BLEED

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd i 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

PROLOGUE

In the grand scheme of human affairs seemingly unrelated events can occur whose superficial similarities can ultimately collide via an unexpected third-party association. Such was the situation involving two legal cases unfolding simultaneously in Manhattan, New York City, in the Supreme Court of the State of New York at 60 Centre Street. The first was a malpractice case where Dr. Thomas Thompson, an ophthalmologist, was being sued for forty million dollars for the wrongful death of a patient following, of all things, a routine cataract extraction. Unfortunately, things were not going well for the doctor after the surprise appearance as a witness of one of the doctor's former professors.

The second case involved the final agonal throes of a contentious matrimonial trial that had taken place many months earlier. The husband, Gerald Barlow, a markedly successful financier, was now being threatened with jail time for dragging his feet on paying

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 1 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

the decreed forty-million-dollar settlement to his now ex-wife by filing progressively ridiculous appeals. The assigned judge was clearly at the end of her patience with Mr. Barlow and justifiably irate. Accordingly, she was only willing to give him a limited time henceforth to come up with the stipulated money. If he again failed to do so, she made it crystal clear he would be facing arrest and imprisonment in Rikers Island of all places. Mr. Barlow was understandably duly alarmed.

Except for unfolding at the same time in the same courthouse and involving the same shocking amount of money, namely forty million dollars, the two cases were totally unrelated, and the involved defendants had no reason to be aware of the other's tribulations. Nor had the protagonists ever met, although if pressed, the doctor might have remembered reading about the financier in the past because Gerald Barlow had been written up on occasion in *The Wall Street Journal* and the business section of *The New York Times* as the founder and managing partner of a successful private equity company, Asclepius Health Partners. As a busy and well-known ophthalmologist who did a lot of surgery, particularly cataracts, Dr. Thompson had the wherewithal and inclination to become what he thought was an equivalently proficient armchair investor. Gerry Barlow had no idea of Dr. Thomas Thompson's existence.

The way these two unrelated forty-million-dollar cases were to become perilously entangled was due to a chance association of both men with Dr. John Stapleton, who preferred to be called Jack and who was currently employed at the Office of Chief Medical Examiner of New York City, known to the world as the famed OCME, the largest such institution in the world. Both interactions had occurred almost two decades previously and had happened purely by chance like most such interactions in life.

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 2 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

The doctor's association had been first. He and Jack Stapleton had chosen ophthalmology, or eye surgery, as their future specialties while they'd been in their respective medical schools. Purely by chance both men ended up doing their residency training under the auspices of the same institution, the University of Chicago, with Jack a year ahead of Tam. That meant that the two men overlapped in the same curriculum and same hospital for several years. Although interpersonal bonds are strongest among those people in the same residency year, both Jack and Tam shared an appreciation of pickup basketball. Since the medical center had access to a gym and an active intramural program, this served as an additional point of connection between the two men, and although they never became particularly close friends, they were certainly congenial and mutually complimentary.

The contact between Jack Stapleton and Gerry Barlow was the opposite of convivial and happened a few years later after Jack had set himself up in Champaign, Illinois, with a rapidly growing ophthalmology practice, which was quickly becoming too big for one eye surgeon to handle. The problem wasn't taking care of the needs of his patients but rather due to the increasing demands of the business side of the endeavor, which Jack detested. At the time, Gerry Barlow was a young analyst working for a private equity company called Health Partners, which had purchased a much larger managed-care company called AmeriCare that had set its eyes on expanding into Champaign. It was Gerry who convinced Jack, as well as a number of other local doctors in various specialties, to sell their practices to AmeriCare, supposedly to free the doctors up from the drudgery of the business side of medical practice so they could concentrate on maximizing patient care. Unfortunately after only a year, the result for Jack, and for many of the other doctors as

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 3 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

well, was far different, and Jack, in particular, suffered acute "seller's remorse." Although AmeriCare did take care of personnel needs, namely hiring and firing support personnel, and the more burdensome task of collections, they also progressively interfered with patient care due to the company's overarching interest in maximizing profits, meaning that the doctors, like Jack, were ordered to see more and more patients in less and less time. In just over a year, Jack became thoroughly disgusted and, after seeing the writing on the wall, decided to leave clinical medicine altogether by retraining in forensic pathology. What motivated him to become a forensic pathologist rather than a practicing ophthalmologist was to be immune from the progressive business takeover of American medicine. Unfortunately, such was not to be entirely the case.

