

A Deadly Cure

A Chris DeAngelo Mini-Novel

By Michael Mucci

"Macon, Pennsylvania is a fictitious place that incorporates the spirit and real people of many such small towns and counties throughout Pennsylvania and America. In that sense it is real, at least to me. I tried to convey that realness to you too."

“By all accounts, the drug supply in the United States is among the safest and most controlled in the world. But it's under a growing threat from organized and white-collar criminals pushing stolen, out-of-date, adulterated or fake medications. They make their way into pharmacies, nursing homes, hospitals and doctors' offices. At best, they are suspect because they are sold outside of the regulated supply chains. At worst, they may be medically worthless or even toxic.

Since 2010, nearly 1,400 adverse reactions related to counterfeit drugs have been reported to the FDA.”

AARP, May 2016

Chapter 1

“I wonder what color his eyes were,” I said as I leaned closer to the corpse, peering into the gaping bloody eye sockets.

“Sheriff DeAngelo, when we find them I’ll let you know,” replied the medical examiner.

I straightened up. Examining a dead body was nothing new to me. I had seen plenty of murder victims—people who had been shot, stabbed, beaten. This one was the most grotesque. The sight made my stomach churn. To steady my nerves I took a long slow breath. I would have reached for a double bourbon had one been available.

“God it’s hot in here,” said Officer Rosemary Tippetts. “Like an oven.”

I glanced around the big circular room. The walls, solidly made of brick, curved to form a dome high over our heads. The dead man, chained to a steel chair, sat in the center of the space. Summer light drifted through a few broken windows high overhead.

“This is the old Macon Clay Works,” I said. “They made bricks and pavers here. This is one of the rooms where they had kilns. I remember my father talking about this place. He worked here when he was a kid fresh out of high school. Said it was like working in hell. The fires, the heat, the smoke—it was a tough, hard environment. Dad quit and got a job in a coal mine because the working conditions were better. Imagine that! A damned coal mine was a nicer place than this.”

I stepped back to allow the photographer to get close to the man’s battered and bloodsoaked face. Snap, snap, snap. He didn’t miss a gory detail. After a few more snaps he nodded to the medical examiner. “Okay, he’s all yours.”

Carefully, Dr. Robertson loosened the chains binding the victim to the chair. I watched as she and her assistants carefully lifted the body onto the gurney. Dr. Robertson felt in the pockets of the guy’s jeans. She looked at me. “No identification.”

“Of course not,” I replied. “Why should it be easy?”

One of my officers called from the edge of the room. “We got something here,” he said as he backed away from whatever he was looking at on the grimy cement floor.

Dr. Robertson walked over to where the officer was pointing. She bent down and then waved the photographer over. He took a few pictures. When he was finished Dr. Robertson carefully

picked up two small objects and place each into an evidence bag, which she handed to an assistant. She came back over to where I was standing.

“You wanted to know what color his eyes were?”

“Not really,” I replied. “It was more of a rhetorical question.”

“Well, they were blue. As blue as the sky.”

“Okay. Any guess as to what killed him, aside from getting his eyes divorced from his head?”

“The eye gouging wouldn’t kill him. Neither would being beaten and burned with cigarettes on his arms and face. And there are dozens of very small cuts all over him—all of them extremely painful, none of them fatal. This was no routine execution. It took a long time for him to die. This murder was either very personal or else the perp was a real twisted sicko. Or both. I don’t know what killed the victim. He’s a young guy, maybe thirty years old, and in good shape. I’ll know more when I get him on the table.”

The cigarette burns interested me. The heavy metal chair to which the victim had been chained was in the center of the room, facing the big double doors. About twenty feet from the chair was another chair of the same industrial vintage, facing the victim’s chair. I went to it and looked at the floor. I called the photographer.

“Did you get shots of these ashes?” I asked him.

“Yeah,” he replied.

Tippets joined me.

“Careful,” I said. “Don’t step any closer.” Getting on my hands and knees I looked more closely at the rough concrete. “See that? The guy who was sitting in this chair ground out his cigarette on the floor. There’s a scorched mark and little fragments of tobacco. Make sure we collect those bits.”

“There are a few more spots,” added Tippets, who was now on her knees too. “I’d say the person who sat here smoked a half-dozen cigarettes. But he didn’t leave any of the butts.”

“He watches enough cop shows on television to know we can get DNA from them,” I replied. “I count six scorch marks. I used to smoke, and even when I was doing a pack a day, I’d probably smoke two cigarettes an hour. There’s only so much nicotine your body can handle. Let’s say the guy sat in this chair and never walked around, and he smoked as he sat. He had to be sitting here for three or four hours. If he got up to take a stroll, it could have been longer.”

I stood up and walked over to the entrance with the big double doors. Looking carefully at the cracked and weedy cement walkway I spotted another scorch mark. “He came out here and put out a cigarette. He—or they—were at this location a long time.”

High overhead, the sun was blazing like a furnace. The air outside was not much cooler than the sweltering oven inside. There was no wind. I felt sweat trickling down my temples. Taking off my hat, I wiped my forehead with my sleeve.

“Have you heard the weather report?” asked Tippets.

“Yeah. No break. It’s going to be miserable all week. The Forest Service has extended its no-campfire order. The woods are as dry as tinder. The city says no watering of your lawn, no washing your car.”

“When the creeks dry up the deer will be forced to look for water,” said Tippets. “Hunting season starts in three weeks. I hope we get some rain before then.”

Chapter 2

“Where’s the homeless guy who found the victim?” I asked.

Tippets took me to a shady spot around the corner. Sitting on the ground was a man I had seen around town. Usually he was drunk. This morning he looked stone cold sober, and plenty scared.

“Calvin, how’re you doing?” I asked. “Tell me what happened.”

“Gimme something to drink, will ya?” he whined.

“Talk first.”

“Okay, okay. I came by here late last night, looking for a place to crash. I saw the door was open so I went inside. It was dark and I couldn’t see nothin’. So I lay down and went to sleep. This morning I woke up and looked around. That’s when I saw that man, chained to the chair. I had been sleeping with a dead guy! I freaked out and got out of there as fast as I could. I was scared he’d wake up and chase after me. Like one of those zombies. I ran to the highway. A police car was driving by and he stopped. I said, ‘You gotta go to the kiln building! There’s something evil in there!’ The cop told me I was hallucinating. I said no, I was telling the truth. And you see? I was.”

“Yes, Calvin, you were telling the truth,” I said. “You didn’t touch the body? You didn’t take anything?”

“Touch it? Take anything? Are you kidding? I wouldn’t go near it!”

“We searched him,” said Tippets. “He’s got nothing on him.”

“Okay, have someone take him to the shelter,” I said.

“How about that drink?” said Calvin. “I’ve been dry since yesterday.”

“There’s plenty of good strong coffee at the shelter.”

Returning to the door of the kiln building, Tippets and I watched as the medical examiner and her assistant wheeled the body out of the darkness of the building and into the open doors of the truck.

“All right, let’s head back to the office,” I said.

Chapter 3

I got into my cruiser, which, despite environmental regulations, I had left idling to keep the air conditioning running. The coolness was a relief.

I wheeled the car along the maze of rutted streets that long ago were crowded with the vehicles and business of the Macon Clay Works. In its heyday before the Second World War, this once-mighty industrial complex covering fifty acres of land along the Susquehanna River took the local clay and made billions of bricks and paving stones that were shipped all over the world. But now it was abandoned, and no buyers were in sight. Part of my job as sheriff was to keep an eye on the place and keep out homeless guys like Calvin, kids who came here for kicks or to get high, and scrap metal thieves looking for anything left to steal.

At the station I went to my office. I was looking at my computer when Tippetts walked in.

“So how’s your mom?” I asked. “With all the excitement this morning I forgot to ask.”

“Not very well, but thanks for asking. She’s been having chest pains. The doctors think it’s a complication of her diabetes. She has to go to the hospital to have some tests done on her heart.”

“I wish her the best of luck. What’s on our schedule?”

“Jack Kampo is in the interview room.”

We had picked him up after a raid on a local garage revealed that the place wasn’t exactly a garage where you could get your car fixed. It was a chop shop. If your car ever had the misfortune to be taken there, there was only one way it would come out: in pieces.

I went to the interview room and sat down at the little table across from Kampo. He was a weaselly, bready-eyed rodent of a human being, with slick black hair combed over to one side of a pale pimply head that needed a good scrubbing. His eyes darted to me, to the table, to his hands—he had a hard time focusing on any one thing longer than two or three seconds. His red plaid grunge-rocker shirt was open at the collar, revealing more black hair peeking out from behind the button. He looked like a guy you could knock over with a good sneeze, but those are the guys you’ve got to watch carefully because sometimes they’re surprisingly vicious.

“Mr. Kampo, I’m Sheriff Chris DeAngelo,” I said by way of introduction.

“Yeah, I know who you are,” he muttered. His eyes searched the room.

I looked at my reports. Then I looked at Kampo. “Yours is a routine case of auto theft and possession of stolen property, with one exception. Do you know what that exception might be?”

“I don’t know. Am I a litterbug too?”

