

A Season to Die

A Chris DeAngelo Novel

Michael Mucci

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For Kati for always being there.

For Michael and Andrea. I enjoy watching as you both find your way through life. I have always been proud.

"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."

Prologue

Sherry Mills never saw the bullet that killed her.

She had just turned on her windshield wipers. The snow had started up again—big damp flakes that stuck to the glass and slowly melted, sliding off into water droplets. Sherry didn't mind the snow; it reminded her of when she was a kid and she used to go sledding down the big hill by the river.

While the snow wasn't enough to hamper visibility, just to be safe Sherry brought her speed down to thirty miles an hour. The highway along the river was two lanes, newly paved thanks to federal highway grants, with snakelike curves that wound among the low hills west of town. It was normally a twenty-minute drive from the bank to the home she shared with her husband. She glanced at the clock on the dashboard. The time was five thirty. Dusk was falling. The one thing she didn't like about winter was the paltry length of the days. The sun came up too late and set too early, and in between it was likely that its warming rays, blocked by the brooding clouds, would never touch the ground.

Sherry Mills took a deep breath and let the air out slowly from between her lips. Getting free was not easy! Too many things from the past weighed her down. For the past few years, it seemed, she had been caught in a whirlpool that was slowly dragging her under.

The opioids had enslaved her. At first the little pills had been a welcome relief from her private misery. It was thrilling to feel the pain melt away! Over the years she had become good at hiding her penchant for self-medication. Expert, in fact. So many times she had arrived home from work completely blasted and feeling no pain, and a few minutes later when Steven got home from one of his boring political meetings he had given her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek and asked her how her day had been even as he was walking out of the kitchen. As he went into his home office she had said to his back, "Just fine, dear." But having him at home meant it was okay to have a cocktail (she never wanted him to think she drank alone), so Sherry would pour herself a good stiff slug of Jack Daniels before turning back to the stove.

"Dinner will be ready in ten," she would call.

"Okay," would come the distant response from upstairs.

As she drove through the snow Sherry's thoughts drifted to her mother. Ruth had been dead for two years, but her words were as clear as day. "No one in our family ever got divorced," she had told her daughter the first time Sherry had run to her, crying. "The Lord has chosen Steven for you, and you for him. He may have a temper, but so do many good men. Are you sure you have not provoked him? Search your soul. Find a way to forgive and forget. Try to be a better wife and helpmate. I was married to your father for thirty years. God took him too early, and I treasure every day we spent together. He had his faults, but it's our job as women to overlook them and keep our families on the right path."

Just as she was invisibly chained to her husband, it felt to Sherry that she was also chained to her job at the bank. Sherry had grown to hate her work.

Change was coming—very soon.

The heavy weights that she had heaped on her own back—her job, her boyfriend, her pills—were crushing her, and it was time to cast them away. It would take a supreme effort and people might get hurt, but Sherry Mills needed to get her life back. If not for her, then for her

dear son. He deserved to have a mother who was clean and healthy, and whose conscience was clear.

She steered the car around a broad curve. Traffic was sparse; after a truck passed her going the other direction, the road ahead was clear.

That's when her life ended.

Sherry never knew it, but after punching a jagged hole in the windshield the bullet blasted into her forehead just above the left eye. Drilling into her skull, it tumbled through her frontal lobe, turning the soft tissue into jelly. Blowing out the back of her skull, it ripped through the headrest and, having lost momentum, ricocheted off the back window and fell onto the rear seat.

With its warm corpse behind the wheel the car drifted out of its lane and cruised along the shoulder of the highway. As the road curved to the left the car kept going straight down an embankment. It slammed into a tree, spun, and tumbled into the icy mud of the marsh. There it lay, upside down, as the wheels gradually stopped spinning.

Within a few minutes the undercarriage of the car became coated with white while the hot parts—the engine and the exhaust system—stayed dark. But as the hours passed they cooled and allowed the big flakes to accumulate without melting.

Chapter 1

It was Tuesday, January 26, at about three o'clock in the afternoon. Deputy sheriff Rosemary Tippetts stuck her head in the door of my office.