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 4 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

CHAPTER 1

Monday, May 4, 7:10 A.M.
New York, New York

Raising himself into a standing position, Jack Stapleton put some serious effort into upping his speed by forcibly pedaling his fire-engine red Domane Trek road bike as he approached the intersection of East 30th Street and First Avenue. As per usual the main north–south artery was chockablock with early morning rush hour traffic, and he was intent on making the traffic light, which he was able to do just barely. The moment he reached the opposite side, he sat back, relaxed a degree, and allowed himself to coast while rapidly descending the continuation of 30th Street, passing on his left the crumbling six-story building still housing the morgue and the rest of the Forensic Pathology Department of the NYC Office of Chief Medical Examiner, or OCME as it was known to everyone. A new Forensic Pathology Center was going to be built as part of the billion-dollar Kips Bay Science Park and Research Campus, SPARC, four blocks south, but the vast project had yet to

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 5 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

break ground as it was going through its final review process. On Jack's right behind a high, rusting wrought-iron fence rose the old and abandoned, twelve-story red-brick Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital. Why it was still standing mostly empty after all the patients had been moved to the new Bellevue high-rise save for a very small wing used as a temporary men's homeless shelter down by the East River rather than either being renovated or replaced, Jack had no idea whatsoever. Nor did anyone else as far as he knew. For nearly half a century, it had just stood there as a kind of mysterious haunted house in the middle of one of New York City's busiest healthcare areas with multiple neighboring health institutions fighting for space.

As usual, Jack's bicycle commute that morning from his and his wife's house on the Upper West Side of Manhattan had been a delight, particularly due to the lovely early May weather. In many ways the trip was the highlight of Jack's workday and far better than the equivalent reverse commute home in the late afternoon. Due to the explosion in popularity of all sorts of speedy electric two-wheeled vehicles, mostly e-bikes, the afternoon's cycling transit through the city and particularly through Central Park, which used to be the most pleasurable part, was now a worrisome ordeal. In the past Jack had never been concerned about his safety, but currently that had changed with so many inexperienced riders going way too fast, even to the extent of casually passing him while all too often simultaneously checking their phones or even texting despite doing more than twenty miles an hour.

Turning sharply to his left, Jack coasted rapidly between two of the OCME's parked Sprinter vans before braking to a quick stop at the base of the cement stairway leading up to the receiving bay's dock where bodies arrived at the morgue and later left after their

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 6 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

autopsies. Hoisting his bike up onto his shoulder, Jack made quick work of the stairs. Still carrying his bike, he entered the OCME on its basement level, nodding a fleeting greeting to the night security officer and waving to the night mortuary tech in his lair, both about to finish their shifts at seven thirty. Jack then headed down the corridor that led to the now empty autopsy room colloquially named "the pit." About halfway down he secured his bike to a standpipe behind the stacks of simple pine coffins used for the unclaimed dead before burial on Hart Island in the Bronx.

At this stage of his work-a-day routine, Jack did not waste time. After appropriately taking care of his bike, he was eager to get upstairs to the ID area where the day began for him and for all the medical examiners currently on staff. The others generally drifted in between seven thirty and eight. There used to be significantly more than thirty MEs in the not-too-distant past, but times had changed as many forensic pathologists, even those trained at the OCME, were being enticed to distant cities by significantly higher salaries than his wife, Dr. Laurie Montgomery, the current chief medical examiner, could match thanks to the city council's limitations on the OCME's budget. Not all the council members were convinced that the OCME was worth the current ninety-million-dollar-a-year operating price tag much less raising it. As such, it was just one of the major issues with which Laurie was being forced to contend.

During the pleasurable bike commute, Jack had let his mind slumber, but now that he had arrived at the morgue, his generally overactive brain began to demand input to keep his emotional demons at bay. To him it almost seemed as if his life was presently going too well, a kind of scary tranquility presaging a possible storm such as what had happened to him in the past when his first family,

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 7 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

including a wife and two youthful daughters, had been wiped out in a commuter plane crash. They had come to visit him at his request when he was retraining in forensic pathology, causing him to feel directly responsible for their collective demise. Currently both Jack Junior, or JJ as he was known, who was now fifteen and in high school, and Emma, now nine and in her special school for kids on the autism spectrum, were doing extremely well. Even Dorothy Montgomery, Laurie's mother who'd been living with them since the death of her husband, had now moved back at least temporarily to her Park Avenue co-op to give them a breather, more so for Laurie than Jack. He had learned to tune out his mother-in-law's invariable list of daily complaints and anti-vax rhetoric, but Laurie wasn't able to do so, thus Dorothy's continued presence created for her a level of suppressed love-hate tension.