“That would be the least of your problems. One of the vehicles we recovered from your garage was a Lincoln town car. We traced the vehicle identification number. A week ago the car was reported stolen by a little old lady in Harrisburg. It was a creampuff—low mileage, driven only on Sundays. A shame to see a nice car like that turned into spare parts.”

“So what?” sneered Kampo.

“There’s more. On the back seat we found blood. What can you tell me about that?”

Kampo shrugged his bony shoulders. “Nothin’. Maybe the old lady’s dog died in her car. Maybe she was a hunter. I don’t do background checks.”

“I don’t think her dog died in the back seat, and not many hunters around here drive Lincoln town cars when they head for the woods. We’re having the blood tested. What if it’s not a dog or a deer?”

“Beats me. I didn’t do nothin’.”

For twenty minutes we went around and around like that. I realized the guy wasn’t going to give me anything.

“Okay, Mr. Kampo, have it your way,” I said as I stood up. “But I’ll be seeing you again very soon.”

He shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Chapter 4

It was lunchtime. The sight of the mutilated corpse at the brick factory hadn't ruined my appetite. I guess after twenty-one years with the Macon, Pennsylvania sheriff's department I was getting hardened to the job. I drove to Denny's Beef and Brew, the no-frills spot for "Gut-Busting Burgers" on River Road. The burgers were enormous, the beer was cold, and the waitresses were friendly. I took a seat at the bar and ordered a Denny's Double Cheeseburger with Bourbon Bacon and a side of fries. No beer, though—I was on duty. I settled for a diet soda, even though I hate all diet drinks because they taste like eighth-grade lab experiments gone wrong. I could have had a near-beer, I suppose, but I didn't want to be seen at the bar drinking anything that even *resembled* real beer. Too many people in Macon were convinced I was a lush who managed to keep his job by some mysterious workings of fate or the support of our illustrious mayor, Elaine Strick, which was funny because Madam Mayor hated my guts and only tolerated me because she trusted everybody else even less than she trusted me. I guess she figured that since I was a known quantity I was the safe bet.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a man approach the empty stool next to me at the bar. "This seat taken?" he said. The voice was familiar.

I turned. "Hey, Stanley, it's good to see you," I said. "Sure, have a seat."

The last time I had seen Stanley Hopkins was at the funeral of his father, which had been at the end of July. I knew his father. His name was Richard "Doc" Hopkins, and he had been a science teacher at the high school. In ninth grade I had taken biology from him. He wasn't a real doctor; for some reason kids started calling him "Doc" and the name stuck even though Principal Dewey strongly disapproved of students calling the teachers anything other than Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So. Stanley was in the class as well, and at the time I felt bad for Stanley on account of him having his own dad as his teacher and the teacher of his friends. But it worked out okay, and we survived; and in fact Doc Hopkins was a pretty cool dude who showed us how to dissect frogs. We each got our own frog, and we learned all the different internal parts. One day he even brought in a cat to dissect. Obviously the school couldn't afford to get every kid in the class their own cat to dissect, and it was made very clear to us that attempting to dissect a regular housecat would get you sent to reform school. Doc Hopkins dissected the cat while we watched. The lab

had prepared the cat by injecting blue or red latex into its veins and arteries, so the circulatory system was easy to see.

Doc Hopkins had died of a massive stroke. He was only sixty-three years old, but he had coronary heart disease, which is caused by too much plaque building up in his arteries. His death came as a big shock because he had been seeing his doctor regularly and had been taking an anticoagulant that's supposed to thin your blood and prevent the formation of clots. It didn't matter. One night he collapsed on the back terrace of the family home—the one that Stanley and his sisters had grown up in—and by the time the EMTs got to him he was already dead.

Stanley sat next to me and picked up a menu, which he didn't look at; he just held it in his hand.

"I'm getting a lawyer," he said. "I'm suing."

"Oh? Who? What for?" I hadn't known Stanley to be particularly litigious. In fact he was one of the most easygoing guys I knew. He was in the insurance business. He and his wife Rita and their three kids lived in Country Club Hills, a nice neighborhood full of people who didn't sue each other.

"I'm suing Venus Pharma. They made the heparin that dad was taking. It's supposed to prevent strokes by keeping your blood from clogging. But it obviously didn't work. Something was wrong."

I didn't know much about heparin other than it was a widely used drug that had made the headlines a decade earlier when it was discovered that much of the raw heparin stock imported from China was contaminated. Apparently they make the stuff from pig's intestines—don't ask me how—and over eighty people had died from the bad batch. I'm not a genius, but it seems to me that anytime you combine the words "pig's intestines" and "China," you're asking for trouble.

"You said you have a lawyer."

"Yeah. Lionel Humphrey. He's done a bunch of big personal injury cases. He sued Trinity Coal for black lung disease and got his clients fifty million dollars. He's agreed to represent me."

"He's going to sue Venus Pharma? Does he have evidence that the heparin somehow failed to protect your father?"

"We'll find out," replied Stanley. "This is all happening right now. I talked to Humphrey two days ago—on Monday, it was. In the afternoon. I gave him dad's remaining supply of heparin."

He's having it tested. If it's no good, we have a case. But even if it's good we may still have a case, against the doctor or the hospital. I don't care." His voice became more acidic as he spat out the words. He jabbed the air with his finger. "Dad didn't have to die! Someone screwed up. There's no way he should have had that stroke."

The bartender, who had been hovering nearby, decided that he had waited long enough for a break in the conversation. He sidled over to Stanley and smiled.

Stanley looked up.

"What can I get for you today, sir?" said the bartender.

"What? Oh. Yes. Sorry. I'll have the chicken salad sandwich on whole wheat. And a beer."

The bartender went away.

"Well, good luck with your legal action," I said. "Keep me posted on how it goes, will you?" To cool Stanley down I steered the conversation towards the topic of our weekly poker games that a bunch of us, including Stanley, had organized. Stanley hadn't played since his dad had died. I told him the guys wanted to see him.

"Isn't it time we had a game at your house, Mr. Sheriff?" he asked.

This was a sore spot. I was the only member of the group who wasn't married, and therefore my house lacked that certain feeling of hospitality that women know how to create. Things like having curtains on the windows and a fresh roll of toilet paper in the bathroom.

"It's no excuse," the others would say. "Just set up the damned table and make sure the refrigerator is turned on to keep the beer cold."

To make Stanley happy I promised to host the next game at my house.

Chapter 5

After lunch I went over to the medical examiner's office. Dr. Thompson had texted me that she had some results to share with me. I found her in the examining room. The dead man lay on the table with his chest sawed open and his guts exposed for all the world to see. Dr. Thompson was getting ready to saw open his skull and take out his brain. For the poor guy things were just getting worse and worse.

"Sheriff, thanks for coming over," she said as she put aside her saw. Stripping off her gloves she picked up a clipboard, to which her notes were attached.

"Please tell me something useful," I said.

"I don't know how useful this is going to be to you, but it sure is interesting," she replied. "Despite his many painful injuries, John Doe died of irreversible brain damage caused by hypoglycemia."

"Low blood sugar?"

"Yes. Unlike your muscles, which can store sugar as glycogen, the brain can't. For its metabolism it's dependent on the sugar that's readily available in the blood. A sudden drop in blood sugar will make you feel sweaty, shaky, and nervous. If you don't do something pretty quickly to correct the situation you'll get a headache, have problems concentrating, and feel dizzy. As the blood sugar continues to drop you'll have problems speaking and may experience seizures. If it sinks any lower you suffer irreversible brain damage, and then the brain stops working and you die."

"Okay, so to add to John Doe's misery at being beaten, burned, and having his eyes gouged out, his brain died from hypoglycemia. Why?"

"The hypoglycemia was the mechanism of death. The cause of death was a massive overdose of insulin." Going to the body, she showed me the right arm. "These two puncture wounds tipped me off. His blood tests revealed nearly zero blood sugar and off-the-charts levels of insulin."

"It seems weird that the body would do that to itself," I said. "I mean, to just keep taking sugar out of the bloodstream until the brain dies."

Dr. Thompson shrugged. "When insulin enters the bloodstream it goes to the liver, the muscles, and the fat cells of the body and *orders* them to take in sugar and store it. These cells

don't know what's happening elsewhere in the body. They just follow the commands of the hormones. The liver, muscles, and fat cells don't know that their actions are killing the brain."

"So John Doe, in the midst of his horrible suffering and torture, was killed by an injection of insulin. What was the manner of death? What are you ruling?"

"Now and then people try to commit suicide by insulin overdose. But John Doe was chained to the chair and could not possibly have injected himself. Meanwhile someone was violently assaulting him with the intent to kill him. I'm ruling it murder."

"How long did it take for him to die?"

"That's another aspect of the horror. Death by insulin overdose comes slowly. It takes time for the liver, muscles, and fat cells to absorb sugar from the bloodstream."

"How long?"

"Because of there are two injection sites, I'm thinking that the killer gave him one dose and then waited until he was unconscious before giving him a second massive dose that would hasten death. The entire process could have taken anywhere from two to five hours."

"What time did he die?"

"About ten o'clock last night."

"Okay," I said. "Anything else?"

