

FOR 23 DAYS THE NORTHERN ADIRONDACKS WAS UNDER SIEGE AFTER TWO KILLERS ESCAPED NOTORIOUS DANNEMORA PRISON. WHAT THIS MULTI-MILLION-DOLLAR ORDEAL REVEALED ABOUT THE STRANGE AND VIOLENT WORLD BEHIND THE WALL

THE TOWN OF DANNEMORA lies in the iron-hard foothills of the northern Adirondacks. A massive wall the color of bone burdens the hardscrabble main street. Behind it lies one of the largest communities in the park, one that has existed here, hidden away, since the 1840s. It is a complex world of roughly 5,000 inmates, correction officers and civilian workers, living and working in perilous intimacy.

I've been visiting and reporting on Clinton Correctional Facility for nearly 20 years. It is a terrible place, strange and often violent. Criminals fear it more than Attica, more than Rikers Island. They call it Little Siberia. They tell ghost stories about inmates who died here in the cold and lonely North. Guards, too, speak of Dannemora as a place where the daily grind of maintaining order twists them into shapes they barely recognize.

By all accounts, the maximum-security prison possesses one single virtue: The rest of us are protected from it. We are free to ignore its existence. In the 1990s, the *Plattsburgh Press-Republican* published a series of reports describing the "code of silence" among officers who work there. The brutal things that happen behind the wall—riots, stabbings, tribal eruptions of rage and vendetta—are rarely revealed.

But on June 6th in the hours before dawn, two inmates shattered the boundary between their world and ours. After months of careful planning, Richard Matt and David Sweat crawled through a chain of tunnels and pipes, slipping out a manhole onto a neighborhood street. They fled on foot through the dark town and disappeared.

What followed over the next three weeks might best be described as a haunting. Matt and Sweat—one convicted of snapping a 72-year-old man's neck with his bare hands, the other of gunning down a sheriff's deputy—became a dread

presence across three North Country counties. With local towns in lockdown and hordes of regional and national media camped out on the sidelines, thousands of potential sightings would pour in from as far away as western New York, Vermont, Philadelphia and Canada.

It wasn't only two killers on the loose that riveted America's attention. It was also the remarkable glimpse of the tangled culture behind the white wall. In time, the Shawshank-like jailbreak would trigger four different state and federal probes. Two prison workers would land behind bars, with a dozen more top administrators and correction officers suspended or forced into retirement.



ON THE MORNING it all began, I was up early loading my truck for a Saturday dump run. The day was gorgeous. I expected to tackle a few chores, maybe mow the lawn and then head out for the afternoon in the canoe that was already strapped to my pickup. Before leaving, out of long habit I ran back inside one last time to check email and scan the news sites. That's when I saw the first sketchy bulletins about Dannemora, with words like *escape*, *murderers* and *missing*. There was talk of a tunnel and a growing manhunt.

In our newsroom at North Country Public Radio, we have a name for moments like that. We call them "red flag" stories. Red flag means drop everything. Red flag means go. Red flag means you have no idea where the next few hours or days or weeks are going to take you. In 15 minutes, I was on the highway heading for Dannemora, already working my cell phone, trying to piece together what had happened.

At 5:30 that morning, officers had been making the rounds in the honor block, a cluster of dingy cells that housed inmates with a record of good behavior. They

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID JUNKIN

were allowed extra privileges—cooking in their cells, wearing civilian clothes and enjoying more relaxed treatment from guards. But on this day the head count had come up two short. Somehow, impossibly, a pair of convicted murderers had vanished from deep within one of the toughest prisons in the United States.

RICHARD MATT'S RAP SHEET dates back to his teens, punctuated with charges of assault, rape and other violent crimes. In 1997 he kidnapped his boss, tortured and murdered him, scattering pieces of his body in the Niagara River. While on the run in Mexico, he killed another man outside a bar, stabbing his victim nine times. He was 48 years old and seven years into a 25-to-life sentence when he broke out of Dannemora. David Sweat, now 35, was less prolific, but no less brutal. In 2002 he robbed a store, then, with his accomplices, shot a sheriff's deputy 15 times before running the officer over with a car. Sweat faced life in prison without the possibility of parole.

