrow.”

Joe smiled in gratitude at Mr. Parker, glad to be free of conversational duties for the moment.

After dinner, the Parkers sat in their living room and watched TV. This, too, was something new to Joe. After dinner at his house, his parents usually worked or read while Joe did homework. He’d brought his homework with him to Delaware, and after a few minutes he excused himself, saying he needed to finish some reading.

The Parkers said good night, and Natalie gave him a kiss on the cheek.

A few hours later, after her parents had gone to sleep, Natalie slipped into the guest room to see Joe. He’d fallen asleep reading, and she decided to wake him up by slipping her hand into his pajama bottom. He writhed, and she moaned quietly into his ear. He finished quickly. Natalie handed him a tissue and whispered, “Thanks for coming.”

*

The next night, Joe found himself at a far bigger party than he expected. The Parkers had hired a caterer, a bartender, and a deejay, and they’d invited a few dozen friends and relatives. Natalie’s sister,
Jessica, was there, but she didn’t say much. She just giggled. That made Joe happy—one less person to talk to.

Natalie hung on Joe’s arm and introduced him around to the people she knew. Her dad made the rest of the introductions. “This is Joe Mengelt, Natalie’s boyfriend,” he said proudly. “He’s at UNYC, studying to be a doctor.” Everyone acted suitably impressed.

“What kind of medicine, young man?” they would say.

“Brain surgery,” Joe would say.

“You must be a very smart and talented young man.”

Joe would look down, because he didn’t know what to say to that.

Around 9:30, Natalie excused herself for a minute to freshen up, and Joe stood alone. He was about to make his way to the guest room when Rob Parker, drink in hand, sidled up, along with a man in his early 30s.

“Joe, Joe,” he said. “I want to introduce you to someone. Remember I told you about the companies I invest in? Well, this is Ray Harper, and he runs one of those companies. Ray is making—well, you tell him, Ray.”

“Are you familiar with computer chips, Joe?” Joe shook his head. “Well, we have developed a chip that we can implant in dogs that will tell us their family name, address, and phone number. It’s about the size of one grain of rice. A vet injects it under the dog’s skin, and, if the dog ever gets loose, we can use a computer program to read the chip, find the dog, and reunite it with its owner. We’re almost ready to go to market with this, and your father-in-law—excuse me, I’m getting ahead of myself here—Mr. Parker is investing in our business.”
The microchip intrigued Joe.

“Let me ask you something about the computer chip,” he said. “How far can the dog go before you can’t track him anymore?”

“The range for this first chip is 50 miles,” Harper said. “But we think in time we’ll be able to develop a chip that can be tracked anywhere in the world.”

“That is a great idea,” Joe said. “Very impressive.” He meant it.

“Well, not as impressive as brain surgery,” Harper said. “I understand that’s your plan.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s a difficult field.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, good luck to you. Let me give you my card.” Harper handed Joe a card. He glanced at the company name: Fido Finder. He rubbed the raised lettering.

“If there’s ever anything I can do to help you,” Harper said, “give me a call.”

Rob Parker elbowed Joe and said, “This is your ‘plastics’ moment, Joe.” They both started laughing. Joe had no idea what they were talking about. Parker noted the quizzical look on Joe’s face. “I guess you’ve never seen the movie ‘The Graduate,’” he said.

No, Joe said.

“You should see it,” Parker said. “It’s a classic.”

“Anyway, nice meeting you, Joe,” Harper said.
Natalie returned almost immediately after her dad and Harper walked away. She and Joe talked, and they agreed that they’d turn in by 10:30. The bus back they wanted to catch to get back to school was leaving Dover at 9 the next morning.

“Did you enjoy yourself this weekend?” Natalie said.

“I did,” Joe said.

“Would you come back again?”

“I would.”

Natalie grabbed his arm and kissed him on the cheek. He kissed her back. She ran her hand across his chest, and he felt Harper’s card there. Something told him to keep it.

CHAPTER 4

Joe and Natalie made several trips to Delaware over the next four years, and they also took the Long Island Railroad to Garden City to see Joe’s parents. With each trip, they fell more deeply in love. Joe had never understood the need for real human contact, but he craved Natalie. Her touch, her support, her warm words affected Joe in ways he never would have imagined.

In Joe, Natalie had found a polymer she could mold into any form she desired. She taught him how to deal with other people, to channel his emotions for good, to be able to deal with any situation. She would never have considered herself manipulative. She thought herself helpful. Here was Joe, who had no real understanding of how to deal with the world. Here she is, making him a fully functional person. He needed her, and she loved that.
The one area of Joe’s life where he didn’t need any help was school. He aced his classes, which he found almost laughably easy. He listened to his classmates bitch about organic chemistry and simply could not understand. Natalie, meanwhile, lasted a week in general chemistry before dropping the class. She thought a career in teaching might be nice, but what she wanted more than that was for them to be Dr. and Mrs. Joe Mengelt.

After junior year, they moved into an apartment together and found the living arrangement suitable. While Joe applied—and was accepted—to UNYC’s medical school, Natalie did her schoolwork, kept the apartment tidy, and fixed their meals. It was a very ‘50s arrangement that suited both of them.

The night after commencement, Joe proposed. He pulled out a ring and said, “Would you like to marry me?” Natalie cried. They planned to be married after Joe’s first year of medical school, and they were. She made all the plans in between hours at her job selling perfume in a department store.

All he had to do was show up, which he did capably, as did 225 guests.

“What do you think of Mexico for our honeymoon?” she asked one night. “Instead of going during the summer, let’s go during winter break.”

“Sounds fine,” he said, not bothering to take his nose out of his anatomy textbook.

She booked a week for them at an exclusive, secluded resort in Cozumel, envisioning a quiet, romantic week where they could plan out their future and perhaps start a family. On their third night there, she said, “Let’s go down to the beach and take a walk.” Joe obliged. They were about half a mile from their room—and all alone—when Natalie stopped, grabbed Joe’s hand and kissed him. “I feel like the luckiest girl in the world,” she said. Joe just smiled and kissed her back.

They sat down on the beach and watched the moon reflect off the water. All was quiet. Natalie was just about to tell Joe about her latest idea—that they buy an apartment in New York—when out of
nowhere a man came up to them mumbling something about needing directions. Joe and Natalie could barely see the man and didn’t understand what he said. He seemed drunk and slightly disoriented.

“What do you need?” Joe asked.

“Dinero! Ahora!”

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a gun. “Dinero! Ahora!” Joe had taken French in high school, but he knew enough Spanish to reach into his pocket and pull out his wallet immediately. He handed it over silently. The man looked inside and found fifty dollars in American money. He threw the wallet at Joe, reached his arm straight out and fired one shot at Natalie. The bullet nicked her arm, but it was painful enough for her to start screaming. Once she did, the man took off.

Natalie was only bleeding slightly, but there wasn’t enough light for Joe to know that. He ripped a piece of the T-shirt he was wearing and tied it around her arm. He picked her up and carried her back to the resort, where a cab was waiting out front.

“Hospital,” Joe ordered.

Inside the emergency room an hour later, Natalie was cleaned up and bandaged. She was more scared than hurt, and Joe was more angry than scared.

“We should not have come here,” Joe said. “My father has always told me that it’s a world full of animals, and he is right.”

In the hotel that night, Joe and Natalie received the requisite apologies from the management. They sent wine and fruit and a letter assuring the newlyweds that their every want would be cared for for as long as they stayed. What Natalie wanted was for Joe to hold her. What Joe wanted was to go home as soon as possible. He booked their travel, and they left four days early.
Back in New York, Joe and Natalie resumed their lives as if nothing had happened, and a frightening incident became a great dinner-party story, slightly embellished. The gun, which they could not see, became bigger, the man more ferocious, their loss slightly greater than it was. It was all harmless, the better to engage Natalie’s friends and their respective families. Joe had never been much of a raconteur, but he enjoyed telling this story—and the story of his mugging as a first-year student—if only to illustrate how the world had become overrun by scum.

“We need to do something about this,” Joe would say, and their guests would nod, even though they had no idea what to do or what he meant.

He shared the story with his med school classmates, who were delighted to listen because Joe rarely spoke and, when he did, he usually made them look bad by knowing what they should have known but didn’t. Now they knew that he was not always a fortunate son. He became more human to them.

But not to the chief resident. Dr. Jerry Koriasky had never liked Joe. He found Joe arrogant and humorless. Those criticisms were understandable. Joe possessed extraordinary knowledge. He had no trouble remembering everything he read and all that he was taught. He could quote at length from textbooks, and he demonstrated a deft touch with basic procedures. Joe also had no discernible sense of humor, and Koriasky loved a good joke. Koriasky started every class with a one-liner or a joke, and, while everyone else laughed to stay on his good side, Joe would not react.

“Joe Mengelt had a humorectomy as a child and has never recovered,” Koriasky liked to say in front of the class. Joe just stared at him. Joe didn’t like being the butt of jokes or the center of attention. He just wanted to do his work.
One afternoon while making rounds in City General with the students, Koriasky demonstrated a particularly intricate maneuver to stop people who had cut themselves from bleeding to death. Joe raised his hand and suggested an alternative method that would work even faster. He stepped in to demonstrate, but, as he did, Koriasky glared at him. “Thank you, Mr. Mengelt, but this is the preferred procedure. I realize you think you’re better than everyone else, and that you know more about medicine than everyone else, but you don’t.”

Years later, Koriasky would use Joe’s technique and claim it as his own. For now, he wanted to step on Joe and cut him down to size. Koriasky thought Joe haughty, but that was a misreading. The only person Joe ever measured himself against was himself. He never went out of his way to show up his classmates or his supervisor. In fact, he didn’t care a thing about his classmates or his supervisor. They were background noise. If Joe could have gone through medical school alone, he would have. Joe intended to be a great doctor, and he approached medical school with strength of purpose. All he wanted at this stage was to get past his colleagues and secure a residency at the best hospital in New York, West Side General.

Joe talked about this with Natalie every night. He said this is what would make him happy. She advised him to keep doing what he was doing but suggested that maybe, just maybe, he ought to be a little more social.

“You want people to want to be around you,” she said, kissing him on the top of his head.

In the middle of his senior year, Joe decided he wanted to pursue heart surgery rather than brain surgery. He made an appointment with his supervisor and, when the day came, he went to Koriasky’s office to deliver the news. Koriasky’s door was open when Joe arrived, but there was no welcome waiting. Koriasky didn’t even look up from what he was reading.
“Dr. Koriasky, I know the National Resident Match Program decisions are coming up shortly, and I plan to apply to West Side General,” Joe said.

“Oh, do you?” Koriasky said.

“Yes, I do.”

Koriasky looked up at Mengelt and smiled.

“I suppose you think you’re entitled to West Side,” Koriasky said.

“I believe I have earned West Side,” Joe said.

“We’ll see,” Koriasky said. “I’ll take your request under advisement.”

Joe got up to leave, then turned around and, taking Natalie’s suggestion to heart, said, “Dr. Koriasky, whatever you perceive that I’ve done to you, I’m sorry. I am trying to be the best doctor I can be.”

“Knowing medical procedure is not all there is to being a great doctor, Mr. Mengelt. There is so much more to it than that. You may have perfect knowledge, as you seem to. What you lack, Mr. Mengelt, are people skills. You appear to have no personality, no sense of humor, nothing to make patients feel confident.”

“I believe they would feel confident knowing that I know the best way to help them heal.”

“I believe you know a lot about medicine, Mr. Mengelt. And very little about being a doctor. In any event, I will take your request under advisement. You may go now.”

Koriasky resumed his reading, and Joe left the office fuming. He tromped through the streets of lower Manhattan like some human bus on the sidewalk. He walked so fiercely that even his fellow New Yorkers noticed. They sidestepped this onrushing maniac lest they be trampled.
“How dare he,” Joe complained to Natalie when he got home. “That arrogant jackass. I do know a lot about medicine. I have perfect scores. I am better than my classmates. I deserve West Side.”

Natalie went over and held him. “I’m sorry, honey. I know you’re the best. I’ve always known.”

“I need a hospital that will hone my skills.”

“I know you do. And you will get one. Koriasky isn’t going to punish the best doctor in his class just to prove a point. Come, sit down and eat.”

Joe looked at the table and saw his favorite meal—steak, baked potato, salad. He was in no mood to eat.

“I appreciate this, Natalie, I really do. But I’m not hungry right now.”

“Listen, Dr. Mengelt, you need to eat,” she said, smiling. She steered him to the table. “You have about eight weeks till Match Day. You have time to change his mind. Now, eat.”

Joe looked at his wife and smiled. Natalie’s IQ wasn’t close to his, but she was good with people. She understood him, that was for sure.

They sat down and ate, mostly in silence. As Natalie cleared the dishes, she said, “Humor them, Joe. I told you, they expect you to be social. These guys want someone they can play golf with. So, be social.”

“I don’t play golf,” Joe said.

“Be social.”

“I will.”

*
Over the next two months, Joe did what he could to ingratiate himself with Koriasky and his classmates. When Koriasky joked, Joe laughed, even if he didn’t think the joke was funny, which he never did. Even if he didn’t understand the joke, which he often didn’t. When they went out for a drink, he joined them, though he rarely imbibed. One night after rounds, Joe bought the first round of drinks. His fellow future-doctors pretended to fall off their stools.

“Joe Mengelt buying a round?” said Ken Shames, a mediocre doctor as far as Mengelt was concerned, but one of Koriasky’s favorites. “I believe this qualifies as a medical miracle.”

Everyone laughed, even Joe, even though Joe did not find it at all funny. If they could have read Joe’s mind, they would seen the words “ungrateful bastards” and “waste of money” flashing in neon.

By late February, though, Joe was feeling better about his chances. “I think they like me now,” he told Natalie one morning as he was getting dressed.

“That’s great,” she said. “Joe, you deserve the best, and you’re going to get it.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

On the first Monday in March, the class gathered in the lecture hall for Match Day, 150 future doctors preparing to find out where they’d be spending the next 3-5 years of their life. And to some degree, they would also be finding out their future earnings. A good placement in a good hospital would set them up for life—certainly long enough to pay off their student loans, anyway.

Koriasky walked into the room, and the class grew silent. “I hold in my hands your futures,” he said. Everyone, even Joe, giggled nervously. “And I know that’s a funny line because even Mr. Mengelt laughed.”

The class broke up. Joe forced the best smile he could, even as he was thinking of what an asshole Koriasky was.
“I will pass these out, but do not open yours until everyone has his or her envelope. Once you have opened them, class is dismissed.”

Koriasky walked up and down the rows, distributing the news. When he got to Joe, he placed the envelope on the desk and said, “I think you’ll like this, Dr. Mengelt.”

Joe felt a sudden relief. He was going to like this.

When the last envelope was handed out, Koriasky said, “And the winners are ...” The next noise was the sound of 150 envelopes opening at once. The noise after that was a mixture of war whoops and tears. Joe opened his slowly.

“Congratulations, Dr. Mengelt,” it said. “You have been assigned a residency at City General to begin ...”

Joe did not look at the rest. He folded up the letter and put it in his pocket. He thought the top of his head might blow off. He had a good mind to walk to the front of the room and strangle Koriasky. What in the hell was he going to learn at City General? City General was a teaching hospital, a veritable MASH unit. The work there was rudimentary, mostly emergency work on people who couldn’t afford to pay. Patch ‘em up, get ’em out. The rabble of the city went to City General because they couldn’t go anywhere else, and the doctors who worked on them were, as Joe would tell people later, “the doctors those people deserved.”

*

Joe typically said little when he got home, so busy was he rerunning in his mind the day’s events and the decisions he made. Today, though, when he walked in the door, when Natalie heard him slam his bag on the hallway table, she came running.

“What happened?”

“That son of a bitch Koriasky screwed me,” he said. “City General.”

He pulled the letter out and handed it to her. She read it slowly.
“Joey, I’m so sorry,” she said.

“I can’t believe he did this. I’m the best doctor in the class, the best doctor he’s probably ever seen or is ever going to see. And yet he puts me in the worst hospital. This is going to ruin my reputation and hold me back from developing my skills.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“What good would that do?”

“Go talk to him. Ask him why. This makes no sense.”

Joe went into the bedroom and closed the door. “No dinner tonight,” he said. He lay on the bed and considered his next move. He could quit altogether, but that would be a waste of his talents and the years. He was closing in on 30—a little too late to start anything else. He could challenge the decision, but the likelihood of success was slim. Or he could do his residency and suffer in silence. When Natalie finally came to bed about three hours later, Joe closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

At 6 the next morning, he woke up, showered, and left the apartment. He wandered around the city for a couple of hours, showing up at Koriasky’s office at 8:40 to wait for him. And to fume. Koriasky finally showed up at 9:15, coffees in each hand.

“Ah, Dr. Mengelt,” Koriasky said. “I thought I might see you here this morning. Coffee?"

The gesture momentarily stunned Joe—he knew I was coming and he brought coffee?—but he accepted. He needed coffee.

“Why?” Joe blurted.

“Dr. Mengelt, I assigned you to City General for two reasons: One, you are an excellent doctor. The people who use City General need an excellent doctor. They don’t typically see doctors with your skill level. Two, while there is little I can teach you about medicine, apparently, you need to learn humility. You need to see patients as individuals. As people. Whenever I see you in rounds, you treat the patients as if they were diseases rather than people. You have to deal with the whole person, Dr.
Mengelt. You have to learn to relate to the people you’re treating. Find out why they are like they are. What caused their behavior? What can you do to not only treat the disease they have, but make them well?”

“You’re punishing me,” Joe said.

“You can look at it as punishment,” Koriasky said, “or you can look at it as an opportunity.”

“I would be so much more useful to the world at a research hospital.”

“That is your opinion. How’s the coffee?”

Joe hadn’t touched the coffee, and now he was sure he wouldn’t. He walked out of Koriasky’s office without saying a word or taking the coffee, went home, and called his father.

“Dad, what would you do?”

“Joe, your supervisor made a mistake. But if you fight him, you will only make it worse. You need to go to City General and put in your time. When you are finished there, you will land well.”

“How? Being assigned to City General is telling the medical world that I am a lesser doctor.”

“Granted, that is true,” the elder Dr. Mengelt said. “But you will prove yourself in time. And while you are there, I am sure you will learn something to benefit us all.”

Joe hung up the phone feeling no better. He plunked himself onto the bed and seethed. What had his dad meant when he said, “Learn something to benefit us all”? What could be learned by treating the indigent and the diseased that would benefit others?

Joe lay down, and for two hours he flopped around. He finally got feeling angrier and more tired, and he went into his top dresser drawer to find a Quaalude. Joe generally didn’t like the side effects, but he needed some quality sleep. He found the pill, and he also found a business card belonging to Ray Harper.

Ray Harper? Who the hell is that? Fido Finder? Oh, yeah. The guy he met at Natalie’s parents’ house who had the computer chips that tracked lost pets. Why did he keep the card?
Joe was just about to toss Harper’s info in the trash when he got an idea. He called Harper.

“I don’t know if you remember me,” Joe said, “but I met you at my in-laws’ house. The Parkers?”

Harper searched his memory. It had been a good six years. “Sure, I remember,” he lied. “What can I do for you?”

“Your Fido Finder chip—how’s that going?”

“Really well,” Harper said. “We have clients in 10 states, and we’re starting to get some interest from animal shelters around the country. Why? What’s your interest?”

Joe said he’d been thinking about the product and wanted to see how it works. “Could I possibly see one? I’ll be glad to return it.”

Harper offered to mail him a sample and a video that explained how it works. A couple of days later, the package arrived in the mail. Joe tore it open. Inside a plastic bag was a speck—something the approximate size and shape of a grain of rice—and a videocassette.

He turned on the VCR and watched a tutorial that explained Fido Finder. A soothing female voice came on: “Welcome to Fido Finder, one of the newest products on the market today. With our Fido Finder, you’ll never lose your dog again. Let me explain how it works.”

As a veterinarian (or maybe it was an actor in a lab coat) held up a syringe, the announcer explained that the chip was injected into the dog, typically in the elbow or the withers. “Inside this minuscule chip is information about the dog. So let’s say your dog runs away. You can call our 800-number to report the dog. A member of our staff”—here, they showed a room full of happy people in cubicles typing away—“will go into our computer system and tell you the exact location of your dog by tracking the radio frequency that’s inside each chip.”

At this point in the video, Joe watched one of the Fido Finder staff members telling the person whose dog is lost, “Mr. Johnson, you can find your lovely collie Misty at 485 Mapleton Drive.” Misty’s owner drives over to that address, and Misty comes running to the car.
“Owner and his faithful friend are reunited,” the announcer said. In the final shot, Mr. Johnson returns home, Misty jumps out of the passenger window and is greeted by the whole Johnson family.

“And that is Fido Finder,” the announcer said. “Your dog will never be lost again.”

Joe sat back and smiled. Then he called Harper. “Fido Finder is a brilliant idea,” Joe said. “I want to order 200.”

“Did you end up going to veterinary school?” Harper asked.

“No. But I know a lot of vets.”

Harper didn’t ask any more questions. A sale is a sale.

That night, when Natalie came home, she found her husband in a most jovial mood. She barely had a second to put down her purse before he grabbed her and started to waltz to music only he could hear.

When she asked why the good mood, Joe explained that he had come to terms with his punishment—“Excuse me, my assignment”—and was now ready to do the best work he could do.

“I’m so happy to hear that,” Natalie said. “I was worried.”

“Worry no more, my dear,” Joe said, smiling.

A week later, a small box with 200 Fido Finders arrived at Joe Mengelt’s house, along with a radio device to track the frequencies. He put the box in his dresser drawer and thought about his first day at City General.

“Well, Dad,” he said to himself, “you wanted me to do something to benefit us all. Here we go.”
CHAPTER 5

NEW YORK CITY, 1989

Joe put on his scrubs, grabbed a cup of coffee and his briefcase, and kissed Natalie goodbye. “Be good,” she said, and if you’d heard the way she said it, you wouldn’t know whether she meant it as an order or in a conspiratorial way. It didn’t matter. Joe was going to be Joe—loving to her, but suspicious and surly to the rest of the world.

He arrived at City General, sat and waited for orientation. He looked around the waiting area and recognized a few faces—mostly those of people he considered the dregs of his class. Then he sized up the remaining crop of residents. Their scuffed shoes and unkempt hair left him cold. One, whose name badge read “Dr. Aronoff,” introduced himself and tried to be friendly, but Joe kept his distance. After a couple of one-word exchanges, Aronoff went off to find more congenial company.

Joe wasn’t here to make friends. He was going to prove that he belonged elsewhere, helping people whose illnesses were more a matter of fate than stupidity. Here at City General, he would give these patients the benefit of his expertise, and then he would go home. This hospital is lucky to have me, he thought.
At 9:05—five minutes late; already a bad sign in Joe’s mind—an administrator whose name Joe didn’t catch came in and instructed the residents where they were to go. Joe started in the emergency room, and he was barely 10 minutes into his stint before the first patient, an idiot who accidentally clipped off the tip of his finger trying to slice open a can of frozen orange juice, came in. Joe took a quick look, flushed the cut with water and bandaged the finger.

The line of patients continued, one after another. There were the chronic coughs, broken bones, a head trauma that occurred after the man said something impolite to his common-law wife. A 16-year-old girl named LaShandra Stephenson came in, wondering why she had gained 20 pounds. After a quick exam, Joe delivered the news that she was pregnant. It was hard to tell who was more incredulous.

“Only had sex but once,” she said.

“That’s all it takes sometimes,” Joe said. “Didn’t you know that?”

She shook her head.

How does she not know that? he thought.

He sent LaShandra Stephenson and the others on their way with minimal effort and equally minimal compassion. Joe recognized that others might see this as disdain, but he felt that if the supervisors looked closely, they would see that he was doing what needed to be done. Patch ’em up, get ’em out. There were too many people here who needed care. There was no time to sit and chat.

Each night, Joe would go home and regale Natalie with stories of patients “so stupid it’s amazing they can tie their shoes.”

“We are doomed as a society,” he would say. “Drunks, addicts, reprobates. That’s all I see, all day long. This society is breathtakingly stupid, and equally dangerous.”

“Just a year there,” Natalie would respond. “Then we can go wherever you want and you can practice the medicine you want.”
For the next few weeks, Joe and the other residents were put on rotations that allowed them to explore the workings of the hospital up close. Joe handled each assignment with equal dexterity and ease. His supervisors were impressed, but also wary. Joe’s reputation had preceded him.

City General’s policy for residents stated that after a month learning the ropes, they would be assigned for the next year to work in a specific department. They learned about their assignments in private meetings with Jake Sweedler, the hospital administrator. Each resident was given a time on a Friday afternoon to discover their immediate future. If they worked weekends, they’d start there tomorrow. If not, bright and early Monday.

Joe heard Sweedler’s secretary call “Dr. Mengelt,” and he went in. Sweedler stood up from behind his large pine desk and extended his hand. Joe was prepared to hate him.

“Dr. Mengelt, I’ve been hearing wonderful things,” Sweedler said. “Clearly, you are in a class by yourself.”

Sweedler looked hard at Joe and waited for a reaction. When a slight smile crept over Joe’s face, Sweedler continued.

“Everyone thinks you are going to be a stellar doctor. Everyone also is concerned by your demeanor. Look, Dr. Mengelt, you have to treat patients as people, as friends, as confidantes. You want them to feel comfortable around you. When you have that ability, you will go from being a technically great doctor—which you already are—to being a truly great doctor.”

“Mr. Sweedler,” Joe said, “I’m never going to be a gregarious person.”

“That’s not a necessary qualification. We want you to be a nice person. We want you to care. Show compassion.”

“I agree,” said Joe. “In fact, I would like to be assigned to obstetrics, if that is all right with you.”
“That’s an excellent call,” Sweedler said. “Because that’s where we’re going to put you. New mothers, new life. We think you’ll get great benefit there. Now please, Dr. Mengelt, relax. Loosen up. Smile with the patients. Celebrate with them. Even if they’re not happy to be parents—and you’re going to find a fair number of people like that here—tell them about the joys of parenting.”

“I will do that,” Joe said. “Even though, I’m sure you would agree, that most of these people shouldn’t be reproducing.”

“That may be your opinion, Joe. And you may be right. But the fact is, they are reproducing. So let’s make the best of the situation. Send them out of here optimistic. Don’t let them go home bitter or angry.”

“Fine,” said Joe, and the way he said it, Sweedler wasn’t sure if he was resigned or infuriated.

*

After a successful—or at least non-confrontational—first two months in obstetrics, Joe found himself working alone. He was slightly surprised by this development. After all, he was still a resident. But this is City General, he muttered, so what can I expect?

One morning, when he’d been at work about 10 minutes, barely enough time to pour his coffee, he heard his name over the loudspeaker. “Dr. Mengelt. Emergency. STAT!” Joe raced down the hall to a delivery room where LaShandra Stephenson—the patient he’d seen a couple of months ago who didn’t know she was pregnant—and her mother were screaming at each other. Magneta Stephenson had given birth to LaShandra when she was 15. She had vowed to keep her daughter from getting pregnant, and she was furious that she was going to be a grandmother at age 31.

“You stupid little bitch!” the mother shouted. “Sixteen and pregnant and now you gonna deliver a month early.”

“I’m sorry, mama,” LaShandra said, sobbing.
The nurse was standing between mother and daughter, trying to calm them both down and having no luck. Joe joined the nurse, forming a protective wall. He spoke softly, but the look in his eyes, a look of fury, froze both of them for a few precious seconds.

“Ladies, please,” he said. “This is a hospital. Now what seems to be the problem?”

“Dumb bitch got herself knocked up and now she gonna deliver a month early,” the mother said.

“What makes you say she’s going to have the baby now?” Joe asked.

“Water done broke,” the mother said.

Joe instructed LaShandra to lay back, and yes, her water had broken. The baby was crowning, and there was no going back.

“Mrs. Stephenson, would you please leave the room now?”

“Ain’t leaving my baby.”

“Nurse, please escort Mrs. Stephenson outside. Mrs. Stephenson, please.”

The nurse gently took her arm. At first, Magneta tried to resist, but Joe looked at her and promised to give her daughter the best care. It might have been the first time Joe ever tried to use any form of bedside manner. He was surprised to see it worked. The nurse and Magneta left the room, and a few minutes later, the nurse came back alone. She was just in time to see LaShandra in the final stages of giving birth.

Joe knew exactly how this would go. He had the neonatal unit standing by just in case, but LaShandra was a little more than eight months pregnant by this time. He wasn’t worried. In less than an hour, she delivered a six-pound baby boy.

“You have a beautiful baby boy!” the nurse said.

Joe tried his hand at small talk. “What are you going to name him?”

“Le’Andre,” she said.
“Oh,” said Joe.

While the nurse cleaned up the baby, Joe sat by LaShandra and explained that in a little while, he planned to run some tests to make sure Le’Andre’s lungs had fully developed. He also said he was going to give the baby an injection to help him stay healthy.

“Go ahead,” LaShandra said. “You know what you doin’.”

Joe Mengelt wouldn’t argue with that. He went into his bag. He took out a Fido Finder and injected it in the underside of Le’Andre Stephenson’s arm.

“Now we’ll see where you go in this world,” Joe said quietly.

The baby let out a scream. Joe swaddled him in a blanket, adjusted his tiny hat, and brought him to his mother. He showed her how to breastfeed and in no time, Le’Andre was asleep.

At this point, Joe expected a thank you from LaShandra Stephenson, but she was consumed with her new baby. “You gonna be good,” she whispered to him. “Gonna take you to school, show you off.”

Joe stood there and watched with a mixture of contempt and anger. He imagined the life of Le’Andre Stephenson—neglect at home, poor schooling, gang initiation, crack user, either in prison or dead by the time he was 18. Maybe earlier. He could not understand the cycle of poverty, and why people like LaShandra didn’t see that she was repeating her mother’s mistakes, which was going to destroy her son’s life. Things started out bleak and got worse from there. And not just for the kid, Joe felt, but for society.

But Joe understood. He understood too well. After being mugged twice—once on the streets of New York and once on a beach in Mexico—he decided that if these people wouldn’t take care of their own, he would. From this day forward, he would be able to track every move that Le’Andre Stephenson made. The Fido Finder would see to that.
That day, he delivered two more babies, and that night, he went home and turned on the radio device that Ray Harper had sent to see how the Fido Finder worked. The frequency read-out showed that all three children were at 11100 Broadway, City General’s address. Joe was ecstatic.

Over the course of his residency, Joe Mengelt brought another 163 children into the world. Almost all of them came from poverty-stricken pockets of New York where, as far as Joe was concerned, they already had three strikes against them. All of them left City General with a Fido Finder implanted in their arm.

In his heart, Joe knew what he was doing was at least unethical and potentially illegal. He didn’t care. He believed that society would consider him a hero if anyone ever found out—which he was sure that they wouldn’t. There were nights when he wanted to tell Natalie what he’d been doing to the babies and why, but he wasn’t sure she would understand. And in any case, he didn’t want her to be culpable. So Joe’s experiment was Joe’s own secret, one he was glad to keep to himself.

At the beginning of Joe’s residency, the conversation at home was roughly the same every night. “How was your day?” Natalie asked.

“How was your day?” Natalie asked.

“The usual,” Joe said. “Another two babies brought into a world that’s too crowded. Another two babies we’re going to be paying for when they’re in prison.”

Natalie attempted to argue back. “Not everyone is a reprobate,” she said.

And then Joe was off, spouting statistic after statistic of the depressing lives these children would lead and how eventually it would filter down to him and her.

“We won’t be able to walk the streets,” he said. “It will be chaos. Those of us who can afford it will all be living behind locked gates and carrying guns to protect ourselves.”

Eventually, Natalie grew tired of this argument. So instead, when he walked in, she would say, “I hope you had great day, honey. Let me get you some dinner and tell you about my day.” And then she
was off, with stories about the women of leisure she had spent the day with or the store clerks she had encountered.

Joe heard but didn’t listen.

*

At night, after they watched a little television or, once a month, set aside some time for what Joe called “marital relations,” Natalie would read in bed and Joe would go off to their second bedroom to write. He had a desk and computer in there, and each night he would add a little to what he had started as a way to vent but had come to think of as his manifesto.

He opened the document labeled “How to Save Society,” poured himself a cup of tea and typed:

Each day, I grow weary, watching the uneducated and poorly educated tromp through this city with a sense of entitlement they have neither earned nor deserve. They expect free everything—free medical care, free food, free transportation. If you don’t give them what they want—and they are all takers—you are immediately branded a racist. This must stop!

My hope is that one day, the real residents of this city will rise up and say enough. Yet I see no movement toward that at this time. Our leaders—the mayor, the Department of Education, the police, my hospital administrators—bow to their whims. They say yes to whatever these people want, if only to keep them quiet.

In my months at City General Hospital, I have seen a parade of brown and black faces come through the door expecting our short staff to make them well when they have done nothing to help themselves. They have subsisted on diets of salty snack foods and sugar; spent their welfare checks on cigarettes, which they smoke incessantly—our waiting room smells like an enormous ashtray; have indiscriminate sexual relations with whomever is around; sit on the couch all day and do nothing to better themselves.
Meanwhile, with scarce resources, we are expected to make them healthy. We do that, and we do that more often than they should have a right to expect, yet their ingratitude is stunning. I hear the words “thank you” almost never, but I hear complaints, criticisms, and questions almost non-stop. They are treated for free, yet they have the audacity to argue with me when I tell them to take their medicine at the prescribed times, to eat better food, to take advantage of the free—FREE!—birth control they are provided.

I had a patient today, a 350-pound Mexican, who was pregnant, take out a pack of cigarettes and start to light one in my office. She screamed at me in Spanish when I told her no. A black woman in a shabby housedress was eating a McDonald’s cheeseburger when I came in to examine her. A dirty white woman—a white woman! I almost never see them—came in with two children under the age of 2 and a third one on the way.

What is going to happen to our country? Responsible people like Natalie and me will have one, maybe two children. But these cretins will continue to procreate. They will have seven, eight, ten children, and in a couple of generations the intelligent people will be overrun by an entitled brigade of morons who will destroy us.

As I watch what goes on, I consider the idea of mandatory sterilization and think that it is due time for implementation. Although I have not decided on a way to carry this out at City General, I have at least made the first step by installing tracking devices in my newborn patients. I have purchased something called a Fido Finder, which I implant in each newborn’s skin. I am then able to follow their every movement.

This very clever technology will help us solve crimes when they occur. Sterilization would stop crimes before they start, but until we can devise a clandestine method for that, we will at least have a way to track these people and get them off the street before they can commit more random acts of violence.
I am typing this manifesto for myself because I believe that at this moment, there are too many bleeding hearts and liberals who would howl that this is a racist tack to take. There is nothing racist about this. I am protecting the population from animals. If we could rid the city of rats, we would. Why is it wrong, then, to attempt to rid the city of human vermin?

I suspect there will be those who say that what I am doing is wrong. They will claim equality for all people, regardless of race, color, creed. I can hear their whining now: “He has violated the Constitution!” “He is branding these children!” “He has already prejudged them.”

I have prejudged them, yes, but that is based on extensive experience. As they say with computers: Garbage in, garbage out.

I am aware, too, that if I am exposed, my name—Mengelt—will be linked with a certain German doctor who performed horrendous experiments on children during World War II. Let there be no mistake: I deplore what Mengele did. Human beings should not be the subjects of experimentation. I will always uphold the Hippocratic oath.

What I have done is not experimentation. What I have done is to create a method of tracking people who I suspect will be a danger to society. If I am wrong about those people, then so be it. No harm. But if I am right, I have created a safe way to save lives and property.

Eventually, I know that I will be lauded for my work. I will be seen as a visionary who helped save a city. Like a superhero.

It was getting late, and Joe had to work the next day. He took the typed pages and stored them in a small safe he kept next to his desk. Natalie kept some heirloom jewelry in that safe, but she rarely had reason to open it, and Joe knew that Natalie was not the curious type. Even if she opened the safe, she would never bother to read what he had written.
Joe walked his empty teacup into the kitchen, rinsed it out, and put it in the dishwasher. He started the machine and went to bed. Natalie was already sleeping. Joe got under the blanket wearing his pajamas and a satisfied smile. There would be more to write tomorrow.
CHAPTER 6

A little more than two months had passed since Le’Andre Stephenson and Shabazz Hakim had been arrested for the Victor’s murders. In that time, New York City police had received two other calls from the same anonymous tipster. None of the crimes was as serious, though one was the brutal beating of a truck driver delivering the Daily News to newsstands across Brooklyn. At about 4:30 in the morning, while the driver unloaded his truck, the men—one black, one Hispanic—ambushed him. First, one kneecapped him with a tire iron. Then, when they went through the driver’s pockets and, finding only his lunch money—six dollars and some change—they bashed his face in. The patrolman who took the report noted picking up bits of teeth among the gravel.

Two hours later, police had been informed of the suspects’ whereabouts, and both men were arrested.

Danny Cartwright had been busy chronicling the arrests. His editors wanted a story about this mysterious tipster, and he had to tell them that even the police were stumped. The anonymous voice never called from a traceable line, and he never stayed on the line long enough for the police to discern anything about him.

Each call went almost exactly the same way. The caller would say: “The people who did the crime”—and then he would name the crime—“are...” and then he would name their names. “They can be found at ...” and then he would name the locations and hang up.
Danny spoke to the dispatchers who took the calls. One source swore he heard a bit of a German accent, but no one else who’d taken his calls heard that.

“There’s a reason this guy knows so much,” Danny’s editors said. “Find it.”

Danny looked at the crimes and the criminals every which way and came up with nothing. Neither he nor the police could discern any pattern. The crimes occurred nowhere near each other. The criminals were all roughly the same ages 17-19, but so what? That was expected. Youth, energy, violence.

What was baffling was that none of Danny’s police sources even had a theory about who the caller might be or how he knew what he knew. If there was one thing his sources always had, it was a theory. Crackpot, maybe, but a theory nonetheless.

“You know the old joke about the football player?” homicide detective Ronald C. Greene asked Danny.

“No,” Danny said.

“Coach says to the player, ‘Son, are you ignorant or just apathetic?’ And the player says, ‘Coach, I don’t know, and I don’t care.’ Well, that’s how I feel about this.”

