

Nate Hegyi, narrating: You're listening to *Operation Night Cat*. I'm Nate Hegyi.

[PHONE DIALING]

Hegyi, narrating: For weeks, our producer Jason Moon had been trying to get ahold of a pivotal source for this series.

[PHONE RINGING]

Hegyi, narrating: A 55-year-old former inmate at the New Hampshire State Prison for Men. Shawn Cochrane.

Voicemail: I'm sorry, but the person you have called has a voice mailbox that has not been set up yet.

Hegyi, narrating: At the time, Shawn was out on parole and he had been a hard guy to reach until Jason finally got a hold of him on the phone on a Sunday morning.

Jason Moon, in studio: Hey, Shawn, can you hear me ok?

Shawn Cochrane, on the phone: Yeah, I can hear you fine.

Moon: Cool. Alright.

Hegyi, narrating: In 2021, Shawn was one of more than 1,000 inmates at the New Hampshire State Prison for Men.

It's a massive compound on the outskirts of the state capital that honestly looks more like an east coast factory than a prison. It's all red brick walls and tiny windows, built back in the 1870s.

Shawn had been in and out of that prison for more than two decades, so he knew it well. And he told us there are a lot of issues.

Cochrane, on the phone: The food is absolutely disgusting. Uh, the place is an absolute filth.

Hegyi, narrating: There have been rat infestations, mold problems, holes in the walls, the sewer backs up weekly, and... it has long been understaffed. In the spring of 2025, more than a third of all positions in the prison remained unfilled. So, corrections officers there work long hours to cover the gaps.

Cochrane: So, nine times out of 10 your interaction with them is very short, very disrespectful, because they're grumpy, because they've worked 75, 80, 100 hours that week.

Hegyí, narrating: Back in 2021, Shawn was serving time after getting busted for theft. And he noticed a real difference between the older corrections officers he'd known for years and the new guys or the "kids," as he calls them.

Cochrane: The kids are worse, uh, because they, they don't want to do anything. They just want to come by and pass out meal. Uh, they want to fuck with you. Like, for instance, you know... In the morning, at 5 o'clock in the morning, you go to breakfast, you come back, and your room is torn apart. I mean, why?

Hegyí, narrating: Shawn says the staff are all overworked and there aren't enough of them. But in his experience, the younger guys tend to be more aggressive. And he struggled especially with a corrections officer named... Corporal Tom Kelley.

[THEME MUSIC IN]

Cochrane: Uh, he's an arrogant cocksucker. He's a punk. Like, if you're a known, uh, teller, ok? He'll scream at you and have an argument with you and blast it out right on the tier that you're a fuckin' rat.

Hegyí, narrating: Tom Kelley. If that name sounds familiar, that's because he's the hunter we talked about in the last episode.

Tom Kelley, on TikTok video: There's blood everywhere. I absolutely smoked 'im.

Hegyí, narrating: The guy at the center of a major poaching investigation that would come to be known as "Operation Night Cat."

Kevin Bronson: It's like they're playing Grand Theft Auto up behind their house except with animals.

Hegyí, narrating: While he seemed to be spending a lot of his nights illegally hunting game, Tom Kelley also worked as a corrections officer, a guard at the New Hampshire State Prison for Men.

Cochrane: He'll throw you food through the slot, or he'll just leave it on the slot long enough so it falls out— out of your tray, out of the cell, and then just not give you any more food. Purposely go out of their way to try to make your life miserable. That's who Mr. Kelley is.

[THEME MUSIC POST]

Hegyi, narrating: America's prisons aren't a cushy experience, but the people held inside them still have rights. And are supposed to expect that, even behind bars, rules about what is and isn't fair will be followed. But Shawn says that's not how things actually go. To him, prison is literally and figuratively a brick wall.

Cochrane: And they can do whatever they want and get away with it because nobody can see over that wall!

[THEME MUSIC POST]

Hegyi, narrating: From NHPR's *Document* team and *Outside/In*, I'm Nate Hegyi and this is *Operation Night Cat*. Episode 2 – Behind The Brick Wall.

[THEME MUSIC FADES OUT]

[BREAK]

Hegyi, narrating: This is *Operation Night Cat*. I'm Nate Hegyi.