As I drove into Dannemora, I found it already surrounded by checkpoints. Nervous correction officers in bulletproof vests brandished shotguns as they searched the back of my pickup, still full of garbage and with my canoe strapped on top. Helicopters swept overhead as anxious residents watched from their porches. People were getting their first taste of fear. "There's still a lot of kids playing outside even though they were told to stay inside," worried Josh Secore, a local resident. "If they're murderers, what makes the kids think they're not going to care about running up and snatching a kid or something?" he said.

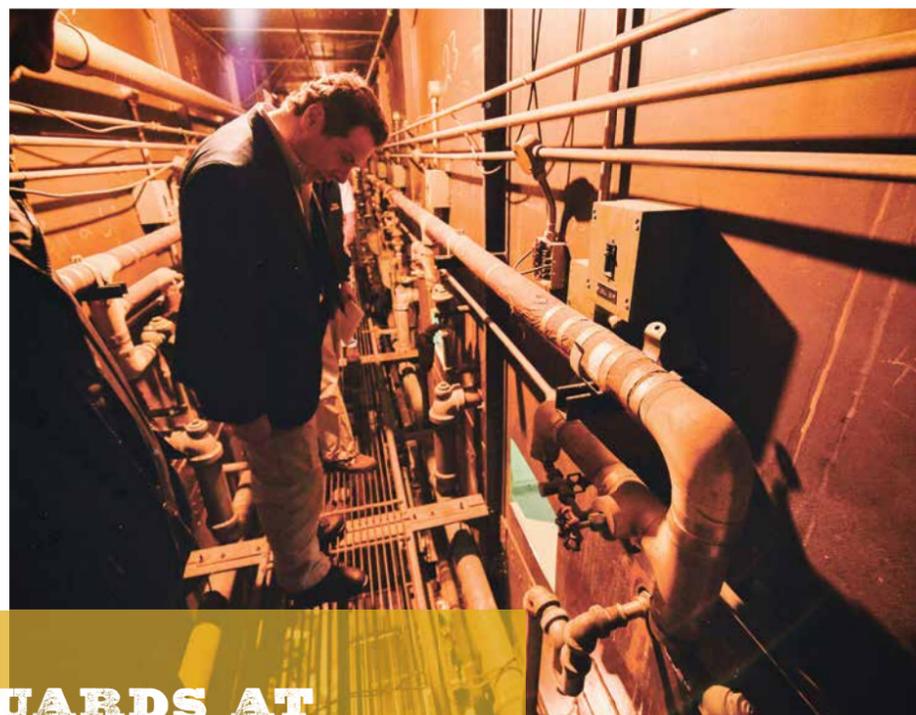
But others were convinced that Matt and Sweat were already miles away. "If I was going to escape from prison, I wouldn't stick around, I'd be gone," said Rich Green, who owns a pizza shop on the edge of town.

I arrived just in time for a press conference with acting commissioner of the Department of Corrections Anthony Annucci. He looked shattered and spoke like someone still trying to find his balance. "This is the first escape from the maximum security facility," he said, leaning heavily on the podium. "A search revealed that there was a hole cut out of the back of the cell where these inmates escaped. We estimate that they climbed down and were able to get out of this facility through tunnels, cutting their way at several spots."

It was hard to fathom. The men had somehow carved their way through steel and brick walls. Astonishingly, they navigated that complex path without being detected.

"It was an extraordinary act," said Governor Andrew Cuomo, who stood at Annucci's side. "When you look at the precision, this was almost impossible to duplicate. One of the big questions is where did the tools come from? We want to find out exactly how this happened. These are dangerous men. These are not people to be trifled with."

I have been inside Clinton Correctional Facility. Years earlier, I joined a tour organized by local history and architecture buffs fascinated by the 19th-century prison. By



GUARDS AT DANNEMORA WORK IN A NERVOUS GRAY ZONE, MAINTAINING A KIND OF TRUCE WITH SOME OF THE MOST VIOLENT INMATES IN NEW YORK. GOING BY THE BOOK, THEY INSIST, ISN'T AN OPTION.

GOVERNOR CUOMO AND PRISON CELL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE. POLICE PHOTOGRAPH BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA



Clockwise from top left: Governor Andrew Cuomo examines the holes David Sweat and Richard Matt cut through their prison cells to escape. More than 1,200 local, state and federal officers combed the dense Adirondack woods searching for the dangerous fugitives.