“Can I quote you on that?” Danny said.

“Please do,” Greene said, knowing that Danny was smart enough not to screw his police sources in print.

“I gotta find out how this guy—we know it’s a guy, right?—how this guy knows who the criminals are and where they are.”

“Good luck, kid.”

While Danny scoured the landscape for clues, The Daily News’ editorial page rhapsodized about the informant in several editorials. The one that run in the paper the day after the paper’s delivery driver was beaten read, in part:
What this person has done for New York City over the past several weeks has been a spectacular service to the greatest city on earth. We wish he would step forward so that we could thank him properly, but until he is ready, we hope he knows that he has our gratitude and friendship.

*

Dr. Lewis Fehrman, the doctor at the Riker’s Island Hospital, finally got around to examining the item he removed from Le’Andre Stephenson’s right arm. He squeezed it, held it up to the light, and noted the tiny type across its front. He couldn’t read what it said even with his glasses on, so he went to a cabinet and pulled out a microscope. Through the lens, he could see a serial number and the words “Fido Finder,” along with a trademark symbol.

Fehrman went to a computer and typed in “Fido Finder.” After a few minutes of research later, he knew the origins of the company and that Fido Finder had been purchased in 1998 by UniAmerica.com, one of the largest holding companies in North America. UniAmerica.com manufactured everything from furniture to foodstuffs, and through its pet division—4Pets—it continued to make microchips to help pet owners track their lost animals. The manufacturer was in southern New Jersey.

The images of chips that came up on the 4Pets website were smaller than the one he held in his hand, but clearly these were just newer models of the same product. How the hell did this get into Le’Andre Stephenson’s arm?

4Pets had an 800-number, so during working hours the next day, Fehrman called. He reached a voicemail maze and left a message explaining what he wanted. Then he waited two days. When no one returned the call, he called again, and he kept calling until he reached an unhelpful person who identified herself only as Maddy.

“I’m trying to trace the origins of one of your products,” Fehrman said.
“Sir, Fido Finder has not been in existence since 1998,” Maddy said. “I’m sure all of those records have long been lost or destroyed. And pets with those devices implanted in them are long dead.”

“But this wasn’t in a pet. This was in a person.”

“I don’t know how it would have gotten into a person. It is intended only for use in pets.”

“Surely you have some employees who worked for Fido Finder who still work for your company.”

“Sir, I have no idea how to find that out. I’m sorry I can’t help you.”

Fehrman hung up, dismayed. He spent the next hour looking up everything he could think of connected to Fido Finder. He tried the serial numbers, searched images, and turned up nothing.

His next call was to the New York Daily News. “Danny Cartwright, please.”

Fehrman didn’t know Danny well, but he knew what all law-enforcement personnel in New York knew—if you gave Danny what sounded like a promising tip, he would work it like a dog until he’d found what he was looking for or at least had exhausted every known lead. Fehrman tipped him off whenever the city tried to do something stupid like cut back on medical supplies or personnel for the prison hospital.

Invariably, a story would appear that forced the budget-cutters to back off, and the Daily News and The New York Times often followed up with scathing editorials warning of potential litigation and the importance of treating the least in our society with as much care as possible. The Post, of course, could be counted on to write the opposite, because why should the city spend precious tax dollars on the scum of our society?

“Edna, it’s Dr. Fehrman at the Riker’s prison. Got a story for you.”

An hour later, Danny met Fehrman at a deli not far from the prison grounds. The doctor handed him the Fido Finder.
“Any idea what this is?” Fehrman asked.

“No idea,” Danny said.

“It’s a microchip. People implant them in their pets so if the pet gets lost, it can be identified and brought back to its owner.”

“And why are you showing this to me?” Danny asked.

“Can we be off the record for a few minutes?”

“Sure.”

Fehrman went through the story about Stephenson bashing his own skull into the wall and the subsequent examination that took place. When he got to the part about finding the chip in Stephenson’s arm, Danny perked up.

“How do you think this got in there?” he asked. “Any ideas?”

“No idea,” Fehrman said. “I was hoping you could help me find out.”

“Did Stephenson have any idea?”

“No. Said he’s had a lump in his arm as long as he could remember. You have to remember—this is a kid who’s probably hardly ever been to the doctor in his life.”

“So who’d put a dog tracker in a human?”

“That’s what I hope you can help me find out.” Fehrman handed Danny a slip of paper containing the words “Fido Finder” and the serial number on the chip. He also gave him a picture of the chip.

“It was made in Millville, New Jersey,” Fehrman said.

“I’ll do what I can,” Danny said.

“I know you will, Edna,” Fehrman said. He smiled.

Danny slipped the paper and picture into his pocket. He went back to the Daily News offices, picked up an envelope and some other papers that had been left on his desk, and signed out a staff car.
“Is there gas in this thing?” he asked the attendant.

“Only the best for you, Danny.”

Most reporters would have followed protocol. They would have asked their editor for permission to go to Jersey, and they would have called the company in Millville ahead of time. Not Danny. Asking the editor was a sure way to be told no. Every hour Danny spent chasing down a story was an hour that he wasn’t churning out something for the paper or the website. So Danny didn’t ask. He just did what he did and, if necessary, apologized later.

As for calling, Danny believed in the element of surprise. He would tell students and all young reporters the same thing: It’s much harder for people to say no to you in person. “I get hung up on sometimes,” Danny would say, “but I’ve almost never had anyone slam the door in my face.”

He bobbed and weaved and sped through traffic on the Jersey Turnpike and arrived at a nondescript industrial park in Millville two hours later. He parked outside a building with a big blue UniAmerica sign. Parking sure is plentiful here, Danny thought.

A receptionist buzzed him through the glass-and-chrome doors.


“Let me see who I can find,” the receptionist said. “Why don’t you have a seat? Would you like a bottle of water?”

Danny declined the chair and the water and said he’d rather pace. Which he did.

A few minutes later, a 20-something company flak named Jennifer Brown came out and ushered Danny toward a couple of chairs. He reluctantly sat.

“I’m here because I’m interested in your Fido Finder line.”

“Well,” Brown said, “Fido Finder is a little before my time. We haven’t made our microchips under that name for many years.”
“I’m interested in tracing the origins of one particular chip,” Danny said. He showed her the picture and the information Fehrman provided.

Brown looked at it, puzzled. “Where did you get this?” she said.

“A doctor gave it to me.”

“A vet?”

“No, a medical doctor. He removed it from a man’s arm.”

“What was it doing in a man’s arm?”

“That’s what I’d like to find out,” Danny said. “So I figured I’d come here, and you could help me.”

Brown stared at the picture. She’d only been with the company for about two years, and most of the questions she fielded had more to do with earnings per share and acquisitions UniAmerica had made. This was a mystery, and Jennifer Brown loved mysteries.

“It’s fairly unlikely that I’ll be able to find anything for you today, Mr. Cartwright. But I will try.”

“I can wait.”

“You’d be waiting till tomorrow, anyway. It’s late in the afternoon, and I don’t expect that anyone in our IT or research departments will start work on this till the morning. Why don’t you give me your card, and I’ll call you as soon as we have something.”

Danny took out his wallet and searched for a business card, which he never remembered to carry. Then he looked up and said, “I’m staying nearby. Why don’t I just come by in the morning? Here’s my cell number.” He ripped a page from his reporter’s notebook and wrote down his contact information.

“That’s fine,” Brown said, handing him her card. “I’ll call you as soon as I have something.”

“You’re sure you can’t just look this up in your computer?” Danny asked.

“Not a chance. We’ll have to search for Fido Finder records.”
Danny left with every expectation that he was going to have to hound this woman to get the information he wanted. He walked back to the parking lot and headed to a budget motel he passed a mile or so back. He glanced at his phone and saw he’d already missed three calls from his office. He anticipated the grief his editor would give him for spending company money on a trip to Jersey and a motel room. Tough luck, Danny thought.

He checked into the motel using the company credit card for the night’s lodging, a toothbrush and some deodorant, and walked to his room. He had no clothes with him, but that didn’t matter. When he was working a hot story, he’d been known to stay in the same clothes for 3-4 days at a time. No one could stand to be near him, but they knew that the worse he smelled, the better the story.

Danny reclined back on the bed and started going through the papers he’d brought along. He opened the interoffice envelope first.

Dear Mr. Cartwright:

On December 1, 2007, you will celebrate your 30th anniversary with The New York Daily News. This is a milestone for which you are to be congratulated.

The next two paragraphs were blah-blah-blah about newspapers being an evolving industry, etc.

“The technical term for writing like this is ‘bullshit,’” Danny liked to say.

Paragraph four, though, hit him squarely between in the eyes.

Because of your tenure with the newspaper and because of your age (55 at the time of your anniversary date), we are offering you and others in the newsroom a buyout. If you are willing to resign or take early retirement, we can offer you one year of full salary and a year of medical insurance at the rate you currently pay.

We will begin taking volunteers for the buyout on October 22. If we do not receive enough positive responses to our offer, we will begin a process of involuntary layoffs starting on December 1.

There was more, but Danny couldn’t focus. He had never considered life without newspapers. Sure, the industry was going through a tough time, and the economy was tanking everywhere he looked, but without newspapers—without him—who was going to do the work? You think some kid can come along and develop the sources I have? You think you fuckers are going to find anyone who knows the city the way I do? Fuck them.
Over a hamburger, which he barely touched, and a pint glass of beer, which he drained several times, Danny tried not to think about the letter. But it was all he could think about. The Post had made him offers several times over the years. Maybe this was the signal to jump ship. But they’re in worse financial shape that the News, and who wants to work for Murdoch, anyway? The Times? Nah. He was too lowbrow for The Times.

In 1993, Danny did one of his most memorable stories—he spent the evening sitting outside the cell of a convicted murderer named Jerry Walker, who was to be executed at 12:01 the next morning. He watched the prisoner pace, and listened to him laugh, cry, and, finally, do something he’d never done before: confess to stabbing and killing his pregnant girlfriend with a machete through her stomach.

Danny didn’t say much during that interview, but, at one point, he asked Walker if he was going to try to sleep.

“I got the rest of my life to sleep,” Walker said.

Danny thought about that quote often. Now, 14 years later, he was sitting in a room feeling like he was about to be executed from the career he loved and probably the only thing that had ever loved him back. He did the caged tiger walk for most of the night, until finally, at 3 a.m., he collapsed onto the motel room bed, still in his clothes.

He awoke four hours later to a ringing phone and an earful of the overnight editor, Johnny Killings, screaming “Where the fuck are you, Edna?” and other love songs. He hung up without saying a word. He woke up again at 9:30 to the voice of Jennifer Brown from UniAmerica telling him that she’d found some information.

“Let me just shower, and I’ll be right over,” Danny said.

Ten minutes later, a rumpled Danny Cartwright presented himself in the UniAmerica lobby, where Brown was waiting.
“After you left, I spent some time in our files,” she told him. “I’ve gotta be honest with you—and, off the record—I wouldn’t be sharing this information at all, except that our liability is limited by the age of this product. Now, what I’ve found isn’t much—most of the Fido Finder original employees are either dead or retired. But I did find contact information for the company’s original co-founder and vice president of sales, Ray Harper. The last records we had for him say that he was the lone salesman for Fido Finder until 1990, when the company expanded.”

Danny looked at the sheet of paper that had Harper’s name and phone number.

“Address?” Danny said.

“We don’t have a current address for him, but if you call him and he wants to talk to you, he’ll share that information, I’m sure.”

“What about sales records?”

“We don’t have those,” Brown said. “If they still exist, Mr. Harper might know where they are.”


“Glad to help,” Brown said. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“Me too.”

Danny shook her hand and went outside to call the number with the 302 area code. Harper answered on the second ring. Danny introduced himself and said he was doing a story about Fido Finder. UniAmerica had given him Harper’s name.

“Can’t imagine why the New York Daily News is so interested, but I’m glad to talk to you,” Harper said. “When do you want to come?”

“Now,” Danny said.

“It’ll take a few hours from New York City.”

“I’m in Millville, New Jersey,” Danny said. “I can be there in an hour and a half.”

“See you in 90 minutes,” Harper said.
Eighty-five minutes later, Danny Cartwright pulled up in front of Ray Harper’s house. Whatever role Harper had played in Fido Finder, the company—and subsequent sales of the company—obviously had treated him well. This was what Danny’s friends at The New York Times would call “a leafy suburb,” with five bedrooms in every house and a Lexus or two in every driveway.

Danny rang the doorbell, and a housekeeper answered. She invited him in and offered him a bottle of water. “Again with the water?” Danny thought. He was a newspaper guy, accustomed to being treated like gum on someone’s shoe. “No, thank you,” he said, and took a seat in an overstuffed chair in one of what looked like several living rooms in the house.

Harper appeared a few minutes later and invited Danny into his home office. He took a seat behind a large oak desk and invited Danny to use the guest chair.

“So, Mr. Cartwright, what’s your interest in Fido Finder?”

“Tell me something about the history of the company? Is it right that you were the first vice president of sales?”

“That’s absolutely correct,” Harper said. “And this is the house that Fido Finder built.”

“Like the House That Ruth Built,” Danny said with a smile.

“Exactly. But I probably drank more than he did.”

“Well, that’s debatable. But anyway ... the company obviously did very well.”

“We sold it for $130 million. I owned 25 percent. But I’m guessing you’ve read the reports and knew that already.”

“Yes,” Danny lied. “Looks like I picked the wrong business to go into.”

“Not a great time for newspapers, that’s for sure.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Danny said. “But that’s not why I’m here. I’m wondering, by any chance, did you save the paperwork from all your sales?”
Harper pointed to a file cabinet. Four drawers, all stuffed with receipts and other Fido Finder detritus. “I am the keeper of the records,” he said. “All the early sales are in there. By the early ‘90s, we kept everything on computer. Those discs are in storage.”

“So if I showed you a Fido Finder chip with a serial number, would you be able to track who it was sold to?”

“Most likely. What’s the number?”

Danny pulled out the paper Fehrman had given him and showed it to Harper. The first numbers were 1989, which told him the year the product had been manufactured.

“There’s no dog alive now that would have this number,” Harper said.

“I know,” Danny said. “But I’d like to find out where this chip was first used.”

“Let’s see if I can help you.” Harper went into the cabinet and pulled out a few dozen folders.

“If we’re gonna do this, you need to help me,” Harper said. “These are probably in no particular order.”

Harper and Danny began to leaf through invoices. It took Danny a few minutes, but he began to understand the Fido Finder filing system. While he was doing that, Harper took his time and went slowly through his folders. For him, it was a little trip down Memory Lane, with occasional comments like “This was my first sale!” and “I remember how hard it was to get this vet to give us his business!”

Danny was five folders in before he finally located a series of serial numbers that included the one he was looking for.

“I think I’ve found it,” Danny said.

“Oh, good,” Harper said. “So where did it come from?”

“It says it was sold to a Joe Mengelt.”

Harper could have sworn he felt his heart momentarily stop. It certainly hiccupped. He hoped his reaction was imperceptible to his visitor.
“Do you remember this Joe Mengelt?” Danny asked.

Harper laughed. “You know, I sold millions of those. Literally millions. Hard to remember one vet from another.” Harper started to break into a story about some doctor he wined and dined, but Danny cut him off.

“Yeah,” Danny said, “I didn’t think you would remember. Now I just have to find this Mengelt.”

“So what kind of dog did you find this chip in?” Harper asked.

“Not a dog,” Danny said. “A person. You sure you don’t remember this Mengelt?”

“I don’t remember anyone I ever sold to who would put a microchip into a cat, that’s for sure.”

“Not a cat, either. A person.”

Danny got up to leave. “Mr. Harper, thanks so much for your help.”

“Hey, why don’t you stick around for a little while?” Harper said. “It’s going to be rush hour by the time you get back to New York. Leave here at 5, and you can be back to the city by 8.”

“That’s OK,” Danny said. “I love rush hour traffic.”

Harper walked Danny to the door. “I just want you to know,” he said, “that those chips are intended for dogs, not for humans.” He wished Danny well and watched him drive off in the Daily News staff car, then pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He punched in the number for Joe Mengelt’s father-in-law, Rob Parker.

“Rob, it’s Ray Harper. I think we may have a problem.”
CHAPTER 7

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2007

Danny thought he saw Ray Harper squirm just a little when he mentioned the name Mengelt. He hoped he was wrong. He wanted to surprise Mengelt—or have the police surprise him. He hadn’t decided on which, but he had a couple of hours to roll the idea around in his head. He turned the radio on to an all-news station to hear if he’d missed anything while he was away and glanced at his phone. Three missed messages from the office. Not good, but Danny would be able to explain them away when he told this story. Editors can go from 0-to-60 on the anger scale in seconds, but they will ease off just as fast if you come up with a great story.

While Danny considered the situation, Ray Harper was winding up his call with Rob Parker.

“I’m still confused,” Parker said. “You think Joe put these Fido Finders in a person?”

“That’s what this reporter said.”

“Why the hell would he do that?”

“I don’t know. He’s your son-in-law.”
They conversation soon switched to their liability. Harper sold the microchips to Mengelt, but that was almost 20 years ago. At the time he had no idea why Mengelt wanted the chips. He still didn’t really know. So that was good. But Harper made money off the process and, eventually, off the sale of the company. So did Parker as an early investor. No one would believe that he didn’t know what his own son-in-law was doing.

“There has to be a good explanation for this,” Parker said.

“I think you better get a hold of Joe as soon as possible,” Harper said.

Parker hung up and dialed Natalie, who was out getting her hair done, as she did weekly. Joe and Natalie had made an agreement early on in their marriage: He would earn the money. She would stay home with the kids, keep the house nice, keep herself nice, plan their activities, make dinner. They ate together nearly every night, just as Joe and his parents had done. But unlike Joe’s father, who filled the air with his angry rants most nights, Joe added little to the nightly conversation.

Joe and Natalie’s relationship became one of 1950s-style convenience, which suited Natalie just fine. Joe was a great provider and a mediocre lover during the rare times he cared to indulge. Once they had children, his interest waned, and, for most of the last dozen years, they had sex once or twice a year. As the kids got older—J.J. was 17 now, and Nan, 15—her responsibilities during the school day were limited to keeping herself occupied.

Joe loved her and the kids, but his thoughts were consumed by work.

Natalie loved Joe—certainly the lifestyle he afforded her—but she was essentially alone in this marriage.

As for Nan and J.J., she surely loved them. J.J. was quiet and recalcitrant like his father, but he never caused trouble and rarely asked for anything. Every other kid his age got their learner’s permit to
drive the minute they turned 16. J.J. was a month past his 17th birthday before he asked for driving instruction. He took the bus to school every day, and if he needed to go somewhere—which was rare—he walked.

Nan was much more social. She was a cheerleader in middle school and hoped to be one again in high school. Natalie wasn’t sure how she felt about this. She liked that her daughter had many friends, but she was concerned because there had been a fair amount of bullying among the girls about everything from boys to bra size. Natalie remember Nan coming home crying a few times, and Nan also came home with stories of how she consoled others who’d been victims.

Natalie saw her father’s number pop up on her phone and answered right away.

“Hi, sweetie,” her father said. “Where’s Joe?”

“At work, Daddy. Why?”

“I need to talk to him immediately.”

Natalie didn’t ask any questions. She gave her father Joe’s cell number, hung up, and went back to primping.

Parker’s call to Joe went straight to voicemail. He looked up Joe’s office number and reached the receptionist, who said Joe was in the delivery room at the hospital. Parker said it was urgent, and the receptionist said she would get him the message ASAP.

Joe didn’t call his father-in-law back for almost two hours. And when he did, he reached an agitated Parker, who began his interrogation with “What the fuck did you do, Joe?” and proceeded to relay the story Harper told about his visit from Danny Cartwright.

“Don’t worry,” Joe said. “It’s nothing.”
“Nothing? A microchip for a dog that was sold to you ends up in a human being, and you say it’s nothing?”

“That wasn’t a human being. That was a murderer.”

“So you did put the chip inside this guy. Holy shit, Joe. This is bad on so many levels.”

“Rob, let me call you tonight and explain, OK? I’ve delivered three babies today, and I’m exhausted. I promise you, there’s a logical explanation for this.”

“Tell me you’re not still doing this shit, Joe.”

“I’ll talk to you tonight.”

Parker put the phone down and started thinking back. Over the years, Joe had kept his political beliefs mostly to himself. No question Joe voted Republican, but Parker never heard any overtly racist remarks. If he’d been involved in eugenics-related experiments or anything like that, he would probably have said something. But no. Joe was quiet most of the time. Whatever information Natalie’s parents gleaned about him came from Natalie.

Parker had played a lot of chess in his life, so he was used to looking several moves ahead. His next call was to his lawyer to discuss his own liability. He fully expected the shit to hit the fan, and he wanted protective gear, just in case.

*

Danny Cartwright made a pit stop at a McDonald’s in East Brunswick, New Jersey. He needed a sit-down and a cup of coffee, and he needed to look up Joe Mengelt. Danny had decided to, as the song said, “Fuck the police.” He was going to track down Mengelt and get the doctor to tell him the story of how a Fido Finder ended up in Le’Andre Stephenson.
Danny envisioned the headline across the front page of the News: Hunt ’em Down Like Dogs. Dogged Pursuit. Something like that. He imagined the interview with Mengelt, where he got the doctor to confess. He saw himself winning the Pulitzer. Appearing on national talk shows. Saving his job.

That last one—that’s what he really cared about. The layoff notice weighed on him. Ordinarily, news like that would have crushed him in his tracks, but he had a story that needed his attention.

Danny kept trying to figure out what would motivate someone to do what Mengelt had done. Imaginary conversations played in his mind. He could hear Mengelt—who, in his mind, had a German accent; the name sounded so much like Mengele—spouting racist hatred and threatening his life. He took a seat in the restroom and plugged the name Joe Mengelt into a search engine. He found a home and office address listed in Garden City, New York. He was about 60 miles away. He could be there in an hour or two.

* 

Joe Mengelt remained incredibly calm considering the circumstances. He never expected to be exposed—at least, not before he was ready to reveal himself on his own terms—but he didn’t care. As far as Joe was concerned, he had done nothing wrong. And he thought that in the court of public opinion, he would remain a hero. I turned in murderers and violent criminals, he thought. Look at what the Daily News says about me. I am a hero. I AM.

He decided to delve into some long-neglected paperwork.

After crawling through traffic for the last hour, Danny arrived at Mengelt’s office just before 5:30 p.m. Danny thought he might be too late, but he walked up to the massive wooden door and turned the knob. It opened. The receptionist was still there, sitting behind an oak desk that commanded
the waiting room. Danny introduced himself and was surprised to find himself immediately escorted back to see the doctor.

Mengelt worked in a majestic old home that he’d had converted to a full medical office. The living room was now a waiting room. Other areas had been partitioned into examination rooms. The maid’s quarters had become Mengelt’s office. The first thing Danny noticed when he walked in was how bare the office was. A bookshelf of medical texts, a desk, two guest chairs, and Mengelt’s diploma. Joe Mengelt spent money on the building, but he didn’t waste money on décor.

Mengelt stood up behind his desk and welcomed Danny Cartwright in. Danny took note of Mengelt’s unremarkable physical presence. He was maybe he was 5-foot-10, 180 pounds. His hair was brown with a bit of gray beginning to make its presence known around the temple. The one thing that stood out were his eyes—dark brown, small, serious, fierce. They looked like he could shoot lasers. Mengelt stared at Danny, and Danny felt slightly afraid.

“I’ve been expecting you,” he said.

Danny thought that was strange. If he’d been in Joe’s position, he would have made himself scarce.

“So you know why I’m here?” Danny asked.

“Yes,” Mengelt said. “I got a call.”

OK, Danny thought. So Ray Harper lied. He knew Joe Mengelt.

“Dr. Mengelt, I want to ask you: Do you know how a Fido Finder microchip ended up in the arm of Le’Andre Stephenson?”

“I put it there when he was a baby,” Mengelt said.
The answer stunned Danny. He expected Mengelt to deny, to hem and haw, and blame someone else. He’d heard so much bullshit in his life, so many lies. Having someone bluntly spout the truth was unexpected.

“Can you tell me about the circumstances?”

Mengelt went through the entire course of events that motivated his actions—being mugged in the city and on his honeymoon, how he’d met Ray Harper, how he devised his plan, how the plan was paying off, and how right he had been.

Danny marveled at Mengel’s certitude.

“You didn’t see anything wrong with this?” Danny asked.

“As you can see, Mr. Cartwright, not only was there nothing wrong, but I was right. I suspected that these women, these niggers and spics, were giving birth to future criminals. And as you can see, that’s exactly what they did.”

“Dr. Mengelt, these are human beings.”

“They don’t conduct themselves that way,” Mengelt said. “When you act like a dog, you deserve to be treated like a dog.”

“But these were babies.”

“Dogs giving birth to dogs.”

Joe felt good venting like this. Danny took it all down in his notebook.

“Did you consider this an experiment?”

“Mostly, yes. I also thought it would be my way to give back to society.”
“Give back to society?”

“Yes, to prove that the blacks and the Mexicans and the Puerto Ricans have no place among us.”

“How many of these chips did you implant?”

“I delivered 166 babies while I was a resident at City General Hospital. All have a Fido Finder in their arm.”

“Why did you stop?”

“I finished my residency there and went into private practice here, in an area where there is much less likelihood that my patients would become criminals.”

“Of the 166 deliveries, how many have you turned in for committing crimes?”

“Well, six are dead for various reasons,” Mengelt said. “I turned in one when he was 13, and I have turned in, I think, three others. Interestingly, no girls. The only thing I have found with the girls is that several of them are already mothers themselves. Which is no big surprise.”

Danny could not believe what he was hearing. This must be what it would have been like to interview Hitler, he thought. Clearly, Mengelt had paid careful attention to where the patients went and what they did.

“Can you show me how this works?” Danny asked.

“I’m glad you asked,” Mengelt said. “Come and watch.”

He turned on his computer and clicked an icon that brought up a spreadsheet with information on each person in whom he’d implanted a chip. Another click took him to a page that showed where they had been in the last 24 hours. Another clicked showed the person’s location at that moment.
Mengelt explained that when he heard about the Victor’s murders, he was able, with a few clicks, to identify whether any of his former patients had been in that vicinity.

It had taken him all of five minutes to figure out Stephenson and Hakim were there. When he heard that the police had no leads, that’s when he made the call.

“It works on radio waves, or something,” Mengelt said. “I was never clear on the technology, but I am clear that it works.”

The conversation went on like this for better than an hour. Danny had interviewed criminals who maintained their innocence, innocent men who’d been duped into pleading guilty, and everything in between, but he’d never come across anyone as clueless as Joe Mengelt. Mengelt was actually proud of what he had done.

“Your own newspaper hails me as a hero,” Mengelt said. “I have committed a great public service. In this case, the ends justify the means.”

“You’ve entrapped people,” Danny said. “You’ve declared these people to be criminals from the moment they were born—all because of their skin color and income level—and then you violated your oath to do no harm. No matter how right you may think you are, there are going to be many, many people who will see what you did as racist. You may not see yourself that way, but they will.”

“I don’t see it that way at all,” Mengelt said.

Danny got up to leave. He extended his hand, and Mengelt clasped it.

“Thank you for telling me your story, Dr. Mengelt,” Danny said. “We’re going to want to take your photo. I can have a photographer out here tomorrow morning at 8, and the story will run the day after. Is that OK?”
“I’ll be here,” Mengelt said.

Mengelt leaned back in his chair. He put his feet up, clasped his heads behind his head, and flashed Danny an arrogant smirk. The memory of that image, the utter cockiness, would stay indelible in Danny’s mind for the rest of his life. And so would the next thing Danny said.

“Dr. Mengelt, I’m not one to offer advice to people I write about. My job is to tell stories. But if I were you, I’d run. Fast and far.”

*

Danny Cartwright drove back to the city with a game-winning-shot/walk-off home run/just won the Pulitzer feeling of euphoria. He remembered a kid once asked Woodward and Bernstein how it felt knowing that the biggest story of their career was over. He daydreamed that maybe someday, some kid would be asking him the same question about the story he was ready to break.

He rolled the story over in his mind. Maybe he would he tell it with a straight news lead, something along the lines of: The informant who turned in the alleged Victor’s killers and two other violent offenders is a Long Island obstetrician, who implanted microchips into the criminals when they were babies and has tracked their whereabouts for the better part of two decades.

Or would he go with something more inflammatory: For weeks, New Yorkers have been wondering about the “hero” who turned in the Victor’s murderers and other violent crimes. The Daily News has discovered his identity: He’s a racist obstetrician from Long Island named Joe Mengelt, and he used microchips he implanted in these alleged offenders when they were babies to track their whereabouts.

Something like that. He’d figure it out as soon as he got behind his computer. He checked his phone. No new messages from the office. That was good.
While Danny made his way back to the city, Joe Mengelt sat in his office, pondered Danny’s advice, and summarily dismissed it, the way he dismissed most suggestions from other people. He pulled the recent Daily News articles from his drawer and re-read them, proudly. The word “hero” pulsed through his mind.

As he went to put the newspaper clips into his desk drawer, Mengelt noticed a folder from an overseas medical conference he’d attended earlier in the year. He opened the folder and discovered that he’d left his passport inside. He’d been meaning to bring it home. He slipped it into his jacket pocket, along with some of the stories from the Daily News and select items from his desk, and left the office.

When he got home, Natalie was waiting at the door for him. Normally, if you would have asked someone their impression of Natalie Mengelt, the adjective you’d get would be “carefree.” Keeping up appearances had always been easy to do, what with a successful doctor for a husband, two solid kids, and a home that always appeared ready to be photographed for a magazine spread.

But now, she looked worried.

“Joe, what did you do?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Daddy said you put some kind of dog finder device into your patients. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“And now people know?”

“They will know. I told a newspaper reporter. Don’t worry, Natalie. I am a hero. The newspaper said so.”
He pulled out the clips and placed them on the table. Natalie brushed them off with an angry swipe.

“Joe, don’t you think people are going to be upset that you treated their children like dogs?”

“What’s for dinner?” Joe said.

The kids were both staying over at friends’ houses for the night, and Natalie and Joe ate steak and spinach salad in silence. Natalie tried to restart the conversation several times, but Joe’s glare shut her down. When dinner was over, Joe took a seat in his library and scanned the latest Journal of the American Medical Association.

Natalie washed the dishes and seethed. She knew Joe was not one to be convinced of anything once he had his mind made up, but she played out the scenarios in her head. She saw Joe being labeled a Nazi, a modern-day Mengele. Did Mengele have a wife? She didn’t know. But she knew how she would be branded. And the kids—even though they lived in a nearly all-white community, they would be, at the very least, harassed.

She went into the living room, turned on some Mendelssohn, and tried to relax. There was no relaxing.

“Dammit, Joe!”

Joe got up from his chair to see what was wrong. He found his wife in tears, angrier than he’d ever seen her. And when she saw him, she picked up a glass figurine from the table and hurled it at his head.

“Do you realize what you’ve done? You have endangered everyone in this house.”

“Natalie, that is enough!” he yelled back. “I will handle this.”
“Handle it? Handle it? You cannot handle this, Joe. This is going to explode on all of us. Have you ever heard of Tawana Brawley? The Central Park joggers? This is going to be a hundred times worse. Even if you’re right, you’re not right. The court of public opinion is going to try you and convict you. And then it’s coming after me and J.J. and Nan.”

Joe looked at his wife, stunned. “You are out of control,” he said. “I am going for a walk.”

“Go. Go for a long goddamn walk. And while you’re out walking, try to figure out how you’ve going to protect us from the angry mobs who are going to torch our house.”

“You have no idea, Natalie. I never knew you were so melodramatic.”

“No, YOU have no idea.”

Joe put on his sport jacket and patted the pocket to check for his phone. “Call me when you’ve calmed down,” he said.

Joe closed the door behind him. Unlike Natalie, he was fine. He walked the tree-lined streets and appreciated the beauty of the homes. Thoughts floated through his mind. *So much craftsmanship went into these Tudors and colonials.* Natalie had never raised her voice to him before. She was always so content. *Maybe people would be upset at what he’d done. I didn’t do anything wrong. So what? It would blow over.*

Self-reflection was perhaps his least favorite thing. For his entire life, 44 years now, Joe Mengelt lived by his instincts. He always did what he wanted and what he thought was proper whether in medicine or at home. It didn’t always make him popular with his colleagues or his family, but he was successful and happy with what he had accomplished. *What if Natalie was right?* He walked past the high school and figured he’d walk another couple of miles till he got downtown. He’d take a cab back from there, and when he got home, Natalie would be calm.
Joe’s cellphone buzzed. It was his father-in-law. He ignored the call. He walked briskly through the dark streets, sorting out the scenarios in his head. *What if Natalie was right?* He reached Main Street at 7:25 p.m., stopped in a bistro, and ordered a cup of tea. *What if Natalie was right? Angry mobs? And what if Danny Cartwright was right—should he run far and fast?* He wished his parents were still alive to discuss this with. He trusted them. His phone buzzed again, this time with a text from his father-in-law. “CALL ME NOW.”

*So this was what self-doubt feels like. Was I wrong? I took this scum off the streets. Was I wrong?*

“I’ll take that tea to go,” Joe said. He left $3 on the counter and walked down the block to the railroad station, where cabs were always waiting for a quick fare.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

“Kennedy Airport. International terminal.”

Joe Mengelt, once so stridently full of self-assurance, was suddenly overwhelmed by self-doubt. He panicked. He went into the men’s room at JFK, put his cellphone in the sink, and soaked it until he was sure it was ruined. He took its corpse and threw it in the trash, then went to the ticket counter. There, he took out most of the cash he had in his wallet and bought himself a one-way ticket to Paris.

It was the last anyone who knew him would see of him for the next seven years.
CHAPTER 8

THURSDAY, NOV. 15, 2007

Danny stopped at home for a quick shower, shave, and change of clothes. He could be at the Daily News office at 9 and would start writing immediately. Unlike some of his colleagues who preferred to take laptops and stay out of the office (and out of the sight of editors), Danny loved what was left of the hum of the newsroom. He tried never to dwell on the idea that the place was beginning to resemble a used-furniture store because of all the layoffs and buyouts.

He prepared himself, too, for the initial angry outburst from the night city editor, Johnny Killings. Johnny was a giant pain in Danny’s ass most of the time, a cynical grouch, but he was a great old newspaperman who pushed and prodded and didn’t have patience for anyone or anything except a good story. They’d been working together, getting on each other’s nerves, cursing each other, and admiring each other quietly for 30 years. Danny and Johnny shared that love of getting the story first and embarrassing the competition. They drank to it early and often. Danny tried to remember that whenever Johnny screamed at him for pushing deadline or disappearing—as Danny had just done with this story.

Johnny was going to lose his mind over this one, Danny thought. In a bad way at first, but then in a good way. Danny thought the best way to deal with Johnny tonight was to saunter in—yes, saunter—wearing a shit-eating grin, twirling his keys and letting Johnny yell himself out. Then Danny planned to say, “I know who turned in the Victor’s killers.”

That would shut Johnny right up.

So that’s what Danny did. He got off the elevator and went straight to Johnny’s desk. Johnny wasn’t there, and there was nothing left on his desk.
“Where the fuck’s Johnny?” Danny asked Jimmy Fuchs, who sat at the next desk. Fuchs was one of the few night reporters still around. “And where’s his shit?”

“ Took the buyout. Said he tried to call you. Said you didn’t answer, as usual.”

“ What do you mean, took the buyout?”

“ What the fuck do you think I mean? They offered everyone 55 and older a buyout.”

“Yeah, I know. I got the offer too.”

“Johnny’s 64. He got a year’s pay and medical, and that took him to retirement. Said he’d been waiting for this. The minute he got the letter, he ran to HR to hand over his badge. And I mean, he ran. Cleaned off his shit and left singing ‘Zip-a-Dee-Do-Dah’.”

Danny braced himself against the desk. Killings had been his editor for decades. He loved the guy as much as he hated him. Killings made Danny better. How could he just up and leave?

“Said the business is no longer fun. Said he’s tired of trying to do more with fewer people and not doing it well. Said he’d rather go fishing.”

“Killings doesn’t fish,” Danny said.

“Right. And if he’d rather do that than work at a newspaper, you know something’s wrong. By the way, where the fuck you been?”

“Who’s replacing Killings?”

“I’m filling in. What you got?”

“The Victor’s murders. I know who turned them in.”

*
The departure of Johnny Killings infuriated Danny. As he wrote the Mengelt story, Danny kept pausing and thinking—about losing his editor, the decline of the newspaper business, and the possibility that his job might not be around much longer. A story that should have taken an hour or two to write took five, including a couple of interruptions by Fuchs to plan when it would be going in the paper. This was late Wednesday/early Thursday. They figured they’d get Mengelt’s picture in the morning and have everything ready to go on the web late Thursday and in the paper Friday. People would be talking about this story all weekend, and there’d be plenty of potential for follow-up stories.

Once Danny finished writing what he could, he had a couple of calls to make. The first was to R.C. Greene to tell him what he’d uncovered. Greene, who was working the overnight shift in the Homicide Division, barely said a word. He preferred to process before saying anything, and this news would take some time. His only on-the-record comment came when Danny asked whether the arrests the police had made based on tips from the anonymous informant would stand up in court.

“Yes,” Greene said for publication. Off the record, Greene worried. The question was whether this was a fruit of the poisonous tree situation. Evidence gathered through illegally obtained information has to be excluded from trial. There are exceptions if the evidence was discovered from a source independent of the illegal activity or if the discovery was inevitable. The first possibility was questionable—unless, somehow, what Mengelt did was legal. As for inevitability, that microchip could have stayed in Stephenson’s arm for the rest of his life, and no one would have known.

If it hadn’t been for Mengelt’s tip, the police might still be looking for Stephenson and Hakim. And Hakim might still be alive.

“You may have really fucked us good, Edna,” Greene said, too stunned to be furious. When Greene hung up the phone, he called the assistant district attorney who was on call.

“We have a problem,” Greene said.
Danny’s second call went to Lewis Fehrman, the doctor who found the chip in Stephenson’s arm. The doctor had a million questions, not many of which Danny wanted to answer until the story hit the paper. But Danny had some questions for the doc. One was whether he anticipated backlash for the close examination he provided Stephenson. Fehrman said no.