What Jack was hoping for that morning would be to find a particularly interesting and challenging autopsy case, or better yet several cases that would require more than the usual efforts on his part and thereby keep his mind occupied for a number of days. Although he and the other medical examiners were all doing more than the usual number of autopsies due to the OCME being mildly short-staffed, from his perspective there hadn't been any intellectually demanding ones of late, and like every other workday morning, he'd made it a point to arrive earlier than the other MEs to have a chance to go over the cases that had come in overnight or during the weekend, so he could cherry-pick the most intriguing and hopefully mentally taxing. None of his fellow medical examiners minded this self-serving effort because everyone was well aware that Jack did way more than his share of autopsies and was in that regard a glutton for punishment.

Eschewing the rear service elevator because of its slowness, Jack

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 8 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

ducked into the fire stairs and took them two at a time on the run. Bursting out of the stairwell on the first floor he cut through the currently empty Sudden Infant Death Office to get into the identification area, which occupied a significant portion of the southwest corner of the building's first floor. Here was a sizable central room with a series of smaller individual rooms along the south side overlooking 30th Street where families were taken to be shown digital images of the recently deceased for confirmation of identity. In the distant past grieving families had to confront the corpse downstairs just outside the autopsy room, which was invariably a severely emotionally taxing experience. Later Polaroid photos were shown to the relatives in the side rooms of the ID area, which was significantly less emotionally traumatic. Now the Polaroids had been replaced by digital images on monitors. Of course, if families insisted, they could see the actual corpse but that was rare.

For a moment Jack held up to take in the scene. Ahead of him off to the right was a large metal desk. Just making herself comfortable at the desk was Elizabeth Silvester, MD, known by all as Dr. Liz.

Behind Liz and standing in front of the kitchenette was a very familiar figure for Jack, namely Vinnie Amendola, a mortuary technician, who was at the moment busily engaged in making the communal coffee.

It was at that point that Jack became aware of yet another presence. Sitting in one of the leather easy chairs in front of Liz's desk but hidden from view behind a *New York Times* newspaper was a figure whose particularly rumpled dark blue pants jutting out from under the paper gave away his identity. Instantly Jack knew it had to be none other than Lieutenant Detective Commander Lou Soldano, a close friend of both his and Laurie's. Although Lou was a relatively frequent visitor to the OCME because years previously

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 9 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

he'd become impressed with the power of forensic pathology in helping solve homicide cases and would often show up to observe specific autopsies, Jack had not seen him for well over a month. It had just been the previous week when Jack had mentioned as much to Laurie and said he was thinking of giving the workaholic detective a call to check up on him. Now Jack wouldn't have to, and on top of that, he was also encouraged that Lou's presence potentially augured a demanding homicide case as had happened multiple times in the past.

Instead of heading directly over to Liz to begin shuffling through the autopsy folders, Jack detoured over to the newspaper reader and with his finger slowly lowered the top edge of the paper. It was Lou all right and as per usual the detective looked like he'd been up all night. Although he worked the day shift, he insisted on being called for homicides during the evening and night, when most took place, and would often go to the scene to make sure everything was done by the book. If there was a particular problem with the case that he thought might be solved by the autopsy, he'd follow the corpse to the OCME and wait for Jack who he knew would be coming in early.

"You look like death warmed over," Jack commented. Lou was a big man mildly overweight with rounded features, perennially red eyes emphasized by dark circles, and doughy-looking skin as a remnant from five million or so cigarettes over some forty years of chain-smoking.

"Thanks, my friend," Lou said good-naturedly. "I can always count on a compliment from my favorite coroner."

Jack had to smile. Lou knew that Jack hated to be called a "coroner," which referred to a mere official title for someone who was legally responsible for determining the manner and cause of death but who may or may not have any medical training whatsoever. In

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 10 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

reality there was a world of difference between a coroner and a forensic pathologist or medical examiner, which Jack was. "Touché!" Jack voiced while maintaining his smile to give Lou credit for a clever retort. Jack took a backward step to sit down on the arm of the second aged leather chair facing his friend. "How's the family?" he inquired. "We haven't seen you for much too long."