INSIDE THE PERIM- ETER

AS HE RELAXED IN HIS CHAZY LAKE backyard on an early June day, my father was swarmed by a line of men toting automatic weapons. The troops swept across the property, marching nearly shoulder to shoulder down to the lake. Dad sipped his beer and quipped to a passing officer, “What took you so long?” Four days after Richard Matt and David Sweat made their break, this was his new normal.

It was my new normal too, since the walls of Dannemora sit less than 10 miles from my front door in Morrisonville. When I first heard the news that two murderers had escaped, I rushed to pick up my nieces and nephew, home alone in a woody area even closer to the prison. That afternoon my brother-in-law pulled into the driveway and yelled for the kids to get inside—he’d had word of a possible sighting on my road. That night my teenage daughter and I watched movies with the volume turned up, pretending the helicopters circling above were just part of the soundtrack.

Friends and neighbors mostly scoffed at the idea that the fugitives were still around. Why go through all that trouble to escape the walls just to wander the wet, bug-infested wilds of the Adirondacks? And even if the two runaways were hoofing it to Canada, they’d never show up in my backyard. They’d have to be really lost, I told myself—though a little voice sometimes answered, *They might be really lost.*

Soon we started hearing that the pair’s getaway driver hadn’t shown up, and they might not have made it far from the prison after all. Then the dogs caught a scent in Cadyville, the hamlet sandwiched between Dannemora and Morrisonville, and my kids’ school was closed as searchers enclosed a triangle of wilderness. I was lucky—my house was just beyond the search perimeter—but others felt trapped, watching an army deploy outside their windows. One friend left to get a carton of milk and wasn’t allowed back until the next afternoon.

I stayed home with my children, flipping obsessively from the local news to the national news

to Facebook to Twitter and back again. CNN reported that candy wrappers and a spot where someone may have “bedded down” were uncovered inside the perimeter. The *Albany Times Union* tweeted about a gunshot in the search area. No, said residents on Facebook, that was tear gas being thrown into a camp. Desperate for information, I cornered a correction officer who told me they were confident that the noose was tightening—then admitted that all bets were off after dark. I began to see the mugshots of Matt and Sweat when I closed my eyes.

The next day Facebook exploded after a homeowner within the perimeter was told that two men were seen jumping a stone wall behind his house. Everyone seemed to think—hope—that this was the end. But there were many more days of rumors and false leads and anxiety before a positive sighting and DNA evidence refocused the search to the Mountain View area—about 40 miles from my home, though it felt like a world away.

—Niki Kourofsky



Civilian employee Joyce Mitchell confessed to a sexual relationship with Richard Matt and her role in the inmates’ prison break. Facing page, top to bottom: An audacious escape plot, salacious details and a suspenseful search proved irresistible to the national news media. The manhunt cost the state an estimated \$20 million and more than a dozen prison employees their jobs.

chance, my guide was a veteran correction officer named Gene Palmer, who would later come to play a pivotal role in Matt and Sweat’s escape. At the time, Palmer struck me as bitter and jaded, but also surprisingly eager to pull back the curtain on the prison’s weird, insular society.

“It’s a large community, a negative environment,” he said, describing a world where written rules and procedures were often bent or broken, where inmate gangs held enormous power. “These critters are awful well organized. They’re little armies,” Palmer said. He showed me the famous North Yard, an expanse of the prison divided into parcels of land where inmates, in reward for good behavior, are allowed to conduct their affairs with little oversight.

By Palmer’s account, keeping the peace inside Dannemora is a high-wire act, a complex and often unwritten system of privileges and punishments. Other correction officers have told me the same thing. Going by the book, they insisted, isn’t an option. Guards work in a nervous gray zone, maintaining a kind of truce with some of the most violent inmates in New York. “With the money that they pay you, you’ll go bald, you’ll have high blood pressure, you’ll become an alcoholic, you’ll divorce, and then you’ll kill yourself,” Palmer said.

Until this June the system seemed to work, though prison advocacy groups and the correction officer union often complained of understaffing, violence and mismanagement in the prison. We now know that in the two years before their escape, Richard Matt and David Sweat began to bend the prison’s unwritten rules in subtle ways. Both inmates were known to be highly intelligent, manipulative and patient. Matt had escaped from custody twice before and nearly escaped a third time from prison in Mexico.