“Everyone who knows me knows that my patients are my patients,” he said. “I take care of them whether they’re felons or innocents. I wouldn’t do anything different than what I did.”

Danny’s second question was what would happen to Fehrman for tipping off a reporter. Fehrman had to admit that, of all the possible outcomes, he never expected the situation to play out like this.

“Off the record, Edna, now I’m a little nervous. It would be a lot better for the police if the tips that led to the arrests could have stayed anonymous.”

“I wish there was a way I could keep you out of the story, Doc,” Danny said. “But without you finding the chip, there is no story.”

“I understand,” Fehrman said. “And I don’t blame you. Let’s just see how it plays out. On the record, I’ll tell you that any doctor who would microchip a patient because he believed that patient to be a danger to society is a danger to society himself. I hope he gets everything he has coming to him.”

Danny agreed. He thanked Fehrman for the story tip and for understanding what might happen next.

Danny added Greene and Fehrman’s comments to the draft of the story and sent it over for Fuchs to read. At a little past 3, Danny stopped by Fuchs’s desk. He said he wanted to ride with the photographer to Garden City the next morning to watch Mengelt get his picture taken. Fuchs told him to be back by 6:30 a.m. Danny could ride with the photographer.
There wasn’t enough time for Danny to go home, so he laid down under his desk. Danny always boasted he could fall asleep anywhere, and he could. He woke to photographer Benny Campbell nudging him with the tip of his boots.

“Hey, Danny, get up,” Benny said.

“I’m up. Where are we?”

“I don’t know where you are, but I’m in the office, and I see you’re supposed to ride with me to Long Island.”

“Right,” Danny said. “Let me just take a piss and get some coffee. Ready to go in five.”

Benny was another of the old guard of newspapermen who’d gotten the buyout letter. Benny had a lucrative side business photographing weddings and corporate events, which he hated. He could make in a weekend what he made in a week at the Daily News, but he was like Danny—he loved the action. The idea of not working for a newspaper was inconceivable.

They got into Benny’s car. Danny kicked away an impressive collection of fast-food wrappers and settled in. He was trying to think about what was in the story and what else, if anything, he needed to ask Mengelt. Benny broke his train of thought.

“You taking the buyout?” Benny said.

“I don’t wanna.”

“Nobody wants to. The question was are you taking the buyout?”

“You?”

“I asked you first.”
“I’m thinking about it,” Danny said, even though he hadn’t thought at it at all since he started chasing this story. “I don’t know.”

“Here’s my thinking,” said Benny, who was always thinking. “If I take the buyout, I have a year’s free pay and medical insurance, and I don’t have to deal with the corporate bullshit anymore. If I don’t take the buyout, I could end up getting laid off anyway. No money, no extra medical insurance.”

“We can get laid off anyway?” Danny asked.

“Jesus, didn’t you read the letter?”

“Too busy working this story. Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure. Remember what a great business this used to be?”

Danny didn’t respond. He started to brief Benny on the story as they pulled up in front of Mengelt’s office.

It was just before 8. The doors were already unlocked when Danny and Benny walked up. They went inside, and the same receptionist who’d greeted Danny the day before was there again.

“Hi, Danny Cartwright again to see Dr. Mengelt. This is my photographer, Benny. We’re supposed to take the doctor’s picture this morning.”

“Dr. Mengelt isn’t in yet, Mr. Cartwright. Why don’t you have a seat? He should be in shortly.”

The contingent from the Daily News sat in the waiting room. They glanced at the golf magazines, but neither of them played, so neither of them cared. They checked their phones. They checked their watches. They looked at the clock. Patients began to check in for their appointments.

At 8:45, Danny asked the receptionist, a young woman in her mid-20s named Anna, when she expected the doctor.
“He was supposed to be here at 8,” she said. “He’s always on time. This is unusual.”

“Have you called him?”

“I’ll do that.”

The receptionist dialed Mengelt’s cellphone, which went straight to voicemail. Her next call was to his home. Natalie picked up on the third ring. Danny heard one side of the exchange.

“Mrs. Mengelt, this is Anna, I’m the new receptionist at your husband’s office. Is Dr. Mengelt there? He’s not? Well, I was expecting him at 8 this morning, and it’s now almost 9. Two patients are already here. Also, there’s a reporter and photographer from the Daily News here, and they said he was expecting them. I see. I see. OK, I’ll tell them.”

Anna hung up and announced to no one in particular, “Folks, I apologize, but Dr. Mengelt had to go out of town. I’ve been asked to reschedule his appointments. For those who need immediate attention, I will refer you to another doctor.”

Danny let the women rearrange their schedules first and listened to them bitch about the inconvenience. In the meantime, he tried to determine what the receptionist meant by “out of town.” His first thought was that Mengelt took his warning to heart. His second thought was that Mengelt was now in hiding somewhere.

When it was his turn, Anna looked up at him and Benny and said, “I’m sorry, gentlemen, but it doesn’t look like Dr. Mengelt can see you today. If you’ll leave me your card ...”

“We’re on deadline,” Danny said. “Can you tell us when he’ll be back?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did his wife say?”
“She said he wasn’t home.”

Anna looked stunned, but also resolute. If she knew anything, she wasn’t going to share the information with Danny Cartwright.

“Thanks, anyway,” Danny said. He and Benny went to the car.

“What now?” Benny said.

“We’re going to the Mengelts’ house.”

Danny wasn’t great with technology, but he knew how to use his phone well enough to look up Mengelt’s home address, which turned out to be about a mile away. He mapped out the route. Danny sat in the passenger seat and tried to figure out the story from here. For all he knew, Mengelt might be home and hiding.

They arrived at the Mengelt home, a sprawling multimillion-dollar center hall colonial with twin porches on either side of the house. Benny took a couple of quick photos before they knocked on the door. Natalie greeted them. Danny knew little about women’s fashion, but he noted that she was well dressed in a gray tailored pants suit and cream-colored blouse, as if she were ready to go to the office. Except she didn’t have a job.

“Mrs. Mengelt, I’m Danny Cartwright from the Daily News, and this is Benny Campbell. We were just at your husband’s office—we had an 8 o’clock appointment—and he didn’t show up. Is he here, by any chance?”

“I haven’t seen him since last night,” Natalie said. She invited them to sit down, and she escorted Danny and Benny into a living room that was twice the size of either of their apartments. They walked across an enormous oriental rug that covered almost the entire room and sat down on a sofa that would accommodate 10 people comfortably.
“This is beautiful,” Danny said.

“It’s Chateau D’ax,” Natalie said. “I bought it at Bloomingdale’s.”

Benny asked for permission to take pictures, and Natalie approved. Danny studied her face. She didn’t look nervous, or angry, or anything he could discern. He wrote in his notebook one word: “expressionless.” If she had anything to hide, she almost certainly would have stopped Benny from photographing her or the house.

“What happened last night with your husband?” Danny asked.

“We had an argument, and he went out for a walk,” she said. “That was the last I saw of him.”

He barely had the next words out of his mouth—“Did he tell you ...”—when Natalie responded, “He told me.”

“So you know?”

“Well, I know now. I didn’t know what he had done until he told me.”

“What did he tell you?”

Natalie took a minute to answer. She tried to plan out how this would look to the outside world. Would she look like an enabler? An idiot for not knowing what her husband had done? She had spent a fair amount of her adult life watching the court of public opinion try—and usually convict—people involved in sensational cases. Many times, they hadn’t thought out how they appeared to the public. What would put her in the best position to avoid an ugly scene and keep her and the children out of the public spotlight?

She decided to turn the question around. “What did he tell you?”
“He told me that he implanted 166 of these Fido Finder microchips into babies so he could track their movements when they became adults,” Danny said.

“And did he say I knew anything about this?”

“He never mentioned you.”

Under other circumstances, Natalie might have been hurt. But in this case, she was happy. Innocence would be her best defense. No one had ever cut Eva Braun any slack.

“Well, that’s right. I only know what he told me last night.”

“And what do you think about what he told you?”

“Can I talk to you without having what I say in the newspaper?” Natalie asked. She didn’t wait for his answer. “I told him it was wrong. I told him it was abhorrent.”

“Why wouldn’t you want that in the newspaper?”

“Because I want to talk to him more, to understand why he did what he did. We really only talked for a couple of minutes before he left, and we mostly yelled.”

“And where is he now?” Danny asked.

“I don’t know. The truth is, we haven’t been getting along for some time. I’m a little surprised he hadn’t moved out earlier.”

This wasn’t entirely true, but the Mengelts’ marriage had been a little strained over the past few year. Joe did his thing—whatever it was—and Natalie did hers. Again, Natalie thought that the more she could disassociate herself from Joe, the better off she would be.

Danny looked around the room. Family photographs dotted the tables and bookshelves. The Mengelts, from what he could tell, looked like a happy family. A happy, wealthy family. A happy, wealthy
family, whose patriarch happened to be into practicing eugenics and was currently AWOL. He asked if he could borrow her husband’s photo, and she agreed to let him take one out of the frame.

“Has he ever disappeared before?” Danny asked.

“To be honest, Joe is the most disciplined person I have ever known. He is always home on time. Other than attending the occasional medical conference, he has spent every night of our marriage at home with me.”

“I thought you said you were having problems.”

“We have our problems, yes. But Joe has always been a devoted father and family man.”

“Do you know what in his upbringing would lead him to do something like this?”

Natalie started to cry. The tears surprised her, but they were genuine. “I don’t know. I’ve called his cellphone multiple times, but it always goes straight to voicemail. I … I … think I’d rather not talk anymore. I’m sorry.”

Danny felt some pangs of sympathy. He could interrogate someone all day long if he thought that person was guilty, but he hated going after people who were merely collateral damage. Danny could see enough into the future to know that this pretty, 40-something woman was about to go through some mercilessly ugly times. He wrote down his phone number and email address on a sheet of notebook paper and asked Natalie to contact him if she had other information.

“This story will be out late this afternoon,” Danny said.

“I’ll be sure to read it,” Natalie said.

She watched Danny and Benny navigate the long walkway that bisected her front lawn and wondered what her future held.
* 

As Benny drove them back to the city, he glanced over to watch Danny scratch out notes. “I see you’re using the professional reporter’s notebook,” Benny said. “Do you think they make an amateur reporter’s notebook?”

Danny didn’t acknowledge the joke. He was busy thinking of all the possible follow-up stories. He needed to find Le’Andre Stephenson’s lawyer to see what he was going to do. Stephenson’s family. Stephenson himself. Mengelt. Where was he? Mengelt’s parents. The families of the Victor’s workers who were murdered. The number of tentacles this story had was amazing. He could be working on this for months.

Natalie Mengelt, meanwhile, spent the morning in her own head chasing around the darkest thoughts. But being the organized, detail-oriented person she was, she also spent a good part of the next few hours on the phone. She called the high school and asked the main office to tell the kids she was going to pick them up immediately after classes. Thanksgiving was next week, and they had all week off from school. She’d surprise them with a trip to see their grandfather, and they’d be thrilled to have the Friday before break off from school.

She packed bags for all three of them and put them in the silver Lexus that she used to drive with such pride.

Next, she called her father and told him she and the kids would be heading his way that afternoon and would be there for dinner if she timed the traffic properly. He asked about Joe. She said she hadn’t heard from him and that they would talk about it when she got to Delaware. She called her lawyer and told him she had an emergency situation. They made an appointment for noon. She called Anna, the receptionist, and asked her to please cancel Joe’s appointments for the next week. Anna asked what was going on. Natalie was vague, something about Joe needing to go out of town on an
emergency. Natalie called the neighbors on both sides to tell them the family was going to be away for a few days and to please watch the house.

Natalie laid out her clothes—a pink Versace top (she was going to try to look as cheerful as possible), a pair of Armani jeans, and her favorite black pumps—got into the shower and cried a long, painful cry. *What’s going to happen to me?* she wondered. *What’s going to happen to us?*

By the time she got to her lawyer, the cry had toughened her up a bit. David Chessler had represented the Mengelts—not only Joe and Natalie, but Joe’s parents, while they were alive—for decades. Joe didn’t need a lot of representation, just enough to set up his medical corporation and draw up wills and trusts for the family. But the Mengelts saw the Chesslers at whatever social occasions Natalie could drag Joe to, and she genuinely liked David. He was charming and understanding. She trusted him.

His secretary let her in, and Chessler immediately got up from behind his desk to give her a hug.

“What’s the big emergency?” he said with a smile.

“Joe’s in a lot of trouble,” Natalie said, “and I’m not sure where he is.”

Chessler downshifted. The smile became a look of worry. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Natalie recounted the situation, including the visit from Danny Cartwright that morning, and David’s face alternated between worry and horror—and maybe a little glee too. Being Joe Mengelt’s lawyer suddenly had taken on extraordinary dimensions. For 35 years, David Chessler had been quietly successful. Now he was about to be famous.

Natalie told him she planned to leave town with the kids for a while, and Chessler thought that sounded like a good plan. He would also make arrangements to hire a security company to watch the Mengelts’ home and Joe’s office. “People will use any excuse to vandalize property,” the lawyer said.
He also discussed options such as bodyguards for her and the children and hiring a publicist to handle the negative attention. Natalie said she wanted to wait until the story came out to see what was needed. “I understand,” Chessler said. He knew she would likely need all that and more, but he didn’t want to alarm her more than she already was.

“Natalie, you’re sure you didn’t know about any of this, correct?” he asked.

“I knew Joe had some racist tendencies,” she said. “But I had no idea about what he did to those children.”

“That’s good,” Chessler said. He paused for a minute. “I don’t mean to be gauche, but we do need to talk about money.”

Natalie rarely handled money for the family, except to pay small bills like the gardener and her hairdresser. Chessler told her his fee, which was $200 an hour. He asked for the first $10,000 up front.

“Let me call the bank,” she said.

“Here. Use my phone,” Chessler said.

Natalie checked her balance—there was a little more than $300,000 in the account she and Joe shared. Good, she thought. Wherever Joe was, he hadn’t drained their savings. She wrote Chessler a check.

“Go,” Chessler said. “Go get the kids, go away, be safe. I’ll call you, and if you need me for anything—anything at all—call me. And please, from now on, refer all media calls to me. I want you seen as little as possible.”

Natalie went home and made herself a tuna sandwich that she decided she didn’t have the stomach for. She threw it out, then went through the refrigerator to toss out whatever leftovers there
were. She moved the trash to the garage and the trash cans to the sidewalk—mindless but necessary tasks. In the 15 minutes or so she had until she picked up the kids, she went into Joe’s home office to see if she could find anything that hinted at what he’d done. There, she founded a number of files, but there was no time to go through anything. She decided to grab a couple of stacks and put them in the car.

Outside the high school, Natalie weaved through the buses that were just arriving. She waved to a couple of mothers she recognized and pulled up to the curb. She watched for J.J. and Nan, who were among the first to exit.

“Hi, kids,” Natalie said. “Come on, I’ve got a great surprise for you.”

“What?” J.J. said.

“We’re going to Delaware to see your grandfather.”

“Do we have to?” Nan said. “Sharon and I have plans for tomorrow night.”

“Tell Sharon you’ll have to see her after break,” Natalie said.

“Is Dad coming?” J.J. asked.

“No, your father had to go out of town.”

“Where?”

“I’ll explain when we’re on the road,” Natalie said. “But right now, I want to beat the traffic.”

The kids bitched and whined, as Natalie figured they would. She told them there was no option. They were going.

*
Natalie and the kids were 90 minutes out of town when Danny’s story became public at precisely 4:30 p.m. Friday.

DAILY NEWS EXCLUSIVE: THE IDENTITY OF ‘SUPERMAN’ REVEALED

By Danny Cartwright

There is nothing super about New York City’s “Superman.” In fact, just the opposite.

The Daily News has learned that the mysterious police informant who turned in the Victor’s killers and several other violent offenders over the past few months is a racist obstetrician from Long Island named John Josef Mengelt, who attended to the births of each of these alleged criminals and then implanted a microchip in them so he could track their movements as adults.

Using a product called Fido Finder that was created to locate lost dogs, the notorious Dr. Mengelt has kept watch over 166 of the children he delivered as they grew to adulthood. Neither the parents nor the individuals with the chips implanted in them had any idea. Rikers Island physician Lewis Fehrman discovered the Fido Finder chip, which is about the size of a grain of rice, in the arm of Victor’s suspect Le’Andre Stephenson’s arm during a routine examination.

In an exclusive interview with the Daily News on Wednesday, Mengelt, who has since vanished, maintained that he had done nothing wrong.

“I suspected that these women, these niggers and spics, were giving birth to future criminals. And as you can see, that’s exactly what they did. When you act like a dog, you deserve to be treated like a dog.”

Mengelt admitted that he put the microchip in the arms of Stephenson and Shabazz Hakim, the two accused Victor’s killers, on the day they were born in City General in 1997. Mengelt, who was a resident at City General at the time and has been in private practice in Long Island for more than 15 years, said he believed his actions were noble and described them as “a way to give back to society.”

Mengelt bought the Fido Finder microchips from a Dover, Del., man named Ray Harper, who co-founded Fido Finder and served as its vice president of sales. UniAmerica bought Fido Finder in the late 1990s. Harper told the Daily News he had no idea that Mengelt had intended to use the chips on humans.

Mengelt said he stopped using the Fido Finders on patients when he went into private practice in “an area where there is much less likelihood that my patients would become criminals.”

He told the Daily News that of the 166 babies in whom he implanted the Fido Finders, six have died of various causes. He turned in one of the children when the boy turned 13—he didn’t specify why—and anonymously dropped a dime on three others, including Stephenson and Hakim. Stephenson is at Rikers Island awaiting trial. Hakim was stabbed to death in Rikers, allegedly by another inmate. No arrests have been made.

Mengelt proudly showed the Daily News a spreadsheet with information on each person in whom he’d implanted a chip. Using the technology, he was able to show the person’s location at that moment and where they had been in the last 24 hours. Mengelt explained that when he heard about the
Victor’s murders, he was able, with a few clicks, to identify whether any of his former patients had been in that vicinity.

It had taken him five minutes to figure out Stephenson and Hakim were there. When he heard that the police had no leads, he made the call.

“Your own newspaper hails me as a hero,” Mengelt said. “I have committed a great public service. In this case, the ends justify the means.”

When a Daily News reporter told Mengelt that it appeared he may have entrapped people, Mengelt said, “I don’t see it that way at all.”

The Daily News spoke to Mengelt early Wednesday evening. He did not show up to work Thursday morning, and his wife, Natalie Mengelt, said she had been unable to reach him since he left their Garden City home Wednesday night to go for a walk.

“We had an argument, and he went out for a walk,” she told the Daily News in an interview at the stately, multimillion-dollar colonial she shares with her husband and their two teenage children. “That was the last I saw of him.”

Natalie Mengelt said her husband had confessed the situation to her just before he disappeared.

“I only know what he told me last night,” she said, describing her husband as a “devoted father and family man.”

Police told the Daily News they were unaware of how the anonymous tipster came by his information. Homicide Detective Ronald C. Greene said he believed Stephenson’s arrest would stand up in court. He declined additional comment.

Much of the city has been transfixed by this story, expecting that the Good Samaritan who turned in these vicious criminals was doing so for heroic reasons. Several newspapers hailed this so-called “Superman” as some kind of anonymous savior. But Fehrman, the Rikers Island doctor, said that “any doctor who would do something like microchip a patient because he believed that patient to be a danger to society is a danger to society himself. I hope he gets everything he has coming to him.”
Amy Diamond had been looking forward to the weekend. She’d cleaned her desk at the Legal Aid Society, stacking the overload of case files she was working on in one neat pile. For the first time in her two-year tenure in this job—her first out of law school—she wasn’t taking work home.

She had just taken off her heels and put on sneakers for the walk to the subway and was just about to shut down her computer when someone shouted from across the room. “Hey, Diamond, you better look at the Daily News’s website.”

Shit, she thought. She opened up the page to Danny Cartwright’s story and began to read. “Shit,” she said out loud.

She reached into the bottom of the pile and pulled out Le’Andre Stephenson’s file. Amy had been randomly assigned the case in September, but she had done almost nothing. Since his arrest, Stephenson had been under psychiatric treatment and in isolation nearly the entire time. She couldn’t meet with him that first night, and he hadn’t even had a preliminary hearing yet. Given everything else Amy had to do, the Stephenson case, while high profile, had been low priority.

Amy started reading through the documents. She’d followed the Victor’s murders in the paper, so she knew most of what had happened, and she’d been alerted when Stephenson was moved to psychiatric. Stephenson seemed guilty to her—hell, everyone knew he did it—so her strategy was simple: Get him to plead guilty, spare the taxpayers a trial, and perhaps get him 25-to-life rather than life without parole. New York had just eliminated the death penalty, so no worries there.

Now, though, she had an entirely different case on her hands, one in which her client had been the subject of a potentially tainted arrest.
Her boss and the other higher-ups in the office were out of town for the weekend. She began making calls and getting an earful of voicemail everywhere. Apparently, she was one of the only people in Manhattan who stayed at work till 5. She left messages with her bosses, then called the authorities at Rikers to request a meeting with Stephenson as soon as possible. She grabbed the case file and slipped it into her briefcase.

On the subway ride home, Amy began running different possibilities through her mind. The most likely one found her in court arguing that Stephenson should be released. That made her slightly jittery. Although she believed in giving every defendant the best effort she could, she didn’t want a murderous psychopath on the streets. “Alleged murderous psychopath,” she muttered to herself. She didn’t want the baggage that came with that scenario, either—her picture in the papers and on TV as the bleeding-heart lawyer who helped spring a murderer from prison on what the public would see as a technicality.

Conversely, if the situation broke the way she hoped—with Stephenson staying in prison but with the possibility of parole many years in the future—and if she did her best to represent her client, faithfully carry out her duties as an officer of the court, and protect the people of New York City, she could advance her career immeasurably and quickly. Amy saw herself holding political office at some point. The Le’Andre Stephenson case, handling correctly, could be her steppingstone.

Amy was so engrossed by the thought that she missed her stop. The weather was relatively warm, so she decided to get off and walk back a couple of blocks. She ducked into a bodega to get a couple of things when her phone rang. It was her boss, Patrick Barton.

“Looks like you’re going to be in the news,” he said. She imagined the grin on his face.

“Looks that way,” she said.
“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “We’ll be there to help you.”

“I appreciate that,” Amy said. “Anything I should do this weekend to prepare?”

“Just get some sleep,” Barton said. “You’re not going to get much for a while.”

*

Le’Andre Stephenson had just cleared 60 days of psychiatric evaluation and had been cleared to be sent to general population. The doctors had finally found the right combination of medications to keep him calm and prevent him from being a danger to himself. He sat in the exam room, in something of a stupor, when Dr. Fehrman came in.

“How are you feeling, Le’Andre?”

“A little stoned. Feel good.” He smiled the smile of the medicated.

“Le’Andre, you remember the lump in your arm that I removed a couple of months ago?”

“Yeah. Had that lump a long time. Don’t got it no more.”

“Right.” Fehrman struggled with how to tell him the news.

“Le’Andre, we had planned to move you to gen pop, but we’re going to keep you in here for a few more days.”

“Why?”

“It turns out, you might be released.”

Stephenson lifted his head slightly and, as Fehrman would describe it later to friends, “almost showed emotion.”
Fehrman told him the story of the Fido Finder and what had happened since, and he told him about the Daily News story.

“I want out now, man,” Stephenson said.

“It’s not that simple,” Fehrman said. “There most likely will be a court hearing, probably on Monday...”

“I want out now, man,” Stephenson yelling, with as much fury as a sedated patient could muster.

“Like I said, there will most likely be a court hearing Monday.”

Stephenson went to get up and tried to lunge at Fehrman, but the cocktail of antidepressants and sedatives the psychiatric unit had concocted for him rendered him relatively harmless. He fell on his face. Fehrman called in a guard, and together they lifted him back to his chair. The guard chained Stephenson’s legs to the chair, just to make sure he sat still. He did.

“I’ll let you know what happens,” Fehrman said.

*

Natalie Parker—in her mind, she had already reverted to her maiden name, to disassociate herself from her missing husband—drove most of the way to Delaware in silence. While the kids listened to music on their iPods, she thought a lot about how to explain the situation to them. She knew she could tough it out, but how do you explain to teenagers that the world they’d known their entire lives was over?

She and the kids arrived at her dad’s house around 7 p.m. Rob Parker ran out to greet his daughter with an enormous bear hug, just in time for her tears. She whispered to him that she had told
the kids nothing, deciding to wait till they got to Delaware, till they were around a support system. J.J. and Nan saw their mother sobbing and their grandfather providing comfort, and they both understood that something was radically wrong. They’d never seen Natalie not in control.

Rob ushered them all into the house. He doubted any of the neighbors had read the Daily News story about his son-in-law, but he was taking no chances. They would hear about it soon enough.

“Mom, what’s going on?” J.J. said. Even though he had no idea what was going on, he was starting to well up. “Is Dad dead?”

“I don’t think so,” Natalie said. “But I don’t know.”

“What is going on?” Nan asked.

Natalie and their grandfather sat them at the kitchen table and told the story. The kids were stunned. Yes, they had heard Joe go on racist rants before. Nan thought back to a time the previous year when her father heard her singing along with the Busta Rhymes song “Touch It” while she was getting ready for school. He heard the lines “I don’t really fuck with you niggas/you niggas is clown” and freaked out. He burst into the room and punched the off button on her CD player.

“You’re not to listen to that anymore. Do you hear me?” Joe said. “Degenerates. Filthy nigger degenerates.”

“Daddy! It’s just a song,” Nan said.


“Yes” was the only answer, and yes is what she said. That ended the discussion.

J.J. had his own memories too. But neither could believe their dad had done something this heinous.

“So what are we going to do now?” J.J. asked.
“I’m not sure yet,” Natalie said. “But I can tell you we’ll be staying here for a while.”

“What about school?” Nan asked.

“You may miss some school,” her grandfather said, going over to Nan and putting his arm around her. “We’ll see. Your mom and I just want you and your brother to be safe, honey.”

The doorbell rang. “In the meantime,” Rob said, “want some pizza? I ordered from Grotto. Your favorite.” They nibbled in silence at the sausage and mushroom pie until Natalie’s phone rang. She checked the number. It was her lawyer, David Chessler. She called him back.

“Mrs. Mengelt ...” he began.

“Why don’t you call me Natalie?” she said. “Or Miss Parker is fine too.”

Chessler was silent for a moment, absorbing that unstated message.

“I wanted to check in on you,” he said. “I take it you’re out of town.”

“Yes.”

“Good. I just drove by your house. Already there’s media outside. I have a worker inside, caring for the property. I think it’ll be better if you stay away for a while.”

“I think it might be better if we sell the house,” Natalie said.

“Let’s not do anything hasty,” Chessler said. “Can you hang on just a minute, please? My other line is ringing.”

Natalie sat on hold for a couple of minutes before Chessler returned. “That was my man in your house,” he said. “Someone just threw a rock through a rear window. He’s called the police. Look, Natalie, this is escalating pretty quickly. Just stay where you are. I’m going to go over there and see if I can calm things down.”
Natalie hung up the phone and went back to the kitchen table. She looked shell-shocked.

“Are you OK, Mom?” Nan asked.

“Should we be worried?” J.J. asked.

Natalie looked down at her plate. “I don’t want you to worry. We’ll get through it together.”

She did not sound convincing.

*

Chessler drove to the Mengelt house and found five TV trucks outside, along with print and radio reporters and a growing handful of onlookers. He walked up to the front porch and said, “My name is David Chessler. C-H-E-S-S-L-E-R. I’m the attorney for the Mengelt family, and I have a brief statement.” He waited for the reporters to gather round and the cameramen and -women to get ready, then began an impromptu briefing.

“First, the Mengelts are not here and will not be here for the foreseeable future. We have caretakers watching the house. We ask that you please respect the Mengelts’ privacy and property as well as their neighbors’ privacy and property.

“Second, we are still looking into the story that appeared on the Daily News’ website this afternoon to determine its veracity. Until then, I would ask the members of the media and the public to please keep speculation to a minimum. We don’t know what really happened or why, but I will provide more information as soon as I have some. Thank you.”

Ideally, Chessler had hoped to go into the house to get away from the crowd, but he knew he couldn’t get away without answering a few questions.

“Where is Dr. Mengelt?” someone shouted.

“I have not spoken to Dr. Mengelt, so I don’t know,” Chessler said.
“Where is his family?” a reporter yelled.

“They are out of town on a previously scheduled vacation,” Chessler said. “I can tell you that Dr. Mengelt is not with them. You’ll excuse me, please.”

With that, Chessler ducked into the Mengelt house.

Sitting in the Daily News’ newsroom, Danny Cartwright watched this scene live on CNN with some amount of delight. Reporters from all over the world would soon be on this story, and they would all be crediting the paper and quoting his work. After all, not only did he break the story, but he was the only one to talk to Mengelt himself, and he had—so far—the only access to Natalie.

Shortly after the Chessler briefing, Danny’s phone rang. It was a CNN producer, asking him to be on at 9. Danny agreed to do a live shot from the newsroom. In the meantime, Danny was busy with sidebars for the next day’s story. He managed to reach Amy Diamond, who told him in a brief conversation—she was furious someone had given him her phone number—she would be in court Monday to examine Le’Andre Stephenson’s options. She declined to say whether she would move for his immediate release. He reached the district attorney, who declined to comment until he could examine the evidence and confer with Amy, the police, and the medical staff at Rikers. He called various police sources, who all told him variations on the same thing: They were looking into all anonymous tips they’d received to try to determine which arrests, if any, had been made through questionable means.

The entirety of the news media would be playing catch-up to Danny Cartwright. Knowing that he was chasing one of the all-time great stories, Danny was able to put the layoff letter out of his mind for a little while and concentrate on finding someone who knew where Joe Mengelt had gone.

*
Ever since the Victor’s murders, Juanita Ricks had been staying with her sister Loretta in Queens. She could not get Jimmy, or the details she had heard, out of her mind. She spent random hours sobbing. Anything could trigger tears. The families of the other victims had formed a support group and invited Juanita to join. Different representatives of the group called her multiple times, but she always declined. The little consolation she had was knowing that the man who killed her husband and four of his coworkers was in prison and, to her way of thinking, always would be.

Jimmy had been murdered more than two months ago, and the story was old news, replaced by the dozens of other cold, calculated, or stupid slayings in and around the five boroughs. Estranged husbands beating their wives to death, drug deals gone bad, one random murder in a park not far from her apartment. She would never understand how anyone could take another person’s life. She taught her fourth-graders to cherish each other, to appreciate their parents and grandparents. Juanita had grown up in a three-bedroom house in Queens that her parents and maternal grandparents shared. They each had a bedroom, and Juanita and Loretta, who was two years older, shared the tiny third room.

On this particular Friday, Juanita came home after school and started reviewing her lesson plan for Monday. Some of her better students were beginning to read a Harry Potter book, and she wanted to be able to keep up with them. She read, made dinner, read some more. With Loretta, who was a nurse, working late, Juanita had the house to herself. By a little past 9, she’d done enough. She turned on the TV, which Loretta must have watched last because it was tuned to CNN. Loretta was a news junkie, especially true-crime stories. She could tell you details and theories about all the murders and the missing white women who dominated the news cycles when there wasn’t a political scandal going on.
Juanita saw the chyron across the bottom of the screen: “Victor’s Murderer Could Be Released from Prison.” On the screen was Danny Cartwright, talking about his story. She went pale. Juanita listened as the news reader went through the story point by point with Danny, trying to get him to speculate on what might happen with Le’Andre Stephenson (Danny thought he had a 50-50 shot to be released) and Joe Mengelt’s whereabouts (Danny refused to guess). Juanita shook her head, slowly at first and then violently shivering at the idea that Stephenson could ever be free.

She was about to pick up the phone and call Loretta when Loretta walked into the door. Juanita rushed to her sister and collapsed in her arms.

“They say the man who killed Jimmy is getting out,” she said.

Loretta walked her over to the couch and watched the rest of the interview, which lasted another 10 minutes. CNN knew a good story when it had one, and, on a slow-news Friday night, they had plenty of time to devote to Joe Mengelt.

Loretta was as mystified as her sister was. She went to the stove and put on some water for tea, then rejoined Juanita on the couch. She shut off the television and consoled her sister for a few minutes. When Juanita calmed down, Loretta proposed an idea. “I want to call this reporter,” she said.

Loretta looked up the phone number for the Daily News and reached a recording saying there were no operators on duty. The Daily News was founded in 1919, and, for as long as there were telephones in general use, the newspaper had switchboard operators manning the phones 24 hours a day. Over the years, operators had routed calls their share of wild calls. There were several about men (and one woman) getting ready to jump from the Brooklyn Bridge, one about a certain New York politician passed out in a strip club, and a fair share of spaceships landing on buildings, in fields, wherever. New York’s crazies somehow knew they could always reach someone at the Daily News.
But in recent years, as the newspaper business shrunk, so did staffing on every level. So when you called the News, you got a voicemail and many choices. Loretta held on and listened until she heard “press 7 for the newsroom.” The phone rang to Jimmy Fuchs’s desk.

“Fuchs.”

“Excuse me?” Loretta said.

“Fuchs.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means my name is Fuchs. What can I do for you?”

“Oh, sorry. I want to talk to that reporter who was just on CNN.”

“Hold on.” Fuchs switched the call to Danny’s desk.

“Danny Cartwright.”

“My name is Loretta Rivera,” she said. “I saw you on CNN just now. My sister’s husband was one of the people killed at Victor’s.”

“What is your sister’s name?”

“Juanita Ricks. Her husband was Jimmy.”

“I’m so sorry, Ms. Rivera. What can I do for you?”

“I want to know how that man, that killer, can be let out.”

Danny started to explain, then asked, “Is your sister with you?”

“Yes,” Loretta said.

“Would she be interested in talking to me?”

“Let me ask.”

Loretta put her hand over the phone and proposed the idea to Juanita.

She vetoed it immediately.
Loretta ignored her.

“She said yes.” Loretta gave him the address, and Danny said he’d be there in 30 minutes.

“Why did you do that?” Juanita asked.

“Because you need the public on your side,” she said. “You need to let the people and the politicians know that they can’t let the man who killed Jimmy and those other people out of prison.”

Loretta had seen these stories play out hundreds of times. She knew that victims of the system—which is what Juanita had suddenly become—needed the public on their side.

“Trust me,” Loretta said. She didn’t mean to put her sister in harm’s way. She wanted her to get justice.

When Danny arrived, Loretta greeted him eagerly. Juanita waited on the couch, her arms crossed. He stuck out his hand, and she shook it limply. Loretta offered Danny some coffee, and when he accepted—“Black, please”—she left the room. She hoped this would spur Juanita to start talking.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Ricks,” Danny said. “Tell me about Jimmy.”

Juanita hadn’t expected this line of questioning. She thought Danny had come over to get her reaction to the Mengelt disclosure. Memories of Jimmy began to flow—their first date (a walk around the botanical gardens), their first kiss, his proposal (he made her dinner and hid the ring under her plate). Jimmy hadn’t gone to college—his family didn’t have the money to send him, and he wouldn’t have known what to study, anyway—but he promised to always work hard, earn as much money as he could, and be there for her. Just before he was killed, they started talking about having a baby. They had saved a little money, and Jimmy thought the time was right. With their opposite schedules, they could take turns watching the baby.

But now, that would never happen.
As she talked, she cried. Danny pulled out a camera and asked if he could take her picture. She said OK.

Loretta came back in with Danny’s coffee and sat down. He asked for her recollections of Jimmy, and Loretta remembered a time when her sister and Jimmy were first dating. They were at Jimmy’s parents’ house, watching TV, when Juanita developed severe stomach pain. Jimmy rushed her to the emergency room and sat with her for hours until the doctor treated her ailment. Loretta always thought that was the most romantic moment. She always called Jimmy “Juanita’s knight in shining armor,” and she said she hoped to meet someone that gallant. So far, she hadn’t.

Eventually, the conversation came around to Mengelt and the possibility that Le’Andre Stephenson could be let out of prison on a technicality.

“It is too terrible to think about,” Juanita said.

“What do you think should happen?” Danny asked.

Juanita Ricks was fairly even keeled most of the time, but she shook and gave Danny the headline for Danny’s next article:

“I want him dead.”

*

Amy Diamond sat at her kitchen table, looking at the Le’Andre Stephenson file she’d dumped there when she’d walked into her studio apartment. Over the two-plus months, she had collected hundreds of pages of evidence from the case—police reports, psychiatric evaluations, crime scene photos, a list of all the evidence sent to the crime lab. She had gone through exactly none of it, and she wasn’t much in the mood to start tonight. But if she was going to go to court Monday on Stephenson’s behalf, she needed to get ready.
She started a pot of coffee and pulled out an envelope thick with pictures of the massacre. The first showed a hand with its fingers severed. The next was two corpses lying in the walk-in refrigerator next to some meat. She felt sick.

This was the kind of case where everyone Amy met expected her to have a crisis of conscience. “How can you defend someone who is so obviously guilty?” they would ask. And, doing her best not to sound self-righteous, she would tell them that everyone deserves representation. The job of a public defender is not to determine innocence or guilt, she would tell them. That’s the jury’s job, or the judge’s job.

This kind of case was the reason Amy wanted to work as a public defender. The criminal procedure and prisoners’ rights classes were her favorites in law school. She rooted for the Mets, not the Yankees, and the Jets, not the Giants. “I am an underdog kind of girl,” she told people.

Of course she wondered why someone would walk into a restaurant and slaughter five innocent people. Every day, people walk into businesses at the last minute and are refused service. They don’t kill people. What triggered the rampage committed by Stephenson and Hakim? That’s what the meat of this case was for Amy.