Back when we were first reporting this story, my producer Lauren Chooljian and I drove out to a little cabin near a fishing pond. We were there to see New Hampshire Fish and Game officer Ron Arsenault.

At one point during the interview, his cell phone literally chirped. It was a text message notification.

Ron Arsenault: [FADES UP] ...animal cruelty are domestic animals. [CHIRPING SOUND]

Lauren Chooljian: Ooh...

Arsenault: Ya know, so, that–

Chooljian: So, did your phone just... ribbit?

Arsenault: That's my cricket phone. [CHOOIJIAN, HEGYI LAUGH]

Chooljian, laughing: Also, I noticed it...

Hegyi, off mic: That's awesome.

Arsenault: So, when we sneak in the woods, somebody hears a cricket, they're not like, "Oh, that's a phone." You know?

Hegy: That's a great point. That's a really smart...

Arsenault: I used to have ducks! But... [FADES DOWN]

Hegy, narrating: Remember, it was Ron who kicked off Operation Night Cat.

It started with Tom Kelley's game camera and a deer he'd shot. But eventually, Ron uncovered a group of hunters who seemed to be illegally killing dozens of animals — bobcats, foxes, coyotes, and more.

A lot of the evidence for these alleged crimes were on Tom Kelley's phone. Text messages between him and his hunting buddies, like this one, which happened after Ron says Tom sent a picture of a dead coyote to the group chat.

Arsenault: Tom's like, you know, "Shot this ugly thing last night," and Randy says, "LOL." And then, Woody says, "Why would you do such a thing?" Tom Kelly says, "I love killing shit. And they were all barking behind my house."

Chooljian: "I love killing shit?"

Hegy, off mic: Yeah.

Arsenault: And then he says, "Hey, the season's closed, you damn outlaw."

Chooljian: Just wait a minute. So, his friends call him out for, like, illegal hunting?

Yeah. And he just says, oh, I love killing stuff.

Hegy: Yeah. So, he knew what he was doing was wrong.

Arsenault: Oh yeah. One hundred percent.

Chooljian: Well and can I also just, the verbage there, like... "I love killing shit." Like, you both love to hunt, but is that how you... talk about it?

Arsenault: No, no. You have to have the respect for the animal that you're hunting, you know. And clearly he didn't.

Hegy: And how does that feel, also knowing that they have a badge?

Arsenault: Oh, it's just disgraceful.

Hegy: Because...

Arsenault: You know, these guys are now in charge of humans, you know, and you're like, "Well, what else is going on?"

[MUSIC IN]

Hegy, narrating: We're gonna come back to the poaching case that triggered Operation Night Cat in the next episode. But first we're gonna spend some time trying to answer that other question – what else was going on with Tom Kelley?

Ron wasn't authorized to share anything outside the scope of his initial investigation. So, my colleagues and I went off on our own... and tried to see behind the brick wall.

[MUSIC POST]

Hegy, narrating: Over the past year, our team has hounded the state for more information on Tom Kelley and the other former or current corrections officers who were allegedly poaching.

We filed public records requests, reviewed audio testimonies, and talked to current and former state officials. We even sued the New Hampshire Department of Corrections for documents.

And through all of this, we got access to some of Tom Kelley and his coworkers' other text messages. Texts that reveal a pattern of disturbing and potentially illegal behavior happening at the prison.

[MUSIC POST]

Hegy, narrating: There are three sets of exchanges I wanna take you through.

The first shows the use of aggressive and violent language.

Like, in one exchange I viewed, Tom Kelley and another CO texted about an inmate who tried to escape. Tom wrote, quote, "Please shoot him." And then the other guy wrote back, "I want to feel his skull cave in with my fists."

[MUSIC UP AND OUT]

Hegy, narrating: There are other examples, too.

Lauren and I were surprised to see these violent exchanges laid out so bluntly. They're the sort of thing that could hurt the public reputation of the prison and the

people who work there – nevermind that if the prison’s HR specialist saw these texts, these guys could be in trouble. But it might also be good to put them in context.

[SOUND OF SOFT FOOTSTEPS]

Chooljian, off mic, walking into a house: Hi! I’m so glad to meet you. I’m Lauren.

Claudia Cass: Hi, Lauren.

Chooljian: Nate.

Cass: Hi, Nate.