"The attorney for CentPenn Mortgage just dropped off another foreclosure notice," she said. "Someone's got to deliver it to the homeowner. Do you want me to go?"

Dealing with the foreclosure process—from delivering notices to presiding over foreclosure auctions—was a part of my job that I didn't like. I really felt badly for people who were in danger of losing their homes. During the Great Recession—which happened in the middle of the decline of the coal industry—the Macon area was hit hard, and a lot of good people couldn't afford to keep up their payments. As the economy improved the foreclosure rate had eased up, but we weren't out of the woods. It seemed like every week we were being asked to perform our official duties in a new foreclosure. Many of them were on behalf of CentPenn, which I had never heard of until a few years ago.

"What's the name of the homeowner?" I asked.

"George Jepper. The house is at 2567 Ridge Street."

I put down the file I had been reading. "George Jepper? I know him. He used to be one of the guys who serviced our cruisers at Adams Garage. Nice guy. Not exactly the most reliable citizen, but he managed to stay out of trouble. Too bad. I'll tell you what—give the papers to me. I'll take a drive out there myself. Maybe I can help him figure out how to get back on track."

The Jepper's house was in a remote area north of Macon, near State Game Lands Number 90, just a mile or so from the old Deerbusters cabin that had been the burying ground for Cindy Crossman's vigilante gang. Since the terrible events of just two months earlier I had avoided this area—too many bad memories. But I had a job to do, so I suppressed my emotions. After checking my GPS to make sure I had the right place, I turned into the long gravel driveway, which had been recently plowed, and slowly drove to the modest wood frame house. Out front was parked an old Chevy pickup truck and a cheap Toyota sedan. At the side of the house sat a dilapidated school bus with flat tires. Probably one of George's projects.

The place looked quiet. I parked the cruiser and stepped up onto the creaking porch. In my hand I held the notice from the mortgage company. I knocked on the aluminum frame of the screen door.

"Who is it?" called a man's voice from inside.

"George? Is that you?" I answered. "George, it's Sheriff DeAngelo. Would you please open the door?"

"I know why you're here," came the response. "Go away!"

"George, I need to speak with you," I said. "C'mon, open the door."

After a moment the inside door opened. Through the screen George Jepper glared at me. In his hands was a shotgun.

"Whoa, George," I said, "Put down the gun. I'm serious. I need you to drop your weapon now." Mentally I calculated the distance from my right hand to the grip of my service revolver, and how long it would take me to draw and fire.

The required time would be too long. He could blow me in two before I had drawn my gun.

"Sheriff," he said, "I don't want to hurt you, but you gotta get off my porch!"

Jepper stared hard through the screen. His hands clenched the shotgun.

"George, listen to me," I said. "All I'm doing is delivering this notice from your mortgage company." I held up both of my hands so that he could see them, and also see the paper in my left hand. "It doesn't mean that you have to leave your house anytime soon. It's just a legal document from CentPenn saying that you've gotten late on your payments. I'm sure you can work something out."

"I don't even know who these bastards CentPenn are!" he said. "I never dealt with any bank called CentPenn. I'll bet they're just a bunch of crooks, trying to kick good people out of their houses."

Jepper had a point. Like I said, until just a few years ago I had never heard of CentPenn, and now I was delivering their foreclosure notices on a regular basis.

"Listen, George, you know how it is," I said while keeping an eye on his trigger finger. "You get a mortgage from a bank, and then they turn it around and sell it to someone else. It's standard procedure. Heck, the mortgage on my house has been sold twice. Sometimes I catch myself sending my payment to the wrong company."

"Ain't nobody going to run me out of my own house," he insisted.

I saw the shadow of a woman behind Jepper. "Honey, what's going on?" she said. I recognized her voice as his wife, Pauline.

"Nothin!" said Jepper. "You go back into the kitchen. Go back and feed the baby. Okay? Just go back to the kitchen."

He turned back to face me, still brandishing the shotgun.