Throughout the weekend, she laid out the case for a motion to suppress the evidence. She decided that, although the Fourth Amendment protects the public from unreasonable searches by the government, Mengelt was not the government. He was a private citizen. He would be liable in a civil hearing, but not in a civil trial. But the police never would have gone to Stephenson’s apartment if it hadn’t been for Mengelt’s tip. The police had no reason to suspect Stephenson and Hakim, nor did they have a warrant to search the premises. In trying to be efficient, they ignored the suspects’ due process. Because they ignored the law, one of the suspects was dead, and the other had spent two-plus months in a prison hospital. Those would be her arguments.
Amy knew exactly how this would play with the public. Not well. Public defenders are routinely vilified for helping people whom the public is already sure, even without a trial, are guilty. Amy had never defended a high-profile murderer like Stephenson before, but she had certainly felt the public’s wrath before. The one that made her laugh was the woman who left a voicemail calling her a “cock-juggling thunder cunt.” Every time Amy would tell that story, she would end it with the same tagline: “You don’t get insulted like that every day.”
CHAPTER 10
Saturday, November 17, 2007

Joe Mengelt knew nothing of the Daily News’ story, Amy Diamond’s troubles, or anything else that was happening in New York. All flight, he wondered whether he had suddenly become news. When he arrived in Paris, he glanced at the airport TV screens to see if CNN was paying attention. It wasn’t. The big story that day was the discovery of at least 30 bodies in an unfinished west Baghdad house, and whether this was the work of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

Joe hated the war. He thought devoting American lives to fighting for who-knows-what in a God-forsaken hellhole like the Middle East was a waste of time and resources. Let the Jews and the Arabs kill each other, he thought. We can just sit back and watch. But this once, he was glad for the war, thankful it provided a diversion that prevented him from becoming news.

All flight long, he had planned out his next moves. He would take the next flight to Geneva, Switzerland, get a room and wait till the bank opened Monday and he could tap into his savings. Over the past 18 years, he had been able to stash a little over $3 million. He imagined that would hold him for a good long time, even in Europe. Once he had money in hand, he would get the proper papers to create a new identity, find a town somewhere that needed a doctor and settle in.

Joe sailed through customs, then got a shuttlebus to the adjacent terminal. He arrived in Switzerland two hours later.

Geneva was a sparkingly beautiful city, and though Joe had no idea where he was going, he enjoyed the cleanliness and relative serenity. He checked into a relatively modest hotel—no reason to attract attention, if there was any attention to attract—then went out for a walk. About three blocks from the hotel, he turned on Rue des Glacis-de-Rive. Shops and restaurants gave way to strip clubs and bars, and he found himself, unwittingly, in the Red-Light District. Women in short skirts, revealing blouses and tall heels paraded outside. They called to him. Their language, he did not understand. Their body language—that, even he could interpret.

He tried to avert his eyes and was about to cross the street when he heard a man’s voice. “What you need?”
Joe looked up and found himself staring at a wall of a human being. This guy had to be 6-foot-8, 300 pounds. He wore a black trench coat and boots that looked big enough for two feet. Joe thought about being mugged in New York, and in Mexico, and feared the trifecta.

“What you need?” the man repeated in an accent Joe couldn’t detect. Maybe German, maybe Slovak.

“Nothing,” Joe said.

“We all need something,” the man said, smiling and slapping Joe on the back with a hand the size of a catcher’s mitt. “You need girl?”

“No.”

“Drugs?”

“No. Nothing, really.”

“Papers?”

Joe looked at him for a moment, and the man knew he’d made a sale.

“What papers you need? Passport?”

“What do you have?”

“Have it all!” the man said, giving Joe another unsettling slap. “Come.”

He ushered Joe toward the door of one of the club. The words “Pussy Cat” glowed in orange neon. They walked up a flight of stairs and into a narrow hallway filled with doors that opened into offices. The man led Joe to the second door on the right, which opened into a room with a small desk and a printing press encircled by boxes. The man flipped on the light switch. A bare bulb and the neon seeping in from outside made odd shadows. The floor vibrated with music from the club below.

“My name, it is Klaus,” the big guy said, extending his hand.” Got anything you need. Anything at all. What your name?”

Joe shook his hand but didn’t answer. He looked around and wondered what was in the boxes.

“Got passport. You need?”

Joe nodded.
“What kind?”

A good question.

“French.”

Klaus went into the stack and pulled out a blank French passport. He handed it to Joe to inspect.

“You like?”

Joe did.

“What else?”

What else would Joe need? Medical credentials would help. “A diploma.”

“What kind?”

“Medical school.”

“You are a doctor?”

“Yes.”

“What doctor?”

“Sorry?”

“What kind of doctor you are?”

“Just a general practitioner,” Joe said. No reason to get specific.

It took Klaus a couple of minutes, but he gathered the necessary materials and handed them to Joe.

“You put on any name you like on passport,” Klaus said. “What diploma you want?”

Klaus walked Joe over to a corner of the room with hundreds of cardboard boxes, each labeled with a different university and stacked alphabetically. The one he wanted, Aarhus, in Denmark, was at the top. Joe knew Aarhus was prestigious enough that others in the profession would recognize it, and he thought the language spoken there was foreign enough that they wouldn’t bother to check references.
“This one,” Joe said, pointing.

“Very good,” Klaus said. He opened the box and handed

“How much?” Joe said.

“Twenty-five thousand euros.”

Joe thought that seemed reasonable for the price of a new life.

“I am not carrying cash,” said Joe, who had about a thousand American dollars on him, but nothing else. “Can we do the transaction on Monday?”

Klaus looked angry.

“I’m sorry,” Joe said. “But who carries 25,000 euros?”

Klaus pulled the passport and diploma from Joe’s hands.

“How much cash you have now?”

Joe took out his wallet. He pulled out $200 and handed it to Klaus.

“A down payment,” Joe said. “I’ll be back Monday.”

Klaus grabbed the wallet from Joe and began going through it. Joe lunged toward him, but Klaus pushed him down. Klaus flipped through Joe’s IDs and saw enough references to “Dr. John J. Mengelt” to satisfy him that Joe was a doctor. Joe was relieved that Klaus didn’t seem to recognize the Mengelt name.

Joe looked up from the floor at Klaus. “All my things are in my hotel. I’ll come back Monday with the money. I promise.”

“You cannot leave. You stay here.”

“And do what?” Joe said.

“You are doctor, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Then you take care of the girls. Monday, I take you to bank. Meantime, what you need to be doctor?”
“I will take care of the girls,” Joe said. “But let me go back to my hotel.”

Klaus hit Joe with a backhand to the jaw. Part punch, part slap, it stunned him more than hurt.

“I ask what you need to be doctor.”

Klaus handed Joe a pad of paper and a pen, and Joe wrote down Klaus a list of supplies he might need to do routine exams. Klaus yelled toward the door, and a young man of maybe 18 rushed into the room. Klaus said something to him that Joe couldn’t make out, and the boy sped out to the pharmacy.

Joe sat on the edge of a desk and rubbed his jaw. Klaus pulled a flask from his pocket.

“Here. Drink.”

“No, thank you,” Joe said.

“Drink,” Klaus repeated.

Joe had no taste for alcohol. It reminded him of what it might be like to drink battery acid. But he drank a small sip. He gagged. Klaus laughed.

The boy returned with a large bag containing the supplies Joe had put on his list, and for the next 36 hours Joe turned the phony document storage room into a makeshift doctor’s office.

Klaus paraded all 25 of his girls through the office during the weekend and always sat within earshot. Joe was curious about the girls, but by necessity the conversations had to be all business. Each girl spoke some English, and when they couldn’t express what they needed in words, they did a lot of pointing and gesturing.

Joe was surprised to find that most of the girls were healthy, though two had gonorrhea and one a raging case of strep throat. Joe asked Klaus for the necessary medications, and within an hour Klaus had them delivered. Joe wondered how Klaus got prescription medicines so quickly without a prescription, but he didn’t ask.

The worst of the lot, who called herself Pearl, came in Saturday afternoon, suffering from anal fissures. Pearl was a small girl, pretty. Reminded Joe of his daughter Nan. Pearl tearfully confided to Joe that she had been held down by two men and raped by a third. Joe examined her and found that she had been ripped apart, and severely. There was little he could do—he was a prisoner here, after all, and he presumed she was too—but he felt something for this girl. In other circumstances, he would have
gone to the police, or at least advised her to go to the police. Instead, he patted her on the shoulder once and asked Klaus to get her a stool softener and nitroglycerine to apply to the wound.

Joe also recommended to Klaus that Pearl stay off the street for a week so she could heal. Klaus told Joe to mind his own business. Joe did.

On Saturday night, after Joe had treated 16 girls, Klaus brought Joe a container filled with cheese and potatoes and a cold beer.

“Is raclette,” Klaus said.

“Raclette,” Joe repeated. He sat down and devoured his dinner but pushed the beer aside. He asked for water and Klaus brought him a glass. He also brought in a blanket and pillow and told Joe to make himself comfortable on the floor. Joe did the best he could to get comfortable and find a position that avoided the neon light that bled into the room. He heard the door bolt shut from the outside.

Joe wasn’t the kind to try to escape. He could understand why he was being held, and despite the circumstances and crude accommodations, Klaus had treated him reasonably well. He felt surprisingly safe, given the circumstances.

Fairly soon, Joe was asleep.

He woke up Sunday morning to one of Klaus’s men unlocking the door. This man—a teenage boy, really, probably no older than Joe’s son J.J.—walked in with a plate of runny eggs and a cup of strongly brewed black coffee. Joe asked about the possibility of a toothbrush and a shower. He soon had a toothbrush, but the shower was denied. Instead, the man brought him some cologne.

Joe thought about the girl, Pearl, and this boy who had carried in his breakfast and bathroom supplies, and they got him thinking about home for a moment. *If my family could see this girl and see how others live, maybe they would appreciate me more,* he thought.

But that thought was fleeting. Joe didn’t want to think about home. Home no longer existed. He had to be a new man with a new life. No reminiscing. He was now ... well, who, exactly? He had to pick a new name.

Joe splashed some on and soon found himself back at work with a new set of girls to examine. It was more routine medicine, but if he was going to be held against his will, at least he had something to do to pass the time.
It was shortly after 6 p.m. when Joe saw the last girl. After she left, Klaus came in.

“You do good job,” he said, slapping Joe on the back. “You want to stay here and work?”

The question left Joe speechless. Stay here and work? And do what?

“You stay here. You take care of girls. Pay you good.”

“No, but thank you,” Joe said. “I would like to pay you and be on my way.”

“Up to you,” Klaus said. “But you will stay. We go to bank in the morning.”

Monday morning, Joe awoke with an aching back but thinking that Klaus would let him go. He would make up an excuse about being expected somewhere. Klaus would understand.

Klaus brought him another raclette—Don’t these people ever eat anything else? Joe wondered—and when 9 a.m. rolled around, Klaus escorted Joe from the second floor of the Pussy Cat to the bank. Klaus opened the heavy steel bank door for Joe and walked in behind him. He waited and watched Joe go to a teller. He saw Joe produce a piece of paper from his wallet containing the number of his account.

Unlike the United States, where withdrawing $10,000 or more got the attention of bank management and the federal government, removing money from his Swiss bank account proved surprisingly easy. The teller gave Joe an envelope containing the 50,000 euros he requested.

Relieved, Joe headed straight for Klaus and they walked back to the Pussy Cat. When they got to the second-floor office, Joe opened the envelope and counted out 25,000 euros.

“Here you are,” Joe said. “Can I have my papers?”

Klaus counted the money and retrieved the paperwork. “Passport for you, diploma for you. You can fill in names. I show you how.”

Klaus pulled a laptop computer and some other gear from one of the desk drawers. He took Joe’s picture, printed it and affixed it to the passport, then showed Joe where to type. Most of us are given our name, and we live with it. Joe had the opportunity now to call himself anything he wanted. He thought about his circumstances, his need to escape his old life. He remembered the French word for escape: Échappé. He tapped out his new name “Jean Échappé,” and in short order it appeared on his new credentials.
Klaus handed them to Joe, then reached into his pocket and pulled out 1,000 euros. “Here,” Klaus said. “For taking care of girls.”

Joe considered declining the offer, but why? He had treated the girls. He had had his freedom taken away for almost two days. He deserved the money. He deserved more, but he wasn’t going to argue.

“Thank you,” Joe said.

“Now you stay. Take care of girls. Take care of Pussy Cat workers.”

“No, thank you,” Joe said. “I have to be in France this week. I am starting a new job.”

“Here,” Klaus said, handing Joe his cellphone. “You call. Tell them you will not be arriving.”

“You don’t understand,” Joe said.

“Call,” Klaus said.

Joe had no one to call. He didn’t know a single person here, and if he did, he wouldn’t want this Klaus to have their phone number.

“I’m sorry,” Joe said. “I don’t have their phone number with me. It’s with my luggage in my hotel.”

“Then you must stay.” Klaus put his beefy arm around Joe and laughed. “You will like here. Geneva is very nice city. You stay here three months. Then we see.”
CHAPTER 11
Monday, November 19, 2007

Amy Diamond walked into the Manhattan Criminal Courts Building ready to file a pre-trial motion to suppress the evidence against Stephenson. She felt as confident as she’d ever felt. She knew her counterpart from the District Attorney’s office would argue that the police had acted to protect the public good. They’d say they could smell drugs coming from Stephenson’s apartment, and that’s why they bashed in the door. They’d say whatever they had to say to make the arrest stick.

But they had no reason to be in Stephenson’s building, other than the tip from Joe Mengelt. She knew from the police reports that they were nowhere without his help.

She requested an immediate Motion to Suppress hearing, fully expecting this to be the end of the state’s case. Then she headed to Rikers to talk to Stephenson. She showed her card at the front gate and was ushered into a holding area. A half-hour later, she had her first official meeting with Le’Andre Stephenson. He stood before her in an orange jumpsuit, his hands cuffed behind his back, his feet shackled together.

She stood up to greet him, and he gave her a verbal smackdown.

“Where you been, bitch?”

“I was here to see you the day you were arrested,” she said. “But they told me you had tried to commit suicide and were in no shape to meet with me.”

“So why you never be back?”

It was a good question, and one for which Amy didn’t have an answer. She could have pleaded an extra-heavy workload or some other excuse, but she simply apologized.

“I’m here now, and I’m here to help,” she said. “I think we can get you out. Soon.”

“I want out now, motherfucker!”

Amy was momentarily surprised by his volume, but she didn’t flinch.
“I’ve filed a motion to suppress the evidence against you,” she said. “I expect we will get a hearing by Wednesday, and you could be home for Thanksgiving.”

“Better get me out of here.”

“I’m doing everything I can.”

“I heard that shit before.”

Amy got up and called for the guard. “I’ll see you in court soon,” she told Stephenson. She did not look back.

Amy had dealt with hostile clients before, but none quite like Stephenson. And she would acknowledge that he had every right to be angry. She hadn’t handled his case as proficiently as she should have. The crime scene at Victor’s had taken weeks to process, and she had so many other cases that demanded her immediate attention. But she’d make it up to him.

Amy’s cellphone buzzed as she walked toward the subway. It was Danny Cartwright. She thought about not answering, but maybe he knew something she needed to know.

“Mr. Cartwright, what can I do for you?” she said.

“Judge Savage just scheduled the hearing on your pre-trial motion to suppress the evidence in the Stephenson case,” Danny said. “The hearing will be tomorrow. I wondered if you had any comment.”

“How did you find this out before I did?”

“I have my sources,” Danny said.

“I appreciate that,” Amy said. “But I prefer to do my talking in court. You’ve read the motion, I’m guessing, so you know what I’m going to argue. And I’m sure you’ve talked to the D.A., so you know what he’s going to argue. So what do you really want?”

“I want to talk to Stephenson.”
“What good would that do him? Or me?”

“It would give him a chance to tell his side of the story, to proclaim his innocence,” Danny said.

“He could tell the world he’s not a danger. Or he could confess.”

Amy thought about it for a minute. On one hand, Danny was right: A positive story could help Stephenson’s prospects when he got out of Rikers. But who knows what Stephenson would say? He barely acted housebroken with someone who was there to protect him. What would he say to a reporter?

“I’m sorry, Mr. Cartwright, but no. Maybe he’ll want to talk to you after his hearing. But for right now, I would advise him to be silent.”

“Hey, I had to ask,” Danny said. “So what do you think the odds are that your motion will succeed?”

“We’re going to win,” Amy said confidently.

Forty-five minutes later, she saw her words in a massive headline on the homepage of the Daily News:

WE’RE GOING TO WIN.

*

Danny had just hit the “send” button on his story when his phone rang. He looked at the readout on his phone and saw the name Judy Hensler. He thought seriously about letting it go to voicemail. Don’t these HR people know that I’m in the middle of the biggest goddamn story we’ve had in years? I’m getting this paper attention it hasn’t had in I-don’t-know-how-long, and they’re going to harass me now?

But he knew that if he didn’t answer, she’d be around his desk before long. He answered, but he didn’t say hello. So she did.
“Danny? Danny Cartwright? Are you there?”

Danny breathed hard into the phone.

“Danny, I’m just calling to ask if you’ve made a decision about taking the buyout.”

“Ms. Hensler, can I ask you a question?” Danny said. “Do you read the paper?”

“Most days, yes,” she said.

“Have you read it lately?”

“Yes, I think so. Why?”

“Have you read my stories?”

“I try not to. I don’t really like crime. It makes me nervous.”

“Well, Judy, your feelings aside, are you aware that I’m in the middle of one of the best stories we’ve had since Son of Sam?”

Silence.

“I don’t have time to worry about buyouts.”

“I realize that you are busy, Danny. But if you don’t decide soon, layoffs are going to begin.”

“The paper needs me,” Danny said. “Now more than ever.”

“The paper needs to make a profit, Danny. We’ve been asked to trim the staff.”

“I’m making the paper a profit. I’m giving the public a reason to buy the Daily News every day.”

“We really need your answer by tomorrow, Mr. Cartwright.”
“Tomorrow, I will be covering a pre-trial hearing that will determine whether a man who murdered five people gets out of jail on a technicality, Ms. Hensler. Please don’t bother me with your petty concerns.”

Judy Hensler started to say something, but Danny hung up, satisfied. So Judy Hensler went back to what she had been doing before she called him—preparing pink slips.

*

Natalie Parker had spent most of the weekend in bed, alternately crying and sleeping, while her father did his best to keep her teenage kids entertained and away from the media. But as long as they had their phones, they were wired in. Rod Parker knew he couldn’t stop them from communicating. The only thing he asked was that they not tell anyone where they were. He didn’t want media swarming his house.

The kids complied. Most of the texts they received were supportive, though their friends were curious: “Did u know about yr dad?” “Is yr dad with u?” “Where are u?” “Are u coming back to GC?” Friends also shared information about the Mengelt’s house, which was now being guarded by a small security force at great expense to Natalie.

When they did get texts, Nan and J.J. waited to answer until their grandfather was out of sight. Nan locked herself in the bathroom and confided what was happening to her best friend, Sharon Besser.

*No idea whats going on and a little scared. Mom is freakin out.*

*Theres an army around yr house.*

*What army?*

*TV trucks security guards protesters.*

*OMG. What are yr parents saying?*
Nothing much. My mom told me what they said in the newspaper about yr dad. Have u talked to him?

No.

Where r u?

Mom asked us not to say.

Think youll be home soon?

I think next Monday.

RU hearing from anyone?

Sharon didn’t want to tell Nan the truth.

Just some stuff.

Who? What?

Nan heard footsteps coming down the hall and stopped typing. J.J. knocked on the door.

“You in there? I need the bathroom.”

“Use the one downstairs.”

“I wanna take a shower.”

“Let me just finish in here.” Nan quickly texted to Sharon. “Gotta go. TTYL.” Sharon texted back several times. “You OK? You OK?” She got no answer. She tried to call, but the calls went straight to voicemail.

Nan slipped her phone in a pocket and surrendered the room to J.J. Before he could close the door, she said, “You hearing from anyone?”
“A few.” J.J. didn’t have many friends. He was introverted and standoffish like his father. Nan couldn’t recall the last time J.J. had a friend over. Maybe seventh grade. In fact, she probably couldn’t name more than two of his friends.

“What are you telling them?”

“Nothing to tell. I don’t know anything about what dad did, and we’re away on vacation.”

“Sharon tells me there are guards around our house. And TV trucks.”

“Wow.”

“Wow?”

Natalie peeked out from her door to see her kids talking. She stepped into the hallway and walked over to embrace them. She put her arms around Nan and motioned for J.J. to join them.

“Big family hug,” she said, gripping them tightly. She buried her head in J.J.’s shoulder. Nan and J.J. looked at each other. They were used to seeing their mother in charge. This was a new, unsettling side of her.

“We’ll get through this,” she said. “But we’re going to have to stick together. Come downstairs with me for a minute.”

“Mom, I was just about to take a shower,” J.J. said.

“This will just take a minute, J.J.” He looked at her face and decided not to argue.

They sat at the dining room table, the only truly formal space left in the house. This was Natalie’s mother’s favorite room. In the five years since she died, Natalie’s father had barely walked in here. He left it as a shrine to her. The rest of the house he completely made over to be much more
welcoming. He had the walls painted in cheerful colors, the stuffy old furniture replaced with casual, comfortable pieces. Rod Parker liked to relax, and his house now reflected that.

But the dining room meant serious business.

“Kids, we’re going to be staying here for a while,” Natalie said. “We can’t go back to Garden City, or we’ll be hounded by the media and who knows who else.”

“How long a while?” J.J. asked.

“A lot of that depends on whether I can find your father and what happens with his patients.”

“What could happen with his patients?”

“I’m not talking about the patients he has now,” Natalie said. “I’m talking about the patients he had—the babies he delivered—when he was a resident at City General.”

Natalie listed the potential possibilities. She mentioned the possibility of lawsuits against Joe Mengelt for implanting microchips into babies, and the likelihood that it would bankrupt the family. She told them they would almost certainly be the target of angry protesters who, unable to take their wrath out on the doctor himself, would go after his family.

“But we didn’t do anything, and we didn’t know anything,” Nan said. “Me and J.J. weren’t even born when Dad did this.”

“I didn’t know anything about it, either,” Natalie said. “It doesn’t matter. We’re his family, and we’re going to be blamed. So I’ve made a few decisions.”

The kids braced themselves.

“This morning, I asked our lawyer to put the house up for sale. We won’t be going back.”

Nan was about to say something.
“Just hang on. We’re going to stay here with your grandfather for now. On Monday, we’ll register you for school here. We’re not going to be able to hide who we are, but I want to get as much distance as possible from your father. Later today, I’m going to send an email to that reporter from the Daily News apologizing for your father’s actions and asking for forgiveness and privacy for us. Also, I’ve asked our lawyer to start legal proceedings to change all of our names. From now on, our last name is Parker.”

Nan and J.J. looked at each other. This was a lot to absorb for anyone, but especially two teenagers. They sat quietly for a minute, Natalie trying to gauge what her children might be thinking. Finally, J.J. asked, “What happened to Dad?”

“I wish I knew,” Natalie said. “I’ve called his cell phone 50 times. It always goes straight to voicemail. The last few times the message said the voicemail was full.”

“Are you scared, Mom?” J.J. asked.

Natalie tried never to lie to her children. But today, she had to. She got up and gave both kids a hug.

“Your father left us a mess, but we’re going to be just fine.”

Natalie left the dining room and holed up in her father’s home office for the next hour. She called her lawyer, David Chessler, and gave him the go-ahead for everything she had mentioned to the kids. She told him she planned to email Danny Cartwright, and she gave the lawyer the bullet points of what she was thinking of saying. Her initial inclination was to pledge to make restitution to all those Joe had injured, but Chessler advised her against that.

“Don’t make promises you may not be able to keep,” he said.

She agreed.
She also asked for one thing she didn’t mention to the kids—she wanted him to start divorce proceedings on grounds of desertion. He agreed.

They were on and off the phone in less than ten minutes. Then she drafted an email to Danny Cartwright at the Daily News. She went back and forth, erasing and correcting, till she settled on this:

Dear Mr. Cartwright,

I appreciated the way you handled the story about my husband and my family, and I would like to ask you for a favor. Please convey to your readers that my children and I are shocked and devastated by what has unfolded over the past several days. As I told you before, we were completely unaware of what my husband had done—and we condemn it in the strongest possible terms. We are away on a previously planned vacation, and, when we come back, we ask the public to respect our privacy.

I ask the same of you. Please don’t try to contact me. If I have something to say, I will be in touch.

Yours Truly,

Natalie Mengelt

She looked at the signature for a moment before she sent it, knowing it would probably be the last time she used that name. Then she went to one of those websites that allowed the user to create a temporary email address. She pasted in the email and hit send.

* 

Danny had been on the phone all day, talking to police, lawyers, legal experts, and others about what might happen when Amy Diamond presented Le’Andre Stephenson’s case. The police maintained they had a solid argument to make. The lawyers split, of course. Legal experts were divided as well.
Some thought Judge Savage would find a reason to keep Stephenson in prison—either for society’s safety, or for his own. But there were others who thought Stephenson was likely to walk, at least temporarily. One law professor told Danny that, even if Stephenson got out, that wasn’t the end of the case. The police may have jumped the gun on making the arrest, but they could still find other pieces of evidence to use for a conviction.

Danny finished the story in the early afternoon and was just about to send to his editor when he received Natalie’s email. He read it over a few times and noted the temporary email address. He added a few sentences to his story, as well as a caveat that the email came from a temporary mailbox that could not be independently verified. He was fairly sure the email came from the real Natalie Mengelt, but he wasn’t taking any chances.

His story hit the Daily News website at 2:30 that afternoon, though it took second billing to the WE’RE GOING TO WIN headline. This fresh story was more analytical than emotional, and the News had little use for analysis these days.

But the speculation in the story sparked a telephone trail that spread among the families of the Victor’s victims. Juanita Ricks answered her phone and barely got out the “hello” before she heard an earful from Jack Clemmons, the brother of Marty Clemmons, the assistant manager in the restaurant that night. Clemmons, an auto mechanic who owned his own shop in Queens, had kept in touch with all the relatives regularly in the months since the murders. He clung to them, hoping someone would be able to make sense of what happened. They all met for the first time two weeks after the murders, after they had buried their dead, in a diner near his business. They had gotten together twice more since then. All except Juanita, who preferred to grieve in private.
“Did you see this story?” Clemmons demanded. “Did you see this story!? This nigger, this piece of shit who massacred my brother and your husband and the others, is going to get out. We have to do something about this. You have to be a part of this.”

“What do you suggest we do?” Juanita asked.

“We’re going to get justice for our people,” he said. “We need to be at the courthouse and let the judge know that he can’t just let a murderer walk the streets because of some legal bullshit. I’m calling all of the families. I want everyone in front of the courthouse at 8:30 Wednesday morning. I want you there, Juanita. We need to be united.”

“I can do that,” Juanita said.

“Goddamn lawyers, goddamn judges,” Clemmons said. “I want everyone to know who these people are. This lawyer, this Amy Diamond, if she gets Stephenson out of jail, everyone is going to know what she did. She will have no peace as long as I’m alive. This Judge Savage, if he lets that piece of garbage out…”

Clemmons didn’t finish his sentence, but he didn’t have to. Juanita knew what he meant. She thought to argue that Stephenson in jail or out would not bring back Jimmy or any of the others. But that was a losing argument with Clemmons, and she knew it.

“I’ll be there,” she said. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“No. Just be there.”

Juanita hung up the phone, uneasy at the agreement she’d just made. Jack Clemmons continued to call the other families to secure their promise to be at the courtroom. Jack Wright’s parents said they’d be there. Clara Fuentes’s husband said he would be there with his son, and Gina Bellacino’s boyfriend promised to attend.
Then Jack went down the street to his shop and took from his desk drawer the Beretta he’d bought a year ago. He was going to the hearing well equipped.

*

While Clemmons was organizing the opposition, the Rev. T. Gerald Benjamin was preparing to descend. Benjamin led one of the biggest AME churches in Manhattan. He’d been a spiritual leader, and sometimes a political leader, for three decades. He was appalled by what he had read about Joe Mengelt. He also knew that, done right, this was a moneymaking opportunity.

Unlike so many African-American leaders, Benjamin saved his fire for the pulpit. In public, he was most measured—when he spoke at all. “If you want to get something out of the white man, you can’t be a threat,” he regularly told his parishioners. “Gotta make ‘em feel comfortable. Gotta make ‘em feel it was their idea.” So while the Al Sharptons of the world yelled and fussed and threatened, T. Gerald Benjamin earned their allegiance by being perpetually calm and sharing the credit. He treated everyone as if they were the only person in the room, the only person he could possibly confide in. He, in turn, got great respect—and great press.

So when he picked up the phone and called City General Hospital to ask for a meeting with Don Russell, the administrator of City General Hospital, Russell welcomed his call. “Thank God it’s not Sharpton,” Russell told his assistant.

Mengelt’s actions reflected horribly on City General’s operation, even though it had been more than 18 years since he had practiced there, and the staff had turned over several times. The hospital’s PR staff had worked overtime over the weekend to send out statements assuring patients and the public at large that nothing like that could ever happen again, and that the hospital was sincerely sorry. The hospital said it was in the process of locating the names of babies Dr. Mengelt had delivered. The problem was that many of its records had been lost in a flood that had wiped out much of the hospital’s
records close to 15 years ago. Everything since was handled electronically, but Mengelt’s work may have been lost to history. The hospital invited anyone who had been born there in the late 1980s and early 1990s and might have been a patient of Dr. Mengelt’s to bring their birth certificate—that would have his name on it—and come in for a free examination. If a chip was detected, it would be removed for free, and they would be compensated for their time and trouble.

Benjamin arrived at City Hospital late Monday afternoon—20 minutes later than his scheduled appointment—and told his driver to wait outside. “This won’t take long,” he said. He rode the elevator to the third floor. Russell’s assistant Derek was there waiting and escorted him to the administrator’s office. Don Russell was just finishing up a phone call. He waved Benjamin in.

“Welcome, Reverend, welcome,” he said, extending his hand.

“Mr. Russell, always a pleasure,” Benjamin said.

Both men sat down and, after a minute of small talk, got down to business.

“How can I help you out of this situation?” Benjamin said.

“This is an ugly one,” Russell said.

“Indeed,” said Benjamin, who began to recap the hospital’s past issues with segregation. He also remembered a time in the ’70s when City General refused care to a black man who immediately keeled over and died on the sidewalk outside. The hospital said at the time that the man didn’t have identification, and they believed he was there to steal drugs. Police found him with identification, and the hospital paid $2 million to the man’s family.

“So what can I do to help?” Benjamin said.
“I was thinking that you could spread the word in your community about what we are doing to treat and compensate anyone who has been wronged by Dr. Mengelt,” Russell said.

“And how much compensation are we talking about?”

“I had a figure in mind,” Russell said, “but I value your opinion, Reverend. What do you think would be fair and adequate?”

Benjamin had a figure in mind too—$30,000 to those who had been chipped and had not been involved in criminal activity. He wanted $100,000 for those whose arrest could be traced to information that Mengelt provided the police. And he wanted $150,000 for Le’Andre Stephenson. His argument was that if Stephenson does end up getting released from jail, he will need protection.

Plus, the hospital would provide a $5,000 per person finder’s fee for the church.

Russell mulled the idea and did a little back-of-the-envelope calculation. Assuming that the Daily News story was right—that there were 166 babies involved in Mengelt’s little eugenics experiment—City General was looking at about a $5 million payout. Maybe even $6 million.

“Reverend, I appreciate your suggestion, but can I ask a little leniency, please?” Russell said. “We are not a wealthy hospital, and we do a lot of good for the community. Could we possibly half that amount? Not the amount that goes to the church—$5,000 seems exceptionally fair for all your help—but, if we could lower the other costs by half, I think we could work that into our budget. I believe our board would consider that money well spent.”

Benjamin consider Russell’s request for a long minute. Then he closed his eyes, clasped his hands together in front of his face and nodded.

“Administrator Russell, I do believe that is most fair,” the Reverend said. “We will say $15,000 for each person affected, $50,000 for those convicted of crimes and $75,000 for Stephenson.”
Russell smiled. “I would ask one other favor, Reverend.”

“Name it,” Benjamin said.

“Let’s not disclose the extra payments to Stephenson and the others who were found to be criminals,” Russell said. “The public might see that as a reward for misbehavior, and I don’t believe that is something either of us wants to try to justify.”

“I will agree to that, in exchange for the hospital not sharing the amount that will be going to the church,” Benjamin said.

“Deal,” Russell said. A handshake later, Benjamin, $830,000 richer, left the hospital. His assistants had alerted the media that the Reverend had something important to share about the Mengelt case, and, when he walked out the door, he was greeted by a gaggle of reporters and camera crews.

Danny Cartwright stood in the back. Danny had never trusted Benjamin—he thought he was a bit too close to the power structure. On the other hand, Benjamin did not rile up his people the way other black leaders could and did. And he did most of his work behind the scenes, with a lot less fanfare than his contemporaries. So when Danny got the call about a briefing, he was somewhat surprised.

“Gentlemen and ladies of the media, so good to see you,” Benjamin said. “I have a short statement to make, and then I will take your questions. I have just come from a meeting with the administrator of City General, Mr. Don Russell. We both agreed that this Mengelt situation is most heinous. Most heinous, indeed. What this so-called ‘doctor’ did was beyond the pale, but what he did was years before the current administration of the hospital—and a fine administration it is, indeed—was here.
“Mr. Russell agreed that the first thing we must do is take care of anyone whose body has been desecrated by this so-called doctor, Mengelt. So I ask the members of my church and the citizens of New York who were born at this hospital in 1988 and 1989 to check their birth certificates. If your birth certificate shows that you were a patient of this so-called doctor, this notorious, good-for-nothing, racist doctor, please contact City General Hospital. You will receive an examination free of charge, and, if this so-called doctor, this abomination of medicine, planted a dog finder in you, you will be entitled to compensation.

“With that, I will take your questions.”

“How much will the victims be compensated?” a TV reporter shouted.

“Each person who has a chip removed will receive $15,000,” the Reverend said.

“Did you negotiate the amount?” another reporter said.

“There was no need to negotiate,” the Reverend said. “Administrator Russell acknowledged that someone who once worked for the hospital had done wrong, and he suggested the amount.”

Then Danny piped up. “Reverend, you have not, to the best of my knowledge, issued an official statement on whether you think Le’Andre Stephenson should be released from jail. In fact, the black clergy as a whole has been quiet. So what do you think?”

This was a question Benjamin had hoped to avoid. The city knew what Le’Andre Stephenson had done. It had been exposed to the brutal pictures and weeks of stories immediately following the murders. But the city was just beginning to grasp the story of what Joe Mengelt had done, and Benjamin wanted to ride that wave. Benjamin didn’t care what happened to Stephenson. He thought of Stephenson as murderous scum, the kind who harms the African-American community in the city. What he wanted in this case was to have white people look in the mirror every morning and see Joe Mengelt
reflecting back at them. The long-term benefits for Benjamin, his church, and the black community could be enormous.

“I believe in the power of the great judiciary,” Benjamin said. “I have known Judge Savage for many years and consider him to be a wise and prudent jurist. I believe that whatever he decides will be best for our city. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

Benjamin got into his car and headed uptown.
CHAPTER 12

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2007

This particular Tuesday in New York was like a day off during a playoff series. With no news—the hearing would be tomorrow—there was nothing left to do but speculate. No one did that better than New York talk radio host Elvin Jostin. Although he was a registered independent, Jostin was a Democrat through and through. But he played a Republican on the radio. “More money in it,” he would tell his family, a lineage that had been voting for Democrats since before FDR and found their son/brother/nephew’s on-air personality a disgrace.

But there was no arguing that he was right—conservatism paid. And not only the millions he commanded in salary from WABC radio but the multimillions he earned giving speeches and selling merchandise. Jostin became a favorite because he defended the city against the politicians from elsewhere who bashed New York with anti-Semitic code words. “New Yorkers work every bit as hard as anyone else—and probably harder,” he said often on his midday radio show. “We deal with crowding, higher cost of living, more traffic, and more danger than anyone. On 9/11, they didn’t go after Minneapolis or Indianapolis or any of those –apolises. Because no one gives a damn about those places. They give a damn about New York. So when I hear some rinky-dink politician from Cowtown, Nebraska, take potshots at us, I’m gonna tell him where to stuff it.”

Jostin voted straight-ticket Democratic in every general election, but he stayed away from primaries so no one could see his voting record. He read the papers thoroughly every day and was appalled at a city that had become so much easier for the haves and so difficult for the have-nots to navigate. But he tempered those thoughts when he got on the radio. The have-nots became “freeloaders living off the backs of people like you and me, hard-working, honest Americans.” Yes, it was cynical, but Jostin liked to live well. The real Elvin Jostin would be on Air America. But he knew what
those saps made, and he knew what he was paid. So off the air, he thought what he thought. On the air, he said exactly the opposite.

In private, he found Joe Mengelt appalling. He also worried whether Le’Andre Stephenson could truly walk the streets a free man before some vigilante took a shot at him. When he got on the radio today, he was rarin’ to go.

“Hear me out on this,” he began. “Joe Mengelt worked in City General, a hospital that has to take anyone, regardless of their ability to pay. Listen again: Anyone. They take anyone. Without regard to their ability to pay. So unwed, single mothers. Girls whose baby-daddies are nowhere to be found. Babies who are, sure as I’m sitting here, going to become the responsibility of the government to feed, clothe, and educate. And they’re NOT going to get educated because education means nothing to people like this.” (He was always careful not to say “these people,” because that led to charges of racism, and that was a distraction Jostin didn’t want nor need. He could stir up anger and resentment in other ways.)

“So Dr. Mengelt sees this, and he’s appalled. And even though he’s sure about what’s going to happen to the babies he delivers, he’s a man of science. A man of science. And he wants to find out what actually happens to these kids.

“So he has access to some monitoring devices. The liberal media calls them ‘dog chips’ or ‘microchips,’ but let’s leave the pejorative labels off and just call them what they really are—monitoring devices. And he puts them in 166 babies that he delivers. These devices don’t hurt anyone. The mother doesn’t know what he’s done, and the babies—who are brought into this world and paid for by hard-working Americans like you and me—are not harmed. Not in the least. And then Dr. Mengelt waits and watches.
“The babies who grew up to be upstanding citizens, they have nothing to worry about. But the babies like Le’Andre Stephenson and his running mate, Hakim Shabazz, who commit terrible, brutal crimes, are found and turned in to the police. Dr. Mengelt does this. Doctor. He does this quietly. He does this not to collect a reward, but to keep our streets safer. Let me say that again. He wants to keep our streets safer. Now who could argue with that?