Hegyi, at the same time as Cass: I’m Nate. Nice to meet you.

Cass: Nice to meet you, too. [DOG HOWLS] Come on in... [FADES OUT]

Hegyi, narrating: Claudia Cass worked at the New Hampshire State Prison for Men from 2006 to 2022. And she worked with a lot of the guys in this story, including Tom Kelley, though she didn’t know him very well.

Cass: He was, like, big into hunting and he would go, you know – I don’t know where, where one goes to, to kill things, but that’s what he did.

Hegyi, narrating: Claudia says the prison is a pressure cooker. It’s been way understaffed for years and officers work huge amounts of overtime.

Cass: I averaged 100 hours a week working there.

Hegyi, narrating: Claudia was actually fired in connection with this staffing crisis.

Back in 2022, she told the warden she would be locking down the prison overnight. There just wasn’t enough staff to keep officers safe, she said. Two days later, she was suspended and then, later fired. She’s suing the Department of Corrections for wrongful termination.

But that staffing crisis hasn’t gotten any better in the years since. Instead of spending time with their families, guards are working overtime with inmates. And the state prison holds everyone from low-level offenders to people convicted of murder and rape. It can be a rough crowd.

Cass: I'll be doing rounds, you know, and they'll be like, "Oh, you know, you have smelly crotch," or they'll be callin' the guys the n-word. They'll be, uh, um... Some threaten your family. Um, yeah, I've seen, I've seen it all.

Hegyi, narrating: Point is, it's not an easy job. Tempers flare.

Tom Kelley wouldn't talk to us for this podcast. So, we reached out to Claudia because we wanted to know... what is it like to work inside the pressure cooker?

And as a corrections officer for almost two decades, what did she see in these texts from Tom? Lauren read the messages we found back to her.

Chooljian: And Kelley says, "Please shoot him." And Masse says, "I want to feel his skull cave in with my fists."

Cass: Mmm.

Chooljian: Is that language that you would use?

Cass: Well, no, I wouldn't do that. That said, there's some people that, you know, society wouldn't be worse off without. Um, so, I don't know who this particular person is, but there's some that it's really difficult to hide your disdain for the person, um, because, you know, we deal with, um, really bad people.

Hegyi, narrating: To Claudia, in this environment with these inmates, words are just words.

Cass: They didn't shoot him. They didn't punch him, didn't cave his head in. But would we talk, like, "Yeah, it would be a tragedy," you know? Uh... yeah.

[MUSIC IN]

Hegyi, narrating: This brings us to our second big set of texts we viewed because in these next exchanges... it wasn't just words.

I'm gonna bring Lauren into the studio to help me read these texts. I am reading for Tom Kelley. Lauren is reading for a coworker that we're not gonna name.

Hegyi: Alright. It's February 25th, 2019 at 8:48 p.m.. Tom texts, "It's Kelley from work."

[TEXT SWOOP SOUND]

Chooljian: "What's up bro?" "You guys mash Tappan?"

Hegy: Tom, "Fuck yes."

[SWOOP]

Choolijan: "How bad he look? You guys send his ass in an ambulance?"

[SWOOP]

Hegy: Tom, "He refused medical. You will see his face tomorrow, LOL."

[SWOOP]

Hegy, narrating: From these texts, it appears Tom Kelley is bragging about assaulting an inmate.

This inmate, Devin Tappan – he actually tried suing Tom over this incident. In court documents, Devin alleged that Tom and a crew of guards threw him to the floor, held his hands behind his back, and then punched, kicked, and tasered him. That lawsuit was dismissed earlier this year because he didn't file suit within the statute of limitations.

Alright, back to the texts.

The next morning Tom Kelley texted that same coworker again to ask how Tappan was looking. The guy said Tappan's face was "fuck[ed]" and that he wouldn't even eat. And in that exchange, Tom Kelley said something important. He said, quote, "LMAO. My fist is killing me."

[MUSIC UP AND OUT]

Hegy, narrating: We told Claudia about all this as well. And this time, her reaction was different.

Chooljian: We've seen information that suggests that Kelley, uh, punched Tappan in the face because he texted another CO to say, "Let me know tomorrow when you go in how bad he looks."