"George," I said, "with your wife and baby there in the house, you really need to put away the gun. We don't want anyone to get hurt. Okay?"

"When they sold us the house, they said everything was going to be fine," said Jepper. "'No problem!' they said. 'Just sign on the dotted line.' Well we signed, and now look what's happening. They want to make us pay all kinds of fees and penalties for stuff I never knew we owed!"

"Who is 'they,' George? CentPenn?"

"Yeah, but at first it was Macon Bank & Trust. That's who I thought we were dealing with. A nice friendly local bank." He raised the shotgun. "Sheriff, it doesn't matter to me who I shoot. Let me tell you something: Before I let anybody run me out of my house, I'm taking as many people as I can with me. Pauline and the baby will be first. I'll be last. Anyone who interferes will be taken out too. Okay?"

My guts went cold. The situation had suddenly escalated, at least in the mind of George Jepper. Now he was talking about a mass bloodbath—taking out his wife and child as well as himself and anybody else who got in the way.

"George," I said, "Let's forget about the piece of paper from the bank. We can resolve that. What I'd like you to do is let your wife and your baby come outside. There's no reason they need to be involved in this. I don't want there to be a tragic accident. You wouldn't want that, would you? Let them come outside."

Jepper made no reply. A moment passed and I could see through the screen that he had lowered the gun. His head tilted forward and his gaze went to the floor. His shoulders slumped. He seemed deflated, like a balloon losing air and drifting towards the ground.

"It ain't right," he said.

"I agree. It isn't right. But there must be a way out."

Slowly, carefully, I reached for the handle of the screen door. Feeling my fingers touch the cold metal, I gently grasped it but didn't pull. With my eyes on Jepper I remained motionless for a moment.

He sighed and shook his head. The gun slipped lower.

Slowly I pressed the thumb lever of the handle. With a soft click the latch released. I pulled open the screen door. It creaked horribly. George didn't flinch.

"I'm a friend, George." With the door pulled wide, I used my shoulder to keep it open against the tension of the spring that wanted to slam it shut.

"Yeah," he said. He took the shotgun and, with his left hand holding the barrel, he stood it on its shoulder stock against the wall by the door.

Gently allowing the screen door to swing shut behind me, I stepped over the threshold and put myself between George and the gun.

"What do you say we go in the kitchen and get a cup of coffee," I said. "We can talk about it."

"It's embarrassing that you're here," he muttered.

"We've got to look out after each other," I said. "Bad things can happen to good people. It doesn't mean anything. We can get help for you and your family."

Jepper turned and went down the hall. I followed him into the kitchen. His wife was there, with the baby in her high chair. The wife had a stricken look on her face.

"Uh, this is Pauline," said Jepper. "Pauline, this is Sheriff DeAngelo."

"Good afternoon, ma'am," I said as I took off my hat. "You've got a beautiful baby."

Pauline gave a nervous smile. "This is Astrid," she said.

"How old is Astrid?" I asked.

"Fourteen months," said Pauline. Her husband stood quietly next to the kitchen table.

"I'll bet she's walking, right?" I said.

"Just starting to," replied Pauline. "She takes a few steps and then falls on her butt. Then she gets back up again."

"That's pretty much the story of my life," I said.

Jepper gave a wry smile. "I'll put some coffee on," he said.

I sat down at the wooden table. "Are you still working at the Adams Garage?" I asked Jepper as he filled the coffee pot.

"Part time," he replied. "I also work at the Sunoco station on River Road. Doing oil changes, stuff like that."

We talked about cars and stuff—like how nowadays you practically needed a degree in computer science to fix a car.

"Have you ever thought about going back to school and getting your certificate in auto diagnostics?" I said.

"Yeah, but that takes money," said Jepper.

"It would be an *investment*, honey," said Pauline as she spooned butternut squash puree into Astrid's mouth.

A cat wandered into the kitchen—a cute little calico. Astrid craned her neck to look over the side of her high chair at the cat, who paused before offering a plaintive meow.