"I sent his fingerprints to the State Police. No match. He's not in the criminal system. His face is so swollen and bruised that I'm not sure anyone would recognize him. But there are two things that may help us." She handed me an eight-by-ten inch color photo. It showed an elaborate dragon tattoo. "This is on his back. It's very distinctive." She handed me a second photo. "He has one other tattoo—on his upper arm is a heart with the name 'Lisa' in it."

I looked at the photos. "Lisa is not going to be happy."

Chapter 6

When I returned to the station house I showed Tippets the photos of John Doe's tattoos. Being a few years younger than me, I figured she was more plugged into the local ink scene than I was. After looking at the dragon tattoo she said, "Of all the tattoo parlors in the area, I think we should start with Bob Dayton. He could pull off something like this, or he would know who could."

Bob Dayton worked out of an old storefront in downtown Macon. It was one of those noble old nineteenth-century brick buildings with the ironwork around the windows and iron columns supporting the front vestibule. His shop, Macon Tattoo, was on the ground floor. Tippets and I found him in the back office. He was eating his lunch. He was about fifty years old and he looked like an old-school biker. He had a big brown beard and a ponytail, and he was wearing faded jeans with one of those chrome chains that go from your belt to your wallet. His forearms and neck were inked. He peered at me over a pair of rimless reading glasses.

"Sheriff DeAngelo, how may I help you?" he said. He spoke in the deep baritone of a classically trained Shakespearean actor, which, in fact, he was.

I showed him the photo of the dragon tattoo. He looked at it thoughtfully. "Yes, it looks like mine," he said as he handed the photo back to me. "I've done many of those over the years. It's an ouroboros, a circular symbol that shows the dragon biting its own tail. Although it seems like a self-defeating act for a dragon to eat itself, it's actually a symbol of eternity and wholeness. The ouroboros appears in Norse mythology as Jomungandr, a sea serpent that grew so large that it encircled the earth and swallowed its own tail. It became known as the World Serpent. It's often taken to symbolize introspection, the eternal return or cyclicity, especially in the sense of something constantly re-creating itself. It also represents the infinite cycle of nature's endless creation and destruction, life and death and despair."

"That's fascinating," I said, perhaps rather rudely. "What I need is the name of the person on whose back this design appears."

Dayton took the wax paper that his sandwich had been wrapped in and wadded it up into a ball, which he tossed into the trash basket. "Help me out here," he said. "I've done ten or fifteen full-back ouroboros over the years. Am I looking at a man or a woman?"

"Man. Age about thirty. Blue eyes. Caucasian."

He nodded. “He’s wanted for some crime?”

“He’s deceased.”

“Ah.”

“He also had a tattoo on his arm with the name ‘Lisa.’ What do you say?”

Dayton stroked his beard like a biker Santa Claus. “Lisa, huh? There was a guy I did about two years ago. It took three days to do the job on his back. I remember his wife or girlfriend came in during one of the sessions. He called her Lisa. She stuck in my mind because she was quite attractive. She was dressed like a regular civilian. She had no ink—at least none showing. You never can tell. Sometimes people who work in straight jobs are careful to keep the ink away from visible areas. Then when they take their shirt off, it’s like, ‘Whoa, you got some serious artwork on you.’”

“And the client’s name?”

Dayton went over to an old-fashioned oak desk and clicked on an equally old-fashioned iMac. After a few more clicks he said, “Wesley Hicks.”

“Address?”

“3491 East Poplar, in the West Side.”

Chapter 7

All the houses on East Poplar Street stood shoulder to shoulder, so that if you didn't have a good pair of curtains your neighbor could watch what you did as easily as they watched their own television. The people who lived here were teachers, restaurant workers, truckers, retirees. It was a quiet neighborhood, at least from a police perspective; the calls we got were mainly for domestic disturbances, kids getting into trouble, and the occasional drunk driver. While there was not much money here, there was some small measure of stability and the promise of a better future.

Standing on the highest point of land, number 3491 was the biggest and nicest house on the block. It was set further back from the street and had a much more expansive front yard. Every neighborhood is like that—among the average houses there are always one or two that are more expensive and luxurious than the others. I guess people who live in such houses feel good about their relatively exalted position next to their less-well-off neighbors.

Passing under a tall elm tree that provided cooling shade from the oppressive sun, I walked up the brick steps to the broad porch and knocked on the door. In the sullen heat there came answer. I called out, identifying myself as a police officer. No answer. I pushed open the door, which was unlocked, and stepped directly into the living room. It was a standard living room, comfortably cool, with a sofa and chairs and wide-screen television bolted to the wall. On the floor was a red carpet, well worn. Over the mantel of the fake fireplace hung a big framed poster of a football quarterback getting ready to throw a pass while an opponent rushed towards him.

On a table by the sofa was a bunch of photos in those inexpensive acrylic frames that stand up by themselves. I went over and picked one up. It showed a young man and a woman sitting by a fire in what looked like a campsite in the woods. I showed the photo to Tippets. “Do you think this could be our John Doe?”

She nodded.

At that moment a car pulled up outside. Through the front window I watched as it parked directly behind my cruiser. A woman got out of the car and, with a worried face, hurried to the front door. I met her there.

“Is something wrong?” she said. “I just went to the store for a moment.”

“Do you know a man named Wesley Hicks?” I asked.

“Yes, he’s my boyfriend. Why?”

“May we sit down? We have a few questions.”

“Sure—just let me take these groceries into the kitchen. Why don’t we talk in there?”

She led the way into the kitchen, a cheery space with a matching yellow refrigerator and stove, and a window that gave a view of the back yard. She put the bag on the counter and we sat down at the table.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Lisa Fielding. I live here with Wesley. We bought this house together two years ago.”

“When was the last time you saw Wesley?”

“Yesterday afternoon at about five o’clock. He said he had some business.”

“You haven’t seen him since?”

“No, and I’m getting worried. He often travels on business but he always tells me when he’ll be back. I’ve called him but it goes to voicemail.”

Tippets showed Lisa the photographs of the tattoos. “Do you recognize these?” she asked.

“Oh my God,” she gasped. She pointed to the arm tattoo of the heart and her name. “Wesley got that on the first anniversary of our meeting. I told him it was silly but he insisted.”

“Ms. Fielding,” I said, “I’m sorry to tell you this but we believe that Wesley Hicks was murdered last night. Do you know anyone who might want to hurt him?”

Tears gathered in her eyes. “No—of course not,” she stammered.

It’s never easy to tell someone that their loved one has died, and especially if they were murdered. But I couldn’t allow myself to forget that the tearful woman sitting across from me had not been ruled out as a suspect. Did she commit the savage killing herself? Probably not, but it could have been another boyfriend who did it, or part of some twisted plan to dispose of Mr. Hicks. You never know until you start seeing evidence.

Lisa told us that Wesley Hicks was a salesman. Of what? She wasn’t sure—some kind of medical supplies. His work involved lots of travel.

I asked if we could look around. Lisa gave her consent.

Tippets and I went through the house. In the bathroom I found a man’s toothbrush and other personal items. Tippets bagged them for use in DNA identification of the body. Upstairs was a small office. Lisa told us that it used to be a bedroom, but since they had no children, Wesley had taken it over. On the desk was a computer, which we seized. Lisa told us she didn’t mind

because she never used it. There was a pile of papers, which I examined. One was a contract for a commercial storage unit. I asked Lisa if she knew anything about it. She said no. It was becoming clear to me that Wesley Hicks didn't share much about his business with his girlfriend.

After confirming that Hicks had a mother living in Wilkes-Barre—she would eventually have to claim the body—we left.

Chapter 8

Fifteen minutes later Tippets and I parked the cruiser by the front door of the office of E-Z Safe Storage. It was one of those nondescript industrial-looking places near the interstate highway, with a dozen sheet metal and cinderblock sheds that looked like long garages with doors arranged in rows on a flat treeless parcel surrounded by a fence. As I stepped out of the car, the heat, intensified by the reflective surfaces of the buildings and hard black asphalt under my feet, hit me like an oven door suddenly opening. Tippets pulled open the plain metal door of the office and I was relieved to be met by cool air-conditioned air. Behind a desk under a bank of fluorescent lights sat a man with an unlit cigar between his fingers and a pair of reading glasses perched on his rather lumpy nose. With his bald head and bear-like build he looked like a corner man for an over-the-hill boxer.

Without looking up he said, “Can I help you?”

Approaching his desk I slipped the Hicks contract under his nose. “We need to get into this unit.”

The man looked up. “Oh—sheriff. Sorry. Didn’t realize you were the law. You got a warrant?”

I showed him my phone. “It’s on its way. You can either get me riled up by making me wait or you can make me happy by letting us do our job.”

“What about the renter?” Through his glasses he peered at the contract. “Wesley Hicks?”

“You won’t be seeing him any more,” said Tippets. “He’s gone to that great storage unit in the sky.”