“But then along comes this so-called investigative reporter for the Daily News, a fellow by the name of Danny Cartwright. I’ve met Danny Cartwright a few times at social occasions. Nice enough man. But this Danny Cartwright comes along and thinks he’s going to unearth the story of the century by making Joe Mengelt into some kind of monster. His own newspaper, which used to call Dr. Mengelt ‘Superman’ when his identity was unknown, is now calling him—get this—‘The Notorious Dr. Mengelt.’ I saw one columnist call him ‘Thoroughly Modern Mengele’ because he used technology to catch criminals. Mengele? Can you believe it? As if Mengelt had done experiments on these children. As if Mengelt had killed anyone. Ladies and gentlemen, let me tell you something, Joe Mengelt did nothing except try to keep you and me, the hard-working people of this city, safe.

“And now, because of this Danny Cartwright, crusading reporter, we are now faced with the possibility that Le’Andre Stephenson, who participated in the murder of five innocent people, five people who were just trying to earn a living, five hardworking Americans like you and me, that Le’Andre Stephenson is going to get out of prison a free man. So Joe Mengelt, who has done something heroic by turning in murderers, has apparently had to go underground. He’s gone missing. He’s had to flee because the liberal left has turned him into the world’s most hated man. But tomorrow, Le’Andre Stephenson might be sitting next to you, having a beer on the next stool. I ask you: In what world is that right?
“I think you should call the Daily News. Call this Danny Cartwright. Tell him to lay off Joe Mengelt. Call him. The number is (212) 210-2100. Call him. Tell him that our streets are better when Joe Mengelt is practicing medicine and murderers like Le’Andre Stephenson are in jail where they belong.”

*

Danny Cartwright made it a point never to listen to Elvin Jostin—or any talk radio. As a reporter, he thought of himself like a baseball umpire. His job was to call balls and strikes. Whichever way the wind blew, he was OK. Just tell the story—the most truthful version possible.

So Danny was unprepared when his phone started ringing.

“Cartwright here.”

“Hey, Cartwright, why don’t you leave Dr. Mengelt alone? He’s a hero.”

“Cartwright here.”

“I’d rather have Dr. Mengelt on my street than that piece of trash Stephenson.”

“Cartwright here.”

“It’s like Jostin says: More Mengelts, less Stephensons. You better think about that. You better think about what you’re doing before you end up like the workers at Victor’s.”

After the first three calls, dozens more followed, but Danny let them go to voicemail. The stupidity of it all—these sheep! Danny thought—started him wondering why people couldn’t make up their own minds. Why did they need some radio clown spewing garbage to be their leader? If they’d spent five seconds thinking through what Mengelt had done, they would not see him as a hero. If they put themselves in the place of Le’Andre Stephenson and the 165 others who were chipped, they would not see him as a hero. They would get in line to sue.
Every call that went through to voicemail broke Danny’s concentration and made him progressively angrier. He was about to get up and get some coffee when the phone rang again. This time, he was ready for an argument.

“Cartwright.”

“Mr. Cartwright? Mr. Danny Cartwright?”

“Yes.”

“My name is LaShandra Stephenson. I’m Le’Andre Stephenson’s mother.”

Danny perked up. He’d left several messages for Stephenson’s mother over the weekend and heard nothing back. He figured she was a lost cause.

“Mrs. Stephenson …”

“It’s Miss Stephenson,” she said.

“I’m sorry—Miss Stephenson, thank for you calling me back.”

“I ain’t callin’ you back,” she said. “I never got no messages from you.”

“You didn’t?”

“No. Where you call me?”

Danny looked at the pad on his desk and read back the phone number he’d tried.

“Don’t know that number,” she said.

“Well, whatever,” Danny said. “I’m glad to talk to you. But you’re calling me. Why are you calling me?”
“Don’t know who else to ask. But my friend give me your stories so I’m calling to ask you: How I keep Le’Andre in Rikers?”

The request puzzled Danny. Here was a mother who wanted her son to stay in jail. Danny had been a reporter for a long time. He’d never gotten a call like this.

“Why would you want that?” Danny asked.

“Gots people threatening to kill Le’Andre,” she said. “Got friends of Shabazz Hakim saying it Le’Andre’s fault Shabazz dead. Shabazz’s father say if he see Le’Andre, he gonna be 10-0. I think Le’Andre do better in Rikers.”

“Have you talked to Le’Andre?”

“I talk to him and told him that, but he don’t want to hear it. He ask me to be at court and bring him a gun if he get out.”

“Miss Stephenson, you’re aware that I’m a newspaper reporter, right?”

“I know it.”

“And you’re aware that I might write a story about our conversation.”

“If you wanna, that OK with me.”

“Well, if I write that Le’Andre asked you to bring him a gun, that might well influence the judge to keep him in jail.”

“Well, then, you write that. Help me keep my boy safe.”

Safe in Rikers. Danny thought that was one of the saddest things he’d ever heard.

“Would you answer a few more questions for me, please, Miss Stephenson?”
“OK.”

“Tell me about the day Le’Andre was born and what you remember of Dr. Mengelt. Was he your regular doctor?”

“Never had no regular doctor. Never even seen him before or since that I can remember.”

“Did Dr. Mengelt say anything to you about putting a monitoring device in Le’Andre?”

“No, sir.”

“What did you think when you heard that Le’Andre had a dog tracker in him?”

“Typical white man shit. Le’Andre have some problems, but he not a dog. Don’t know why anyone would do that.”

“Was anyone else in the delivery room with you?”

“My momma.”

“Did she talk to Dr. Mengelt?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember them talking?”

“I don’t remember the day. I remember me and momma have a fight, but I don’t remember nothing else.”

“What were you fighting about?”

“She all mad that I was pregnant.”

“How old were you?”
“Fifteen.”

“And how old are you now?”

“Thirty-four.”

“And Le’Andre’s father?”

“Jerome? Don’t know how old he is. Maybe 40 now. He in prison. Armed robbery and attempted murder. Ain’t seen him since Le’Andre was a baby.”

Danny continued to collect more details from LaShandra Stephenson—about how she couldn’t control Le’Andre when he was a child, about her reaction to the Victor’s murders (“I am so sorry for those families. I had three brothers killed, so I know how it hurt”), about her life, and about Le’Andre’s safety.

“So what you think I should do?” LaShandra Stephenson asked.

Last time Danny gave someone advice, it was Joe Mengelt, who fled the country. Although LaShandra Stephenson had no reason to flee, Danny was out of the advice-giving business.

“I can’t tell you what you should do, Miss Stephenson. I don’t know. Maybe you should talk to Le’Andre’s lawyer.

“Miss Stephenson, can I ask one more question?”

“Go ahead.”

“You’re not planning on bringing Le’Andre a gun, right?”

“No. I ain’t gonna violate my parole.”

Danny hung up and began pounding out the next day’s exclusive. New York woke up Wednesday to this headline: KEEP MY BOY IN JAIL.
Amy Diamond applied one more coat of ruby red lipstick and checked her outfit in the mirror for a final time before she left her apartment. She was going to be a celebrity today—for better or for worse—and she wanted to look as splashy as possible. Her skirt had a small slit on each side, her blouse was a little bit see-through, and she kept the top two buttons undone. She took her work absolutely seriously, but she wanted the millions who saw her on TV that night to think “smart” and “hot.” When her work was done, she hailed a cab to the courthouse.

Her client, Le’Andre Stephenson, finished packing up his belongings in a laundry bag. He had been instructed to take them with him, just in case the judge released him. He put on a button-down shirt and tie she’d sent to him the day before. It was maybe the third time Stephenson had ever worn a tie. The first two times were at funerals for his friends.

Two guards entered Stephenson’s cell when he finished dressing and handcuffed him.

“You gotta?” he asked.

“We take no chances with you,” the bigger of the guards said without malice. The smaller guard picked up the laundry bag, and they escorted Stephenson out.

“Did you see what your mom said about you in the paper today?” the bigger guard said.

“Ain’t seen no paper,” Stephenson said.

“She said she hopes the judge keeps you in here.”

As far as Stephenson was concerned, this was the last time he would ever see the inside of Rikers. If the judge didn’t let him out today, he was going to make a move.
“Ain’t gonna keep me in here,” Stephenson said.

The guards walked him through four locked doors, then handed him off to another guard who brought him to the van that would transport him to court. Stephenson looked outside and saw himself free.

Amy Diamond got out of the cab in front of the courthouse to a waiting media throng. She smiled as they rushed to her.

“Ms. Diamond, what do you expect the judge to decide today?” a TV reporter asked.

“The only thing he can decide—Le’Andre Stephenson has to be set free,” she said.

“What do you think about what his mother said?” another asked.

“I sympathize with Miss Stephenson, but I disagree with her. Le’Andre will be safe on the outside. He doesn’t belong in jail.”

“You think he’s innocent?"

“Let’s let the judge make the legal determinations, OK? I’ll be happy to talk to you afterwards. Thank you.”

Amy walked away satisfied with her performance.

The van carrying Le’Andre Stephenson drove into the bowels of the courthouse without any notice or fanfare. He was removed from the vehicle and placed in a basement holding cell. He remained handcuffed. A guard watched him silently from a nearby glass booth.

A few minutes later, the guard escorted Amy Diamond in to see her client. “I’ll come get you when it’s time,” he said.

Amy walked into the cell and sat across from Le’Andre Stephenson.
“Good morning, Mr. Stephenson. How are you feeling this morning?”

“Feeling like you better get me home today.”

“I’m going to do everything I can,” she said.

“Everything,” Stephenson repeated.

Stephenson looked menacing, or as menacing as someone can look in a tie, anyway. That worried Amy. His demeanor didn’t bother her, but she didn’t want him to do anything to sway the judge against him.

“Can I ask a favor, Le’Andre?”

“You can ask.”

“When you go into court, be as nice and friendly as you can possibly be. The scarier you are, the less likely the judge will be to let you out. You do want to get out, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Then look at the judge. Smile. You do know how to smile, right?”

Amy Diamond smiled. Le’Andre Stephenson did not. He had survived by never smiling, by never giving an inch. He’d engaged in little deductive reasoning in his life, but there was one thing Le’Andre Stephenson had learned: If people think you’re not fucking around, they’re gonna leave you alone. It was the law of the streets.

“Just do your best,” Amy said.

The guard emerged from his glass booth and opened the cell door. Stephenson still had the handcuffs on.
“What about these?” Amy asked, pointing to the handcuffs.

“They stay on,” the guard said. “Court rules.”

“My client looks guilty in handcuffs.”

“The handcuffs are for everyone’s safety,” the guard said.

“I want them off,” Amy said.

“Take it up with the judge,” the guard said.

*

By the time the courtroom doors were unlocked, a crowd was waiting in the hallway. Reporters and onlookers filed into the courtroom and filled every available space on the three back courtroom benches. Danny Cartwright sat in the back, closest to the door. He knew that whatever happened in here today, there were going to be a lot of pissed off people to talk to. Pissed off people are the best people to talk to.

He saw The Rev. T. Gerald Benjamin walk in with a woman he assumed was LaShandra Stephenson. She did not look in Danny’s direction, but Benjamin flashed what Danny took to be a dirty look. He saw Juanita Ricks walk in, holding the elbow of someone he didn’t recognize. It was Jack Clemmons, the brother of Marty Clemmons, who had been murdered along with Juanita’s husband, Jimmy. They were the only family members of the victims to show up. Danny heard Juanita expressing surprise that Jack had driven to the city.

“It’s the day before Thanksgiving,” Jack said. “Traffic is light.”

Juanita came over to Danny to say hello.

“Who came with you?” Danny asked.
“That’s Jack Clemmons. His brother was in Victor’s that night. If you want to talk to him after, I’m sure he’ll talk to you.”

“Great,” Danny said. “Thanks.”

Juanita excused herself and joined Jack in seats directly behind the assistant district attorney’s chair. Juanita turned around, looked at Danny, and smiled. Danny fully expected her to walk out with a different expression on her face.

The assistant district attorney, a stone-faced veteran of the office named Matt Keller, walked through the same doors carrying a file under his left arm and a briefcase in his right hand. He set up at his table and placed his pad and reference documents just so, and he waited for Amy Diamond as if she were prey.

Amy came in a couple of minutes later, shortly before 9. She looked over at Keller, who nodded curtly. The guard from downstairs walked Stephenson into the courtroom. He was still in handcuffs. Amy decided not to press the point. Everyone sat and waited.

At 9:05, Judge Milton Savage entered the courtroom with a let’s-get-to-it gait. “Ms. Diamond,” he said. “You’re up.”

Amy Diamond stood before the court and made the expected argument — that Le’Andre Stephenson was only arrested because of the actions taken by Dr. Josef Mengelt 19 years early. Mengelt implanted a tracking device in Stephenson, and he was the one who tipped off the police about Stephenson’s whereabouts. Without that device, without that tip, Le’Andre Stephenson would still be on the street. She finished by pointing out that Stevenson has yet to be tried, it’s never been proved that he was involved in the murders at Victor’s, and the police did not have just cause to enter Stephenson’s apartment to make the arrests.
Her remarks were short, sharp, and on point. She finished in less than five minutes. For the families and friends of the victims and those who were getting their first look at the workings of the court system, it was a surprise how undramatic the proceedings were. The real drama was watching Le’André Stephenson, who was mostly stone-faced but once or twice broke into a smug grin. Jack Clemmons leaned over to Juanita Ricks and said he wanted to strangle Stephenson right there. She held his arm as if to hold him back.

“Mr. Keller?” Judge Savage said.

Matt Keller stood up and straightened his tie. “Your Honor, these are extraordinary circumstances,” he said.

“Mr. Keller, spare us the theatrics and long-winded speeches, please. It’s the day before Thanksgiving. We stipulate that these are extraordinary circumstances, and this is a matter of great public safety. Just give me your best argument for keeping Mr. Stephenson locked up.”

Chastened, Keller stepped back and started over.

“Your Honor, the state stipulates, too, that what Dr. Mengelt did was beyond the pale. And it may be true as well that the police would not have caught Mr. Stephenson at that moment if it hadn’t been for Dr. Mengelt’s phone call. However, the police ultimately would have caught up with Mr. Stephenson and Mr. Shabazz.”

“Does the state have evidence linking Mr. Stephenson to this murder?”

“The state has guns, knives, clothing, and numerous other pieces of evidence.”

Amy piped up. “All collected during an illegal and highly unethical arrest. Fruit of the poisonous tree, Your Honor.”
“What do you have to say to that, Mr. Keller?” Judge Savage asked.

Matt Keller asked for a moment and shuffled through his paperwork to buy a little time.

“We also have some forensic evidence gathered at the scene.” Keller pulled out some fingerprints. “These match Mr. Stephenson’s fingerprints.”

“Would the state have been able to match Mr. Stephenson’s fingerprints if he hadn’t been arrested?” the judge asked.

“Yes,” Keller said.


Judge Savage: “How would the state have been able to match the fingerprints, Mr. Keller?”

Keller: “Mr. Stephenson has a long criminal history.”

Judge Savage: “But would police have been able to match the fingerprints that quickly to make the arrest the same day?”

Keller: “Not necessarily that quickly, Your Honor. But soon afterward.”

Judge Savage: “Mr. Keller, I’m sympathetic to the state’s case. No one wants an allegedly dangerous criminal running around our streets. However, if we release Mr. Stephenson today, there is no stopping the police from obtaining fresh, untainted evidence linking him to the crime scene, is there?”

Keller: “No, sir.”

Judge Savage: “I see Officer Burkhardt in the courtroom, and Detective Greene. I am sure these fine representatives of our city’s police department will make sure that justice is served fairly.”

Both officers nodded subtly.
“Before I make my ruling,” Judge Savage said, “I want to ask a question of Mr. Stephenson’s
mother, who is sitting in the courtroom.”

LaShandra Stephenson looked up at the judge.

“Mrs. Stephenson, I read a story in the New York Daily News that said you wanted your son to
stay in jail. Was that story correct?”

Le’Andre Stephenson turned his head and flashed her the most evil look Danny had ever seen.

“I said that, yeah,” LaShandra said.

“The story also said that your son asked you to bring him a gun,” the judge said. “Was that
portion of the story correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mrs. Stephenson, did you honor your son’s request?”

Again, Le’Andre gave his mother a death stare.

“No, sir. I ain’t got a gun.”

“You don’t have a gun in your car, by any chance?”

“Don’t own no car. I took the subway here.”

A wave of nervous laughter could be heard in the courtroom.

“Very well. Then Mr. Stephenson, I intend to release you, with an order that you remain in New
York. But I want you to hear me and hear me well. There is wisdom in what your mother said in the
newspaper. It’s possible that you may have been safer inside Rikers Island than on the streets. I don’t
presume you innocent or guilty. A trial court will have to do that, and with evidence gathered legally—which I don’t believe has been the case so far.

“But there is a portion of this city—a large portion—that has already found you guilty. There are people in the group who will want to do you harm. You are in an angry city, Mr. Stephenson, and at times deservedly so. I ask the citizens of New York to remember that we have a presumption of innocent until proven guilty in our society, so please allow the law to do its work. As for you Mr. Stephenson, my suggestion is to go back to Brooklyn and keep an extremely low profile. Do you have anything you wish to say?”

Le’Andre Stephenson was a man of few words, and, as Amy Diamond leaned over, she instructed him to utter only one. “No,” he said. With most defendants, she would have asked them to say thank you. She didn’t bother. She didn’t think Le’Andre had those words in his vocabulary.

“Bailiff, please remove his handcuffs. Mr. Stephenson, you’re free to go.”

For the next few minutes, the courtroom became a cacophony of bleating, sniffling, and yelling. And not an ounce of joy. No one rooted for Le’Andre Stephenson, and he didn’t care. He was free, and he was anxious to get back to the streets.

Amy went to shake hands with Stephenson, but he was already headed toward the door, accompanied by a guard whose job it was to hand over his belongings and the standard $25 that former prisoners received upon their release. Amy cleared her paperwork off the table and walked into the hallway, ready to take on the media. She found herself instantly surrounded by lights, cameras, and microphones. Danny, who had already phoned in his lead, stood just outside the gaggle, close enough to hear but far enough away to nab other interview subjects before they left the courthouse.
“Let me start with a statement,” Amy said. “I want to commend Judge Savage for his even-handedness. This was a difficult decision, I’m sure. The court of public opinion has already convicted Mr. Stephenson, and any ruling in his favor is seen as a sign against the city and in favor of lawlessness. But this is why we have a legal system. There are rules that must be followed. As the judge said, if the police can produce evidence—legally obtained evidence—to arrest Mr. Stephenson, then I’m sure they will do that. Now I’ll take your questions.”

“Yeah, I have a question,” came a loud voice from across the hallway. “How does it feel to let a murderer loose, you cunt?”

It was Jack Clemmons, and he was seething. Juanita Ricks, who’d just finished sobbing, held Jack’s elbow, but he yanked it away and started running toward her. Jack was a decent-sized guy, but even the Giants’ best fullback couldn’t have gotten around all those blockers. Not when a half-dozen of them were policemen.

“That was my brother he killed,” Clemmons shouted as police and other bystanders held him back. “And her husband. And other people’s sons and daughters, you piece of shit.”

Amy remained stoic as she watched the onlookers hold Clemmons back. She came prepared for the worst, and now here it was. Rick Burkhardt, the officer who arrested Stephenson after Dr. Mengelt phoned in his tip, gripped Clemmons’ bicep hard and whispered something into his ear that seemed to mollify him for the moment. He escorted Clemmons to the elevator, and they rode to the first floor together. When the doors closed, Burkhardt reiterated the message he had whispered: “We’ll get him.”

Danny hung back and waited for the reporters to get their sound bites. What he wanted was access to Le’André Stephenson. When Amy was free of the rest of the media, Danny descended.

“Ms. Diamond, I’m Danny Cartwright from the Daily News.”
Amy took a look at Danny. She didn’t know what to expect, but Danny wasn’t it. For one thing, he was a hell of a lot older. And he looked more like one of her clients than the dogged reporter he’d proved to be on this story.

“Mr. Cartwright,” she said, extending her hand.

“Do you have a few minutes to talk quietly?” Danny asked. “I want your guidance on something.”

“Guidance?”

“Let’s just sit and talk, and I’ll explain. There’s a coffee shop right next door. Care for a cup?”

“Sure.”

Amy and Danny rode the elevator in relative silence, save for a moment of small talk about the weather. They made their way through the lobby and to the revolving doors. Danny went through first. On the other side, he said, “I read somewhere that it’s polite for a man to go through a revolving door first.”

“I think that was in Dear Abby,” Amy said.

“I don’t know, but I didn’t want you to think I was rude,” Danny said.

Amy smiled. This guy, who seemed to have no trouble sucking information out of everyone he talked to, was endearingly, disarmingly awkward. Maybe that’s how he did it.

Other than the workers, the coffee shop, called Greek’s, was empty. They sat down at a table in the window.

“You want anything to eat?” Danny asked.

“Coffee is fine,” Amy said.
They ordered coffee and when it arrived, Danny held up his cup and toasted Amy.

“Congratulations on a case well argued,” he said. Then he got down to business.

“So what was that experience like?” he asked.

“Are we on or off the record?”

“Either way.”


“Scary, yeah?”

“You could say that.”

“I want to talk to him,” Danny said.

“Good luck with that.”

“Can you help me?”

“That’s what you wanted to ask me?”

“What did you think I wanted to ask you?”

“I didn’t know. But not that.”

“Can you help me? I want to hear his side of the story.” He also wanted a photo of where Mengelt had inserted the tracking device. But he didn’t share that with Amy.

Amy thought about Danny’s request and realized that, even if she did want to help him, she had no way to reach Le’Andre Stephenson.
“I don’t have a phone number for him,” she said. “You have to remember—he’s not on probation. He was released. And he probably doesn’t have his apartment any longer.” She paused for a second. “I would ask his mother, I guess.”

“You think he’s going to stay with her?” Danny asked.

“The woman who said she wanted him in jail? I think he’s more likely to go after her than he is to ask to sleep on his couch.”

They both chuckled slightly at the idea. “Let me think for a minute,” Amy said. Danny complied, looking out the window on city streets that were remarkably deserted, even for a holiday eve.

He saw a lone man heading toward the restaurant. As the man got closer, Danny recognized him as Jack Clemmons. LaShandra Stephenson may not have had a gun, but Jack Clemmons did—in his right hand. And he was fuming.

Danny knocked the table over and pushed Amy Diamond to the floor just as Jack Clemmons fired his first shot. The bullet shattered the window, and shards of glass rained down on Danny and Amy. The next shot came not from Clemmons but from the owner of the restaurant, a former military marksman known to his customers as Greek. He pulled his gun out from behind the cash register and hit Jack Clemmons in the chest. Clemmons crashed to the sidewalk, dead.

Danny and Amy stayed on the floor for the next minute.

“Are you OK?” Danny asked.

“Compared to what?” said Amy, who was shaking.

“Good point,” said Danny, who was shaking too. Danny had covered too many shootings to count in his career, but this was the first one he’d ever witnessed.
While Danny and Amy lay low, the manager ran out the door to get a look at his target. He congratulated himself on some pretty impressive shooting.

Greek was standing over the body when three police cars roared in.

“Drop the gun!” they commanded Greek. And he did. He put up his hands and continued to admire his shot until three officers wrestled him to the ground.

“Hey,” Greek yelled. “This was self-defense. This asshole shot into my restaurant.”

The other officers looked down on the floor and saw Danny and Amy. Their backs, anyway. They were still face down on the sticky floor, on top of and adjacent to a pool of coffee and glass.

“You OK,” Officer Frank Sampedro asked. “Do you need an ambulance?”

Danny slowly lifted himself up, as did Amy. Pieces of glass fell off their backs. Sampedro took one look at started laughing.

“Edna? Edna. Oh, Jesus Christ. I can’t wait to read tomorrow’s paper.”
CHAPTER 14

THANKSGIVING DAY 2007

Danny had nowhere to go, so he went to the office, which was just the way he liked it these days—empty of management. He picked up the morning paper and admired the layout: a photo of Greek’s window with the story “REPORTER SAVES THE DAY” inside the frame. Since Danny was a subject of the story, he didn’t get to write it. But he enjoyed reading about how he’d pushed Amy Diamond to safety. He particularly liked the quote from Greek: “If that reporter guy hadn’t acted so fast, we’d be talking about three dead—him, her, and the shooter.”

The police said Greek wouldn’t face charges for shooting Jack Clemmons. Both Clemmons’ widow and Juanita Ricks were quoted in the story saying that Jack had never been able to get over his brother’s death. “Another senseless death in a long line of senseless deaths,” Juanita told Danny’s colleague Artie Bates for the article.

Danny read the story over twice and send Bates an email congratulating him on a tight, thorough story. Then he debated whether to call LaShandra Stephenson. Was 9 a.m. too early on a holiday? Danny wasn’t big on social protocols—he’d once called a mobster at home at 11:45 p.m. to verify the color of his breast-pocket handkerchief—but he wanted to find Le’Andre. He figured if Le’Andre was anywhere, it would be at his mother’s house. Even accused murderers celebrate holidays, right?

He placed the call, which went directly to an answering machine.

At this point, Danny’s options were few. He could go to the Stephenson house and knock on the door, which had been a surprisingly effective technique in past stories. “You’d think people would slam the door in your face,” he used to tell young reporters, “but they hardly ever do.” He could go to Le’Andre’s old apartment, but that seemed potentially dangerous. Danny had always thought of himself
as a hard-bitten reporter, but, after being shot at the day before, he was feeling a little more cautious. He decided to call Detective Ronald Greene in Homicide. He didn’t expect Greene to be working on Thanksgiving, but he’d leave a message anyway.

He was surprised when Greene picked up with phone.

“Greene, this is Edna.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Edna. How did you know?”

Danny didn’t know what he didn’t know, but he knew how to improvise to get information from Greene. “I just had a feeling.”

“This went down two minutes ago. Literally two minutes. And we kept it off the radio. Come on. Who tips you off?”

“I’ve got sources everywhere,” Danny said. “Is it OK to report?”

Greene said to give him 15 minutes to notify the higher-ups. “But here are the details. We took down Le’Andre Stephenson outside his mother’s apartment in Fort Greene at 9 o’clock this morning. A neighbor called to say he saw Le’Andre coming toward the building. He was carrying a Sturm Ruger 9 millimeter, and he fired several shots through her front window. His mother was home at the time, but she wasn’t in the room. No one was injured.

“What’s his condition?”

“10-0. We got the fucker but good. Don’t put that in the story, of course.”

Danny said of course he’d pocket that quote.

“Think this was suicide by cop?”
“I don’t know if I’d call it that,” Greene said. “I think he thought suicide by cop would be down the road. First, he was going to get his revenge. Then if we caught up with him, he’d try to take down a couple of us before we got him. But leave that shit out of the story, OK? I don’t want anyone else getting any ideas.”

“What else do you want to say?” Danny asked.

Greene thought about it for a moment. “What I’d like to say is that his mother was right: He was safer in Rikers. But don’t say that.”

“Any idea where he spent last night?”

“No idea. He left the courthouse and disappeared. We’ll trace the gun to see where it came from. My best guess was it was stolen, but someone might have given it to him.”

“Did he say anything?”

“We had four officers at the scene. They ordered him to drop the weapon. He said, ‘Ain’t goin’ back,’ and fired his weapon at one of the officers. All four officers returned fire. Stephenson was hit four times. He died at the scene.”

“Anything else?”

“Let’s say that we’re thankful for the tip and that no one else got hurt.”

Fifteen minutes later, Danny’s story was posted on the Daily News’ website. Then he settled in to write a long takeout for Sunday’s paper, detailing what had transpired since the day Joe Mengelt made his first phone call.

*
Natalie Parker—the Mengelt permanently removed from her name—was busy in her dad’s kitchen preparing Thanksgiving dinner. Rob Parker had suggested they go out, or have something catered in, but Natalie wouldn’t hear of it. There would be turkey, stuffing with cranberries, sweet potatoes and marshmallow, mashed potatoes, and homemade rolls—the same meal they’d had every Thanksgiving since the kids were born. She wanted this to be as close to a normal holiday as possible.

The early part of the week had been rough. J.J. and Nan sat in their grandfather’s guest room—which they shared—with the door closed almost all the time. J.J. played video games and Nan texted with her friends. Twice, Natalie and her dad had been able to coax the kids into going out to eat, but the kids said almost nothing. Natalie tried to cheer them up with offers to go to the movies, to get ice cream, to take a daytrip to the historic sites in Philadelphia. What she heard in response was a lot of “no, thanks.”

J.J. was taking this better than Nan was. He cared about his possessions, but as far as people went, he didn’t much care. Maybe the people in Delaware would be friendlier than the kids he’d grown up with. J.J. was his father’s son.

But Nan—Nan was a social being, like Natalie. She’d talk to anyone and everyone. For the most part, that’s what she had been doing since Natalie picked her up at school the previous Friday. She mostly texted, but sometimes she called. Early Monday, she probably had 15 different conversations going, mostly with her girlfriends but also with a certain boy she liked named Andy. By that afternoon, most of the messaging had dried up. The ones that kept going became hostile.

*Is it true your father is secretly a Nazi?*

*Did you know what your father was doing? I heard you did.*

*I heard your family is related to Mengele.*
Soon, kids were passing around Nan’s number. By Tuesday she started getting texts from numbers she didn’t recognize and phones that were blocked.

*Andy hates you Eva Braun!*

*Have a good time in the bunker Nazi girl. Maybe you’ll commit suicide like Hitler.*

*I heard you’re not coming back to GC. I’m glad. We don’t need Nazis around here.*

She forwarded some of these to Sharon, her best friend since first grade, who was supportive at first, or at least neutral, about Nan’s family situation. Sharon texted back a lot of “hang in there” and “it’ll get better” messages. But by Tuesday night, Sharon had gone radio silent. Nan texted her a few times—even called her once—but no response. Nan hoped it was because of the holiday. She figured she would hear from Sharon before long. But on Wednesday, there was nothing from Sharon and only abuse from anonymous others. She took out her computer and went on myspace to find a petition to “Keep J.J. and Nan Mengelt Out of Garden City High,” and found another page called “The Mengelts Should Kill Themselves.”

The comments were vicious. The one that stuck with her was, “I always knew there was something wrong with the Mengelts.” They always knew? How could they know when Nan herself didn’t even know?

The pressure began to mount. Alone with her thoughts, Nan imagined herself ostracized everywhere she went. She thought of her father. Whenever she would go to him with what she thought was an enormous problem, he would tell her that her problem was a pebble. “Hold it at a distance, and it looks small,” Joe would say. “But put it up to your eye, and it’s the size of a boulder.”

She hated when he said that, though usually he was right. But now, her father was the object in front of her eye, and he was a boulder.
Wednesday night, after she worked herself into a lather, Nan tried talking to her mother. All that bought her was a whole lot of “Ignore them” and “Why don’t you put down your phone for a while and get off the computer?” comments.

Nan went back to the guest room and asked J.J. what he was hearing from people in Garden City.

“Mostly nothing,” he said.

“What does that mean?” she said.

“People are assholes,” he said. “I don’t let it bother me.”

Nan believed that. J.J. was the most self-assured teenager she could imagine. Nothing anyone said or did bothered him.

“J.J., these people are calling me a Nazi and telling me to kill myself like Hitler.”

“Are you a Nazi?”

“No. Duh.”

“Then why should you care?”

“That sounds exactly like something Dad would say.”

“Look, we’re not going back there, so what difference does it make?”

“I wanna go back there. I want to see my friends.”

“You just said your friends are telling you to kill yourself.”

“Those aren’t my friends. I want to see Sharon. I’m thinking of running away.”

“Forget about it, Nan. Where would you live? What would you do for money?”
“Maybe Sharon’s parents will let me stay with them.”

“Yeah, good luck,” J.J. said.

On Thursday morning, as Natalie cooked, Rob walked by the kids’ closed door. He wanted to say something to try to draw them out, but he didn’t know what. He felt remorse for introducing their father to Ray Harper, the Fido Finder guy. Of course he had no idea how that would turn out, but he couldn’t help but feel responsible.

Rob thought he might play on their sympathies. So while Natalie cooked, he went upstairs and tried to engage them in conversation.

“Kids, how’s it going?”

“Great,” J.J. said, his face buried in his game.

“Good!” Rob said.

“I think he was being sarcastic,” Nan said.

“Oh,” Rob said. “Look, I know this is hard on you. Think of how hard it is on your mom.”

“How hard it is on Mom?” Nan said. “How about how hard it is on us?”

“Think bigger than yourself, sweetie. I’m asking you to cut her some slack. We’re all in this together. Our lives aren’t going to be normal for a while, but it will be OK in the end.”

“How do you know that?” Nan asked. “I mean, I’m sure it will be OK for you. Your name isn’t Mengelt. But we’re always going to be Mengelts. It’s bad enough our name was so close to Mengele. Now it’s like we’re related to Hitler.”

“Nan, I’m sorry,” Rob said.
“Gramps, it’s not your fault,” J.J. said. “But this is a mess. We want to go home. Our lives are there. So is our stuff.”

Until that point, J.J. had been ignoring the conversation for the most part and trying to say as little as possible. Arguing wasn’t going to get them home or fix this situation. But Nan did not want to be talking about this. After three days buried in her own thoughts, she saw a lifetime of misery ahead, with all of them trying to escape Joe Mengelt’s horrific shadow. She excused herself to go to the bathroom. She sat in there and turned on the shower to mask her sobs. She was in bathroom maybe ten minutes when Sharon finally texted.

My parents say I cant talk to you anymore.

Why?

Your father. My father says its dangerous to be around u.

Please!!!

Ill try. But they said theyll be checking my phone. If I'm in touch with you they will take the phone away. So sorry. Hope your OK.

Sharon, please!!!

Nan had her other friends, but Sharon was the only one she trusted completely. They told each other everything and helped each other through childhood. Shortly after Sharon’s 13th birthday, some girls started a rumor that she had had sex with a boy in the school bathroom. The taunts became so prevalent that Sharon confessed to Nan that she thought about killing herself. Nan sat with Sharon that night until she was sure Sharon would never do something that drastic. Eventually, the thoughts dissipated. Now Nan needed Sharon to stick by her, but that wasn’t going to happen.
Nan was trying to think of what to do next when she heard her mother calling for her to come down and help set the table. It was just after noon. They’d be eating at 1.

When Nan walked downstairs, Natalie could tell she’d been crying. But Natalie didn’t want to call attention to it. “I thought I heard the shower,” she said. “You don’t look clean. And you’re still in your pajamas.”

“I forgot,” Nan said. “Let me go up and get ready.”

“Come here first,” Natalie said. She swept the hair out of Nan’s eyes and said, “I love you, honey. You know that. We’ll get through this, I promise. We’re Parkers. We’re made of tough stuff.”

Hearing that she was a Parker wrecked Nan. She gripped her mother and wept.

Rob and J.J. came downstairs and peeked into the kitchen. They saw Nan in her mother’s arms and immediately backed out, opting for seats at the dining room table. They looked at each other and then down. They said nothing.

About a minute later, Natalie walked through the swinging door with a bowl of cranberry sauce to put on the table. She was surprised to see them.

“Supper’s ready,” she said. “Help me set the table, then I’ll bring in the rest of the food.”

Rob and J.J. did as they were told while Natalie tended to the gravy. Nan had gone upstairs to clean herself up. Ten minutes later, the food was on the table.

“Nan, we’re ready,” Natalie called.

“Be down in a minute,” Nan called.

They sat quietly waiting. After a couple of minutes passed and Nan hadn’t come downstairs, Natalie sent J.J. up to get her. He knocked on the bathroom door, but Nan didn’t answer.
“Nan, come on, dinner,” he said.

Nothing.

“Hey, mom, Nan isn’t answering.”

Natalie and Rob ran up the stairs. Rob banged on the door.

“Come on, Nan,” Rob shouted.

He reached up to the top of the doorframe and pulled down a skeleton key to open the door. They found Nan slumped next to the tub, a knife by her side, blood coating much of the tile floor. She had slit both wrists. Her phone was next to her, and there was a brief text conversation with Sharon still on the screen.

\( \text{Nan: I'm really afraid.} \)

\( \text{Sharon: Don't text me anymore. I don't want to lose my phone. Andy says don't text him either.} \)

*

Natalie, Rob, and J.J. spent the better part of Thanksgiving in the ER, awaiting news of Nan. They cried and consoled each other and tried to make sense of Nan’s action. Natalie was hugging Rob when she glanced up at the TV, which was tuned to CNN with closed captions on and the volume off. The crawl read: MENGELT CASE COMES TO VIOLENT END.

“Mengelt case?” she said out loud.

Rob looked up, and they both watched the story unfurl. There was a headshot of Le’Andre Stephenson and video from outside his mother’s apartment. His body was on the ground, covered in a sheet. Police and neighbors were milling around. A reporter was interviewing LaShandra Stephenson, who was in full hysterics. She was surrounded by several angry-looking family members.
LA’SHANDRA: I TOLD THAT JUDGE TO LEAVE MY BABY IN JAIL. IN JAIL, HE BE SAFE.

REPORTER: THE POLICE SAID YOUR SON FIRED A SHOT INTO YOUR APARTMENT.

LA’SHANDRA: I KNOW HE MAD AT ME, BUT I ONLY WANTED WHAT BEST FOR HIM.

REPORTER: CAN YOU TELL US WHAT YOU REMEMBER ABOUT DR. MENGELT?

LA’SHANDRA: DON’T REMEMBER MUCH. I DO REMEMBER HE DID SOMETHING TO MY BABY. HE THE REASON MY BABY IS DEAD. HE AND THAT JUDGE.

UNIDENTIFIED FAMILY MEMBER: I WANT YOUR VIEWERS TO KNOW THAT WE WILL BE FILING A LAWSUIT AGAINST CITY HOSPITAL FOR $50 MILLION FOR WHAT THEY ALLOWED THIS RACIST DOCTOR TO DO TO LE’ANDRE. WE ARE GONNA TAKE DOWN THE WHITE POWER STRUCTURE.

REPORTER: THANK YOU TO THE STEPHENSON FAMILY.