In Dannemora, the inmates maneuvered to have their cells located side by side. They studied the prison’s layout, finding weaknesses in security procedures. In 2013 the men struck up a friendship with a civilian worker named Joyce Mitchell, a boxy, frazzle-haired woman in her early 50s from the nearby town of Dickinson Center. She had been assigned to supervise the tailor shop where the inmates worked sewing uniforms. Mitchell, married to another prison worker, Lyle Mitchell, and the mother of a teenage son, was becoming perilously close to Matt, a darkly handsome man in his late 40s.

“We talked every day,” Mitchell would later confess, telling investigators that Matt “treated me with respect and made me feel special.” She admitted to giving the men

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA (2)

PHOTOGRAPH FROM GETTY IMAGES

naked photographs of herself, writing explicit letters, kissing and fondling Matt in stairwells and in the workshop. An internal probe conducted before the prison break failed to prove any sexual relationship between her and Sweat; she has continued to deny any such contact. But secretly Mitchell had crossed dangerous lines, her loyalties blurring.

As the months passed, she began doing small favors for the two men, buying them art supplies and food, carrying messages to their families. Early in 2015, she smuggled tools into the prison that Matt and Sweat would use to cut their way out. “Matt asked me to get him two hacksaw blades,” she recalled. “I bought the blades at Walmart and brought them into work, in my bag.”

Undetected by guards, David Sweat first cut an opening in the back of his cell. He crept out onto a utility catwalk and was able to crawl down into rarely used maintenance tunnels behind the cellblock. The wiry inmate would take to leaving a dummy in his cell at night to trick any guards glancing inside. Moving cautiously, he spent weeks exploring, probing for a possible escape route.

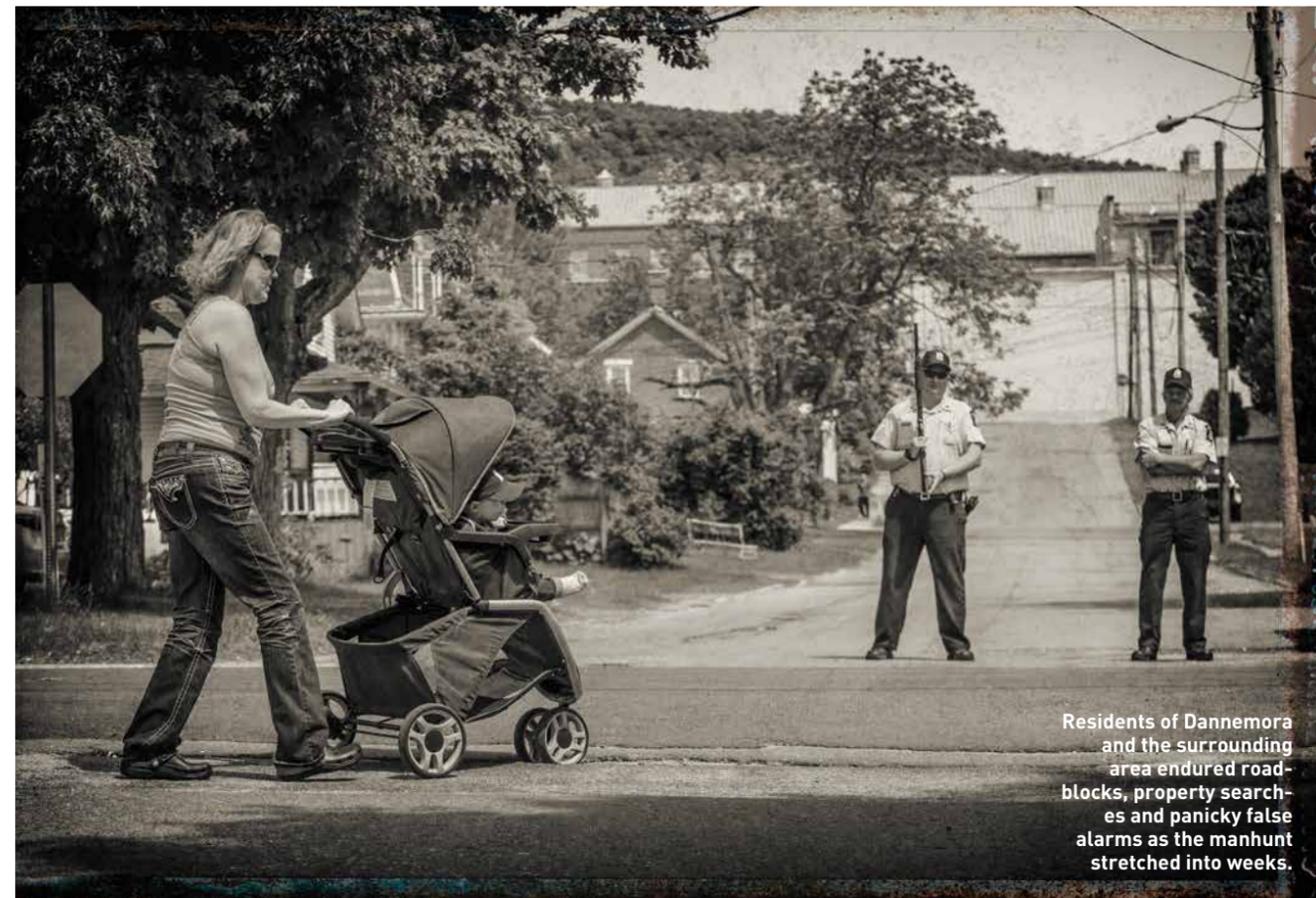
He was aided by Dannemora’s increasingly lax security. The prison’s top official, Superintendent Steve Racette, has since resigned under pressure. In an interview with the *Adirondack Daily Enterprise*, he acknowledged that he had been aware that correction officers were regularly out of