"Petunia wants some milk," said Jepper. He went to the refrigerator and took out a carton. He poured a little bit of milk into a plastic bowl. Petunia ran to where he placed the bowl on the floor. With a look of weariness—one more mouth to feed!—Jepper put the carton back in the refrigerator before sitting down at the table.

After a few minutes I felt like we could venture back into volatile territory—the mortgage.

"So, you're having a rough time making the payments?" I asked.

"We saw this house and loved it," said Pauline, "but we weren't sure we could afford it. We went to Macon Bank & Trust. The loan officer was super nice. He told us not to worry, that we could definitely do it. He made us feel confident."

I wasn't the biggest expert in mortgage writing, but I knew a few of the important steps. "Did he qualify you?" I asked.

"Sure," replied Jepper. "He asked me how much I made every month, and what other debts we had."

"He *asked* you, or did he want to see pay stubs?"

"Oh, I had some pay stubs," replied Jepper. "I showed them to him. He said, 'Surely you're going to be making more than this next year.' He asked me how much I thought I was going to make next year. I figured it would be a lot more than I was making at the time, so I told him."

"We assumed George would be getting a lot more work from Adams Garage," said Pauline. "And I was planning on getting back my old job at the library."

"Only the library wasn't hiring," said Jepper, "And Adams Garage didn't increase my hours."

"Did you guys read the mortgage documents?" I asked.

Jepper and his wife looked at each other. "Not too closely," said Pauline. "Our lawyer told us everything was fine and we shouldn't worry about any of it. He said to just sign them."

"Who was your lawyer?" I asked.

"A guy who was referred to us by the bank," replied Jepper. "His name was Randy Misner."

I didn't know the name. "How about your loan officer at the bank?"

"Cheryl Platt," replied Jepper. Her name sounded familiar. I had probably met her at a Chamber of Commerce breakfast.

"When were you made aware of the fact that CentPenn had taken over your mortgage?" I asked.

"Only a few months after we bought the house," replied Jepper. "We got a letter in the mail. But we were already falling behind in our payments. We did our best, but we kept getting further and further behind."

"All right," I said. "I'm going to leave this notice on the table. It says that unless you get current with your payments, CentPenn will schedule a foreclosure sale of the property. This will happen sometime in April or May. They have the legal right to do it. Now I've known you for a long time, George. I urge you to get ahead of the curve on this. Put the house up for sale. Find an apartment that you can afford. I know an honest real estate agent in town—her name is

Hilary Benson. She'll find a nice place for you. If you're paying less for your housing, you can start to save money. Maybe you could go back to school for more training, like Pauline suggests. A mechanic who works on expensive cars like BMWs can make a good living, but you've got to get the training. You've got to step up your game."

Jepper nodded. "Okay. That makes sense."

"If you do that," I said, "We'll forget about what happened a few minutes ago. Pointing a shotgun at a law enforcement officer is a felony that could land you in jail for a long time. Nobody wants that—especially Pauline and Astrid. Okay?"

"Okay," said Jepper.

"You now have a child in the house," I added. "You need to keep every weapon you own unloaded and under lock and key. Do you know how many children are killed every year in household gun accidents? Too many. Just a couple of years ago over in Fayette County, a two-year-old toddler took his stepfather's pistol out of his mother's purse and shot himself in the head while the adults were watching the game in another room. I'm telling you, George, I don't want to have to come to your house some day because of a terrible accident."

George nodded. I got up from the table—I figured George had enough stress for one day without me lecturing him anymore. But I also made a note to myself to check up on him and his family to see if they were making the necessary changes.

"I'm going to have Hilary give you a call," I said. "Thanks for the coffee. Take care of yourself. I'll let myself out."

It was late afternoon and gloomy clouds hung overhead like a bad memory. As snowflakes wandered aimlessly in the air I drove back to town. It seemed so wrong that George and Pauline had been led down the primrose path by the mortgage officer at the bank. I thought the world was free of that kind of shady dealing. I guess not—some crooks just don't know when to stop.

Chapter 2

I don't like having a loaded shotgun pointed at me, even by a guy like George Jepper, who probably wouldn't shoot me. But when you're a cop, "probably" is a word that carries a lot of weight. If you're wrong about "probably," you could end up being cut in two.