“Okay,” replied the man as he stuck his cold cigar in his mouth. He didn’t even bother to ask more about Hicks—the fact that he was dead was all the guy needed, or wanted, to know. He clicked around his computer. “Unit G-22.” Getting up from his armchair, which wasn’t easy because his stomach was round like a potato sack and he had two skinny sticks for legs, he waddled to a cabinet. He opened the metal door and selected a key from among the dozens hanging on little hooks. “Follow me,” he said, the cigar still jammed in the corner of his mouth.

We went out into the searing heat. The man led us to one of the rows of sheds—row G, as was painted on the endcap shed in big white letters—and then down the row to number twenty-two. He unlocked it and I said, “Thanks, we’ll take it from here.”

It had a door like on a garage that you pull up. The air was hotter than it was outside and I began to perspire. After I had stepped inside, it took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. I saw before me half a dozen wooden shipping palettes on which were stacked ordinary cardboard cartons. The cartons bore various labels. I went to the nearest one. Its label bore the name and logo of Aphex Pharmaceutical. After slipping on a pair of gloves I opened the box, which was not sealed. Inside were consumer-sized boxes of Invigro, a drug for erectile dysfunction.

Another carton held boxes of insulin vials. Another held drugs for depression.

“Anybody else inquire about Mr. Hicks or this unit?” I asked the man with the cigar.

“Nope,” he replied. “He paid his rent on time. No problems with him.”

“Okay,” I said. “We’re going to seal off this unit. Officers will be arriving to go through these materials and take them to the police lab.”

Leaving Tippets at EZ Safe Storage to await the crime scene guys, I went back to the station.

Chapter 9

I was behind my desk when I got an email. The lab had determined that the blood in the back seat of the car at Jack Kampo's chop shop was human. The stain had been there no longer than forty-eight hours.

I had Kampo brought to the interrogation room. I found him slumped in his chair. His face wore a sour expression like a teenager whose dad had just taken away the car keys. He glanced at me as I sat down across from him.

"When can I get out of here?" he asked. "Can't I put up bail or something?"

"You'll be arraigned tomorrow, and if the judge grants you bail, you'll be free until your trial. But you may not get bail."

"Why not?"

"Because we have a big problem. The blood that was found in the back of that Lincoln town car is human. Someone bled in that car. Any guess as to why?"

Kampo sat up in his chair and shrugged his boney shoulders. "How the hell should I know? Maybe someone got a bloody nose." He said it a little too loudly and too quickly. I could sense he was trying hard to be a tough guy but he couldn't hide his nervousness.

I smiled. "Jack—may I call you Jack?—you don't strike me as the type to kill someone. Unless maybe you got mad at your girlfriend? Did you beat her up in the back seat of the fancy car?"

His eyes flashed in genuine anger. "I didn't touch my girl! You can ask her! Her name is Crystal. I'll give you her number. I'm telling you, I didn't do a damn thing in that car."

"It won't be long before we get the DNA analysis of the blood," I said. "Then we'll start matching it up against open cases. Sooner or later we're going to roll lucky sevens. We'll be able to link the car with a crime. I know the prosecutor. He loves nothing more than casting a wide net and charging everyone and everyone involved. Especially a murder case. You know how easy it is to convict someone as an accessory after the fact? Hell, I bet we could convict the guy at the service station who pumped the gas into this car. We could convict the guy who runs the damn car wash where this car took a run through the brushes. And you? As the poor schmuck who tried to destroy evidence, you'll be a prime target. It's Pennsylvania statute 5105, entitled 'Hindering apprehension or prosecution.' It says, 'A person commits an offense if, with intent to

hinder the apprehension, prosecution, conviction or punishment of another for crime or violation of the terms of probation, parole, intermediate punishment or Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition, he conceals or destroys evidence of the crime, or tampers with a witness, informant, document or other source of information, regardless of its admissibility in evidence,' and so on. First-degree felony, up to twenty years in prison.”

He gave his thin lips a good licking. Taking a deep breath, he said, “He’ll kill me.”

“The guy who sold you the car?”

“He didn’t sell it to me. He just told me to get rid of it. As a favor.”

“A favor? What was the favor he would do in return—not burn down your garage?”

“You don’t know these people. They’ll kill me in a heartbeat.”

“You can choose to go to prison for twenty years. How old will you be when you get out? Forty-five? Fifty? It’s a rough life. I hope you’re ready.”

As he sat there, glowering, with his arms folded tightly across his chest, he started rocking back and forth in his chair. I readied myself for a violent outburst. But after a moment he stopped rocking. It was like someone had pulled the plug and let the air out of him.

“I’m screwed either way,” he moaned.

“Tell me what happened, and I’ll see what I can do.”

With a sign he ran a thin hand through his greasy hair. “Okay. Rocky Morell brought me the car. Asked me to get rid of it. He said that my being a good team player would not be forgotten.”

“Did he mention who else was on the team?”

“Nah.”

“Why would he come to you? Had you gotten cars from him before?”

“Yeah, once in a while. He knew my brother in high school.”

“Who’s your brother?”

“Kevin Kampo. He died last year. Hunting accident.”

I remembered the case. Just after Thanksgiving, Kevin Kampo had been deer hunting. He was up in Elliott State Park, deep in the woods, when he apparently had been cleaning his rifle when it went off, killing him instantly. Two days later his body was found. It was hidden by newly fallen snow; the State Police bloodhound had made the discovery. Personally, I couldn’t figure out how he managed to accidentally shoot himself in the head. I thought it was suicide, or perhaps even murder, but the coroner ruled it an accident. Case closed.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said. “How do you contact Morell?”

“I don’t. He calls me.”

Chapter 10

I thanked Kampo for his cooperation and told him I'd get back to him. In my office, I did some research on Rocky Morell. He lived in Philipsburg, a town of a few thousand people about twenty miles south of Macon. His juvenile record was sealed. As an adult he had been arrested for assault (a bar fight) and petty larceny (passing a bad check at a liquor store). Charges were dropped on both. He had also been investigated for car theft, but never arrested.

I wasn't getting too excited until, under "known associates," I saw the name Rudolph Testa. That was interesting.

Testa was rumored to be a Philadelphia mobster—a *capo* in the Bruno crime family. Age forty-six, he was born in Philadelphia and had worked at the usual criminal activities including loan sharking, gambling, and protection rackets. He was suspected in the death of Alfredo "Shorty" Perroni, who had been found buried in a shallow grave on the grounds of an abandoned factory in Norristown. Perroni's bound arms had been burned with cigarettes before he had been strangled with a chain.

The story—never proven—was that Perroni had made the mistake of banging one of Testa's girlfriends, an aspiring reality-TV star named Molly Sky. A New Jersey girl, her real name was Mauretina Skylovski. Apparently Testa didn't approve of this dalliance. Molly Sky vanished. The word on the street was she had abruptly gone home to her mother in Trenton. The problem was that said mother, Mrs. Eva Skylovski, swore her daughter never crossed the threshold. Perroni vanished too, until a gas company crew had the temerity to dig at the old factory without clearing it with the Bruno family in advance. The discovery of the corpse didn't produce charges; denials and alibis flowed plentifully, and the district attorney never had the evidence to make a case.

In recent years Rudolph Testa had been seen around Macon and other central Pennsylvania towns. The theory was that he was trying to expand the family's territory and establish networks for prescription pills, opioids, booze, and hookers. The Bruno family was a very diversified operation—if it could make a profit, they'd do it.

The chain, the cigarettes—it seemed like a kill signature worth pursuing. But why murder Hicks so viciously? Mob hits are usually clean. Just business. In Perroni's case the transgression had been personal, but he hadn't been tortured as ruthlessly and as thoroughly as Hicks. If Testa

were involved, whatever Hicks had done must have been plenty worse than screwing one of his boss's girlfriends.

Chapter 11

For dinner I drove to Toscano, the fancy Italian place owned by my friend Dave Valenti. I went there because it was air conditioned, the food was good, and Testa had once put the squeeze on Dave. I thought it'd be worthwhile to get an update.

As I was driving, Tippetts called to confirm what I suspected: The DNA lab had determined the blood in the back of the Lincoln town car belonged to Wesley Hicks. This meant that we needed to find Rocky Morell, and it made me more interested in Rudolph Testa. I thanked her and asked her to get everything we had on Testa. She said she was going off duty and asked if Officer Montana could do it because he was working the overnight desk. Irwin Montana was older than me and had been with the department a lot longer, but he had never gotten past patrol officer because his personal life was a mess and he drank too much. In fact, seeing how Irwin Montana's career had remained stuck in first gear had helped motivate me to get my act together and control my drinking. I didn't want to end up like him—passed over again and again for promotions that he should have been able to get.

I called Montana and asked him to pull up the files on Testa. He asked why, and I told him he was a person of interest in the Hicks murder. Montana said he'd get right on it.

The restaurant was crowded so I sat at the bar. I like to sit at the bar and eat because when you're alone you feel less conspicuous than if you were sitting at a table by yourself. Someone interesting might sit next to you, and you can always converse with the bartender if they aren't too busy.