Cass: Whoa. Um, and there's very few reasons that we can punch anybody. Um, you know, you have to be in a struggle that you feel is basically life or death before we're close-fist punchin' people.

Hegy, narrating: Of course, violence is often part of American prison life. The New Hampshire Department of Corrections has an entire handbook dedicated to use of force, which lays out when they consider it justified... and when they don't.

Cass: So, for us to punch them, it would, in my, my experience, is only if they're attacking you.

[MUSIC IN]

Hegy, narrating: Here's where things take another twist. A couple weeks after bragging about beating an inmate, Tom Kelley texts someone else – Randy Inman.

If that name also sounds familiar, it's because he's another member of the group being investigated in the poaching ring – the guy who apparently came screaming home from work when the cops got a search warrant for his house.

Randy also worked at the prison... as a supervisor.

Now, back to the texts. I'll read again for Tom Kelley. Lauren is reading for Randy.

Hegy: March 11th, 2019, 7:45 p.m. Tom writes, "My hand is still fucked up, so I need to tell Mindy so I can get it looked at. You still on board saying you stepped on my hand?"

[TEXT SWOOP]

Now, Mindy, by the way, is an HR specialist at the prison.

Choolijan: Randy texts back, "Yes, because I did."

[SWOOP]

Hegy: Tom, "Exactly. Thank you." Then a little later, Tom writes, "I told Mindy" and she says she would contact you at some point today. I said you stepped on my hand."

[SWOOP]

Hegy, narrating: After this exchange, Randy filed what's called an "employee accident/injury report." In it, he writes that he was doing a cell extraction of Devin Tappan – that's when guards forcibly remove an inmate from their cell. During this extraction, Randy says Devin "charged" at him, quote, "swinging his arms at me."

He writes that he struggled to handcuff Devin.

And then, quote, “it was during this time that I unknowingly stepped on Corporal Kelley, Thomas’ hand. I instantly felt his hand move under my boot and I quickly moved my foot,” end quote.

Randy sent a photo of this form to Tom.

Chooljian, reading as Randy Inman: “FYI, I’m putting this in Mindy’s box on her door.”

[SWOOP]

Hegyi, reading as Tom Kelley: “Awesome, thank you so much.”

[SWOOP]

Chooljian, reading as Randy Inman: “Just don’t forget who loves you.”

[SWOOP]

[MUSIC UP AND OUT]

Hegyi, narrating: We don’t know exactly what happened here. But one interpretation of this exchange is that Tom Kelley bragged about hurting his hand “mash[ing]” an inmate. And then he asked one of his hunting buddies to help him cover it up, to falsify a witness report – maybe so he could get treatment covered.

If that’s true, it would be a crime. And at minimum, it is grounds for more investigation.

[MUSIC IN]

Hegyi, narrating: Regardless of how you might feel about America’s prisons, the people held there have constitutional rights. The eighth amendment bars cruel and unusual punishment.

And, after all... it’s called the New Hampshire Department of Corrections, not the Department of Punishment. Dignity and honesty are actually two of the values written into their mission statement. The department says its overall goal is to, quote, “promote successful re-entry into society.”

Some people could write that off as unrealistic or naive.

But if we choose not to take it seriously... if we assume that prison is a pressure cooker and this is just the way things are... we might not know if the very people charged to uphold the law are guilty of breaking it.

And that brings us to the third set of texts we found – the missing mail.

Shawn Cochrane, on the phone: It's not ethical. It's not fucking ethical!

Hegyi, narrating: That's after the break.

[MUSIC UP AND OUT]

[BREAK]

Hegyi, narrating: I'm Nate Hegyi. You're listening to a special series of *Outside/In* called *Operation Night Cat*.

Jason Moon, on the phone: Is it alright if I record this call like last time?

Shawn Cochrane, on the phone: Yeah, that's fine. No problem.

Moon, on the phone: Okay, cool.

Hegyi, narrating: That again is producer Jason Moon talking with Shawn Cochrane. The guy who railed against Tom Kelley earlier in the episode.

Shawn, he's been in and out of New Hampshire's state prison for almost two decades. And in his younger years, he also spent time in the state's juvenile jail – a place called the Youth Development Center or YDC.

Now, if you live in New Hampshire, you might know that the YDC is at the center of a huge government scandal here. Shawn is one of more than 1,000 people who've come forward with allegations of sexual and physical abuse they say they went through there. Almost a dozen former staffers have faced criminal charges.