After returning to the station I shuffled some papers before heading over to Denny's Beef & Brew for some dinner and a few drinks to steady my nerves. I got there around eight and found a seat at the bar. From my friend Floyd, the bartender, I ordered a Jim Beam on the rocks, a cheeseburger, no onion, and fries.

My drink came. The booze felt good going down. I looked at my hand. It had stopped shaking. Jim Beam was working his magic. I had to tell myself that I was going to have no more than two drinks. Maybe three.

As I sipped I watched the screen. The Penguins were playing the Devils. The score was tied at one each. It was the last game in January with more than two months left in the season. With a bench load of injuries it didn't look good for the Penguins. Better luck next year.

"Sheriff DeAngelo! This seat taken?"

I turned in the direction of the familiar voice.

"Jake, how's it going?" I said as he took the stool next to mine.

"We're surviving," he shrugged. "It's been pretty quiet around town. Ever since you did that one-man Rambo job on Cindy Crossman and her gang of murderers, our circulation has dropped. Nothing like a good crime wave to sell newspapers. When the show's over, people lose interest."

"Sorry to make life tough for you," I replied.

"You know, when it comes to the Crossman case, some people are getting wacky ideas," said Jake. He raised his hand to get Floyd's attention.

"Such as?"

"Have you seen our blog page? Where we print all the crazy letters to the editor that we won't put in the print edition? There's a growing cabal of malcontents who are saying that it was a big mistake to confront Crossman and her accomplices. These folks say that the people Crossman's gang had killed over the years were scumbags who deserved to die: rapists, dope dealers, pedophiles. Crossman was a noble vigilante who cleaned up Macon when *you*—their low-paid sheriff—couldn't."

"They conveniently forget that the conspiracy began when Sheriff Holbrook was in office," I said as I picked up the glass of whiskey Floyd had set down on the bar. "I came in at the end of Crossman's annual bad-guy-elimination program. Christ, I had been on the job for only a few days! I barely had time to get my name painted on the damn door before all hell broke loose."

"To many folks around here, Holbrook was a saint," said Jake as he picked at the bowl of peanuts. "No matter that he took a boatload of bribes from Crossman. Once you're canonized, people don't want to admit they were wrong. So they look for someone else to hate."

"That would be me," I said. "So who are these people?"

"We don't require that people use their real names when they post a comment," replied Jake. "The publisher is re-thinking that policy, but for now, all we know is that the biggest loudmouth is MegaMom99."

"Can't you identify her through her IP address?"

"Give me a court order and we'd be happy to," said Jake with an ironic smile.

"Aw, I don't want to know. I might find out it's my mother."

"Ha! Your mom sure is a tough old gal."

"Yeah," I said. "She'd be just the person to tell everyone what a loser I was. She wanted me to become a lawyer."

"Like Cindy Crossman!"

I laughed so hard the booze trickled out of my nose. I reached for a paper napkin. "You got that right," I said when I had regained my composure. "You got that right."

I didn't want to get into it with Jake—he was a reporter, after all—but I still hadn't gotten over the fact that Cindy Crossman and two of my closest friends—people I had known from my school days in Saint Francis Square—had masterminded a serial killing spree in Macon that had lasted for twelve years. They kept the secret from me because unlike Sheriff Holbrook, who was cool and methodical, and could be depended upon, I was a drunk cop who couldn't be trusted to keep my mouth shut even if I were bribed. They weren't afraid of me because I was a cop; they thought I was a loose cannon, a liability. When I uncovered the scheme, they tried to kill me. The episode had left a big jagged hole in my heart.

Floyd set my plate on the bar. If there's one thing about Denny's Beef & Brew, it was that Rubio, the cook, made a top-notch cheeseburger. His culinary skills almost made up for the thin layer of grease that seemed to cover every visible surface in the joint.

I was hungry and ready to dig in when my phone buzzed. I pressed the button. "DeAngelo here."