I was off duty, so I ordered a beer and a shot of bourbon with my steak and French fries. I'll admit there were times during the day when I was annoyed that I didn't have a bottle of whiskey in my bottom desk drawer. When I got off work, that first drink of the day always tasted damned good; but I think I had learned my lesson about booze, and for the past few months I'd been able to resist the temptation to buy a bottle for the desk drawer. I was managing to make it through the workday without liquor touching my lips. I knew that if I couldn't keep my drinking under control I'd have no choice but to go on the wagon and join Alcoholics Anonymous. I was feeling pretty proud of myself for maintaining my self-discipline, at least in the booze department.

Dave Valenti came behind the bar to look at the cash register. He saw me and walked over.

“Hey, Chris,” he smiled. Because I had known Dave since we were kids in Saint Francis Square, he was one of the few people in town who called me by my first name regardless of the situation. “You being taken care of?”

“Absolutely,” I replied. I motioned him to come closer. “Say, has Rudolph Testa been around here recently?”

He nodded. “He’s coming tonight. When you’re done eating, come up to the office. We can talk there.”

Lisa, the bartender, was both attractive and congenial—Dave always hired the best people—so it was nearly eight o’clock when I finally gave up my seat and made my way up the narrow stairs to the second floor. I found Dave behind his desk.

We made chitchat for a few minutes before I asked him about Testa. “Has he threatened you?”

He shrugged. “Not overtly. But I get the message. He presents himself as a legitimate businessman. Has a company called Eastern Central Beverage Distributors. Provides beer, wine, and hard liquor to the restaurant trade. The stuff he sells is overpriced crap. I buy a couple of cases of his bottom-shelf booze every week, and most of it I throw away. It’s watered-down swill.”

“Dave, why didn’t you reach out to me?” I asked. “We’ve been friends since our mothers took us to the same playground, for Christ’s sake. I’m the damn sheriff! I’m supposed to know what’s going on in my town.”

He looked sheepish. “I don’t want to get in the middle of anything,” he said as he raised his hands in surrender. “If paying Testa a couple of hundred bucks every week keeps him happy, then I’ll do it. I don’t want any trouble. It’s not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal? Dave, what’s wrong with you? You can’t keep going on like this forever. When you’re seventy years old are you still going to be paying this guy?”

“Okay, okay,” he said. “You made your point. I’ll think about it.”

His desk phone rang. He picked it up. “Thanks,” he said before hanging up. “Speak of the devil—ten seconds from now, walking through that door will be none other than Rudolph Testa.”

Chapter 12

I barely had time to swivel my chair to face the visitor when, without a knock, the door opened and Rudolph Testa entered the office. When he saw me he froze for an instant before putting a big fake smile on his face. He looked at Dave. “Sorry—I didn’t realize you were in a meeting. I’ll wait downstairs.”

Before he could turn and close the door behind him, I said, “That’s quite all right, Mr. Testa. Dave and I are just shooting the breeze, talking about the good old days in Saint Francis Square. Please come in.”

He stopped and turned. After looking at both of us and deciding, I suppose, that since his business was “legitimate” he had nothing to fear, he slowly closed the door and pulled up the chair opposite mine.

“Mr. Testa,” I said with a smile, “I understand you’re in the liquor distribution business.”

“Yes, I am, sheriff” he said defensively. “Everything clean and legal.”

“You’re pretty far away from Philadelphia.”

“I’ve got family in Central Pennsylvania. Anyway, we’re just trying to expand our territory. Nothing wrong with that, is there?” He gave me a challenging look.

“No, not at all,” I smiled. “Say, what are you selling today? May I see what you’ve got?”

“I don’t have product with me right now,” he replied. “I’m here to see what my good friend Dave Valenti needs. Whatever he wants, we can get. Isn’t that right, Dave?”

“Yeah, sure,” nodded Dave.

I shot Dave a stern glance. He avoided eye contact. I made a mental note that at the first available opportunity I’d take Dave behind the restaurant and kick his ass for being such a wimp. His willingness to be intimidated by the likes of Rudolph Testa was extremely disappointing. He wasn’t behaving the way kids from Saint Francis Square were supposed to behave.

I looked back at Testa.

“You must have *something* here from—what’s the name of your company?” I asked.

“Eastern Central Beverage Distributors,” he said.

“I see crates all over this office,” I said. “Can you show me one of your products?”

Dave got up and went to one of the boxes and pulled out a bottle. He handed it to me.

“Caribbean Gold Premium Rum,” I read from the label. “Looks good.” I pulled open the protective seal and popped the cork top. “You got a glass?” I asked Dave. “I’d hate to be rude and drink from the bottle.”

As Testa watched with a scowl on his face, Dave got a bar glass from a shelf on the wall. After eyeing it to make sure it was clean, he set it on the edge of his desk. I poured a shot of Caribbean Gold Premium and then lifted the glass to my lips.

The taste was something between watered-down piss and a dead fish floating belly-up in the Susquehanna River. It was all I could do to not spit the vile concoction onto the floor. Keeping a straight face even as the toxic sludge burned its way down my throat, I set the glass on the desk.

With my lips clamped shut I forced a smile and nodded. I felt my eyes watering and had to blink a few times to clear them. Then, after the acid flavor had abated, I said, “Caribbean Gold, huh? It packs quite a punch. Yessir, it’s got quite a kick.” I looked at Dave. “This reminds me of the elixir we used to steal from old man LaCosta’s drugstore when we were kids. What was that stuff called?”

Dave glanced at Testa, who was still scowling. With all that frowning I would have thought the muscles of his face would have gotten tired by now. Looking at me, Dave gave a little shrug. “I dunno,” he said. “I forget.”

“You remember,” I smiled. “It was Dr. Gumper’s Patent Cough Syrup. Ten percent codeine. Man, drinking that stuff was liked getting kicked in the teeth by a mule.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Testa stiffen and his scowl got even darker. I gave him a big smile. “Do *you* drink this stuff, Mr. Testa?”

“I run an honest business,” he retorted.

“That’s not what I asked.”

He said nothing.

“That’s okay,” I said breezily. “So how much do you charge per bottle for Caribbean Gold Premium Rum? I might want to pick up a few. Use it to unblock my toilet at home. I think Caribbean Gold Premium Rum would be better than Drano to keep it running smooth. You know what I mean?”

“You got a big mouth, sheriff,” said Testa.

“You’d better watch yours,” I replied. I stood up. “If my friend Dave chooses to waste his money buying this rotgut, that’s his business. But if he decides to cancel his account with you and you give him any heat, then it might become *my* business. Am I understood?”

Testa gave me something between a smile and a sneer. “Sure, sheriff. Perfectly understood.”

Chapter 13

The next morning I got up at dawn, which is highly unusual for me. Ordinarily I need several attempts by my hated alarm clock to rouse me from my slumber, but I suppose I was feeling energized by the prospects of tackling a big case. My problem is that I get bored easily. As a cop, after weeks of doing nothing but writing speeding tickets and breaking up fights between drunks, I'm ready to jump out of my skin. That's not to say I'm glad that poor Wesley Hicks got a preview of Hell before his untimely death. No one should suffer like that. But as long as it happened, someone had to jump on the case, and that's the kind of police work that I lived for.

As part of my ongoing effort to cut down on my drinking, I had gotten into the habit of making myself a normal, healthy breakfast. I was eating less sugar, too, which made me feel better. I don't know what's worse for you—alcohol or sugar. I know a guy who takes great pride in not drinking alcohol but he sucks down five soft drinks a day, and he looks like the Pillsbury Dough Boy—all soft and mushy. God knows what his arteries look like. Probably like old sewer pipes, full of gunk.

After enjoying two scrambled eggs, whole wheat toast, a banana, and black coffee, I went to the sink to wash the dishes. I've never owned a dishwasher. Never wanted one. I like washing dishes because there's something relaxing and therapeutic about it. Maybe it's the suds, or just the routine of washing and rinsing.

While I washed the dishes I looked out through the big kitchen window. My back yard faced the woods, and the view was nice. It calmed me down. Sometimes a deer would wander into the yard, or a fox. At such times my four-legged friends were welcome visitors. But during hunting season when I strapped on my orange vest and took my rifle to the State Game Lands, our relationship changed. Such is the way of the world.

I was looking out of the window and wondering when we'd get some rain to bring green to the undergrowth when something caught my eye. It was a movement behind a beech tree. Probably a deer, I thought. When there's a heat wave and a drought they get desperate and come right up to your house, looking for water or anything green to nibble on.

Suddenly the window exploded in a shower of glittering glass. I heard something slam into the cabinets behind my head. Without thinking I dropped to my knees, my hands still wet and sudsy.

Goddamn stupid hunter! I thought. *It's not even the season yet!*

I took a white kitchen towel and waved it over my head, within clear view of the idiot outside. There was silence. Gingerly I raised my head.

Another sharp crack and a second bullet smashed through what was left of the window, howled past my right ear, and plowed into the cabinets a little lower than the first shot.

I realized it was no misguided hunter. He was not shooting at deer. He was shooting at *me*.

On my hands and knees, I crawled across the glass-covered kitchen floor to the chair where I had hung my belt and holster. Taking my service revolver, I crawled out of the kitchen and through the living room to the front door of the house. Carefully, slowly, I opened the door. Hot summer air from outside flowed across my face. I felt a tickle. I put my hand to my forehead and then looked at my fingers. They were stained with blood. No matter—I had more important things to worry about.