Cochrane, on the phone: I have a law firm that's part of my YDC case. They wanted me to write a narrative about the YDC.

Hegyi, narrating: Shawn had to write down details of what he says staff did to him when he was a kid – very personal details – and send them in the mail to his lawyer. He did this while he was incarcerated at the men's prison.

Cochrane: And I wrote two narratives. The first one was 23 pages. Never made it to his office still, to this day. Wrote a second one. Never made it to his office still to this day—

Moon: Wait, so you're saying you wrote those YDC narratives in the prison and they never made it out?

Cochrane, on the phone: That is correct.

[MUSIC IN]

Hegyi, narrating: You probably know that opening or stealing someone's mail is a federal crime. The Post Office has a whole branch of investigators who deal with this kind of thing.

But mail in prison works a little differently. Sometimes, people send drugs to inmates, concealed in envelopes that are meant to look like they're coming from their lawyers or someone else official. So, prison staff are allowed to comb through that incoming mail, to make sure it's legit.

But outgoing letters sent to a lawyer or to the courts? They cannot be opened or interfered with.

Moon: Just to spell it out, what do you think happened to those narratives?

Cochrane, on the phone: Tha-That's my question. I mean, all that personal fucking written stuff about sexual abuse and what went on and what happened to me. Those are substantial... things that I wrote in there. Where are they? Who's reading them?

[MUSIC POST]

Hegyi, narrating: We don't know exactly what happened to those narratives. We do know what happened to some of Shawn's other mail.

[MUSIC UP AND OUT]

Hegyi, narrating: In 2021, Shawn was trying to file legal complaints about how he was being treated at the men's prison. This happens a lot, and you can imagine that some guards see it as a huge headache. Some officers go so far as to call these complaints "rat notes."

[MUSIC IN]

Hegy, narrating: And Shawn was known for writing a lot of them. Lauren's back to help me read another text thread.

Hegy: I'll be Tom Kelley and you're one of his buddies, a correction officer named Chris Masse. Chris, by the way – not a part of the poaching ring, but he's someone that Tom went to law enforcement academy with. And we should also note that Chris did not respond to our requests for comment for this story.

Chooljian: Ok, so this conversation happens almost midnight, February 15th, 2021. Chris writes, "Holy fuck dude, this legal mail and rat notes are out of fucking hand."

[TEXT SWOOP]

Hegy: Tom, "Dude, it's bad. I took a ton home with me that probably contained your name."

[SWOOP]

Chooljian: Chris texts back, "From who? LOL. Cochrane?"

[SWOOP]

Hegy: Tom, "Yep."

[SWOOP]

Chooljian: "Thanks for savin' my ass, haha."

[SWOOP]

Hegy, narrating: After that, Tom sends a photo. Six envelopes, fanned out. It's mail addressed to a court that he seems to have taken directly from the prison.

That mail – it belonged to Shawn Cochrane. The guy whose YDC narratives went missing and who was actively filing complaints against Tom Kelley's work buddy, Chris Masse.

After Tom sent that photo of the envelopes, Chris Masse texted back.

Chooljian: Chris writes, "yeah, dude, you're the true hero here tonight. Haha. Think we're going to have to search some cells tomorrow."

Hegy: Tom, "Yep."

Chooljian: "Let's do it," Chris writes back. "Me and you."

Hegyi, narrating: And Shawn told us that, around this time, Tom Kelley did tear his room up.

Cochrane, on the phone: They ripped our whole tier apart because they knew that I was filing complaints against them.

Hegyi, narrating: Public records back him up. They show Tom and some other guards searched his cell two days after this text exchange between Tom and Chris.

[MUSIC UP AND OUT]

Hegyi, narrating: When he was interviewing Shawn, producer Jason Moon told him about the texts we had discovered. He read them out verbatim. We've bleeped some of the names.

Moon: Tom, "I just read all of them." Chris, "And? LOL." Tom, "You need to be careful what you say in front of the nurses because he's trying to call them as witnesses and he says he's filing criminal charges against you." Tom, "Also, he filed charges against [bleep] for slamming his head into a wall I guess. LOL."

Cochrane, on the phone: Yup.