position and failed to follow proper protocols in the honor block where Matt and Sweat were housed. He said the prison was plagued by retirements, describing morale among guards as “really, really” low. “I liken Clinton [prison] to the Titanic,” Racette said—a massive ship that he was trying to gradually turn around.

But the iceberg was already looming. While Joyce Mitchell smuggled in a growing cache of equipment, correction officer Gene Palmer—the man who once gave me a tour of Dannemora—was also stumbling into a risky relationship with the two inmates. Matt was known in the prison as a talented artist, making landscapes and portraits of celebrities. In exchange for paintings, Palmer agreed to provide the convicted killer with pliers, a screwdriver, a pair of glasses equipped with a small flashlight, as well as other contraband.

Palmer also gave the two men access to a utility corridor that provided a key exit point in their escape. Then, in the final days before they vanished, he smuggled in a packet of frozen hamburger, given to him by Mitchell, that contained a fresh set of hacksaw blades. “I was doing Matt a favor,” Palmer admitted in an interview with State Police. “I did not realize at the time that the assistance made their escape easier.”

In the first days after Matt and Sweat vanished, state



Residents of Dannemora and the surrounding area endured roadblocks, property searches and panicky false alarms as the manhunt stretched into weeks.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

SATELLITE IMAGE FROM GOOGLE EARTH/LANDSAT

officials insisted that it was unlikely that uniformed guards aided the men. They said outside contract workers helping with maintenance in the prison might have accidentally left tools in unsecured locations. But it soon became apparent that something had gone deeply wrong. This wasn’t a momentary lapse or an oversight by an untrained civilian. The long tradition of iron-clad security symbolized by Dannemora’s towering white wall had crumbled.

“I understand prisons run on a delicate balance and having a good relationship between guards and inmates is important,” said Governor Cuomo. “But there’s a line. And when the line is stepped over, then action has to be taken.”

For now it was too late. Outside the prison, one of the largest manhunts in New York State history was gearing up. “We are putting on a full-court press and of chief concern is the safety of the community and the citizens,” said state police Major Charles Guess, who led a search effort that grew to include more than 1,200 local, state and federal officers. “We have a message for David Sweat and Richard Matt: We’re coming for you and we will not stop until you are caught.”

At first, as I spoke to cops and investigators, two possibilities seemed likely: The men were holed up locally, maybe in one of the derelict houses near the prison, and would be found quickly. It was also possible that they had already fled. Matt was known to have connections in Canada and Mexico. Maybe the two men had dashed across the border that first night, reaching an international airport in Ottawa or Montreal? With an escape plot this cunning, it seemed

certain they had crafted an equally detailed and well-orchestrated plan to flee northern New York.