I saw no movement. Crouching, I ran across the lawn and dove behind the big oak tree that shaded the driveway. Lying on the dry, hard ground, I waited. Hearing and seeing nothing unusual, carefully I circled around the house, keeping hidden behind trees, shrubs, and the old garage. Soon I was behind the fence with a view of the shattered kitchen window. The only sounds were the chirping of the cheerful birds and the drone of a commercial jet flying thirty thousand feet over my head. There was no wind and the air was humid and oppressive, even at this early hour.

Slowly, carefully, step by step, I made my way in a wide circle to the spot where I thought the gunman may have been. It was a stand of old beech trees, and there were several of them that, if you stood behind them, offered a clear line of sight to the kitchen window. I carefully searched the ground, covered in leaf litter and stunted grass. I found nothing.

Turning around, I squinted into the morning sun. The gunman must have retreated towards the road—Rural Route 138—that ran about a thousand yards behind my house. Keeping my eyes on the ground, I walked towards the road. I saw no evidence. After a few minutes I came to a row of dense prickly bushes, which I pushed through; and after crossing the ditch I was standing on Rural Route 138. It was a residential neighborhood, semi-rural, with plain frame houses on large lots roomy enough for parking old trucks, trailers, and farm equipment.

Even during what in most other places was morning rush hour, there was little traffic. I saw nothing suspicious. The sun was climbing in the sky and the blood on my face mingled with

sweat. Standing there in my civilian clothes, face bloody, holding a revolver, I must have looked like a character from a slasher movie. But to my amazement none of the cars and trucks that passed me slowed down. As they sped by, the drivers seemed to take no notice of me.

What was the world coming to?

I had no time to ponder these larger philosophical questions. Someone had tried to kill me and I had to find out who.

As I was turning to re-enter the woods and walk home, a tow truck pulled over to the shoulder. I glanced up and recognized the driver. He was one of the guys we used to tow illegally parked cars.

Alighting from his truck, he walked over to me. “Hey Sheriff DeAngelo—are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah—just had little dustup,” I replied. “I’m fine. No problem. I was just going home to get cleaned up for work. What brings you out here?”

“A tow job,” he replied. He took a slip of paper from his pocket. “About half an hour ago we got a call from one of your patrol officers. There was a car parked along here illegally. Too close to a fire hydrant. I guess it must have been that one, there.” He pointed to a yellow hydrant about fifty feet further along the road. “I got the call to tow it. I guess I’m too late—the guy must have driven away.”

“Let me see that,” I said. He handed me the paper. “Cadillac with Pennsylvania plates. Okay, thanks for your effort. I’ll handle it from here. Sorry you missed your guy. I’ll make sure you’re paid for the tow.”

“Gee, thanks Sheriff DeAngelo,” he replied. He went back to his truck and pulled away.

I went home, relieved that I had a solid line on whoever had tried to shoot me.

Chapter 14

After showering and making sure there were no more particles of glass stuck in my hair, I went to the station. Before filing the incident report I checked the registration of the Cadillac parked by the fire hydrant. The owner was Rocky Morell.

Tippets came into my office. “You look like you’re thinking deep thoughts,” she said. “You want some coffee?”

“Sure—thanks,” I replied. “The picture is coming into focus. Rocky Morell brought a stolen Lincoln to the chop shop operated by Jack Kampo. Told him to break up the car as a favor. It turns out the car was stained with the blood of Wesley Hicks, who was tortured and killed at the clay works. It’s safe to conclude that Wesley Hicks was transported to the clay works in the back seat of the Lincoln, and during the ride, or just before, someone worked him over to soften him up. Rocky Morell is a known associate of Rudolph Testa, the Philadelphia mobster. Testa is a nasty guy with a predilection towards excessive violence, as we see in the unsolved case of Shorty Perroni, who had been burned with cigarettes before being strangled with a chain. Maybe Testa did the murder, maybe not. But it serves as an opening for a theory.”

“And this morning,” said Tippets, “Someone driving a Cadillac registered to Rocky Morell took two shots at you while you were in your kitchen.”

“The crime scene guys are at my house now, trying to recover the bullets,” I said. “But that probably won’t help. I’m sure the rifle used to shoot at me is now at the bottom of the Susquehanna. And since Pennsylvania does not require the registration of firearms, even if we somehow found the gun we couldn’t make a connection to the owner.”

“Why would Rocky Morell want to kill you?”

“Because I’m getting too close to something.”

“It must be that Rudolph Testa is selling counterfeit booze. You threatened him last night.”

I drummed my fingers on the desktop. I shrugged. “Maybe. Somehow that seems like overkill, even for a guy like Testa. In any case, our first order of business is to apprehend Rocky Morell. Are you ready to saddle up?”

Twenty minutes later I eased my cruiser along a shady tree-lined suburban street outside of Philipsburg. Behind me were two backup units. “Number forty-seven is the third house on the left,” I told Tippets. “Blue with white shutters.”

“I see it,” she replied. “And I see a Cadillac parked in the driveway. A black SRX.”

“That’s our man.”

I waited until one of the other units had sealed off the far end of the street. Then I got out of my cruiser.

“Hey sheriff, what’s going on?” asked a kid on a bicycle.

“Are you here to arrest a bad guy?” said his buddy, who was holding a skateboard under his arm.

“Can we watch?” demanded a third. Then a girl ran up the sidewalk to see what the excitement was all about.

“Kids, we need you to go to your homes and stay inside,” said Tippets.

“Aw, that’s no fun,” said the kid on the bike.

After a few minutes we had cleared the street and the Morell house was covered front and back. I went to the front door and knocked.

A woman came to the door. I asked to see Rocky Morell.

“He can’t see you now,” she replied without stepping aside.

“So he’s here—inside the house?”

“Umm... yes,” she hesitated.

Without further conversation I pushed past her. Behind me, an officer hustled her out of the house to a cruiser, where we’d keep her on ice.

With guns drawn Tippets and I searched the first floor—living room, kitchen, pantry, dining room, a guest bedroom and bathroom. No Rocky Morell. We were at the foot of the stairs leading to the second floor when Tippets whispered to me, “Do you hear that? It sounds like someone singing.”

“It’s coming from upstairs,” I replied.

With my service revolver leading the way like a hunting dog in the field, we ascended the thickly carpeted treads. At the second floor landing we paused. Tippets motioned to the right, down a hall. We eased our way to a closed door. In the air was the faint smell of steam and a bath product—something musky and manly.

The singing was quite clear now. A man was singing an opera, and badly. His voice managed to hit one note out of three or four.

Gently I turned the brass doorknob and pushed. A wave of steam hit me in the face, instantly condensing in the chilly air-conditioned hallway. I stepped into a bathroom. The floor and the walls were covered in white tiles. Overhead, the ceiling light fixture glittered in the steamy cloud. Under a big foggy mirror was a marble-topped sink with two basins. An expensive-looking toilet sat in a discreet little alcove. At the far end of the room was a spacious glass-enclosed shower.

“Libiamo, ne’ lieti calici,” the voice—a tenor, more or less—sang lustily. *“Che la bellezza infiora, e la fuggevol ora s’inebria a voluttà!”*

“Verdi,” whispered Tippetts. “La Traviata.”

“Thanks,” I replied.

I approached the door of the shower. Through the pebbled glass I could see the fleshy bulk of a man vigorously soaping himself.

“Libiamo amore, amor fra i calici, più caldi baci avrà!” he bellowed like a tone-deaf mule.

I pulled open the door. “Rocky Morell, you’re under arrest,” I said. “Come out with your hands up.”

“Hey, what the hell—!” he turned to me wild-eyed. “You can’t come in here!”

“Sorry, Pavarotti, but we just did,” I replied. “Step out of the shower.”

He looked past me and saw Tippetts. His hands instantly went to his privates. “Get her out of here,” he protested.

“Suddenly you’re Mister Modesty?” I asked. I grabbed a towel from the heated rack. It was a very nice towel—big and warm and fluffy. I held it out to him. “Here. Cover up.”

“Can I rinse off first?” he asked.

“If you don’t mind my deputy holding a gun on you, go right ahead.”

Sullenly he rinsed off and then took the offered towel. He wrapped it around his wide waist. It barely covered him. Gingerly he stepped from the shower enclosure. I handed him a second fluffy towel. “Enjoy it while you have it,” I said. “I’m sure the towels they give you in state prison aren’t so nice.”

We took him to the bedroom where I allowed him to get dressed. Then we went downstairs.

Chapter 15

We questioned him at the station. I informed him of the evidence we had against him regarding two crimes: the murder of Wesley Hicks, for which we had the testimony of Jack Kampo, and for which we anticipated developing more evidence linking Morell to the theft of the Lincoln; and the charge of the attempted murder of a police officer—me—earlier in the morning.

“The common element in both these crimes,” I told Morell, “is *you*. At the moment, all our evidence points to you as the man who kidnapped, tortured, and killed Wesley Hicks, and to you as the person who attempted to kill me this morning. If there’s anyone who’s a candidate for the death penalty in Pennsylvania, it would be you, Mr. Morell.”