Moon: Chris, "Yeah, I'll talk to [bleep] this morning. Literally all I've done to this cunt is call him a junkie." Tom, "Yeah. He wrote [bleep]'s name down." Chris, "I'll talk to her. And we really got to intercept this cunt's shit bad. Gotta have the boys tear that room up." So, what do you make of these messages? Are you, are you... surprised?

Cochrane: Yeah, I'm really surprised. You have them outright admitting that they stole my fucking legal mail! That's a lawsuit. That's a slam dunk lawsuit. They could lose their job for that.

[MUSIC IN]

Hegyi, narrating: Shawn says he tried to talk to one of the older COs... a guy he respects and knows personally... about all the ways Tom Kelley was treating him.

Cochrane: I said, "Why are you allowing this to go on in your unit?" And he said, "I'm in blue."

[MUSIC UP]

Cochrane: And I said, “Ok, I get that, I get that.” I said, “But at the end of the day, it's not ethical.” I said, “You're allowing these men to treat us this way, knowing that they're treating us this way and you're not doing anything about it.”

[MUSIC UP AND OUT]

Hegyi, narrating: Back when we interviewed Conservation Officer Ron Arsenault, he showed us around this wooden cabin in the woods near a fishing pond.

Arsenault, off mic: Pretty cool, huh?

Chooljian: It is pretty cool!

Arsenault: So, they'll do... [FADES OUT]

Hegyi, narrating: The place had major summer camp vibes. This is where Fish and Game will sometimes teach hunters' ed. The kind of thing you need to do to get your license.

Arsenault: ...And this is where I come, like, after kids fishing day.

Hegyi: Yeah.

Arsenault: I'll hide my truck and I'll hide in here and I'll watch over limits. [HEGYI LAUGHS] This is my secret hiding place, so don't, [LAUGHS] don't tell anybody... [FADES OUT]

Hegyi, narrating: At this point, all we knew about Tom Kelley was what Ron had told us about Operation Night Cat. That he had been caught baiting deer and killing bobcats at night.

Back during that initial investigation, Ron was already thinking about how he was gonna use Tom Kelley's text messages.

Arsenault: I like to think of it, um, from the very beginning, how would I prosecute this? Because that – you have a really solid foundation, thinking like that, because then you're like, “Oh, what do I need to prove? What do I have? What do I need for evidence?”

Hegyi, narrating: But this is also when Ron found all of these other text messages. Stuff that was way outside his areas of expertise – not to mention totally outside his jurisdiction as a conservation officer.

Arsenault: So, at that point, I was like, "Oh, that's not good."

[MUSIC IN]

Hegy, narrating: Ron could have chosen to stay in his lane, to keep focused on the charges he knew he could personally make stick.

But he didn't. Instead, he reported what he found up the chain of command. And from there, it went to the New Hampshire Attorney General. It went to federal investigators. And it went to Tom Kelley's bosses at the Department of Corrections.

Arsenault: We, we have a duty. We need to hold people accountable.

Hegy, narrating: One group of alleged poachers. Two sets of potential crimes.

Arsenault: And, you know, just because you're wearing a badge doesn't mean you should get away with stuff.

Hegy, narrating: So... did they?

[THEME MUSIC UP]

Hegy, narrating: That's next time on the final episode of *Operation Night Cat*.

Dean Williams, on the phone: It's the embarrassment. It's the embarrassment to say, "How in the world did this happen?"

Arsenault: You know, we're taught, you know, "Oh, report all this stuff, You know, everything, you know, report it and we'll do something. Report it." Bullshit.

[LAUGHS]

[THEME MUSIC POST]

Hegy, narrating: *Operation Night Cat* is a special three-part series from NHPR's *Document* team and *Outside/In*.

This episode was reported and written by me, Nate Hegyi, with help from Lauren Chooljian and Jason Moon.

Jason produced and mixed this episode. He also wrote the music.

It was edited by Taylor Quimby and Katie Colaneri, with help from Rebecca Lavoie, Jackie Harris, Dan Barrick, Justine Paradis, Felix Poon, and Marina Henke.

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Taylor Quimby is the executive producer of *Outside/In*. Rebecca Lavoie is Director of On-Demand at NHPR.

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[THEME MUSIC UP AND OUT]