Natalie, Rob, and J.J. watched the CNN reporter extricate himself from the Stephensons and continue his story.

REPORTER: THE NEW YORK TIMES IS REPORTING TODAY THAT AT LEAST SIX PATIENTS OF DR. MENGELT’S HAVE STEPPED FORWARD TO HAVE TRACKING CHIPS REMOVED FROM THEIR ARM. THE TIMES SAID THE FAMILIES HAVE SPOKEN WITH ONE OF THE NEW YORK’S MOST CELEBRATED NEGLIGENCE ATTORNEYS, BEN BARKER, AND PLAN TO FILE A CLASS-ACTION LAWSUIT AGAINST CITY GENERAL AND POSSIBLY AGAINST DR. MENGELT HIMSELF.

Rob Parker walked over to the receptionist and asked if she could please change the channel.

“What are we going to do, Dad?” Natalie asked.

“I wish I had an answer for you, honey,” Rob said. “Let’s take it one day at a time. We’ll worry about Nan first and then we can worry about everything else.”
Natalie looked over to see the ER doors open, and a doctor emerge. He looked at her and said, “I’m sorry.”

*

They drove home in silence punctuated only by sobs. Rob drove. He could barely see the road. Natalie sat next to him in shock. J.J.—the usually stoic J.J.—curled up on the back seat, trying to figure out how his life, so normal just a week ago, had come completely undone.

They got back to the house to find Thanksgiving dinner exactly as they left it, but several hours colder. The gravy had congealed. The turkey dried up. The mashed potatoes hardened.

Natalie began carrying the plates and platters into the kitchen to dispose of the meal. Every dish felt like a dead weight in her hands. Each trip from the dining room to the kitchen pained her. Rob and J.J. sat in the living room. Each tried to think of something to say. Both failed till J.J. broke the haze of the moment. “I’m going to help Mom.”

He joined Natalie in the dining room, and they cleared the room. Then he scraped the food into the garbage while she rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. When they finished, Natalie asked J.J. to sit down with her and her father.

“I’m in so much pain right now, I don’t know where to start,” Natalie said. Rob looked like he was going to get up to console her, but she gave him a look that said she didn’t want his consolation just yet. “I’m angry at Joe, I’m angry at Nan, I’m angry at the world right now. Nan was such a beautiful girl. So sweet. I think we have to get away from this country for a while. I think we have to go someplace where no one has heard of Joe Mengelt or anything about this. So let’s start thinking about where we can go. Also, I’m going to call that Daily News reporter to let him know what happened to Nan. I think Garden City should know what it did to my beautiful girl.”
Natalie barely had the last word out when she fell apart. She lifted her knees to her head and hugged her legs and rocked back and forth. Rob and J.J. both jumped up and hugged Natalie. Rob had never seen his daughter like this, and it both scared and scarred him. It hurt to see his only child devastated like this by a problem he had created. Inadvertently, of course. But still.

“Mom, I’ll do whatever you want to do,” J.J. said. “I’m with you.”

“Right now, just hold me,” she said.

Together, the three of them held each other and cried.
CHAPTER 15
FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2007

Natalie slept maybe two hours. She had gotten out of bed at least 10 times that night to check on J.J.’s breathing. She laughed at herself for this behavior. J.J. was fine. Of course he’s fine. He’s 17. He’s J.J. He’s like Joe—the mostly strong, mostly silent type. When the clock radio hit 6 a.m., she sat up and looked at the pad by her bed. She had written the number of the Daily News on there, as well as a short to-do list that included calling her lawyer, David Chessler. Her message for him would be simple: Liquidate everything and send her the money as soon as possible.

She went downstairs, made herself some coffee, and tried to talk herself into adjusting to the new normal of life with no Nan. Her dad came down a few minutes later and kissed her on top of her head.

“We’re going to get through this, sweetheart.”

“I know,” Natalie said.

They went without speaking for the next 30 minutes before Natalie forced herself to go upstairs and shower. By the time she finished and dried her hair, it was nearing 8 a.m., the first time she could start making phone calls. She sat by her bed and waiting for the clock to change. When it finally did, she dialed the Daily News, figuring to leave a message for Danny Cartwright.

Danny had just walked in and taken off his coat. He thought about letting the call go to voicemail, but why? Why not start the morning with a reader who wanted to argue?

“Danny Cartwright here.”

“Oh, Mr. Cartwright, I expected to leave a message.”
“Who’s this?”

“Natalie Parker.”

The name didn’t register with Danny.

“Do we know each other?”

“I’m sorry. You know me as Natalie Mengelt.”

Danny sat up. “Oh, Mrs. Mengelt…”

“Ms. Parker.”

“Ms. Parker, yes. I’m sorry. Thank you for calling. What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Cartwright, my daughter committed suicide yesterday.”

“I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“My daughter, Nan, killed herself yesterday.”

Danny wondered what he was going to write about for tomorrow. Now he knew.

“Oh, Mrs. Mengelt—Ms. Parker—I am so sorry for your loss.”

“Her friends—her so-called friends—bullied her on the phone and the computer. She slit her wrist.”

Suicide was usually a taboo subject for newspapers for reasons Danny never fully understood and certainly never appreciated. He recognized the need for privacy, but the suicide rate had been going up a percentage point each year. Danny thought the time was past to start covering suicides in the paper—especially the ones that occurred in public places. His editors disagreed. They called it a “personal decision,” and anyway, they didn’t have the manpower to cover everything.
But Nan Mengelt’s suicide surely was a story.

“If you go on myspace, you’ll see some of the comments. And her phone is filled with hateful text messages.”

Danny asked Natalie to read some of the messages, and she did. Natalie also gave him names and phone numbers of some of Nan’s friends. She wanted them to hear the news from a reporter, but what she really wanted was to claw their eyes out. But what she really, really wanted was her Nan back.

“Mr. Cartwright, I hope you will write a story so that the people who harmed my daughter will know what happened. I hope they can live with what they’ve done. I also hope my husband will see the story and get in touch with me. He has destroyed our lives.”

Danny took down every word Natalie Mengelt said. He asked where she was. She told him but asked that he not put that in the paper. “Please just say we’re staying with relatives. We won’t be coming back to Garden City. I’m asking my lawyer to put our house up for sale. Please let everyone know that we are profoundly sorry for what my husband did. As I told you before, we had no knowledge of this. The kids weren’t even born when it happened, and Joe never said anything to me. For what it’s worth, I find it appalling.”

Then Natalie asked one other favor: “I know I have told you my new name, which is my maiden name. Please refer to me as Natalie Mengelt in your story. Don’t tell people that I’ve changed my name. I don’t need people tracking me down right now.”

She gave Danny her phone number and said to call her if she had questions.

“I appreciate the way you’ve written about this situation, Mr. Cartwright,” Natalie said. “I’ve read your stories on the Daily News’ website and they all seem very fair. And I’m so sorry that someone shot at you. That must have been very scary.”
Danny had to think a minute about what had happened two days ago. He was reeling from the news of Nan’s suicide and energized by the story he intended to write.

“Oh, I’m fine,” Danny said.

“Well, I don’t know how,” Natalie said.

There’s something wrong here, Danny thought. Here was this woman, forced out of her home and her life by something her malignant husband did, dealing with her daughter’s suicide, her husband’s disappearance, and potential financial ruin. And she’s feeling sorry for me?

“Don’t give it another thought,” Danny said. “Please just take care of your family. And thank you for calling me. If I have any other questions, I’ll be in touch. But your information and everything else is safe with me. My story—your story—should be on the website by noon.”

*

Danny hung up the phone and started typing. He’d gotten as far as:

_Nan Mengelt, the daughter of the notorious doctor who implanted microchips into 166 babies_

when he looked up and saw Judy Hensler from Human Resources standing in front of his desk. She had in her hands a stack of envelopes.

“Danny, I didn’t expect you to be here,” she said. “In fact, I didn’t expect anyone to be here.”

“Then what are you doing here?” Danny asked.

“Well, I’m sorry to break this news to you,” she said, “but I’m delivering letters inviting you and others from the newsroom to come to HR for a talk.”

She handed Danny a letter with the envelope flap tucked inside.
“So you’re firing us? What about the buyout?”

“The buyout still stands,” she said. “But we’ve had to institute the buyout and layoffs immediately. The company isn’t meeting profit projections.”

“Isn’t meeting profit projections?” Danny could feel himself getting red in the face, and he could hear his voice echoing through the newsroom. “This is a newspaper, lady. It’s a goddamn public trust. It shouldn’t have fucking profit projections.”

“There’s no reason to be abusive, Mr. Cartwright.”

“Don’t fucking ‘Mr. Cartwright’ me. I’ve worked here over thirty years. My name is Danny.”

“Very well, Danny. Now, please, don’t make me call security.”

“How the fuck”—and when he said “fuck,” he pounded his desk—“do you expect the people of this city to get their information? From TV?”

Danny crumpled the letter Judy Hensler had handed him and threw it at her. It hit her square in the face. She turned away so Danny couldn’t see her cry and headed for the elevator.

“I am so sick of these bureaucrats trying to run newspapers,” Danny said to the empty room. Then he went back to writing.

He’d written another sentence, maybe two, when two large men wearing sport jackets with a security company logo on them got off the elevator and went straight to his desk. Danny was looking at his notebook.

“Danny Cartwright?”

“What?”
“We’ve been ordered to take you to the lobby,” the bigger of the two said. “Your employment is being terminated immediately.”

Danny noticed that the guard had arm as big as Danny’s thighs. His counterpart was built like a professional athlete. Danny gave them nicknames in his mind: Beefy and Beefier.

“Guys, if you could wait about 45 minutes...”

“Now, please,” Beefier said.

“I’m in the middle of a story.”

“Now, please,” Beefy said, beginning to make his way around the back of Danny’s chair.

Danny got up and began to pick up several items from his desk.

“Leave that here,” Beefier said. “Everything on your desk is the property of the New York Daily News.”

“But these are my notes,” Danny said.

“Leave them,” Beefy said. “Anything that belongs to you will be returned to you.”

“Thirty-plus years and I can’t even clean out my desk?”

“The Daily News has retained a company that will come in and clean out your desk and the desks of the others who are being laid off,” Beefier said. “You will receive anything that is yours in the mail in one to three weeks.”

Danny started to get up. “Wait—did you just say the Daily News hired a company to clean out our desks? How can the Daily News have money for that but not have money to pay people to report the news?”

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“Come with us, please,” Beefy said.

“I need my notebook,” Danny said. “I have to write this story.”

Danny thought about grabbing the notebook and running, but he had no escape.

“Just let me take my notebook, guys,” he said. “I’ll write this at home and send it in. You don’t have to tell anyone.”

Beefy said nothing but made his answer clear by taking Danny’s notebook and stuffing it into the desk. He slammed the drawer for emphasis.

“I can’t fucking believe this,” he said. “This is an exclusive story. Have you guys been reading about the doctor who microchipped his patients?”

Beefy and Beefier said nothing. They each grabbed one of Danny’s arms and led him to the elevator. Danny rode down, muttering out loud about how the News wasn’t going to get the story and he couldn’t even write it because he didn’t have his notes.

They walked him off the elevator to where Judy Hensler and several others from Human Resources and Security were waiting for him. Judy Hensler looked as if she had a small paper cut under her eye.

“Mr. Cartwright, you are being terminated by the Daily News for insubordination and for striking a coworker,” the head of HR said. “The Daily News reserves the right to press charges against you, but we will consider the matter closed if you walk away peacefully and avoid all contact with the Daily News. Your final paycheck will be mailed to you. Because of the circumstances under which you are leaving, you will not be entitled to severance pay. You no longer have access to this building or to any Daily News property. If you attempt to enter this building again, you will be arrested and charged with trespassing. Your computer logon has been deleted. Please hand over your ID badge and any keys you have.”
Danny looked shellshocked. He unhooked his ID badge from his shirt pocket and took a look at his picture. He was 25 when he joined the paper, and his job had been his life for 30 years. The picture had changed three or four times over the years. He’d been about 47 when this latest one was taken. He noticed that the bags under his eyes and his receding hairline weren’t as prominent then as they’d become.

“Can I just have my notebook, please?”

“Any property left in the newsroom will be collected and mailed to you in one to three weeks,” the HR head said.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that song before,” Danny said. “You know I was writing an exclusive story.”

“Good day, Mr. Cartwright.”

Beefy and Beefier took Danny by the arms and walked him to the revolving door. Just before he got in, Danny turned around and yelled, “Fuck you. No wonder this place has gone to shit.” Beefy and Beefier got into the revolving door with Danny and nudged him onto the street with enough force to make a statement but not so much to risk a lawsuit.

Anyone else would have been thinking of the lost wages and severance, but Danny was thinking of how to get his notebook. Without it, he couldn’t write the story about Nan Mengelt. He had a decent memory, but not good enough to recount everything Natalie Mengelt had told him. And now, he didn’t even have a way to contact her or a place to publish the story. He figured he could call the newsroom and maybe Jimmy Fuchs or someone would get the notebook. But he’d have to wait at least an hour till someone showed up. He walked over to the nearest coffee shop, sat down at the counter, and ordered a cup while he waited.
The guy sitting next to him was reading the Daily News. He was reading yet another story about the mortgage crisis and how the economy was tanking. The guy was shaking his head. He turned to Danny.

“We’re fucked, man,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to be out of work now.”

The guy tossed a couple of bucks on the counter and left.

* 

Danny watched the seconds go by on the coffee shop clock. He knew the guy was right—this was a terrible time to be out of work. But he wanted to write that story.

He’d been sitting there for almost 45 minutes when his cellphone rang.

“Cartwright.”

“Danny, it’s Fuchs. What the hell happened?”

“I got fired.”

“I know you got fired. There’s a man and a woman in security uniforms emptying your desk.”

“They were going to fire me, anyway. But I was in the middle of a story, Fuchs. Listen: Mengelt’s daughter killed herself yesterday. Some kids were bullying her and she cut her wrist. I talked to the mother. But everything’s in my notebook. Can you get it out of my desk?”

“Let me try.”

Fuchs put down the phone and walked over to Danny’s old desk.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but there’s a notebook in that desk that I need.”
“I’m sorry,” the woman said. “Our orders are to box all material from this desk. Any personal items will be returned to the owner in one to three weeks.”

“One to three weeks?”

“One to three weeks,” the woman repeated.

“But this is news,” Fuchs said. “I need this notebook.”

“Sorry,” the man said. “One to three weeks.”

Fuchs went back to the phone. “Sorry, Danny. They’re boxing up your shit now. They said they’d send it back to you…”

“I know,” Danny said. “In one to three weeks.”

Danny hung up. He sat for a few more minutes and tried to make sense of how his newspaper—that’s how he thought of the Daily News, as his—was going to get along without him. No one has the contacts that he has. No one has been around long enough to build up the trust he’s built up. No one’s going to pursue the Mengelt story with the same determination he’s shown. These people are fucking idiots. They have let so much talent walk out the door. He was just one of many.

He thought of his old night city editor Jimmy Killings, who knew the city better than anyone. Killings had survived several rounds of layoffs before taking the buyout. Whenever Danny got too cocky about his own work, Killings could cut him down to size with two sentences.

“Cartwright,” he’d say, “this newspaper was here before you, and it’ll be here long after you drop dead. You’re not that good.”

Danny thought about that now. The newspaper was here before him, yeah, but how much longer would it be around if this was how it treated valuable employees?
Danny figured he had two shots at getting back in touch with Natalie Mengelt. The first was through her lawyer, David Chessler. He got Chessler’s number from directory assistance and dialed. On the fifth ring, the machine picked up and Danny heard the message that Chessler was out of the country for the next week. The other was through her father. He called Dover information and got the number for Rob Parker. He called and heard the beginning of a message: “The number you have dialed has been disconnected.”

As he walked around lower Manhattan, trying to come up with another way to find Natalie, Danny could only come up with one more idea: Drive to Delaware and ask Rob Parker where his daughter had gone. He dismissed the idea out of hand. Even if Parker was there, and even if he knew where his daughter was, there’s no way he would tell Danny. And what could Danny offer, anyway? He was no longer employed, so he had no forum to tell her story. The idea of freelancing the story occurred to him, but the other papers in town had shown relatively little interest. Both had done some reporting, but after getting beat day after day by Danny, they ceded much of the Mengelt story to the Daily News.

Danny spent the next seven hours walking around lower Manhattan. The temperature was above freezing, but he was already numb.

* 

As soon as noon struck, Natalie went to the Daily News website. She scrolled through multiple times but could not find the story. She refreshed the screen over and over, but nothing showed up. Lots of Black Friday stories—a man had been severely beaten in a fight over a doll—and the usual massive dose of sports coverage. But nothing about her Nan. She wanted the people of Garden City to read the story and realize what they had done. They bullied a beautiful young girl to death.

Natalie decided to call Danny to see what happened. She got through the recorded message maze and into the newsroom.
“Daily News.”

“Danny Cartwright, please.”

“I’m sorry. Danny no longer works here.”

Natalie sat at the end of the phone for a moment.

“Hello?”

“I’m sorry, but that can’t be. I talked to him a couple of hours ago. He was writing a story...”

“I don’t know what happened, ma’am. I came in and they told me Danny was gone. He may have taken the buyout. The paper offered buyouts today to about 25 people in the newsroom. I know Danny was one. He may have taken it.”


She hung up the phone. Now she didn’t know what to do.

*

Four thousand miles away, Natalie’s (former? estranged? dead?) husband was finishing his first week locked in a room over a strip club in Geneva. He had been practicing routine medicine and trying to stay sane. On Wednesday, Joe had complained that his back hurt, so they moved him into another room, this one with a small cot. It wasn’t much, but it was better than sleeping on the floor.

Joe Mengelt had been shuttered in this cramped, crowded room and allowed to leave only once a day, to shower, escorted down the hall by Klaus or one of his men. They brought him ill-fitting clothes to change into—T-shirts with writing in languages Joe didn’t understand and pants one or two sizes too big—and fed him a diet of heavy, fatty foods. Not out of malice. That was just what they ate.
Joe walked the length of the room when he wasn’t seeing patients. He had never been one to exercise regularly, but he could feel his body and mind starting to atrophy. He asked for reading material but was ignored. He spent his plentiful space and time examining his new passport and medical credentials or looking at the designs on the euro notes he’d gotten from the bank. They were certainly more colorful than American money.

Around dinnertime, Joe heard the door unlock. He turned around to see Klaus walking in with Pearl, the young prostitute he had helped the previous weekend.

“Girl is bleeding,” Klaus said. “You fix.”

Klaus stood in the doorway as if he were going to watch the exam.

“Can I have some privacy here, please?” Joe asked. “This is not fair to the girl.”

“I be right outside,” Klaus said.

Joe asked the girl to remove her dress and underwear and lie on the desk, which was the closest thing he had to an exam table. She did as she was told without saying anything. Joe looked at her in horror. Not only was she bleeding, but she clearly had been battered.

“How old are you?” Joe asked softly. He wanted to make sure Klaus couldn’t hear their conversation.

“Eighteen,” Pearl said.

“How old are you really?”

“Sixteen. Fifteen.”
Joe went through the bag of supplies Klaus had brought him earlier in the week. He had compresses, but he needed ice. He knocked on the door and asked Klaus to bring him a bucket of ice. In short order, Joe was applying ice to the affected areas.

“You shouldn’t work for at least a week,” Joe said. “Your body needs time to heal.”

Pearl nodded and put on her clothes. Joe knocked on the door again.

“This girl should not be out on the street,” Joe said. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Must have her out,” Klaus said. “She is best earner. Men like them young.” He laughed.

“She is bleeding,” Joe said. “She is much more susceptible to disease.”

“She will be fine.”

“I would like to see her again at the end of the night,” Joe said. “Can you at least bring her back here when she is finished? Let me at least try to help her heal more quickly.”

Klaus said he would try. He walked up to Joe and said, “You good doctor.” He gave Joe a playful slap on the cheek. As Klaus and Pearl walked out, Joe said, “I’ll see you later tonight.”

Joe spent the next eight hours alone, trying to ignore the booming bass from the first-floor club. He thought about ways he might escape. A week of this had been enough. Could he grab a gun? Probably not. Fight his way out? Highly unlikely. The windows were sealed shut. The only way out was the door.

Around 2 a.m., the club went quiet. The last of the patrons settled their tabs and left. A half-hour later, Joe heard the door open. Pearl and one of Klaus’s men walked in. As they did, Joe rushed toward the door. He stiff-armed Pearl into the young man as hard as he could, and the man fell backward on his head. Pearl landed on top of him.
Joe raced down the flight of stairs and into the empty street. He ran till he reached the first main street—he had no idea what it was called or where he was—and saw some taxis outside a hotel. He thought he saw two men running after him. He jumped inside a cab, ducked down, and told the driver to move. He threw a 500 euro note on the seat. The driver hit the gas. Joe stayed well below the window. He wasn’t sure where he was going, but he was getting out of Geneva now.

In a few minutes, after they were outside the city center, Joe lifted his head up to see if they were being followed. They weren’t. He asked the driver to take him to France.

“Where in France?” the driver asked.

“It doesn’t matter where,” Joe said. “Just France. We’ll start there.”
CHAPTER 16

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2007

Danny woke up at 3:01 a.m. and again at 3:23 and 3:37. Sleep was no use. He had probably walked 10 miles on Friday as he tried to reconcile what had happened and figure out what he was going to do next, but it didn’t tire him out. Worse, he had had no luck resolving his problems.

He decided to get out of bed and maybe clean up the place, which he’d been meaning to do for the last 10 years or so. At least throw out some of the old papers and magazines. He had stacks of them everywhere. Many he’d read; the others he intended to. He took out some grocery bags and started filling them with papers, but every now and again a headline would catch his eye, and he’d want to revisit the story. When it was clear that no piles would be relocated, he gave up and sat on the couch. He turned on the TV but paid no attention to what was on. He kept running the incident over in his mind. Damn it, why did I throw the envelope at her?

You used to be able to do things like that in the newsroom. He remembered the time a reporter put his fist through the wall when his story got cut. He saw a copy editor throw a telephone at another editor in a dispute over what page to place a story on. People actually gave a damn back then. Their passion was tolerated—and usually celebrated. Now, Danny liked to say, you could turn the place into an insurance office, and a third of the people working there would just keep right on going.

Danny loved his newspaper like a spouse—he had disagreements, but, if anyone said a negative word, he was ready to pounce. You couldn’t tell Danny that newspapers were becoming irrelevant because he always shot back with: “Where are people going to get the real news from? Television?” You could tell Danny that newspapers were getting thinner from lack of ads, were cutting staff, were no longer part of the conversation. He’d say that all good stories start in print. Everyone else just leeches off newspapers.
Newspapers mattered. Being a newspaperman mattered. Being a newspaperman was his identity. And now, for the first time in his adult life, he wasn’t one.

Exhaustion finally settled in. He lay down on the couch and fell asleep for a few hours. When he woke up, it was 7:30. He decided to call Johnny Killings, his old night editor. Killings would set him straight.

A few hours later, Danny and Killings were having lunch in a diner near Killings’ house in Queens.

“So you really fucked up this time, Cartwright,” Killings said.

“If it didn’t happen Friday, it would have happened Monday,” Danny said.

“Monday, you would have had severance. Now, you got nothing.”

“I got satisfaction.”

“That don’t pay the rent.”

“Yeah,” Danny said. “It’s a good thing you’re buying.”

“So what’re you gonna do now that you fucked things up?” Killings asked.

“I don’t know. What are you doing now?”

“Nothing. I’m gonna rest. Spend time with my wife. Do some fishing. Fuck newspapers.”

Danny recognized that what Killings said was 5 percent true, 95 percent bravado.

“Yeah, I’m sure. That’s easy to say after a week.”

“Best week of my life.”
Danny spent the next couple of minutes looking closely at Killings’ face. He studied the wrinkles and figured each one represented a story. He wanted to hear those stories, but what he really hoped for was some encouragement. Then Killings dropped the pretense.

“Look, Danny, it was a great business. But it’s over. Every guy I talk to who’s left the News—and I meant everyone—is happier and healthier. Even the guys who went into PR. And the newspaper is gonna publish tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, with or without you.”

“What do you think I should do?”

“I don’t know, Danny. Are you gonna try the other papers?”

“It’s no use. The Times doesn’t care about what I do, and the Post is in worse financial shape than the News.”

“Kid,” Killings began (this made Danny smile because Danny was no kid), “you’re clinging to a dying business. Go into PR.”

Their burgers came, and they ate without speaking much. Danny had always respected Killings for being a hard ass. Killings made your work better. He forced you to dig deeper, be smarter. He didn’t expect such defeatism from a guy who’d spent his entire career in the business.

“You know what?” Danny said, pushing himself up and out of the booth. “Go into PR? Fuck you, Johnny. When did you become such a dick?”

Danny threw a ten and a five on the table and walked out. He got into his car and started driving toward Delaware.

*
Danny expected to find nothing when he arrived at Rob Parker’s house late that afternoon, but he pulled up just in time to find Rob, Natalie, and J.J. loading up Rob’s Land Rover with suitcases. Looked like they were going for a long trip. Danny parked his little Ford Focus on the street and walked up the driveway.

“Hi, Miss Parker, Mr. Parker,” he said. “Danny Cartwright.” He almost said “from the Daily News,” but he stopped himself. Rob waved to Danny, then ushered J.J. into the house.

“I remember,” Natalie said. “I called the Daily News. They told me you were no longer working there.”

“Right,” Danny said. “After I talked to you, they came around with the layoff notices for me and a bunch of other people.”

“I’m so sorry,” Natalie said.

Danny couldn’t believe this woman who’d gone through so much pain was again apologizing to him about anything.

“Don’t apologize, please,” he said. “I came here to apologize to you.”

“Why?”

“Because you told me your story, and I wasn’t able to tell it.”

“That’s just the way things are going lately,” Natalie said.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“We’re going away for a while,” Natalie said. “As you know, things aren’t going so well. It was nice of you to let me know, but you could have called. You didn’t have to come all this way.”
“I didn’t have your number,” Danny said. “They didn’t let me clean out my desk or take my notebooks. I tried to call your lawyer …”

“And you got the message that he’s out of the country. Me too.”

“Yeah.” Danny nodded. He looked at Natalie and saw a woman withering. He thought she seemed reasonably tough when he first met her in Garden City, but now her color was ashen. She appeared thin and exhausted, smaller somehow. He wondered how she was still standing. Then Natalie leaned against the car. Danny thought she might faint.

“Are you OK?” he asked.

“I just need some water,” she said.

Danny took her arm and walked her into the house, where he maneuvered her to the couch.

“Mr. Parker,” Danny called.

Rob, who was upstairs cleaning up some odds and ends and trying to keep J.J. distracted, came down to find Natalie on the couch and Danny in his kitchen cabinets, looking for a glass.

“Your daughter looked like she was going to faint, so I brought her inside,” Danny said.

“Thank you,” Rob said. “The glasses are in the cabinets on the left.”

Danny found what he was looking for and went to the sink.

“So why are you here?” Rob asked.

“I think you know that I talked to your daughter for a story this morning,” Danny said. “Well, I got laid off right after I talked to her. Fired, actually. I wanted to see if I could talk to her again. And apologize. I know she expected the story about your granddaughter to be in the paper tomorrow.”
Rob escorted Danny into the living room, where Natalie was now lying on the couch, crying quietly. Danny put the glass on the coffee table in front of her and backed away. Rob sat next to his daughter and comforted her, propping her up and putting his arm around her. Danny watched this scene unfold and tried to assess the situation. These people had done nothing wrong, and Danny, by uncovering the story, had unintentionally caused them anguish. He didn’t feel guilt—that wasn’t Danny’s way—but he wanted some sort of justice. So even as part of him wanted to leave, to go back to New York and figure out his next move, a stronger part wanted to tell their story and get the world off their backs.

Rob motioned for Danny to sit down, and he did, taking his reporter’s notebook out of his back pocket and putting it on the table.

“That’s OK, honey,” Rob said to Natalie. “We’ll be OK.”

Danny watched for another minute before asking if there was anything he could do. Rob waved him off, so Danny sat. Then J.J. came downstairs without saying anything and sat on his mother’s other side. “It’s going to be OK,” J.J. said.

When Natalie finally regained her composure, she reached for the water. She thanked Danny for bringing it to her and apologized for what he just witnessed.

“Usually I’m tougher than this,” she said.

“Please,” Danny said. “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

He paused awkwardly, then asked: “Would you let me tell your story? I would really like to tell what has happened to you. I think the world should know how devastating this situation has become.”

“I thought you were out of a job,” Natalie said.
“I am,” Danny said. “But I think there would be many newspapers interested in this story. I can’t guarantee anything, but I think, if I write this story, I will find an editor who wants it.”

The family looked at each other and agreed. Natalie still wanted Nan’s story told, still wanted her “friends” to know what they’d done.

“You’ve been fair to us,” Natalie said. “Go ahead.”

Danny asked Natalie to walk him through the entire situation again. He asked about what had happened to Nan and how J.J. felt about losing his sister. He asked about their plans—where they were going when he pulled up—and whether they thought their lives would ever get back to normal. He saved the questions about Joe for the end.

Their interview lasted for about an hour. When they finished, Danny asked for one more favor: a picture.

“Do you have a camera?” Natalie asked.

“In my car,” Danny said. “Excuse me one minute.”

Danny ran out to the car and pulled a small camera he carried with him everywhere for just-in-case moments like this. He went back in and saw Natalie looking in a mirror. She wanted to look presentable.

They sat on the couch, Rob, Natalie, and J.J., and gamely stared at the camera. Natalie’s eye makeup was smudged. Rob looked like someone who had just woken up thinking there was an intruder in the house. J.J. appeared dazed. It would be hard to find three more defeated-looking people, or an image that conveyed more pain. Danny snapped the picture.

*
Before Danny pulled out of the Parkers’ driveway, he assured them that he would find a place to tell their story. In the back of his mind, he was thinking The New York Times, but he didn’t want to raise their hopes—or his. He had a conflicted relationship with the Times, which infuriated him with its relative lack of focus on New York City but also drew his deep admiration for the amount of time and resources it put into projects the editors there found important.

That rarely included crime stories.

To have this story in the Times would give Natalie the closure she sought and also stick it to the Daily News for the shoddy way it had treated Danny. Not to mention that having a clip from The New York Times would only help his impending job search. Now he just needed to find the right editor and make a pitch. That would be tough to do on a Saturday, but he had a few phone numbers to try. One was a reporter; the other two were low-level editors. As soon as he got far enough away from the Parkers’ house, he pulled into a McDonald’s parking lot, grabbed a cup of coffee, and made the first call. He reached Kerry Grau, a night metro editor he met a couple of times when she was a reporter. He’d always found her a little snooty, but she came out of the Columbia School of Journalism and at 28 had been a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize.

“Kerry, this is Danny Cartwright. I don’t know if you remember me …”


Damn, Danny thought. Word travels fast.

She went on. “I’m sorry about that. You know we’re getting ready to cut staff here too.”

Sounded to Danny like she thought he was calling about a job.

“I’m not calling about a job,” he said. “But I have a story the Times might want.”
“What’s that?” she said.

“What have you been following the Mengelt case?”

“Your stories? Yeah. Great stuff. But I figured once he disappeared and the guys who committed the murders at Victors were dead, that was it. What else is there?”

“I’m just driving back to New York from an interview with Mengelt’s family. Their teenage daughter committed suicide on Thanksgiving, and the ex-wife, son, and father-in-law are getting ready to relocate. It’s a horrible story.”

“Wow. Where were they?”

“Let’s just say in another state, Kerry.” Danny didn’t think the Times wouldn’t send someone to Delaware to find Natalie Mengelt, but he indulged his own paranoia. “I’ve been with them for a couple of hours and now I’m heading back to the city. You interested?”

“I’d take a look, yes. But let me run it up the chain and see what everyone else says.” She looked at her phone and wrote down Danny’s number.

“Great. I have a picture of them, and a lot of information no one else will ever have.”

“OK. Give me an hour or two.”

Danny figured he had more reporting to do. His next stop was Garden City to see what, if anything, was happening at the Mengelts’ old house. He also wanted to talk to Sharon, Nan’s best friend, to get her side of the story.

He was about an hour outside Long Island, somewhere in New Jersey, when Kerry Grau called back and said her editors would like to take a look at the story. She couldn’t guarantee anything, but she
promised they would give his work serious consideration. She said it would be fun to stick it to the
News, and Danny smiled.

He promised to deliver the story—about 1,500 words, he guessed—by noon Sunday.

*

Danny pulled into Garden City a little past 8 p.m., which the average person might have
considered too late to knock on anyone’s door. He drove past the Mengelt house, now encircled by a
large temporary fence. He noted two security guards sitting in a shack that had been installed in the
front yard. Danny stopped to ask them a few questions. Once he identified himself, they had little to say.
No, there had been no vandalism. No, there had been no one arrested in protests. In fact, the protests
had stopped. Too cold outside, probably.

Danny pulled onto a side street and looked up directions for Nan’s best friend Sharon’s house.
Turned out, she lived two blocks away. He pulled up outside a white, center hall colonial with a wrap-
around front porch, just in time to see the lights go out and three teenage girls leaving. They were
giggling and talking and had a Saturday kind of happiness to their step.

“Excuse me,” Danny said. “Is one of you Sharon?”

“I am,” said the tallest of the three. Sharon was a pretty girl with dark red hair and stunningly
clear complexion for a teenager.

“My name is Danny Cartwright. I’m a reporter for the ...” He stopped himself. “I’m a reporter.”

Sharon and the other girls were silent.

“I was hoping to ask you a few questions,” Danny said. “It’s about Nan Mengelt.”

“That loser?” one of the girls said. “She doesn’t live here anymore.”
“Is something happening with Nan?” Sharon asked.

“Well,” Danny said. “She’s dead.”

Sharon’s pretty face turned ashen, and all three girls started to tear up.

“What happened?” one of the girls asked.

“She killed herself,” Danny said.

Danny listened to them snuffle and waited for them to say something. When they didn’t, he asked if they could continue the conversation inside. It was cold out.

Sharon invited Danny in. They all went inside. An adult would have offered coffee, but these were 15- and 16-year-old girls. They offered nothing but tears. The girls sat on a sofa, and Danny sat in an overstuffed wing chair. He took off his coat, folded and stuffed it between his right leg and the arm of the chair.

“Are your parents home?” Danny asked.

“They’re away for the weekend,” Sharon said.

Danny considered whether he would be crossing the line by questioning these girls without an adult around. Screw it. He was going to do what he had to do. He had a deadline.

“I talked to Mrs. Mengelt today,” Danny said. “She said Nan was upset over what her father had done, and then when her friends abandoned her, she became so depressed that she slit her wrists.”

Danny watched the girls process the news. He rarely got emotionally invested in any story, but this time he wanted these little shits to feel the pain Nan Mengelt must have felt. Everyone who had a hand in ostracizing Nan Mengelt should feel guilty for the rest of their lives.

“I don’t believe this,” Sharon said. “Really? She’s really dead?”
“Yes,” Danny said. “Is Mrs. Mengelt right? Did you tell Nan you were never going to talk to her again?” He watched as Sharon appeared to shrink right in front of him.

“I-I-I” was all Sharon could get out. She couldn’t talk. She buried her face in a pillow. He watched mascara run down the other girls’ faces. Natalie Mengelt would have gotten a small measure of revenge from this, he thought. She wanted these girls to feel the pain she felt.

Danny asked the other girls their names. One was Maggie Spencer—she was the one who called Nan a “loser”—the other Allie Anderson. They were in 10th grade with Sharon at Garden City High School. They said they knew Nan, but not as well as Sharon did. For the next 15 minutes or so, they answered Danny’s questions surprisingly honestly. Danny had expected pushback or obfuscation, but these girls felt guilty. They pushed their friend to the edge, and now she was dead. They were at least partly responsible.

“I never should have avoided her,” Sharon said. “I’m so sorry. You have to forgive me.”

Danny wasn’t sure whose forgiveness Sharon wanted. His? Nan’s? God’s? Probably all three. She needed someone to make this go away.

“Do you feel like you bullied her?” Danny asked.

Sharon looked at him, and a new round of tears began. These girls had live relatively sheltered lives. They had never experienced anything like this. Danny snuck a look at his watch: 8:47 p.m. He let the room fill with silence. It took more than four minutes before any of the girls responded.

“We weren’t as supportive as we should have been,” Sharon said, finally. “Oh God, I can’t believe this.”

Danny sensed there was little more to gain from this interview, so he made a move to start putting on his coat.
“Is there anything else you’d like to say?” Danny asked.

“I’m sorry,” Sharon said.

Danny thanked the girls, picked himself up, and headed out the door.

He drove back to his apartment thinking about the story, running several potential leads through his mind. For Daily News readers, the Mengelt story was a daily occurrence and mostly front-page news. The Times had only run two or three significant pieces that he could think of, and they were all inside the paper. He needed to make the readers care quickly, or else they would turn the page.

When Danny got home, he made a pot of coffee and pushed some old newspapers off his kitchen table so he had space to write. The place was a disaster, but the place was always a disaster. An old butcher block table, two mismatched chairs, a raggedy plaid couch, a portable TV he’d had since the 1980s, a rarely made bed, and an unfinished dresser were the sum total of his possessions. He didn’t care. He lived to work.

While the coffee brewed, he went through his notes. This story was rich in detail and tragedy, and normally Danny would have just knocked it out. But now he had the added pressure of potentially writing for The New York Times. Or, if it went badly, for no one. No pressure at all, he thought to himself. And then he started writing.

By DANNY CARTWRIGHT
GARDEN CITY, N.Y. – Ten days ago, Natalie Mengelt was the wife of a successful obstetrician and mother of two happy teenage children living in this leafy Long Island suburb. On any given day, her biggest worry might have been what the family would have for dinner that night.

Today, her husband is thought to be on the run from authorities, her daughter committed suicide on Thanksgiving day—bullied, Mrs. Mengelt said, by girls she considered her best friends—and she finds herself looking for a place to live in peace and anonymity.

“My life will never be normal again,” she said in an interview, asking that the location of the conversation be kept confidential. “It is extraordinary how much your circumstances can change overnight. One day, I was living a dream, and now I am living a nightmare of my husband’s making.”