Lou, Jack, and Laurie were good friends socially, more so before JJ and Emma had arrived on the scene. Lou and Laurie had met way back, prior to Jack's arrival, and for a short time they had been an item, but it hadn't worked out mostly because of Lou's blue-collar insecurities. Later, after working with Jack on a couple of difficult homicide cases, Lou became an advocate for Jack and Laurie as a couple. It was also true that a number of years previously Jack and Lou had conspired to keep Laurie from marrying a two-faced, shady arms dealer who for a time had Laurie in his grasp by portraying himself as a caring, principled financier.

"The family couldn't be better," Lou said. "My youngest daughter is about to graduate this month from college, thank God, so the economic pressure will be officially off, and I can retire from the rat race."

Jack laughed at the absurdity of Lou's comment. He knew that Lou loved being a detective and that there was no way he was ever going to voluntarily leave the force. After being divorced eons ago, Lou's work and his children, who chose to live with him, were his total life, and now that all the children had been launched, it was going to be just work. Jack was aware that being a NYC police detective was his entire identity, and because of his dedication, he was very good at it. To that end Jack was convinced Lou had played a major role in the precipitous fall of the NYC homicide rate over the previous decade.

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 11 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

"And how's the Stapleton family doing?" Lou asked. He was well versed with the health issues Jack and Laurie had faced, first with JJ's cancer and then with Emma's autism.

"Couldn't be better," Jack echoed. "Almost going too well, which, as we've discussed in the past, makes me nervous. I'm in desperate need of a good case to keep me occupied, so I'm hoping your presence means you've brought me something challenging."

"You're too much," Lou said while folding up his newspaper. "You're such an emotional pessimist when it comes to your private life. But be that as it may, I do have a case that I'd love your help on. Whether you'll find it challenging, I don't know. Unfortunately, I got a call around three o'clock in the morning from my Detective Captain William Stratford. His wife, Gloria, committed suicide last night, and he was beside himself with emotion and couldn't think straight, which is why he called me. I told him to sit tight and that I'd get in touch with the Nineteenth Precinct to get someone over to his apartment on the double and come myself to oversee everything, which he said he'd appreciate because he admitted he was a basket case from the moment he'd heard the shot. He said they had been sleeping apart for almost a year and that she'd been struggling after the death of their middle child from an overdose. I could tell he was truly emotionally strung-out and not thinking right. I told him not to touch anything, and he assured me he hadn't and wouldn't."

"Sorry to hear, my friend," Jack responded. "But I'm a little confused. How can I help? It is what it is: a tragedy following a tragedy."

"You can help by hopefully dispelling my concerns that things are not quite as they seem. I'm certain you remember the awful and shocking Paul Seton case three years ago. He was a detective third grade on my team. It haunts me."

"Of course I remember the case," Jack said. It was another death

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 12 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

that Lou had accompanied to the OCME. Paul Seton had shot his wife, Sharron, and tried to stage it as a suicide, but Jack, using a preponderance of evidence gleaned from the autopsy and the MLI workup, had essentially proved otherwise, leading to Paul's confession. In that case the first piece of evidence that had alerted Jack to the truth was that Sharron had been naked when found, and he knew both from personal autopsy experience and the forensic literature that women who committed suicide rarely, if ever, did so naked. "Am I sensing here that you are about to tell me that Gloria was naked when you arrived?"

"Gloria was not naked, but there was a troubling fact that unfortunately the OCME medicolegal investigator took me aside to mention, which I can't let go of. Making it worse, it was one of the MLIs that you've complimented in the past as being particularly knowledgeable, which I suppose added to my 'heebie-jeebies.' It was Janice Jaeger."

"She is really good," Jack agreed with a nod. "She's one of our most experienced MLIs. What did she tell you?"

"She told me to keep an open mind. She pointed out to me that Bill's service Glock, which was the weapon involved, was still in Gloria's hand, which Janice said rarely happens, reminding me that the gun being in Sharron Seton's hand when she was discovered was the second fact in the Seton case that had made you initially question that it was staged besides the victim being naked. Up until that moment the idea that Gloria's death might have been staged never occurred to me. Now I can't get it out of my mind."