“Wait—whoa,” he exclaimed with palms up. “I got nothing to do with Hicks. It wasn’t me. I just got the car. You can’t hang that on me.”

“You’re the guy I’ve got,” I replied, “and all the evidence—circumstantial though it may be—points to you. When a jury hears about the atrocities committed against Wesley Hicks—about the torture, the burns, the cuts, the eyes gouged out, and finally the agonizing death by insulin overdose—and they see you sitting in the defendant’s chair, they’ll be falling all over themselves to find you guilty. I’d say you’ve got a big problem, Mr. Morell.”

“I’m telling you it wasn’t me.”

I shrugged. “Okay, it was someone else. A mystery man. Call him Mister X. You’re going to let Mister X hang it on you? You’re willing to do the time for a crime committed by Mister X? I don’t see your logic, but hey, if that’s what you want, and if that’s your story and you’re sticking to it, then more power to you.”

I stood up and looked at Tippetts. “I don’t see any reason to waste any more of our time here. I think Mr. Morell would rather sit in his cell, alone, while Mister X lounges by the pool drinking margaritas with sexy girls.”

Morell pounded his fist on the table. The sound was startling enough to make me turn around.

“Yes?” I said.

Morell glared at me. “The man you want is Rudolph Testa.”

“Do you mean for the Hicks murder?”

“For *everything*.”

“Everything, huh? All right Mr. Morell, why did you try to shoot me this morning? You and I have never had any business together. You had no motive, did you? And I assume you’re not one of those random shooters who pick people out of the phone book to kill. No, I believe that I was your target. By the way, did you think you got me?”

He was looking at the floor, like a dog that knows it’s been bad and was waiting for the stick to come down.

“Yes, I did.”

“With the second shot?”

He nodded. “I thought I got you. Then I left. I went back to my car.”

“By the way, did you see a parking ticket on your car?”

Again he nodded. “Too close to the damn hydrant.”

“I think Rudolph Testa hired you to kill me because I was ready to come down on him for his counterfeit liquor business. I know he’s putting the squeeze on many of the local eateries. He’s a common gangster who will keep pushing until someone bigger and tougher pushes back.”

Morell frowned and scratched his head. “He didn’t say nothing about his liquor business. It was about an investigation.”

“What investigation?”

The corner of Morell’s mouth curled up in a tight little smile. He shot me a sideways glance. “Into the Hicks murder. It had nothing to do with the liquor business.”

“You know something?”

“Do I get a deal? And protection?”

Chapter 16

“If you give me credible evidence, I’ll recommend to the district attorney that you were cooperative. And of course if you didn’t commit certain crimes, we’re not going to charge you for them.”

Morell sat for a moment, staring at his hands.

“Is the opera star going to sing?” asked Tippetts.

Morell nodded. “My girlfriend, Imelda.”

“The woman who came to the door?”

“Yes. She’s an illegal. Her parents brought her here when she was in high school. They came from Cuba. I want you to help her. If the government sends them back, they’ll all be arrested and put in jail as dissidents.”

“Let me guess—Rudolph Testa knows she’s undocumented.”

Morell nodded. “He told me if I wanted Imelda and her family to stay safe, I had to do some things for him.”

“What were those things?”

“I had to get a car, which was easy.”

“The Lincoln.”

“Yes. At five o’clock on Tuesday evening I went to the address that Testa had given me—Fifty-Three Industrial Drive, down by the river.”

“It’s an industrial park that’s largely abandoned,” said Tippetts. “The company that was developing it went bankrupt. Only a few of the offices are leased.”

I knew the place well—it was yet another location in Macon to which we had to pay particular attention because of the threat of vandalism and kids going there to drink and get high.

“There was no one around,” continued Morell. “I picked up Testa and another man. The guy’s hands and mouth had been duct taped. He was obviously in big trouble. Testa shoved the guy into the back seat. Testa got in next to him. He told me to drive to the Macon Clay Works.”

“Did Testa talk to the man?” I asked.

“He only told him that if he cooperated he’d be okay, and that nothing would happen.”

“What happened when you got to the clay works?”

“Testa told me where to go. I pulled up in front of the old kiln building. Testa told me to help the guy inside. As we were getting the guy out of the car I noticed his head was bleeding, and there was blood on the back seat. Testa told me not to worry about it. We got the guy inside. It was hot as hell in there. You could barely breathe. In the middle of the room was a steel chair. It looked like it had been bolted down to a plate set into the ground. We put the guy in the chair and Testa chained him down. The guy was plenty scared—I think he pissed his pants. Testa kept telling him not to worry, and that if he cooperated he’d be going home soon. Once the guy was secure, Testa told me to leave. He told me that he’d call me in a couple of hours to pick him up. ‘Go have a nice dinner,’ he said. ‘Mr. Hicks and I have some personal business to discuss.’”

“Personal business?” I asked.

Morell shrugged. “That’s what he said. I said okay and went out to the car. Before I left I needed to take a leak, so I went around the side of the building. Then I walked back to the car. As I was opening the car door I heard a scream. It made my blood cold. I had never before heard a scream like that. I drove away from there fast. I didn’t want to know what Testa was doing to that man. I went to the Red Lion to get something to eat. Then I hung around at the bar, watching the game. At ten thirty Testa called and told me to pick him up. I went back to the clay works. He was waiting outside the door, smoking a cigarette. He was alone. He got in the front seat of the car and told me to drive him back to the industrial park. I did. When he got out of the car he told me to get rid of the car. He told me to give it to Jack Kampo. The next morning—Wednesday—I took the car to Kampo and told him to chop it up.”

“Which he would have done if we hadn’t raided his garage a few hours later,” I said. “All right. What about me? Why did you try to shoot me this morning?”

“Last night, around midnight, Testa called me. He said he’d pay me ten thousand dollars, as well as keep quiet about Imelda, if I took you out. He was adamant that he wanted it done right away. He gave me your address and told me to go there early in the morning and catch you either in the house or as you were leaving.”

“Did he say why?”

“He said we were both in great danger. I asked him why. He replied I should ask fewer questions, do the job, and be happy.”

“He specifically said that you were *both* in great danger?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I stood up. "If you'll excuse me, Mr. Morell, Officer Tippets and I will be right back."
Leaving another officer to watch Morell in the interview room, I took Tippets to my office.
I slumped into my chair. I really wished I had a bottle in my drawer.

Chapter 17

“What’s going on?” asked Tippetts. “You look like someone died.”

“Testa told Morell they were both in danger,” I replied. “Rocky Morell is not involved with Testa’s liquor racket. There’s no reason for Testa to have reacted that strongly to what I said to him in Dave Valenti’s office. Testa must have said to Morell they were both in danger because he knew I was investigating them for the Hicks murder. Testa hired Morell to kill me because of the Hicks investigation.”

“But how could Testa have been tipped off?”

“I really hate to say this, but someone in this department is on Testa’s payroll.”

“Who?”

“It’s not me and it’s not you. That leaves one other person: Officer Irwin Montana. Last night I told him to get us everything we had on Rudolph Testa. He asked why. I told him it was pursuant to the investigation of the Hicks murder. Almost immediately after I spoke to Montana, Testa called Morell and told him to kill me.”

Tippetts slowly sat down. I thought she was going to cry. After a moment she said, “Irwin’s been on the force for years! Longer than either of us. He’s been like a father to me. I can’t believe it. Are you sure?”

“I hope I’m wrong. I can’t be sure until we have evidence. But of course you remember my predecessor, Sheriff Clay Holbrook. There was no nicer man to work for. Everybody loved him. He hired me when no one else would, and helped me get my life in order. But he had a dark secret. After he died, the truth was revealed and there was a terrible scandal. That taught me a lesson: Never assume anything about anyone. As for Officer Montana, while I’m going to withhold judgment, as of this moment he’s out of the loop. Nothing operational can be shared with him. I’m going to contact the inspector general at the Pennsylvania State Police. They need to lead the investigation into his conduct.”

We returned to the interview room.

“Mr. Morell, do you know why Rudolph Testa tortured and killed Wesley Hicks?”

“He said it was because of the drug business.”

“What about the drug business? Was Hicks a competitor? Did Testa want to eliminate a rival?”

Morell shook his head. "That wasn't it. Testa was pissed because Hicks was selling crap. Phony drugs."

I was astonished. Rudolph Testa, the owner of Eastern Central Beverage Distributors, purveyor of rotgut swill, peddler of cheap counterfeit pisswater, was upset because Wesley Hicks was doing the same thing in the pharmaceutical market?

"But if Testa took offense at Hicks's business, why not just rub him out? Or even better, demand a cut in return for protection?"

Morell shook his head. "I don't know. Testa has his reasons, I'm sure." He gave me a look that showed fear. "He's the devil. I do my best to steer clear of him. When he calls, I do what he says and then I go home and give thanks he didn't slit my throat."

"All right," I said. "Do you know where Testa is right now?"

"No. He's got three or four offices. He stays on the move, never very long in one place."

From the evidence box I took Morell's cell phone and handed it to him. "You're going to call him and tell him that you need to meet him. Tell him that you want him to see the storage facility where Hicks kept his phony drugs. The street value of these drugs is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. He should seize them and sell them off."