Mrs. Mengelt—who has changed her name but asked that her new identity not be disclosed—is the estranged wife of John Josef Mengelt. He’s the doctor who was discovered to have implanted Fido
Finder microchips in 166 babies he delivered at New York’s City General Hospital in the late 1980s because he wanted to track their movements as adults. He believed that these children, nearly all of whom were black or Hispanic, would grow up to be criminals.

On Sept. 7, two of the children he delivered, Le’Andre Stephenson and Hakim Shabazz, now grown, proved him right: They committed five brutal murders at Victor’s restaurant in midtown Manhattan. Both men were arrested, thanks to an anonymous tip that police believe came from Mengelt.

Following their arrests, Shabazz was stabbed by an unknown assailant at Rikers Island while awaiting a preliminary hearing. Stephenson was shot to death outside his mother’s apartment after being released by Judge Milton Savage, who ruled that Stephenson had been arrested illegally.

Mengelt has since disappeared, leaving behind a growing string of lawsuits against him, his family, and the hospital where he worked as a resident. His family home here is guarded 24 hours a day after several windows were broken. For several days after Mengelt disappeared, the house had been surrounded by news crews and a mob of onlookers, but those crowds have dissipated, according to the guards on duty at the house Saturday night.

Mengelt’s medical office, located just a few blocks from his home, has a large sign on the door that says “Closed.” A temporary wire fence surrounds the property.

His estranged wife, meanwhile, said she finds herself “paying for the sins of my husband.”

“I knew nothing about any microchips,” Mrs. Mengelt said. “Joe never confided in me. Yes, he sometimes made racist comments, but I always admonished him to stop. He never talked to me about any of this. Never.”

When news of Mengelt’s actions broke and crowds of news trucks and onlookers began gathering outside of their house, Mrs. Mengelt fled New York with her teenage children, J.J., 17, and Nan, 15, fearing for their safety. They had been away from home for a little more than a week when Nan Mengelt’s friends began texting their disdain—first for her father and then for her.

Someone she may or may not have known sent her a text saying, “Maybe you’ll kill yourself like Hitler.” The boy she liked told her to stop texting. Her best friend said she was no longer allowed to talk to her or she would have her phone taken away. Distraught, Nan Mengelt slit her wrists on Thanksgiving Day.

In an interview Saturday night at her home here, Nan Mengelt’s best friend, Sharon Becker, broke down in tears when she heard the news.

“I’m so, so sorry,” she said. “Nan was my best friend, and I let her down.”

Nan Mengelt’s friends described her as a fun, friendly person who always put herself before others. Miss Becker remembered going through a particularly difficult period where she was bullied repeatedly. She said Nan was the only friend who stood by her.

“She was there for me,” Miss Becker said. “I wasn’t there for her.”

Mrs. Mengelt described herself as “utterly, completely heartbroken” over her daughter’s suicide.

“Nan was the sweetest, most caring girl in the world,” she said. “But she was a teenage girl, and teenagers can be so fragile. If only one of her friends had stood by her. But no one showed the slightest bit of compassion for a girl in trouble.”

Mrs. Mengelt said Sharon Becker is just one of countless people who let down her family and have persecuted her unfairly. She points to City General Hospital, which has started legal proceedings to force her—and her husband, if he is found—to cover any judgments against the hospital related to her husband’s actions. A spokesperson for the hospital said she could not comment on pending litigation.

She said her lawyer, David Chessler, who took a $10,000 retainer, has not returned her phone calls in several days. Chessler’s voicemail said he is out of the country.

Nor has Mrs. Mengelt received any calls of support from her friends—though she acknowledged
being difficult to reach. Emails? She said she has not received any.

But no disappointment hurts more, Mrs. Mengelt said, than the one she has suffered at the hands of her husband. She said she has heard nothing from his since he went for a walk on the evening of Nov. 14. She said she has no idea whether he is dead or alive, though she also acknowledged that she has not yet filed a missing-persons report. (“I’ve had much more pressing things to do,” she said.) She said he could be anywhere. They did not vacation or have a second home, so there was no natural destination for him.

“I’m so disappointed in Joe,” she said. “There was no call for what he did to those babies and no reason for what he has done to us. I hope he’s safe. I also hope that he will step forward and explain the disaster that he caused.”

Joe and Natalie Mengelt married in 1986. She said his racism may have resulted from two incidents—he was mugged while they were in college together at the University of New York City in 1981, and they were mugged on a beach in Mexico during their honeymoon.

“As scary as those situations were,” she said, “they were isolated incidents. That doesn’t make everyone a criminal. And to treat those babies like dogs is just disgusting. Joe never said much about either incident after they happened, but I guess they stuck with him.”

After their children were born, the Mengelts moved to Garden City, where Joe was raised by his father, Dr. Josef Mengelt, and his mother, Irene, a bookkeeper. The population here is more than 90 percent white and only about 1 percent black. The Mengelts bought a multimillion-dollar center hall colonial with twin porches on either side of the house. They lived there for about 15 years until Nov. 14, when Joe walked off.

When he left, Natalie, fearing for her and her children’s safety, abandoned the house. They have been holed up with a relative in another state.

On her good days, Natalie Mengelt will tell you that she bears a reasonable resemblance to the actress Diane Lane. But in an interview Saturday afternoon, she described herself as looking like Diane Lane will look 20 years from now.

“I have aged terribly in the last 10 days,” Mrs. Mengelt said. “The pressure has been intense, and losing my daughter....” Her voice tailed off, and tears flowed.

When she was able to compose herself, Mrs. Mengelt said her goal from here out is to make sure her son J.J. is safe and is allowed to grow up in peace, and that she can recover her life. She did not know yet where that would be, but she speculated it would be in another country.

She did not intend to give another interview. The only reason she gave this one, she said, was to shame the people of Garden City for what they have done to her family.

“I hope the people who shunned us, who shunned Natalie, never have a peaceful night’s sleep again,” she said. “I will be paying for what my husband did for the rest of my life. I hope the people of Garden City pay for what they have done.”

* 

Danny finished his story at midnight, then went to bed. He woke up at 6:30, made some coffee, reread his work from the night before, and hit send on both the story and photo. Then he waited.

Every story Danny Cartwright ever wrote had mattered to him, but the stories that righted wrongs—those mattered more. He sat back and thought about those. The nurse whose boyfriend tried to infect her with HIV; his story helped changed the law to make what the boyfriend did a felony. The
mentally ill man who’d been beaten in jail but couldn’t defend himself; Danny’s story got the man moved to a safer facility. The children who’d been taken from their parents by Child Protective Services when a corrupt cop planted drugs in their house; that story put away the cop and reunited the family.

This story couldn’t have that kind of effect on the Mengelt family. There was no way to put the toothpaste back into this tube. But maybe he could help the family gain a little peace.

So he sat and he waited, and, six hours later, he had his answer: Yes. Kerry Grau, his editor, emailed him to say she liked the story. She had a couple of minor, easily answerable questions, and there was the matter of editing to conform to New York Times style. She would have an edited version for him to read in an hour or so, and the story would be in Monday’s paper.

Danny raised his fist in victory.
CHAPTER 17

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2007

Danny woke up multiple times through the night. By 5, he had finished sleeping. He slipped on some pants and his coat and went downstairs to find a paper. He could have looked up the story online, but this one he wanted to hold in his hands. He walked the two blocks to the closest convenience store and arrived just in time to find the clerk cutting open the bundles of papers. Danny picked up a copy of the Daily News, which had a nice exclusive about two women who posed as apartment buyers so they could steal diamonds and furs. Danny couldn’t help feeling a little twinge of jealousy—that would have been his story.

Then came The Times. Danny grabbed a copy before the clerk had a chance to move the papers onto the counter. He looked above the fold. Nothing. He flipped the front page over, and there it was. Across two columns was the headline:

*Husband Gone, Daughter Dead;*

*Woman Seeks Answers, Closure*

By Danny Cartwright

Danny was a Daily News guy through and through. He never aspired to The Times and didn’t expect the thrill he felt at that moment. His first New York Times story, a front-page story, and the culmination of months of work. The first six paragraphs made the front page before the story jumped inside. There was the picture Danny took of Natalie and J.J., and an undated headshot of Joe Mengelt. Danny scanned to make sure the story remained intact, and it had. He picked up five more copies, poured himself a cup of coffee, and paid the man.

“My. Fucking. Story!” he said to the clerk, who nodded and smiled, gave him his change, and had no idea what Danny meant.
It was freezing outside, but the only thing Danny felt was joy. And maybe a little feeling of revenge. He hoped those bastards at the Daily News saw what they lost. But he knew they probably didn’t care. They had a scoop of their own. Maybe not as good or important as Danny’s, but they had something, didn’t they? Danny realized that his departure had no significant effect. It was just as his old editor Johnny Killings had said: They’re going to publish tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, with or without you.

Of course they’ll publish, Danny thought. But what they publish won’t be as good. As he walked into a stiff wind, Danny consoled himself with that thought.

When Danny got back to the apartment, he opened The Times on his table and slowly read through the story. If it had been edited, he didn’t recognize the changes. That made him happy. What would make him happier would be to get a lead on where Mengelt might be. The advantage he had publishing the story in The Times was that he gained worldwide reach. Maybe a reader would see the picture of Mengelt, see Mengelt himself, and turn him in.

In his dreams, Danny found Mengelt and dragged him to justice. Danny would be hailed as a hero, and, even if a Pulitzer Prize didn’t come his way, a book deal would. Or something. Anything that rewarded the work he put in on this story. “How I Captured the Notorious Dr. Mengelt,” he imagined the title reading.

At 7:15 a.m., he got his first email from an old Daily News friend, who wrote: “See you went over to the dark side. 😊 Good for you!” He watched as comments trickled in on The Times’ website—most railing against Joe Mengelt’s actions, but some in praise of The Times for reporting the story. One even noted how The Times had lured away Danny, and how The Daily News’ loss was definitely The Times’ gain. Maybe so, Danny thought, but this is almost certainly a one-off. Elsewhere in that day’s
paper was a story about how The Times was cutting 5 percent of its staff. At any other newspapers, cutting 5 percent of the staff would be chopping into bone. At The Times, it would be barely noticeable.

Shortly after 11 a.m., Danny got an email from Natalie Mengelt, thanking him for the story. She said she had heard from several people in Garden City who expressed condolences. Not only that, but a couple had apologized for not showing her support when she needed it the most. She concluded the email:

*By the way, we have packed up and moved. This is a temporary email address that will expire 10 minutes from now. I will be in touch at some point in the future. Please don’t try to contact me. But if I ever hear from Joe, I will contact you.*

*Best,*

*Natalie*

*P.S. I also found out why I haven’t heard from my lawyer, David Chessler. He was in Belize for the Thanksgiving holiday and had a heart attack. He’s dead. He’s dead, and he now has $100,000 of my money. As if my life couldn’t get more complicated.*

Danny thought briefly that maybe Natalie was being a little self-centered, but given all she’d been through, he guessed she had a right to be.

The rest of the day went on pretty much like that for Danny—intermittent notes, a couple of gracious phone calls, one or two jealous calls from colleagues who would have killed to have their work appear in The New York Times. He spent a lot of the day explaining that no, he had not switched newspapers, which led to a volley of regretful emails from supportive friends.

“What are you going to do next?” an old college buddy asked.
A damn good question. Unless he somehow found Joe Mengelt, the biggest story of his life was over. His career at The Daily News was certainly over. His career in newspapers likely was too. No one would be hiring in this recession, especially a 55-year-old making top dollar.

He had a good amount of money saved—Danny had basically worked and slept for 30 years, and never spent money on anything. So he could easily afford the rent on his apartment and a basic health insurance policy for several years. But what would he do for work? For his entire adult life, Danny’s identity was tied up in being a reporter. And now, he wasn’t one anymore.

“I have no idea,” he wrote back.

By Tuesday, the emails had slowed, and by Wednesday, the Mengelt story was old news. He searched various online sites, bulletin boards, and other places where someone might have posted a comment about seeing Joe Mengelt. He posted Mengelt’s picture, asking that anyone who saw the doctor to please get in touch.

He heard nothing.
CHAPTER 18
JULY 24, 2014
ASHFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

Danny Cartwright was now an observer, “a civilian,” he called himself ruefully. He’d been out of newspapers for seven years, and he watched the business retrench with horrifying quickness. Most newspapers now barely had the resources to cover their community’s institutions, which Danny figured was exactly what the government wanted. Danny found it sad, and, though he was no longer affiliated with a paper, he felt a kind of survivor’s guilt for those he left behind to cover what Danny thought were mostly surface-level stories that would be forgotten seconds after they were read.

In 2008, a former Daily News business editor named Kent Owen, who had left the newspaper business three years before Danny did, took a job heading the journalism department at a small western Massachusetts liberal arts school in Ashfield called Winston College. The school wanted him to take the program from mostly theoretical, which it had been, to professional. The first person he called was Danny.

Danny didn’t know Owen well—they never worked together—but Owen was known as a bright guy. “He should be working for The Times,” both his supporters and detractors would say. Owen was that exceedingly rare newspaperman who had a doctorate. “An accidental doctorate,” he called it. To hear Owen tell it, he had wanted to teach journalism at the college level, so he stayed in school. After he
earned his Ph.D., he taught for one year, realized he didn’t know anything concrete about the subject matter he taught, so he left academia for the so-called real world. He spent 20-plus years as a reporter and editor. In 2005, he read the tea leaves and decided to jump from the business before he was pushed. He taught for a couple of years, then took the job at Winston.

When Owen called, Danny had been out of work for nearly a year. He had tried to get another reporting job, but no one was hiring. Money wasn’t an issue for Danny, but boredom was. Still, the idea of leaving New York pained him.

“Come visit,” Owen told him. “You’ll love it here. It’s a lot greener than you’re used to, and the air is fresher. And you’ll have summers off.”

“What would I do with summers off?” Danny asked. He was serious.

Owen knew Danny would be restless, but he thought the Winston students could learn so much from Danny about the importance of doggedly pursuing a story. It took three calls, but he convinced Danny to take a visit. Danny liked what he found. He signed on as a visiting instructor with a one-year, renewable contract.

Owen prepared Danny well for what was to come. “There’s an old saying in higher ed,” Owen said, “‘The fights are so fierce because the stakes are so low.’ Remember that, and you’ll have all the perspective you need.”

They both got a laugh out of that as they watched professors bitch about having to teach three courses. As if that was a burdensome workload. Owen liked Danny, and he was pleased that Danny threw himself into teaching with the same gusto he had for reporting. Danny loved the students, and, when he got a good one, he rode that student hard. He made sure that everyone who came through his classes left with a thorough understanding of how to find and report the news. He taught about
document searches, about cultivated sources, about telling great stories. Some faculty members with Ph.D.’s looked down on Danny—the way they looked down on all non-tenure-track instructors—but Danny knew he was getting through to the students, and that’s what mattered.

In classroom discussions, the Mengelt story inevitably came up as an example of how to pursue a lead. He ran across few kids who’d heard of the story, but after a year or two, Danny got tired of rehashing the details. He was proud of his work, yes, but he also felt slightly embarrassed, like he was one of those old guys telling war stories. “In my day …” He vowed never to become one of them, and so far he had been true to his word.

What bothered him most about the Mengelt story was that it had no ending. Danny had done impressive work, but not knowing what happened to the notorious doctor ate at him. “Every good story has a beginning, middle, and end,” he told his students. So the Mengelt story was not yet a good story, and, with Danny out of the newspaper business, it wasn’t going to be.

But Danny enjoyed teaching, and he continued to sign new contracts every year. He kept himself immersed in the business by writing for the local newspaper from time to time and by reading The Daily News and The Times online thoroughly every day. Over the years he occasionally stumbled on someone writing follow-up stories related to the Mengelt case—City General paying out a $10.6 million lump sum to Joe Mengelt’s patients and The Rev. Benjamin; the tangled estate of David Chessler; the Mengelt properties being sold at auction; a wrongful death lawsuit filed by Shabazz Hakim’s family against the city of New York; Amy Diamond being named a U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York; the fifth anniversary of the Victor’s murders. They were passionless, matter-of-fact, short stories.

According to the anniversary story, the New York police had made a half-hearted attempt to find Mengelt after he fled. Mengelt had been seen getting off a plane in Geneva the day after he left his
home in Garden City. A few days later, someone found Mengelt’s passport in a trash can in the Geneva Cointrin Airport. After that, though, the trail went cold. The NYPD stopped looking.

Danny couldn’t blame anyone, because where would you even start to look after that? But seven years later, no one else cared, and that pained him.

*

Danny spent his summers sitting around waiting for fall. He loved late July, when Winston College came back to life. Faculty members returned to town, or at least they showed up in their offices more frequently. Students trickled in, settling in their off-campus housing and lounging around campus. This year, the department had decided to review its curriculum, and Owen asked the faculty to return for a department meeting. Danny hated department meetings—typically, they were three-hour sessions that could have been handled in an email. But it would be nice to start gearing up again for the school year.

Danny arrived at 1:15—fifteen minutes early. He was sitting in the conference room when Jason Henke came in. Other than Owen, Jason was the one person on the journalism faculty who had treated Danny with some conviviality. Once or twice a semester, they even went out for a drink together. Jason had started his career as a reporter at a small paper in New Hampshire. Realizing he was never going to make any money, he opted to go back to school. He never left. He met a woman, they had a son, and he settled in for the long haul. This was his 15th year at Winston. Jason always went somewhere exotic for the summer to work on a novel that, as far as Danny knew, no one had ever read. Jason was long-winded—Danny could see how he wouldn’t last in a newsroom—but a decent guy.

“Jason,” Danny said. “Good to see you.”

“It’s good to be seen,” Henke said. He always said that.
“How was the summer?”

“Good, good. Got a lot written.”

“You went to France, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Chamonix. It’s in the French Alps.”

“Sounds nice.” Danny immediately wished he hadn’t said that.

“Let me show you some pictures.”

Uh-oh. Henke took out his iPhone and began to regale Danny with stories of his family’s adventures.

“This was the view from our apartment,” he said, showing Danny various views of mountains that ascending into the clouds. “It was incredible.”

He scrolled through 60-70 pictures of various views and vistas. “Here’s one of Mount Blanc. We were right there,” he said, pointing to his building in relation to the mountain. “A couple of times, we went up to the midway point to have lunch. It was like you had a view of the entire world from up there.

“You take a cable car to the midway point, and there’s a gondola that brings you to the top. We wanted to go to the top a couple of times, but we never got there. It’s always shrouded in clouds, so we thought it was pointless to go all that way up and then not be able to see anything.”

Danny nodded politely, and Henke kept going.

“The last time we went up to the midway point, Jenny somehow stepped out of the cable car the wrong way, and she twisted her ankle. The amazing thing is, they have a doctor stationed right there at the midway point throughout the daylight hours. You can’t believe how many people he sees every day.”
“How many?” Danny asked.

“Well, I don’t know a number, but there were five other people in the waiting room when we got there. Some guys who got hurt hiking, some people with altitude sickness, things like that. So we finally get in to see this guy, and he speaks the weirdest broken French I’ve ever heard. Like pidgin French or something.”

Danny was about to excuse himself and get some coffee when the rest of the faculty came in, so he stuck around. Henke greeted them, then picked up the story for all to hear. “So I was just telling Danny that Jenny twisted her ankle on Mount Blanc, and we had to go see this doctor. Anyway, he’s wrapping her ankle, so I take out my phone to get a picture. He goes ballistic. He starts yelling and slaps the phone out of my hand, then he storms out of the room. A nurse had to come in and finish.”

Henke scrolled through his pictures. He held up the phone and said, “Here he is.” The phone got passed around the table. When it reached Danny, he gave a cursory glance and was about to pass it along to the next person when he took a second look. The picture was slightly blurred, but he fixated on the face of the doctor, who glared at the photographer with pure animus.

He looked like Mengelt.

Could it be Mengelt? Really? His hair was longer and grayer, his face heavier. But the eyes. Those eyes. So fierce. So defiant. Those were Mengelt’s eyes. Danny would never forget those eyes. He stared at the picture for a good, long time and flashed back to the day almost seven years ago that he advised Mengelt to run fast and far.

“What was this doctor’s name?” Danny asked.

“Jean something,” said Henke, who was now in the middle of another story.

“Jean what?” Danny said.
“I don’t know,” Henke said. “I think I have a card or some information or something, but it’s at home. Why do you care?”

“Just wondering,” Danny said. “He looks familiar.”

“I’ll look for it when I get home,” Henke said.

Danny sent the picture to his email and passed the phone along.

If you asked Danny what happened in that meeting, he wouldn’t have been able to tell you, so consumed was he with the thought that he may have finally found Mengelt. When they finished the meeting—Owen said they would reconvene every week until school began—Danny asked Henke to please look up the doctor’s name the second he got home. Henke said he would, and he did. He called Danny twenty minutes later with the name: Jean Échappé.

Danny pressed Henke for anything he could remember about this doctor, but there was little beyond the pidgin French and the anger over his picture being taken.

“So you think you know this guy?” Henke said.

“I’m almost sure I do,” Danny said. He hung up the phone and began to check on flights to France.

* *

While he scrolled through the different websites that sold airline tickets, Danny called Kent Owen.

“I may miss a couple of meetings,” Danny said.

“What’s going on, Danny?”

“I think I found Mengelt.”
“The doctor?”

“Yeah.”

“How? Where?”

“Henke. Henke had a picture. Mengelt worked on his wife’s ankle in France. She twisted her ankle, and he fixed it.”

“Wasn’t Mengelt a gynecologist or something?”

“An obstetrician,” Danny said. “But so what? I looked at this picture, and this guy looks like Mengelt. I will never forget those eyes. Let me send you the picture.”

Danny emailed Owen the photo and an old headshot of Mengelt, and Owen spent the next few minutes trying to convince Danny that this was a fool’s errand.

“It could be Mengelt, I guess,” Owen said. “But you don’t know that it’s Mengelt, and, even if it is, what do you want with him?”

“I can sell this story,” Danny said.

Danny was 62 years old, but at this moment, he was a teenage boy with the keys to a cherry-red Corvette, a wallet full of cash, and no parents around. Owen knew that trying to talk him out of the trip was senseless, so he decided to warn him of the potential dangers.

“Stick with me for a second, Danny,” Owen said. “Let’s run through all the things that could happen. It might not be Mengelt, that’s number one. If not, no harm, I guess. Just some expenses. OK, so what would you do if it is Mengelt? You don’t have police powers, so you can’t arrest him. And even so, is he even wanted on any criminal charges?”
“I want him to tell his story,” Danny said. “I want to know what he’s been doing for the last seven years. I want to know how a man can just abandon his family like that. I want to know if he has any remorse by the mess he left behind. I want closure on this story.”

“What if he has a gun, Danny? What if he shoots you?”

“Look, I’ll keep in touch with you so you know where I am right until I go into his office. If he shoots me, I died some kind of a hero. If he tells me his story, I have a great story.”

“Have you even been out of the country, Danny? Do you even have a passport?”

“I went to Canada a couple of years ago.”

Owen had exhausted every way he knew to keep Danny in Amherst. “Can you be back for the first day of school?” he asked.

Danny assured him that he would be back—and with a story.

“Then go,” Owen said. “Get the story.”

Danny said thanks, then clicked on the button to purchase his plane ticket and room rental.
CHAPTER 19
JULY 27, 2014
CHAMONIX, FRANCE

Danny stayed awake almost the entire flight from Boston to Geneva, Switzerland. But when he
nodded off, he dreamed. The first time, he dreamed that he burst in on Mengelt, who taunted him for
taking so long to track him down. Then Mengelt exited a side door and jumped off the side of a
mountain, presumably to his death. Mengelt’s fall jolted Danny awake. In another dream sequence,
Danny walked into Mengelt’s office in Chamonix, and they ended up in a fight over a gun. The sound of
the gunshot—what Danny dreamed he heard—woke him.

Danny played those scenarios and others in his head as the car he hired took him on the hour
ride from the Geneva airport to Chamonix. He decided that the element of surprise was going to be
crucial to whatever he did. Last time, he abetted Mengelt’s escape. At least, that was what he always
told himself. He never said it to anyone else, but it always weighed on Danny’s mind that Mengelt might
have stayed if Danny hadn’t said something.

The car pulled into Chamonix and in front of the apartment Danny had rented for a week. The
rental agent made small talk, asking Danny what brought him to Chamonix.

“Hiking,” Danny lied.

After Danny settled in, he went out to get the lay of the land. At another time, he might have
marveled at the way the town seemed walled in by the mountains, and by the snow that covered the
mountaintops even on warm July days. But on this trip, he didn’t care. He wanted Mengelt—or Jean
Échappé, as he was now apparently known.
Danny made the climb from his room to the foot of the mountain where the cable cars brought hikers, skiers, and other tourists more than 7,500 feet to the Plan de l'Aiguille—the location of Mengelt’s office. He stared up at the mountain. The cable cars rocked in the wind and appeared to jump each time the cable pulled them up. He saw hikers scaling the rocks. The mountain looked like it went straight up. A small knot formed in Danny’s stomach, but he gamely bought a ticket for the next morning.

“You have a doctor at the midway point?” Danny asked the clerk. “Because I get altitude sickness sometimes.”


With nothing to do until the next morning, Danny walked around Chamonix and looked in the shops. The town itself was a grid of maybe eight blocks of stores and restaurants, largely catering to the needs of outdoorsmen and—women. That is, quick, casual dining and weather-appropriate clothing. The temperature was mild, but Danny had read the signs on the kiosk at the mountain, and it said to expect 50 degrees in the morning. He ducked into a shop near his room and bought a jacket, then headed to one of the small convenience stores to get something for dinner.

Danny had just turned down a side street when he heard an argument coming from a second-floor window. He looked up in time to see a boot flying by that just grazed his head. As he dodged the footwear, he noticed a man and woman screaming at each other in some combination of English and French. Danny could hear bits and pieces, but nothing substantive other than the word “tricheur.” Danny had forgotten most of his high school French, but he remembered that word—cheater. He moved slowly and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible. Just another pedestrian heading somewhere else and trying to be polite by not eavesdropping. He wanted to see, but he certainly didn’t want to be seen.

Danny glanced up at the window, then looked at the door. The man ran out of the building, his arms flailing. He was cursing to himself, but just loud enough for Danny to hear him say, “Damn
women.” Another shoe sailed out the window. The man went to retrieve one shoe, Danny the other. As Danny squatted down, he got a good look at the man’s face. It was him—Mengelt. Danny was sure.

Mengelt did not see Danny. Mengelt would not have seen anyone at that moment. He was too busy trying to maintain his composure. His girlfriend, Mariel, had become increasingly possessive, freaking out every time he made eye contact with another woman. She stuck her head out the window and screamed at him to “reste dehors” (stay out).

Mengelt grabbed the shoe from Danny and headed inside. “Je suis désolé,” he called over his shoulder.

Danny froze for a second, shocked that he’d found Mengelt and surprised but pleased that he hadn’t been recognized. He now knew where Mengelt lived and where he worked. He headed back to his room and called Owen.

“It’s him.”

“You talked to him?”

“No, but I saw him. I was face to face. It’s him.”

He went on to explain the shoe incident to Owen, who was still skeptical about this whole idea but was now roped into Danny’s world.

“So what are you going to say?” Owen asked.

“I think I’m going to tell him that seven years ago, he stood me up. He owes me a photo.”

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Joe Mengelt—Jean Échappé as he was known here—went back inside to try to calm down Mariel. He had met her a few months earlier at the halfway-point restaurant on Mont Blanc, where she
worked mostly as a waitress in the high-end portion but occasionally filled in at the snack bar. She first made eye contact with the doctor when she saw him walking toward the cable cars. When she found out who he was, she made it a point to get an appointment. One day, when it was a little icy on the mountain, Mariel pretended to step wrong on a rock. She limped over to the medical station and told them she wrenched her ankle. In his office, he pressed and massaged her ankle. Suddenly her injury was not serious enough to stop her from grabbing his crotch and shoving her tongue in his mouth.

Mariel was sexy as hell—five-foot-ten, with long brown hair and absolutely no inhibitions, as Joe would come to find out—but also quick to anger. She had grown up in Chamonix, tried to leave for college 10 years ago, and found out after a few weeks that she couldn’t hack the rest of the world. Chamonix was simple and easy to navigate. Her family was here, and, though they weren’t close, they provided a lifeline when necessary.

She was now 28 and hoping for better. A doctor was better. Within a month, the doctor was living in her place, at her insistence, because she hated his tiny three-room villa, and he loved assertive women. Mariel was take-charge, much like Natalie. He appreciated that.

She asked nothing about his past, and he volunteered nothing. Joe told her what he had told everyone else who asked: He had grown up in Canada (he lied) and come to Chamonix in January on the recommendation of a website he had found that promised a secluded place to live and play. He appreciated the way the mountains surrounded the town. They made him feel protected. He needed some protection now.

Mariel continued to yell at him in French, telling him that she found the photo he had received from a lady admirer, and she wasn’t going to stand for that. Joe responded, mostly in English, that just because a woman had given him her photo, that was no reason to suspect he was cheating.

“She was a patient,” Joe said. “I’ll never see her again.”
“I was a patient,” Mariel yelled. “You saw me again.”

“You pretended to be a patient,” he said.

Joe smiled, which only infuriated Mariel more. She threw a glass at him and told him to pack. He complied. If Joe had learned anything, it was that you shouldn’t stay where you’re not wanted.

Mariel sat at her kitchen table and sobbed. Joe threw his clothes into his bag and left the apartment without saying a word.

“Connard!” she yelled.

Joe rolled his suitcase down the street toward his place. He didn’t mind. If the last seven years had taught him anything, it was that he functioned well on his own. He liked living simply, liked not having to answer to anyone.

He barely remembered the keypad pass code to get into his place. It was a furnished third-floor walk-up that he rented by the month. Normally, this was a place for skiers and hikers who came to visit Chamonix for a week or two and needed a place to eat and sleep between excursions. He felt like a giant in this place, which could have fit into his living room in Garden City with space to spare. The downstairs was a claustrophobic kitchen with an eating area adjacent to a couple of chairs and a sofa. Up a winding staircase were two bedrooms with barely enough room for beds and shelves (no dressers), and a bathroom under a sloped roof. Joe had to duck to get out of the shower. He had rarely showered there, though.

Other than clothes, his personal possessions were almost nonexistent. In the last seven years, he had purchased almost nothing. He used a small portion of his salary for living expenses, and the rest went into a Swiss bank account. Mariel would have been shocked if she knew how much he was worth.
He bought the food for her apartment and always paid for restaurant meals, but there had been no occasion for gifts so far, and they hadn’t traveled together yet.

Joe looked in the half-sized refrigerator and found nothing but a jar of mayonnaise. He scrounged a can of tuna from the pantry and made dinner. After two bites, he found he wasn’t hungry, so he opened a book and read. He thought about Mariel, thought about walking over and asking for her forgiveness. But for what? For having a photo in his pocket?

He dragged his suitcase upstairs, lay on the bed, and pondered his future. He liked Chamonix well enough to stay, but with an ex-girlfriend working right next door, they would be certain to bump into each other over and over. That sounded uncomfortable. Joe was already living uncomfortably. Now work was going to be uncomfortable too? No. He decided not to empty his suitcase.

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Three blocks away, Danny was enjoying the cheese and bread he had bought, still thinking about Mengelt and what he had witnessed and how lucky he had been not to be recognized. But wait ... should he be insulted that Mengelt didn’t remember him? Of course not. They had only seen each other once in their lives. And Danny was the one looking for Mengelt. Mengelt had no reason to be looking for Danny. Danny finished up and set out his clothes for the next morning as he planned his strategy. He was going to be there first thing in the morning, sitting in Mengelt’s waiting room. He hoped to talk his way into an examination room—assuming they had something like that halfway up a mountain—and situate himself near the door. He pictured Mengelt walking in, looking down at a chart, barely paying attention to him. Mengelt would ask what the trouble was, and Danny would stand in front of the door and say ... what? What was the perfect line? Did he even need a line? Maybe the smartest thing was to just reintroduce himself and ask for an interview.
And if Mengelt said no, what would Danny say? Danny had no leverage here. He could tell Mengelt he just wanted an interview. He could tell him what happened to Natalie, Nan, and J.J., of all the pending lawsuits that he had escaped. Though maybe the doctor already knew. Danny didn’t know. He’d tell Mengelt that he was going to write the story no matter what, so the doctor might as well cooperate.

Mengelt had no incentive to cooperate. Danny had no idea what the doctor had been doing for the past seven years, but he seemed to be living in an idyllic little corner of the world. No one was likely to find him here, and, if Danny exposed him, he could always move along. Danny wondered what he could offer the doctor to make him want to cooperate.

How about a head start? Tell me your story, Danny could say, and in exchange I’ll promise not to publish anything for 48 hours. Refuse, and I’ll have something flying around the internet within minutes. Danny would have to hope that Mengelt didn’t know about what had happened at The Daily News, and he had to hope that Mengelt feared being caught.

The closest Danny had ever been to a situation like this was the time he talked a potential jumper off the Brooklyn Bridge by promising to tell his story in the paper. The guy was distraught over a breakup, and he just wanted someone to listen. That happened in the mid-1980s, and people still talked about it. The resulting story was selected for one of those best-in-journalism book compilations, and Danny won a couple of awards.

Maybe Mengelt was in a similar situation. Maybe he wanted someone to listen. Maybe he had been running. Maybe he was tired of running. Danny could hope.

Danny wanted to go into Monday with more certainty. *We don’t always get what we want,* he reminded himself. He set his alarm to wake him at 7 a.m. and lay on his bed, hoping for some sleep.
CHAPTER 20

MONDAY, JULY 28, 2014

CHAMONIX, FRANCE

The cable cars began ascending to Aiguille du Midi at 8 a.m. Danny left his room at 6. He stopped for coffee and a croissant and trudged through the empty streets and up the hill that led to the mountain. The wind was in his face the whole time, and he watched the cable cars sway. His stomach was in knots thinking about both the ride up and the confrontation. He had no idea how Mengelt would react when Danny showed up in his office.

Danny paced around the plaza, watching some hikers begin to climb the mountain and workers slowly take their stations. The hikers said nothing. The workers spoke French at a pace Danny couldn’t begin to translate. He tried to calm himself with sips of coffee and bites of food, but that only made him more jittery and stomach-sick. He threw his food in the trash and stared downhill as the morning fog lifted.

He checked his phone every few minutes, mostly for the time, sometimes for something to read. He could not concentrate. He shivered. He looked up and tried to figure out the angle of the mountain. What was that? Eighty degrees? Eighty-five? He tried to recall whatever French he could, in case he needed to communicate with someone in Mengelt’s office. He read the same plaza signs he had read yesterday. He thought about the seven years that had led to this moment.

At 7:45, a few other people showed up for the cable cars and began to form a line. Danny got in behind them. They offered him the front of the line—he had been there, after all—but he declined. He wanted to watch some people go up first. Two couples stepped in front of him and talked about their plans to take the gondola across to the top of the mountain. Danny looked up. The entire top of the
mountain was covered in clouds. He wanted to ask them what would be the point of going all the way to the top, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

And then, Danny turned around to see the doctor slowly making his way toward the line. Danny sized up the situation and thought he might end up in the same car with Mengelt. Was that good? It could be. He kept his back to the doctor, who was looking at his phone and paying no attention to those around him. Let’s keep it that way, thought Danny. The doctor wore a white shirt, a striped tie of muted colors, khaki pants, and black shoes. He carried a small medical bag and a cup of coffee. He was prepared for a routine day, Danny thought. Good.

The sudden sound of a voice jolted Danny out of his own thoughts. It was a recorded message saying, first in French and then English, that the high winds were causing the cars to sway more than usual, but no delays were expected. If the cars stopped, riders were instructed to stay inside. Do not attempt to open the car, the announcement warned.

Eight minutes later, the cable operator did whatever cable operators do to turn the machinery on. Danny felt a chill as the gears started grinding and the cars began to move. The first six people got on, and the attendant closed them in. Danny and Mengelt were next. The attendant greeted the doctor—“Dr. Échappé,” he called him—and they chatted for a moment about the weather.

“Vous avez une compagnie ce matin,” the attendant said, looking at Danny.


Danny slowly recalled enough of the words to figure out what the attendant said.

The cable car arrived, and the attendant opened the door. “Entrer,” he instructed Danny, and waved him into the car.

“How long is the ride?” Danny asked.
“Cinq minutes.”

Five minutes. Danny braced himself. He stepped into the plastic-enclosed bubble. Then Mengelt did the same. The attendant closed the door. The cable jerked their car from the landing station and started up the mountain. Danny felt the car rock. His stomach wobbled. Mengelt looked out the window. Danny looked at him. Danny took out his phone and quietly snapped a quick photo. It was imperfect—a little blurry, and it was a little more profile than head-on—but he wanted to get something without Mengelt knowing. The doctor took no notice.

Then Danny spoke. “Dr. Échappé?”

Mengelt looked up, surprised to be acknowledged.

“Oui?”

“Do you remember me?”

Mengelt looked hard at Danny. It had been seven years, and he’d only ever seen Danny in person once.

“Non.”

“My name is Danny Cartwright.”

Mengelt looked at him again. Danny Cartwright? He searched his memory. That sounded slightly familiar.

“The last time we spoke,” Danny said, “was in your office in Garden City.”

Mengelt froze, trying his best not to show fear. Another man might have tried to weasel his way out, deny the question, speak only in French. Something. Not Joe Mengelt.

“Now I remember,” Mengelt said.
“I’ve come a long way to see you,” Danny said. “It took seven years to find you.”

“And how did you do that, Mr. Cartwright?”

Danny gave Mengelt a quick scan. His initial thought was that Mengelt reminded him of the serial killers he had interviewed. When you asked about their crimes, they showed no emotion. Joe Mengelt showed no emotion.

“You treated a friend of mine who came to Chamonix for a visit.”

“What luck. Well, you’ve found me, Mr. Cartwright. What can I do for you?”

Just as he said that, the wind whipped their car, which jerked and came to a stop. From the speaker inside the car came an announcement that the wind was causing some disturbances, and they hoped to have the system operating soon. The movement of the car didn’t appear to bother Mengelt at all—he must have been used to it—but Danny felt like an egg being beaten. All he wanted to do at this moment was keep his food down and carry on a conversation.