"Okay, I get your problem. Let me grab Gloria Stratford's folder! Hang on!"

Jack got to his feet and walked over to the desk where Liz was now busily going through the autopsy folders and attaching assigned

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 13 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

ME names with sticky notes. Jack didn't mind this interruption of his usual cherry-picking activity as he was optimistic Lou's concerns would keep his mind at bay at least for the morning.

"Have you come across a gunshot suicide named Gloria Stratford?" Jack asked after a mutual greeting.

"Not yet, Dr. Stapleton," Liz said with a shake of her head.

"The name's Jack. Do you mind if I look?" he asked. He always preferred to err on the diplomatic side so as not to present himself as being too pushy with the junior MEs because of his seniority and because his wife was the chief.

"Please, be my guest, Jack," Liz said with a smile. "Also, there's a pedestrian death caused by an e-bike that I thought you might find interesting." It was common knowledge that Jack, who was the only ME who regularly commuted to and from the OCME on his bike, had strong feelings about the surge in electric two-wheel fatalities that the city had been experiencing. "Would you like to be assigned the case?"

"Absolutely," Jack said as he shuffled through the remaining stack of unassigned autopsies. He quickly found Gloria Stratford's and pulled it from the others. He then took the e-bike case folder from Liz and put it under his arm before starting back across the room to where Lou was waiting. As he walked he extracted Janice Jaeger's MLI report from Gloria's folder and began scanning it. Just as Lou had said, Janice wrote that the apparent weapon, a Glock 19, was still in the victim's hand. It was underlined with a note in parentheses that said she'd seen that on only one other occasion during her entire MLI career.

"Who wants some joe?" Vinnie called out from where he was standing at the kitchenette. All three people in the room raised their hands.

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 14 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

Jack sat back down on the arm of the second leather easy chair. "Let me finish reading over Janice's report," he said. "I do see where she mentioned the gun was in the victim's hand."

"Please, be my guest!" Lou said as Vinnie came by with two mugs of coffee.

Vinnie then retreated to one of the numerous other unmatched straight-backed chairs sprinkled around the room with his *New York Post* opened to the sports page and his own mug of java.

Jack, who was a rapid reader, quickly finished and looked up from Janice's report. "Okay," he said. "Seems that everything else besides the Glock being in the victim's hand was consistent with a suicide, including there being no obvious gunshot residue on her fingers and with the involved gun being an automatic rather than a pistol. The entrance wound is described as appropriately stellate with little or no surrounding soot, suggesting it was a contact wound, which it normally is. Its location was in the right temple where the vast number of such wounds are located and the exit wound on the left side, slightly posterior, and elevated as suspected. She also mentions that there was no suicide note."

"I can confirm that," Lou said.

"And you remember that there being no note is not at all suggestive it might not be a suicide as is the conventional wisdom. Correct?"

"I remember you telling me that," Lou agreed with a nod. "Which surprised me at the time, but I'll take your word."

"Janice also mentions there were multiple sedative and sleeping medication containers on the night table, and more important that she'd learned the victim had recently been given a cancer diagnosis, both of which are known to be associated with suicide."

"Bill mentioned her cancer diagnosis," Lou said with another nod.

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 15 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM

"Okay, well that seems to be it. We'll confirm all this at autopsy and also determine the exact path of the bullet. What about the slug? Had that been recovered?"

"It had been by the crime scene team and was sent with the body and the gun. It should all be here."

"Okay, then," Jack said. "The autopsy should not have any surprises despite your so-called heebie-jeebies, but we'll keep an open mind. Since I'm assuming you've been up all night, do you really want to participate or would you prefer to head home for some sleep? I'm imagining the post is going to be pretty straightforward despite your worries."

"I'd like to see this through," Lou said. "If you'll have me."

"Vinnie!" Jack called out loudly. "Let's get Gloria Stratford ready for her autopsy."

Vinnie, following his usual routine when Jack wanted to head down to the pit and start work early, remained hidden behind his *New York Post* as if he hadn't heard. It was a staged, passive-aggressive ploy, fully expecting Jack to come over and swipe away his newspaper. It was a game in which he and Jack indulged almost every day. Having witnessed it all before, Liz merely rolled her eyes. Same with Lou Soldano.

Bleed_9798217184125_all_4p_r1.indd 16 9/22/26 12:25:31 PM