There was plenty of speculation, but few clues. In the days that followed, a gloomy dread settled over the region. Rain began to fall, complicating efforts to scour nearby woods and neighborhoods. Small armies of officers cordoned off whole neighborhoods and rural areas, slogging through fields and backyards as far away as Willsboro in Essex County. There were panicky false alarms. Matt and Sweat appeared to be everywhere and nowhere.

“Searchers are methodically moving through an environment where it is not only difficult to navigate, but the distance you can see ahead of you is sometimes only a few feet or less,” said state forest ranger Captain John Streiff.

The two inmates had vanished into a vast region of forests and bogs so dense that they could be hiding almost at your feet and you wouldn’t see them. During those drizzly, anxious days, I drove through remote parts of Clinton, Essex and Franklin Counties that I had never seen before, following tangled old logging roads flanked by a curtain of green. As I spoke to local residents, the fear and frustration were plain.

People spoke of locking doors for the first time, checking the back seats of their cars, keeping loaded guns in their bedrooms. Some were afraid to tend their gardens or visit their summer camps. Local school districts closed or suspended outdoor activities.

Two weeks passed with no confirmed sightings. The search began to seem surreal. People (Continued on page 58)

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Continued from page 31

compared Matt and Sweat to D. B. Cooper and Bonnie and Clyde. Some even admitted to a kind of grudging admiration. Maybe they had really done it. Maybe they had vanished into thin air. Eager to get back to normal life, some locals began calling for the intensive search to be suspended or scaled back. Surely the killers were long gone.

But Major Guess refused to shift his focus. "We do not have any conclusive evidence that either of the inmates has left this area," he told reporters. That meant they would keep looking, keep slogging, keep following every local lead until something paid off. "We're getting closer with every step we take," he insisted.

The pressure on law enforcement to get results was intense. Public safety was one concern; cost was another. Early estimates put the price tag for the search at more than \$20 million, a number that is almost certain to rise dramatically in the final tally.

The first hopeful clues came in the interrogation of Joyce Mitchell. In her confession, she described a plan that involved her, Matt and Sweat escaping Dannemora together after first murdering her husband. "I was supposed to give my husband, Lyle, two pills," she admitted. "The agreed upon meeting time [outside the prison] was midnight. I was to drive my Jeep and bring my cell phone, GPS, clothes, a gun," and other supplies, she said.

If she had followed through, the scheme might have worked. With nearly six hours of lead time, they might have been hundreds of miles away before the escape was even noticed. But Mitchell got cold feet at the last minute. "I was caught up in the fantasy," she told police, describing a prison romance that was exciting until it turned scary. "I enjoyed the attention, the feeling both of them gave me, and the thought of a different life."

On the night of the escape, Mitchell "panicked and couldn't follow through with the rest of the plan." Based on her account, State Police became convinced that there was no Plan B. If that was true, the inmates had been forced

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to flee on foot with few resources. They were likely living rough in harsh weather, stealing supplies from the scores of shacks and hunting camps scattered through the dense woods. Searchers intensified their cabin-by-cabin sweeps, working their way outward from Dannemora.

In late June, they finally caught a major break. A camp owner reported seeing someone flee a cabin about 30 miles from the prison. Investigators soon confirmed that the men had stolen food, a map and likely weapons, and found matching DNA from items the fugitives left behind.

Suddenly, Matt and Sweat no longer seemed ghostly or untouchable. Their complex scheme was unraveling. Evidence suggested that they were likely exhausted, desperate, fleeing without a coherent plan. Then, on June 26th, Richard Matt broke cover. He fired at a passing RV with a shotgun stolen from one of the hunting camps, apparently hoping to hijack the vehicle. Later that day, a tactical team with the US Border Patrol helicoptered to a new hot spot where a possible sighting had been reported.

At first, it appeared to be another false alarm, another shadow in the forest. But as Border Patrol Agent Christopher Voss crept through a section of brushy wood south of Malone, he caught a glimpse of a figure on the ground. "I could see an individual, the person was lying on his stomach," Voss later told NBC News. "There was a shotgun pointed right at me and I engaged the individual." Matt was shot in the head and killed instantly. The man who seduced Joyce Mitchell and schemed to commit murder again after his escape was later found to have been undernourished, bug-bitten and drunk on stolen liquor.