“I’d like to tell the story of what happened to you after you left the United States,” he said, gagging on the last few words.

“And what is my incentive to tell that story?”

“To explain your point of view,” Danny said, wondering what shade of green his skin was at this moment.

“You interviewed me seven years ago, Mr. Cartwright. You know my point of view.”

“Do you have any regrets?”

“None.”

“What about your family?”
Mengelt looked at him. “None.”

“Dr. Mengelt …”

“The name is Échappé.”

“OK. Dr. Échappé. Are you aware of what happened to your wife and children?”

“No. I haven’t spoken to them in seven years.”

“Did you know that Nan committed suicide?”

Mengelt looked at Danny. He wasn’t sure he believed him. Danny noted that for the first time, Mengelt appeared to show some emotion.

“No, I did not know that.” He looked like he wanted details, but he did not ask. So Danny volunteered.

“She was bullied by girls and boys she thought were her friends,” he said. “Boys and girls in Garden City. They said they wouldn’t be friends with her because her father was a Nazi.”

“I am not a Nazi!” Mengelt said. “My family are not Nazis. I was trying to protect people like you and me from the scum who pollute our city with violence. Why do people not understand that?”

“The methods you used made people think of Mengele and eugenics,” Danny said. “A lot of people think you are some kind of Nazi.”

Mengelt stood up, which made the car move even more. But this time it was Mengelt, not Danny, who was scared. Mengelt moved to the bench next to Danny as if getting ready to take him into his confidence. Danny flinched slightly. He didn’t like the way the car tilted. He also wondered if Mengelt was getting ready for a fight. He didn’t think so, but he braced himself.
“I had hoped that by leaving, I would save the family a lot of grief,” Mengelt said. “All the way over on my flight out of New York, I thought about what you said—run fast and run far. And I thought about what my family might go through. I thought that if I got away, they would be safe. People would feel sympathy for them.”

Mengelt looked down. Danny noticed that the doctor’s eyes had begun to mist. Danny thought he heard Mengelt say “Oh, Nan ...” under his breath.

“I’m sorry to bring you that news,” Danny said.

Mengelt said nothing.

For a minute, Danny felt like he had the upper hand on Mengelt. He was about to ask, “Do you want to know what else you left behind?” but worried that offering him information would be like taunting. He didn’t want the doctor to clam up, so he let silence fill the car. He had always found that silence was a useful tool for getting interview subjects to talk. The quiet freaks them out.

They stayed quiet for 20, 25, 30 seconds. Then the cable cars started moving again, each thrust up the mountain making Danny more nauseated.

“When we get to the top,” Mengelt said, “let’s go to my office. I will talk to you.”

“OK,” Danny said. He had what he wanted.

When the cable car finally arrived at the exit point, the attendant at the top unlocked the door and welcomed them to Aiguille du Midi. He patted the doctor on the shoulder and said something in French that Danny could not hear.

Mengelt motioned for Danny to walk with him.

“I will talk to you, but I have two conditions,” Mengelt said.
“What are those?” Danny asked.

“One is no photos. Obviously I am going to have to leave here, and I don’t want anyone looking for me.”

Danny looked at his phone. “Of course,” he lied.

“The other is that nothing is printed anywhere for 72 hours. I want a head start. Can we agree to that?”

That was easy for Danny to agree to. He had no idea what he was going to do with this story. It could take months to find someone to publish.

“I agree.”

“Very well,” Mengelt said, leading Danny toward the lookout point adjacent to his office. The doctor walked toward the thin wire fence and glanced up.

“Have you seen this view?” Mengelt asked. “It is magnificent.”

Danny feared heights under the best of circumstances, and he also had this nagging thought that maybe Mengelt would try to push him off the mountain. He inched his way toward the ridge but stayed far enough from Mengelt’s reach. Danny looked down quickly at the town below him, then turned back and took a few steps until he felt like he was on firm footing.

“Oh, you’re afraid of heights, I see,” Mengelt said. “Too bad. You are missing a glorious view.”

Mengelt motioned to Danny to follow him. They walked through a snack bar area into a small maze of tunnels that led in three different directions—one toward restrooms, another to a kitchen used by both the snack bar and the fancy restaurant upstairs, and the third to the medical facilities where
Mengelt spent his days. Mengelt pointed up to the restaurant and said, “After our interview, we will have lunch there.”

The doctor led Danny to his office, which looked like every quick-service medical clinic Danny had ever been in—a small waiting area with eight chairs, two exam rooms, and a door with the words “Le bureau du docteur.”

“My nurse is not here yet, I see,” Mengelt said. “Have a seat. Let me put down my bag and take off my coat, and then we can talk.”

Mengelt went into his office, and Danny sat in the waiting area. He flipped absentmindedly through the magazines, which were all in French. He might have been there 30 seconds when the front door to the clinic opened and a woman in a white starched uniform and nurse’s cap came in, her coat draped over her arm. She might have been 45, and she looked like something out of a 1940s movie.

“Un client, déjà?” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Danny said. “I don’t speak French.”

“Oh,” the nurse said. “I am the one who should be sorry. I am Danielle. I am Dr. Échappé’s nurse.”

“My name is Danny,” he said.

“Are you injured, Danny?”

“No, I am here to talk to Dr. M-- ... Dr. Échappé.”

“I am sure he will be out soon,” she said.
They exchanged small talk for a couple of minutes, and she told Danny how lucky they were to have a doctor like Dr. Échappé here. They mostly dealt with sprained ankles, and once in a while broken legs, but the doctor had a calm presence that made the patients feel reassured.

“That’s nice,” Danny said.

“Are you a friend of Dr. Échappé’s?” she asked.

“More of an acquaintance,” he said.

The conversation ended there. Danielle sat down and started processing some paperwork. Danny fidgeted in his chair and looked at his phone. Five minutes had passed since they had walked in. Danny stood up.

“Would you mind seeing what is taking the doctor so long, s’il vous plaît?” Danny asked.

“I will,” Danielle said. She got up and knocked. No answer. She tried to turn the knob. It was locked.

“Dr. Échappé?” she called. “Dr. Échappé?”

Danny went over to try the knob. “Do you have a key?” he asked.

The nurse went to her desk to fetch the spare key. She put it in the lock and turned. They opened the door. Danny looked around. The window was wide open. Mengelt was gone.

“GOD DAMN IT,” Danny screamed.

He ran out the front door of the clinic, through the hallway maze, toward the cable cars. He circled the area, looking for Mengelt. Nothing. He ran over to the attendant.

“Did you see the doctor?”
“Je ne parle pas anglais,” the attendant said.

“Échappé, Échappé! Le docteur!”

“Ah,” the attendant said, and he pointed down.

Danny got into the next available cable car and looked down on Chamonix, trying to see where Mengelt might have gone. Most of the foot traffic he could see seemed to be coming toward the mountain, a collection of hikers and sightseers ready for their adventure.

“I can’t believe I let him out of my sight,” Danny said.

Danny didn’t feel anything on the ride down except furor. Seven years ago, he talked this guy into running. Now, he had let him get away.

When the cable car arrived at the bottom of the mountain, Danny raced out and toward the town. He headed straight for the building where he saw Mengelt and that woman fighting. When he got there, he banged on the door, which jarred the people in the adjacent apartments. They stuck their heads out of their doors and glared at him. At night, Chamonix got raucous with drunks and partiers, but during the day, this was a quiet place. Danny turned around, embarrassed.

“Pardon,” he said, and he knocked again, trying to be less obtrusive this time.

Mariel, the woman he saw arguing with the doctor the day before, came to the door. When she opened the door, Danny stopped for a second to take her in. She was tall and cool and pretty, and she dressed as black as coal.

“I am looking for Dr. Échappé,” he said. “Dr. Échappé.”

“He does not live here,” she said. She looked disgusted. “I am on my way out.”

Danny stood in front of her. “I saw him here yesterday.”
“Oui. But he does not live here anymore. I threw him out.”

“Do you know where he went?”

Mariel pointed to a building down the block. “That is where he lives.”

Danny thanked her and ran toward a building that would have fit in in Brooklyn except for its burnt orange exterior. That color was altogether French. He tried the door, but it was locked. There was a keypad, but that was useless for Danny’s purposes, and there was no intercom. Danny sat on the front stoop and waited. He hoped maybe he’d catch Mengelt on his way out. But the first people who came out was a couple getting ready to go to the laundry next door.

“Excuse me, do you know Dr. Échappé?” Danny asked as he caught the open door.

“No,” they said.

Danny described Mengelt, and they said, “Ah, third floor in the back.”

Danny took the stairs two at a time and found himself winded as he reached the top floor. He knocked on Mengelt’s door. No answer. He turned the knob, and it opened. Danny went in slowly and looked around. There were few places to hide here. Mengelt wasn’t in the bathroom or hiding behind the kitchen counter. Danny walked up the spiral staircase that led to the bedrooms. No Mengelt there, either. He looked in the dressers in both bedrooms. Both were empty. There was no sign that anyone had been living here. Mengelt was gone.

He slammed the door to the apartment and loped down to the street level, disgusted with himself. “SON OF A BITCH,” Danny screamed, beginning a string of profanities that lasted a good two minutes as he tried to decide where to look next. How in the hell would he find this guy now?
As best Danny could tell, there were four ways out of Chamonix—car, train, bus, or car service. If Mengelt had a car, it was over. He could be heading anywhere. The buses and trains ran less frequently, so Danny might be able to catch him at the station. And if he took a car service, at least someone would know where he went.

Danny headed toward the Chamonix-Mount Blanc train station, a stately three-story building that looked like a Swiss chalet or an old hotel walled in by a verdant mountain. The station must have had ten entryways. Danny went in the center, hoping he might find Mengelt. All the entries, it turned out, led to the same set of tracks, and he ran out there to see if the doctor was waiting on the platform. He wasn’t. Danny went into the ticket office to ask if anyone had seen Échappé. The lone person working was an elderly woman who spoke no English.

“Échappé?” he said to her. She stared at him and handed him a train schedule for all the stops between Chamonix and Martingy, Switzerland, which was about 45 minutes away.

“No, no,” he said. “I am looking for Dr. Échappé.”

“Je ne comprends pas,” the ticket agent said.

Damn. Danny thought for a minute, then remembered he had a translation app on his phone. He typed in “I am looking for” and heard “Je cherche.”

“Je cherche Dr. Échappé,” he said.

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

Danny pulled up the picture of Mengelt. “Échappé,” he said, pointing.
“Je ne l’ai pas vu,” she said.

Danny checked the translation. She had not seen him.

What passed for a bus station—a shack with windows—was next door to the train station. Danny checked there next. Again, no one had seen Échappé.

Danny spent the next hour walking into every business that advertised a car service. He finally found someone who recognized the doctor, but the man said he had not seen him today.

“Why are you looking for him?” the man asked.

How to explain that? Danny just waved and said thanks.

Danny figured the likelihood that he could find Mengelt was about zero, so he did what reporters do when the subject of their story won’t talk—he went to find people who would talk. He found Mengelt’s landlord, who said the doctor had paid for the room for six months, in cash. He knocked on the neighbors’ doors. The few that were home were short-term renters, who either had never seen Mengelt or knew nothing about his existence in Chamonix.

He made his way back to Mariel’s to find no one home, then he plodded up the hill again for the ride up the mountain to see what Dr. Échappé’s nurse could tell him. This time up the mountain, alone, Danny was too busy cursing himself to be afraid. He got off and headed to the doctor’s office. He found Danielle sitting quietly. There were no patients.

“Hello,” she said, then did a double-take when she recognized him. “What happened to Dr. Échappé?”

Danny debated how much to tell her about the doctor’s past.

“He seems to have run off,” Danny said.
“Run off?”

“Run away.”

“Oh. Why?”

Danny didn’t respond. Instead, he said, “What can you tell me about Dr. Échappé?” he said.

She told him Échappé had started there about five or six months earlier, during ski season. She said he had been pleasant but quiet and stayed primarily to himself. “The only thing unusual was that he did not like to have his picture taken.” She pointed to the wall. Danny saw picture frames holding portraits of the medical staff. In Danielle’s, she was smiling brightly. In Dr. Échappé’s, it said: Image à venir. (Picture to come.)

“Did anyone come to visit him?”

“No,” she said. “But he did date the waitress at the restaurant on the mountain. The nice restaurant, not the snack bar. Her name is Mariel.”

“Is she working today?”

“I think so.”

Danny thanked her and started to head out.

“Why did Dr. Échappé run away?” the nurse asked. “Is he in trouble? Is he coming back?”

“Good questions,” Danny said as the door closed behind him.

*
Danny climbed the steps to see Mariel. It was mid-afternoon on the mountain, and the restaurant was empty, so now she had plenty of time to talk. She poured coffee for herself and Danny, fired up a cigarette, and spewed hate.

“Yes, we lived together, but he was a cheater and a liar,” she said. “I found a picture of a girl in his pocket. He said she was a patient who gave him the picture, but look at this woman.”

Mariel pulled out the photo. “Look.”

Danny looked. It was a picture of Natalie. The photo was remarkably well preserved, especially considering that he must have been carrying it around for the last seven years.

“I saw him slip it in his pocket,” Mariel said. “Where is the picture of me? I asked him. Why isn’t that in your pocket?”

Danny wondered if he should explain. What would be better for this woman to think—that her boyfriend was a cheater and a liar, or the truth?

Danny tried to find out anything she might know about Mengelt’s past few years, hoping that it might provide clues about where he had gone. Mariel said she knew relatively little about him. He told her he grew up in Canada and moved to Europe about seven years ago because he wanted to see the world and experience what it was like to practice medicine in other places. He said he had lived in various places—Geneva, some small towns in Switzerland and France—but never stayed anywhere for more than a year. He told her he wanted to live like a local, and once he got comfortable, he knew the time was right to move on.

“When he moved to Chamonix, where did he move from?” Danny asked. “Did he say?”

“He said he had been living in Martigny, Switzerland, but only for a little while.”
Danny wrote down Martigny.

“Does he have a car?”

“No,” Mariel said, much to Danny’s relief.

“Why are you looking for him?” she asked.

“I’ve been wanting to write about him for a long time,” Danny said, thanking her and getting up to leave. “Oh, and the woman in the picture? That’s his wife.”

*

Danny white-knuckled the ride down the mountain and went straight to the train station. The likelihood of finding Mengelt in Martigny was almost zero, but he had to try. He arrived just in time to find out that the last train of the day had left 15 minutes ago. He showed the ticket agent—a new one this time, an older man—Mengelt’s picture, but again the agent was no use.

The next train to Martigny would be leaving at 10:30 the next morning. Danny had nothing to do but think and try to guess Mengelt’s moves. He briefly considered heading to the airport in Geneva. If you were trying to get out of Chamonix, Geneva would be the closest, best place. But if Mengelt had fled for the airport, he could have gotten on a plane and already taken off.

Danny had one chance—the police. He dialed his old NYPD buddy R.C. Greene in Homicide. It was just turning 9 a.m. in New York. With any luck, Greene was working the dayshift. He was.

“Greene.”

“R.C., it’s Danny Cartwright.”

“Who?”

“Daily News?”

“Edna.”

“I know, Edna. I’m just fucking with you.”

“I forgot how funny you were.”

“Edna, where the hell you been?”

“I live in Massachusetts now. I’m a professor. But listen, R.C., I found Mengelt.”

“Who?”

“Are you fucking with me again?”

“Yeah. What do you mean you found him? Where’d you find him?”

“In France. A town called Chamonix. He was working as a doctor on a mountain. Listen, R.C.: Do you guys have warrants out for his arrest?”

“Probably. Maybe. I’m not sure. It’s been seven years, Edna. Who knows?”

“Do you think the Swiss police would help you?”

“I thought you said he was in France.”

“He was, but, after I confronted him, he took off. I think he might be heading to the airport in Geneva, Switzerland.”

“What do you want me to do about it, Edna?”

“Can you get the police to look through surveillance video to see if he’s been in the airport? He’s using a different name now: Échappé. E-C-H-A-P-P-E. Jean Échappé.”
Greene took down the information and Danny’s phone number and said he’d call.

“Good. Let me also send you a current picture of him. It’s not a great picture, but they’ll be able to get the idea of what he looks like. Maybe you’ll send them an old picture of him too?”

“Now why didn’t I think of that?” Greene said.

“Ah, NYPD sarcasm. How I miss it. Thanks, R.C.”

Danny spent the next three hours wandering around Chamonix, sticking his head into every doorway on the slim chance that Mengelt had decided to hide out in plain sight. No sign of him emerged. He found a couple of shopkeepers who remembered him as a previous customer, but no one had seen him for days. Danny was on his way back to his room when Greene called.

“Bad news, Edna. They haven’t seen him.”

“How do they know that so fast?”

“I sent them the pictures, and they use facial-recognition software. The Swiss police—they’re one of the most advanced force in the world. They can fast-forward through hours of surveillance footage in minutes.”


“Sorry, Edna. I can try Paris, if you want.”

“I appreciate that, R.C. But that’s about five hours away from here. Pretty unlikely he’s going through there, especially without a car.”

“You gonna keep looking?”

“Yeah, I’ve gotta. But hey, why don’t you come over here and help me?”
“Because I work for the NYPD, and I make an NYPD salary. If anyone’s going to France, it ain’t a detective.”
Danny sat on the rickety train that passed through and over the mountains from Chamonix to Martigny, imagining himself catching a glimpse of Mengelt and chasing him through the streets of the small Swiss town. But he knew that was a fantasy, that Mengelt was unlikely to return anywhere that he might be recognized. Still, the least Danny could do was check out the place where Mengelt supposedly worked.

When the train dead-ended at the Martigny station, Danny got off and wandered into, of all things, a Subway restaurant to ask directions. He finally found someone who spoke English, and the customer pointed Danny toward the hospital, a three-story, gray-and-cream castle-like building that stood just past a roundabout, framed by mountains on either side. The building was majestic, but Danny was too preoccupied with Joe Mengelt’s whereabouts to notice or care.

The receptionist could understand Danny well enough to get him to the hospital’s employment office, where the head of the department, Etienne Laurent, looked at Mengelt’s picture and confirmed that, yes, this man he knew as Dr. Jean Échappé had worked there for a few months as an emergency room physician.

“But then, one day, he did not come back,” Laurent said. “I do not know why.”

Danny explained why he was asking—he was doing a story on “the disappearing doctor,” he said—and the administrator seemed intrigued and eager to help. Danny gathered more background on Mengelt, then asked for—and, to his surprise, received—the file containing the job application Mengelt had filled out. The list of past employers included hospitals and clinics in towns Danny had never heard of in France, Germany, and Switzerland. Danny jotted those in his notebook.
If he had been traveling on the newspaper’s dime and time, he would have retraced Mengelt’s footsteps. But he was doing neither, so he planned to call each when he got home.

Laurent said he knew little else about Dr. Échappé, other than the address where he lived in Martigny. He said the doctor had revealed nothing about his personal life during his stay at the hospital. He recalled that the doctor’s references had been excellent, as had his work. As for friends on the staff, he had made none.

“As far as I know, he worked and went home.”

Danny flipped through the rest of the file, which was written in French and of little use to Danny here. He asked for permission to copy the documents. Laurent obliged. It was only a few pages, but Danny could have them translated. He thanked Laurent and handed him a business card. “If you hear from him, please call me.”

As Danny was getting ready to walk out, Laurent reached into his desk and handed Danny a sealed envelope.

“If you see Dr. Échappé,” he said, “you can give him this. It is his last paycheck.”

*

Danny walked the three blocks from the hospital to the home address Mengelt had left, a small furnished apartment above a pharmacy. He found an elderly landlady and communicated with her awkwardly through the translation app on his phone. She remembered Mengelt only as someone who paid for six months in advance, in cash, and lived there for approximately three. She said that one day she found the apartment door open. When she peaked inside, she saw that his possessions were gone.

She knew nothing else about him, other than where he worked.
“I thought it would be nice to have a doctor in the building,” she said. “I am old and sometimes need medical attention. Years ago...”

Danny saw where this was going—a lonely old lady about to filibuster—and excused himself. He popped into a few stores along the main street, then slowly, dejectedly made his way back to the train station.

He had enough here to write a story. What he didn’t have was an ending. In any version, he was going to look at least foolish, if not inept. He had Mengelt right there, stuck in the same cable car. How could he let him get away?

Danny had a lot of time to think about that as he returned to Chamonix in the late afternoon. When he got back, he decided to go see Mariel one more time. Maybe Mengelt had returned. Or called.

He got to her building just as she was returning from work. She had a bag of groceries in her hands, and he took it from her. They walked upstairs together.

“Did you happen to hear from Dr. Échappé?” he asked when they got inside.

“Not at all,” she said. Danny searched her face for some reaction but saw nothing.

“You did not tell me,” she said. “Why are you looking for him?”

“I want to write a story about him,” Danny said.

“I understand that. But why? Who is he? Let me make you dinner. You can tell me the story.”

Danny sat for a minute, trying to decide how much to share. Was there a way Mariel could use this information that could help Mengelt or hinder Danny? Would she help Mengelt if she could? He decided that whatever he told her would most likely only make her hate him more. While Mariel stir-_
fried fresh scallops and vegetables in a white wine sauce, Danny went over the Mengelt story in enough
detail to appall Mariel and satisfy his own need to reveal as little as possible.

Mariel poured some wine, and they sat down to eat, every few bites followed by a bit of
awkward conversation. Danny complimented the food, and Mariel said it was nothing. Mariel asked
about Natalie Mengelt, and Danny revealed that he had not spoken to her in seven years and did not
know where she had gone since leaving Delaware.

“I cannot believe he was married,” Mariel said. “He told me he had no family.”

“Well, he hasn’t had a family in seven years,” Danny said.

They returned to silence. The clinking of forks on plates made Danny jittery.

“Didn’t you say that a patient gave him that picture he was carrying?” he asked.

“That is what he told me,” Mariel said.

“Did you ever see this woman in person?”

“I did not,” Mariel said.

“Do you know the nurse that works in the mountain clinic? Her name is Danielle.”

“Yes, of course. We work next door to each other.”

“Do you know where she lives?”

“Yes.”

“Take me there.”

Mariel grabbed her purse—and Natalie’s picture—and led Danny from the building to Danielle’s
apartment three streets away. She was sitting on her patio, sipping wine and reading a book when they
arrived. Danielle and Mariel greeted each other warily—Mariel was jealous of every woman Mengelt encountered, and though Danielle assured her that her relationship with the doctor was professional only, she sensed Mariel’s occasional disbelief.

Mariel showed the picture of Natalie to Danielle. “Have you ever seen that woman?” Danny asked.

Danielle nodded.

“Was she a recent patient?”

Danielle shook her head. “I was looking for a form in his desk yesterday and found that same picture in a yellow envelope. I don’t know who it is, but I don’t remember her as a patient.”

“Damn,” Danny muttered under his breath. In the space of a few minutes, he had gone from thinking that maybe Joe and Natalie Mengelt had been working together somehow to realizing that maybe Joe Mengelt was just a man who desperately missed his wife.

“Dr. Échappé—did he come to work today or call?” Danny asked.

“No. We had to call on another doctor. Our supervisor said that, if he does not show up tomorrow, he will be fired.”

They spoke for a few more minutes, but Danielle had nothing to offer that helped Danny. He said good night and walked Mariel home.

“I’m sorry this didn’t work out for you,” she said.

“But I guess it worked out for you,” he said.

He shook her hand and went back to his room to prepare for a disappointing plane ride home.
Danny had been back at Winston College for nearly four months. He had stepped off his flight from Geneva in a surly mood, and nothing had happened since to lessen his feeling of failure. His students noted his lack of energy and enthusiasm, and one even asked him directly what was wrong. Danny couldn’t begin to explain.

Kent Owen, his department head and friend, was the only one who knew the full story. He tried to console Danny, who was having none of it. Danny typed up his resignation, effective at the end of the school year, and turned it in.

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” Owen said. He motioned for Danny to sit down.

“I can’t in good conscience teach these kids how to be great reporters when I’m not one anymore,” Danny said.

“That’s just bullshit,” Owen said. “You had a great career at the Daily News. You don’t need me to go through all the stories you broke, the prizes you won, and the lives you saved. No one bats 1.000, Danny.”

Danny said he appreciated the nice words, but he preferred to go home and sulk.

“Are you finished reporting the story about Mengelt?” Owen asked. “You’ve reached everyone?”

“I’m done, yeah.”
“Then go home after your last class today and write the damn thing. You don’t have classes tomorrow, and we have the holiday weekend. Do it. Finish it. You’ll feel better. In the meantime, take this.”

Owen went to hand Danny the letter, but before he did, he pulled it back and tore it in half. Then he gave it to Danny.

“Next week, if you’re still feeling like you want to resign, type up another one, and I won’t even argue with you.”

Danny thanked him and headed for class. This was his 400-level capstone class, his best students. These were kids who’d been with him for three-plus years and universally loved him. He apologized to them for his poor performance and tried to explain what was bothering him. He promised to make it up to them.

“For the rest of the semester, for the rest of my time here at Winston, I am HERE,” he said. “Present. You have my full attention.”

The students gave him a standing ovation. Suddenly, Danny felt better than he had in months. He went home and opened his laptop. Five hours and a pot of coffee later, he finished his story.

**LOST & FOUND & LOST: THE NOTORIOUS DR. MENGELT AND ME**

By Danny Cartwright

I found Josef Mengelt—“The Notorious Dr. Mengelt,” as we in the media came to call him—almost completely by accident. My colleague Jason Henke and his family were vacationing in Chamonix, a picturesque town in the French Alps. They took a ride in a cable car to the midway point, Plan Praz, elevation 1,999 meters. As his wife, Jenny, was getting out, she slipped and twisted an ankle.

Henke was surprised to find that the French government had a medical station on the mountain. It caters mostly to hikers and skiers but also to the occasional clumsy tourist as well. He sat in the examination room with his wife while the doctor on call wrapped her foot in an ace bandage. And being a member of the human race in the year 2014, Jason felt the need to capture this moment on his cellphone camera.

The doctor yelled in what Henke describes as “some kind of pidgin French,” slapped the phone out of his hand, and stormed from the room. A nurse came in, apologized and finished the job.
Henke told this story during a department meeting at Winston College in western Massachusetts, where we are both on the journalism faculty, and he insisted on sharing the photos. My first thought was to give the pictures a quick glance and move on, but something drew me to the image.

His hair, once short and trim and brown, had become wavy, wiry, long, and gray. He wore a bushy beard that extended a good six inches onto his chest, and he’d gained 20 pounds, at least. But those eyes. Those eyes that bore holes in me seven years earlier. Those eyes, which showed no remorse. Piercing. Full of certitude, void of understanding. Henke looked up the doctor’s name for me. He was calling himself Jean Échappé, but I knew his real name: John Josef Mengelt.

You can be forgiven if the name John Josef Mengelt doesn’t ring a bell. Though he left behind a trail of at least 10 bodies—including that of his teenage daughter, Nan, who committed suicide—he’s been out of the public consciousness for most of the last seven years. But in 2007, this obstetrician from Long Island became one of the biggest and certainly the most mysterious stories I covered in 30-plus years as a police reporter for The New York Daily News.

Let me refresh your memory.

* *

Just after midnight on Sept. 5, 2007, two men walked into the Victor’s, a discount steakhouse, in Midtown Manhattan. Le’Andre Stephenson and Hakim Shabazz had been smoking crack for most of the night, then switched to pot. Now they wanted food.

When the staff at Victor’s told them the restaurant was closed, Stephenson lost his temper. He pulled a Glock 19 from his waistband. He shot the night manager, a man named Marty Clemmons who was on duty only because the owner was sick. Then he forced the other four workers toward a large walk-in refrigerator and shut them inside.

Stephenson picked up a meat cleaver and chopped Clemmons’s hands off. Then he went finger by finger. After he finished, Stephenson opened the refrigerator and emptied his gun into the Victor’s staffers. Three died instantly. One was still alive when Stephenson took the cleaver to him.

Then Stephenson turned on one of the grills, took out a couple of steaks, and cooked a midnight snack for himself and his friend. When they finished, they went back to Stephenson’s Cortelyou Road apartment in Brooklyn, where they shot up heroin and nodded off.

I was working the overnight police shift at the Daily News when I heard that police had found the bodies. And I was still working later that day when police got an anonymous call from a man who told them not only who committed the homicides but where the two men could be found. Police went to Brooklyn and made the arrests without incident.
The informant was hailed as a hero. He had not been looking to collect a reward—there had been none offered—and he did not seek fame. As best the police could tell, the caller just wanted these two violent men off the street. One of the police officers in the case, a detective named Ronald C. Greene, referred to the informant as “Superman.” By the next day, my newspaper, The Daily News, had written the headline “Saved By Superman.” Pretty soon, the rest of the media had caught up.

“Superman” phoned in two more tips over the next few weeks. If at first the police were skeptical, they came to love these calls. Whoever this anonymous tipster was, however he knew this information, police didn’t care. A solved crime is a solved crime. But for me, I wanted to know: Who was this man? How does he do what he did? Will he ever step forward? So many questions, no answers.

In the meantime, Hakim and Stephenson were sent to Rikers Island to await trial. Hakim didn’t make it. He was shanked by an unknown prisoner the next day. Stephenson spent three days in isolation and tried to kill himself. While he was being evaluated, a prison doctor, Lewis Fehrman, found a lump in his arm. He made a small incision in Stephenson and removed a microchip—the kind used to track lost dogs.

Then Dr. Fehrman called me.

We examined the chip and found the name of the manufacturer, who led us to the salesman, who led us to the purchaser: John Josef Mengelt. I confronted Dr. Mengelt on November 14, 2007, in his Garden City, New York, office. Two things I will remember forever about that meeting. Going in, it was his eyes. Mengelt looked like he could stare dried gum off cement. Going out, it was his smirk. His mouth twisted to his left, just so.

“I’ve been expecting you,” he said.

I asked him how a Fido Finder microchip ended up in the arm of Le’Andre Stephenson.

“I put it there when he was a baby,” Mengelt said.

He told me about his motivation—he had been mugged in the city and on his honeymoon—and how he felt he had been right to do this. He saw himself as a protector. He thought he was giving back to society. Those were his words. He wanted “to prove that the blacks and the Mexicans and the Puerto Ricans have no place among us.

“I suspected that these women, these niggers and spics, were giving birth to future criminals. And as you can see, that’s exactly what they did…. When you act like a dog, you deserve to be treated like a dog.”

He told me that he implanted Fido Finders in the first 166 babies he delivered at City General Hospital. Of those children, six had died by 2007, one was arrested as a 13-year-old (on a tip from Mengelt), and he had turned in three others in addition to Stephenson and Hakim.
“You’ve entrapped people,” I said to him. “You’ve declared these people to be criminals from the moment they were born—all because of their skin color and income level—and then you violated your oath to do no harm. No matter how right you may think you are, there are going to be many, many people who will see what you did as racist. You may not see yourself that way, but they will.”

“I don’t see it that way at all,” he responded.

Then he gave me that cocky look of his. And then I said something so stupid, I can’t believe it. Something I never revealed to anyone till now: “Dr. Mengelt, I’m not one to offer advice to people I write about. My job is to tell stories. But if I were you, I’d run. Fast and far.”

And he did.

I have told myself many times over the years that he would have figured this out on his own and that it’s not my fault. But just the fact that I said it has eaten me up inside for the last seven years.

* Mengelt slipped out of the United States and eventually out of public consciousness. If anyone saw him, they never turned him in. More likely, they never noticed. But if you had been in Cuba in the early 1990s and run into Robert Vesco (“fugitive financier Robert Vesco” as he was forever known), you probably wouldn’t have thought anything of it, either.

But Mengelt left behind a veritable Superfund site mess. His wife and teenage children fled their home in Garden City, afraid for their lives. The pressure of being John Josef Mengelt’s child became so crushing that his daughter Nan committed suicide that Thanksgiving. As for Mengelt’s wife and son, they changed their names, moved away and, as far as I know, have not been heard from since. Stephenson was released from jail on a technicality and eventually shot and killed by police. The brother of one of the Victor’s employees was killed when he tried to shoot Stephenson’s defense attorney.

And there were lawsuits, including a $101.6 million judgment for Mengelt’s patients from City General, and a wrongful death suit filed by Hakim’s family against the city of New York. That case is still being fought in the courts.

While all that was happening, I was losing my job at the Daily News and becoming a journalism instructor at Winston College in Massachusetts.

Occasionally, I tell my students about the Mengelt story. And I tell them how every story needs a beginning, middle, and end. For seven years, I have had the beginning and middle, but never the end. Then my colleague Jason Henke came along, and I thought I had the ending.

I would go to Chamonix, confront Dr. Mengelt and, well, I wasn’t sure what. Certainly I’d ask him to give me an interview. I wanted to understand how a man can run away from his family and his obligations like that. Did he feel remorse? Was he even capable of remorse for the horrors he had caused?
Would I try to get him to give himself up? Nah. There was no one to give himself up to. There were no charges pending against him. Not only that, but his family never filed a missing-persons claim, so he was not technically missing.

Joe Mengelt had no reason to cooperate with me. But I was going to try.

*I flew to Geneva in late July and planned to confront Mengelt in his mountaintop office. I arrived in Chamonix, settled in—and accidentally bumped into him on the street. His girlfriend accused him of cheating on her and had thrown a boot, which flew out the second-floor window of her apartment and grazed my head. Mengelt came out of the building to retrieve the shoe. He grabbed the shoe, quickly apologized, and went back inside. So now I knew where he lived.

The next morning, I lined up for the cable car ride that would take me up to Mengelt’s mountaintop clinic. As I was waiting, Joe Mengelt showed up and stood behind me. We ended up in the same cab. I could feel my stomach lurch—and not just because high winds blew the car back and forth. At last I had him. And there was no way he could get away.

The first thing I did was quietly take his picture. As you’ll see, with the car rocking and me trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, I did a poor job. Then I asked if he remembered me, fully expecting him to say no. After all, he had only seen me once, and that was seven years ago. I told him my name.

“Now I remember,” he said.

“I’ve come a long way to see you,” I said. “It took seven years to find you.”

“And how did you do that, Mr. Cartwright?”

“You treated a friend of mine who came to Chamonix for a visit.”

“What luck. Well, you’ve found me, Mr. Cartwright. What can I do for you?”

“I’d like to tell the story of what happened to you after you left the United States,” I said.

“And what is my incentive to tell that story?”

“To explain your point of view.”

“You interviewed me seven years ago, Mr. Cartwright,” he said. “You know my point of view.”

I asked whether he had any regrets, and he said none. And, yes, that included leaving his family. He said he was unaware what had happened to them. He didn’t know that his daughter Nan had killed herself.

When I delivered that news, I think I saw—for the first time—a human side to Joe Mengelt. I can’t say for sure, but he appeared to tear up. He also got angry when I told him the details. Scary-angry.
To the point that when he stood up, I thought he planned to attack me. He did not. Instead, he sat down beside me and confessed.

“I had hoped that by leaving, I would save the family a lot of grief. All the way over on my flight out of New York, I thought about what you said—run fast and run far. And I thought about what my family might go through. I thought that if I got away, they would be safe. People would feel sympathy for them.”

Neither of us spoke for the rest of the ride up the mountain. Then Mengelt said that when we got to the top, we could go to his office and talk under two conditions—no photos and a 72-hour grace period before anything is published.

“I want a head start,” he said.

I agreed.

We walked to his office, and he asked me to have a seat in the waiting room so he could get ready.

That was the last I saw of Joe Mengelt.

*  

After waiting five minutes, I asked his nurse to check on the doctor. He had slipped out the window.

I chased him down the mountain. I looked for him in Chamonix. Nothing. I asked a New York police detective to have Swiss police check the Geneva airport. Nothing. He did not have a car. No one at the bus or train stations had seen him leave town. Few people knew him, and no one knew where he went.

The next day, I went into the nearby Swiss town of Martigny, where Mengelt had worked in the local hospital’s emergency room before coming to Chamonix. They had not seen him. He had skipped town one day, they said.

I spoke to his nurse in Chamonix, who worked with him for five months and barely knew anything about him. I spoke to his girlfriend in Chamonix. She said she had been angry because she caught him carrying around a picture of another woman. She thought the woman had been one of his patients.

She showed me the picture. I told her: That is his wife, Natalie.

It turns out that Joe Mengelt apparently has been carrying this picture in his pocket the entire time. This ice cube of a man, who thought nothing of implanting a monitoring device in children of color and fleeing his family and responsibilities, has at least a sliver of humanity.

In the four months since I returned home, I’ve done as much reporting as possible on this story. I checked all the references that “Dr. Jean Échappé,” as he called himself, listed on his job applications in
Chamonix and Martigny. They all panned out with extraordinary consistency. Each job—in France, in Switzerland, and in Germany before that—lasted a few months. Each time, he provided exceptional, methodical treatment. The French called him “froid,” the Germans called him “kalt.”

Cold.

But effective.

He left each job the same way—without warning. One day, he just didn’t show up. He left behind no friends, and no forwarding address. The only remembrance they had of him was his last paycheck.

*

I don’t know where Joe Mengelt is physically, and I doubt I’ll ever find out. But he is on and in my mind every day. In my mind, he says the same thing over and over: “All the way over on my flight out of New York, I thought about what you said—run fast and run far.”

That was the last thing I wanted to hear—that my words had prompted him to run. I didn’t know why I said that then. I still do not know now.

Over the years, I have played out this story in my mind a hundred different ways. What if Dr. Fehrman had never found the chip and asked me to chase it down? Le’Andre Stephenson might have been tried and convicted. Joe Mengelt might still be with his family, still monitoring the movements of those patients he delivered in the 1980s. Nan Mengelt might still be alive.

She would have graduated college this year.

I have no regrets for having exposed Joe Mengelt’s revolting acts of eugenics. I checked with a mathematics professor I know, who told me that the number of babies Joe Mengelt delivered who went on to commit crimes is not significantly larger than one would expect in any population of 166 babies.

But I do regret two things: One is that other than having to be separated from his family, Joe Mengelt never truly was punished for the wreckage he caused.

My other regret is that I was unable to bring him to justice.

But I like to think that in the movie version of this story, I will.