With trembling hands, Morell made the call while we listened in.

"Hello?" said a voice. I recognized it as Testa's.

"Rocky here. I got something for you."

"What?"

"I know where Wesley Hicks kept his inventory of drugs."

"Where?"

"A place called E-Z Safe Storage, near the interstate. He's got a unit there."

"So what?"

"What do you mean, 'so what'? He's got crates and crates of merchandise. It's got to be worth a fortune. If someone doesn't go in there and grab it, either the cops will find it or the guy who runs the storage facility will eventually take it. It's crazy to leave it there. It could be sold off at a huge profit."

"Why are you telling me this?" said Testa.

"Because it wouldn't be right for me to take it all myself," said Morell. "You have a claim to it. It's yours, ain't it?"

There was a moment of silence. Tippets and I exchanged glances. It was now or never.

“Burn it,” said Testa.

“What?” replied Morell incredulously.

“I said burn it. Get rid of it.”

“Wait a second, boss. Let’s think about this. This stuff has real value. If you have reservations about selling it in our usual area, maybe we could ship it overseas. To Africa or Asia. The market is huge, and who cares what happens after it leaves our hands? I’ll take care of the details. We’ll go fifty-fifty. You don’t have to lift a finger. It’ll be pure profit.”

There was another pause.

“Okay,” said Testa. “I want to see this stuff for myself.”

I nodded to Tippets. The operation was moving ahead.

Chapter 18

In my office, I assembled my team. I called Tippetts and had begun to give her my instructions when she said, “I’m sorry—perhaps you haven’t seen the request I put on your desk. I asked for a few hours off this afternoon to take care of my mother. She’s being released from the hospital and I need to drive her home. I want to make sure she gets settled and takes her insulin. I’ll be back by five o’clock.”

“Okay, no problem,” I said. “I’ll approve it. We’ll handle this without you. I hope your mom is feeling better.”

At two o’clock that afternoon, Rocky Morell, nattily attired in a grey business suit we had brought to him from his home, sat in his car outside Unit G-22 at E-Z Safe Storage. Overhead the fierce sun blazed. There was not a cloud in the sky.

Fifty yards away, I waited in an unmarked car—a plain Ford Escort. I was alone in the car. This was because E-Z Safe Storage was a difficult place to set a trap. The site was nothing more than a barren, treeless tract of asphalt-covered land, upon which were constructed rows of sheet-metal sheds. There was no cover, no place to hide. Our operation had to be lean and quick. I had officers placed inside Unit G-22 and two cruisers tucked out of sight near a loading dock, but that was all I could risk.

Inside the Ford Escort, I waited. The air conditioning could barely keep pace with the rising heat of the day. In my field of vision I could see Unit G-22, Morell in his car, and through the waves of heat rising from the asphalt the long lane that led to the front gate of the facility.

The minutes ticked by. I could see Morell becoming impatient as he sat in his car, turning his head to look around.

A car turned into the gate. It was a black Mercedes with Pennsylvania plates. The car cruised slowly up the lane. Before it reached Morell’s car it stopped. Silently it waited, like a cat stalking its prey. Through its windshield I could see the silhouette of one person in the car, the driver.

Again, Morell looked around.

Keep cool, you damn fool!

The Mercedes crept forward on its cat feet. Now it was nearly abreast of Unit G-22. Morell opened his car door and stepped out onto the burning pavement. He approached the driver’s side door of the Mercedes, as if to speak with the driver.

Suddenly a puff of smoke appeared at the open window. Morell staggered backward. There were two more puffs in quick succession. Morell collapsed, flat on his back.

The door to the Mercedes opened. With one foot on the pavement, Rudolph Testa looked at the body. Then he whipped around and looked at the door to the unit. He must have heard something from inside, because he quickly got back in his Mercedes, closed the door, and slammed the car in reverse.

The chase was on.

In the little Escort, I tailed Testa through the gates and onto the highway. He headed east, which would bring him to Interstate 80. At speeds approaching a hundred miles an hour and careening through traffic, it was all I could do to keep the Escort on the road.

On a wide curve about a mile from the Interstate, one of my units, which had been on routine patrol in the area, pulled onto the highway just ahead of the Mercedes. The Mercedes swerved as Testa tried to exit the highway. He lost control and the car plowed off the shoulder and rammed its way into a field, coming to rest in a shallow ditch.

As I brought the Escort to a stop on the shoulder, Testa opened the door of the Mercedes and, gun in hand, fled on foot across the field to a line of trees.

I gave chase. Occasionally turning to fire a wild shot at me, Testa dodged into the trees and scrambled toward a low wooded hillside. I knew where he was going: the entrance to the old Black Star coal mine, abandoned fifty years ago. The mine was a warren of decrepit and dangerous tunnels and chambers. If he got deep enough into these passageways, he could surface at any one of many entrances within a mile radius.

As Testa ducked into the mine entrance, with its steel frame twisted with age and overgrown with vines, I squeezed off a couple of shots. I couldn't tell if I hit him.

Panting, out of breath, I stumbled to the dark gaping hole in the earth. I knew he was in there, somewhere, in one of the dozens of timbered corridors. I had to go in after him: to wait would give him an unacceptable head start towards another exit.

Gingerly I stepped along the rusted rails of the track once used by the coal cars. My flashlight helped light the way, aided by the occasional glimmers of light from the narrow ventilation shafts that rose to the surface. The air was cool and musty, and water dripped from the exposed roots and rotting timbers. I stopped to listen. From somewhere far ahead came a clinking sound,

as if someone had slipped on a loose rock. I edged forward, holding my flashlight to the side, at arm's length, away from my body.

Suddenly there was a loud report and a bullet crashed into the wood frame next to my head, sending splinters flying. I doused the light.

In the darkness ahead, for a brief second the faint glow from a ventilator shaft was dimmed by a fleeting shadow.

Cautiously I pressed forward.

I heard a sound—a human sound, like a groan.

I flicked on my light.

Lying on the black rocky ground, Rudolph Testa raised his pistol and aimed it at my head. He pulled the trigger.

The gun clicked. He pulled again. Another click.

“You’re finished, Testa,” I said.

He threw the gun down. His other hand clenched his upper thigh. Blood oozed from between his fingers.

“Looks like I hit your femoral artery,” I said. “Unless we get you out of here soon, you’re going to bleed to death.” I reached for my radio. It was useless—we were too far underground.

“I don’t care,” he said. His voice was weak.

“Why did you do it?” I asked.

“Kill the bastard Hicks?” he replied. “Payback. He deserved what I gave him, and worse. He should rot in hell.”

“What did he do?”

“He killed my sister.”

“How did he do that?”

“Sophia had diabetes. Type one. She needed insulin to live. I bought it for her. I got it from a pharmacy in Sophia’s neighborhood. A little family place. She took the insulin and she was still sick. She took more, and got sicker. Everyone who has type one diabetes knows that if you run out of insulin, hyperglycemia sets in. Then you get diabetic ketoacidosis. Then you die. Sophia died. I told the doctor she had been taking her insulin. The doctor said, ‘There’s no insulin in her blood. None. Zero.’ I had her insulin tested. It was nothing but water. I went to the pharmacy. I told the owner to tell me where he got his insulin. After he gave me the name of Wesley Hicks, I

shot him. He was just as guilty as Hicks. Then I contacted Hicks. Told him I wanted to do a deal. The stupid asshole agreed to meet me.”

“How was Hicks selling counterfeit drugs any worse than you selling your bogus liquor?”

Testa’s eyes flashed in anger. “My liquor doesn’t kill anybody!” Then he sank back. His eyes closed and his breathing became labored.

From behind me came flickers of light.

“I’m here,” I called. Two of my deputies approached. “Get this piece of garbage out of here,” I said. “Maybe he’ll recover and live long enough to die in prison.”

Chapter 19

I made my way back to the mine entrance. My thoughts drifted to Tippetts and her mother.

A horrible thought flashed into my mind. I took my phone and punched Tippetts's number. The call went to voicemail. Where did her mother live? I searched online and found an address for Francesca Tippetts. She lived on the West Side. I knew the building.

Twenty minutes later I pulled open the door to the Herald Arms Apartments. Francesca Tippetts lived on the second floor, rear. I bounded up the steps and reached the door. After I knocked, Tippetts answered.

"Sheriff DeAngelo—what's going on—why are you here?"

"Where's your mother?"

"She's in the living room. She's just getting ready take her insulin."

I went into the living room. Francesca Tippetts sat in an overstuffed armchair, with an old-fashioned doily behind her head. In her hand she was holding a small cardboard box.

"Where did you get that?" I asked her.

She glanced from me to her daughter. Sheepishly, she told me that she had gotten a "special deal" from a neighborhood pharmacy. "The man said it was overstock and they had to sell it," she said, "but it was perfectly safe."

I took the carton. It was one of Hicks's. A little package of death.

"Call the EMTs," I told Tippetts. "Have them come immediately with real insulin. There's no time to lose." I turned to her mother. "You're a lucky woman, Mrs. Tippetts. A very lucky woman."