In hindsight, it seems a small miracle that he lived as a fugitive in the northern Adirondacks for three weeks without harming anyone.

Two days later—23 days after the manhunt began—a lone State Police sergeant named Jay Cook spotted David Sweat in a field. Sweat had man-



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aged to reach Constable, a few miles from the Canadian border. Cook gave chase, pursuing Sweat on foot and calling for him to surrender. When he feared that the inmate might escape into the woods, Cook shot him twice.

Sweat was badly wounded but alive. Photographs of his capture showed a bedraggled-looking man, bent and bloodied and pathetic. He would later tell authorities that the inmates had sprinkled black pepper on the ground in an effort to confuse the tracking dogs that were pursuing them. They ate canned food scavenged from camps. They spent much of the three weeks wet, cold and frightened. They split up after Matt began drinking and they quarreled. On his own, Sweat hoped to move faster, eventually escaping to Mexico, but all that ended in a muddy field.

“The nightmare is finally over,” said Governor Cuomo, who spoke at Titus Mountain, south of Malone, after helicoptering in to celebrate the close of the ordeal. A crowd of local residents and law enforcement cheered and hooted. “Mr. Matt is deceased and David Sweat is in custody. It has been a long, long time. This was an extraordinary situation. If you were writing a movie plot, you would say this was overdone.”

As I write this, more than a month after Sweat’s capture, I think Cuomo was mostly right. The Dannemora escape had it all: sex and violence, betrayal and bravery. It involved some of the most stubborn and courageous police work imaginable, pitting hundreds of officers not just against two elusive killers, but against some of the wildest and most unforgiving terrain in the eastern United States. And the inmates themselves were right out of central casting, ruthless and calculating. Their odyssey took us from the mysterious world inside Dannemora through the rain-drenched Adirondack woods. And it all ended in scenes of gunfire, hard justice and death. It was the stuff of Adirondack legend.

But in another way, I think the nightmare hasn’t ended—and likely won’t end for a very long time. The

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family of Joyce Mitchell lies in ruins, shattered by her dangerous infatuation. She was sentenced in September to two-and-a-third to seven years; at press time, correction officer Gene Palmer was still awaiting his fate.

Matt and Sweat’s escape failed, but I’m guessing their plot will mean an end to Dannemora’s tradition of secrecy. At the very least, they put a huge, indelible crack in that great white wall. Now it’s the things we’ve learned and are still learning about life in Clinton Correctional Facility that may haunt us for a long time.

Already, *The New York Times* has published a damning report alleging that correction officers retaliated against other inmates after Matt and Sweat escaped, hauling them into utility closets where they were beaten and threatened with waterboarding and other forms of torture.

This is ugly stuff, and maybe it should haunt us a little bit. Maybe we were too eager to accept the code of silence. Maybe we were all complicit in pretending that everything was safe and secure, not only in Dannemora but in all our prison towns.

I guess this will be the last high-profile escape we see for a very long while, but there are still more than 4,000 state and federal inmates in the park. There are also hundreds of workers like Joyce Mitchell and Gene Palmer who enter that world behind bars every day. The manhunt is over, but a small army of correction officers and civilian employees remains on the job, navigating the dangerous gray zone where moral lines and human loyalties blur quickly.

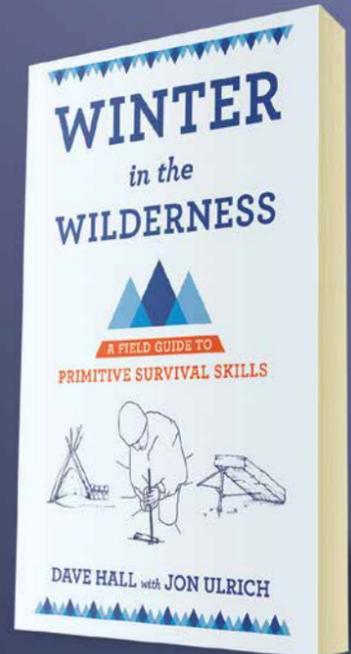
We’ve learned that our Adirondack prisons are places where life can go horribly wrong with a single compromise, a single act of corruption or friendliness or compassion.

Brian Mann is an award-winning reporter and Adirondack bureau chief for North Country Public Radio. His reporting on the Dannemora prison break was featured on National Public Radio, CNN and other media outlets.

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