It was Tippets. She told me there had been an auto accident along River Road where the creek met the Susquehanna River. A car had gone off the road and was upside-down in the marshy muck. The crane was on its way.

I asked Tippets where she was. She replied she was tied up at the station with a prisoner and one else was available to take the call.

I had to go. After bidding farewell to Jim Beam, I flagged down Floyd and asked him to put my burger and fries into a takeout box.

Fifteen minutes later I pulled up to the scene of the accident. A civilian had dialed 911 after noticing the tracks heading off the highway and had stopped his car to investigate. The civilian was sitting in his car.

"What do you suppose happened, sheriff?" he said as he opened his car door.

"Won't know until we investigate," I replied. "Please stay in your car." Scrambling down the slippery embankment I reached the overturned car, which was positioned sideways so that the driver's door faced in my direction. My flashlight revealed a woman sitting in the driver's seat. She was upside-down, just as the car was, with her body supported by the lap belt. Her head was in the icy water. There was no point in trying to rescue her. I pulled open the rear door to check for other passengers, like a child. The back seat was empty, with no child seat in place. The front passenger seat was also empty.

The headlights of the crane truck cut the swirling snow above me. I hustled back up the embankment to the road. After talking to the crane guy I went back to my cruiser. I opened the takeout box and, holding the cold burger in one hand, punched in the car's plate number into the computer.

"Oh, shit," I said to myself as the name came up. With my free hand I hit the button for the station. I got Tippets on the line.

"We've got one victim in the car—a late model Lexus," I told Tippets. "The car is registered to State Senator Steven Mills. Yep—the same guy who's running for governor. His wife's name is Sherry Mills. I've met her. I saw the driver in the Lexus and it could be her, but right now her head's underwater. Gotta go—the EMTs are here."

With my burger in my hand I got out of the cruiser and met the EMTs. Together we waited while the crane lifted the car out of the water and maneuvered it to the side of the road. The EMTs went to work extracting the victim. I took a walk around the car. The windshield had a big hole in it.

One of the EMTs approached me. "Sheriff, you need to look at something," he said. He took me to the body and pulled the cover away from the head.

The victim was definitely Sherry Mills. Just above her left eye was a jagged hole.

"Is that what I think it is?" I asked.

"Yes," replied the EMT. "It's the kind of damage a high-powered rifle would do. The bullet started tumbling after it went through the windshield. By the time it entered her skull it was whipping around like a blender. The back of her head was blown away. The medical examiner will give us the final verdict, but I think it's safe to say this woman was dead before her car left the highway."

After popping the last bit of burger into my mouth, I took out my phone and called the state police. Their crime lab guys would be taking the car.

Sherry Mills was *my* problem.

In the drifting snow I walked back to where the crime scene guys had indicated the car left the pavement. Mills could have taken the bullet at any point along the road before that, at least until there was a curve, which was about a mile beyond where I stood. I walked along the road for a while before turning around. The hole that I had seen in the windshield was smack in the middle, roughly at eye level, which meant the bullet's trajectory had been flat. The shooter's elevation wasn't very much higher than his target. About half a mile from where the car had gone off the road, on the other side of the highway, was a driveway. I walked over to it. The snow had accumulated on the gravel surface and I saw no tracks. I turned and faced the direction from which Mills' car had come. Anyone standing where I was would have a clear shot at an oncoming vehicle.

The driveway led to an abandoned farm equipment dealer's place. There was a locked gate and a big "No Trespassing" sign, but the gate was set back from the road, leaving plenty of room for a vehicle to pull over and then back up to the gate, well away from the traffic lane.

I went back to the car and told the crime scene guys to check the driveway carefully. It was a routine request—I had to cover all my bases. Judging from the surrounding terrain—relatively flat with a mix of woods and clear areas—it could have been a hunter's stray bullet. Or even just some guy who was out testing his rifle, or shooting for fun. People did that around these parts.

By the time the Lexus was loaded onto the flatbed truck and covered with a tarp, the EMTs had left for the morgue with the body.

I checked the time. It was nearly nine o'clock. My next task was to deliver some very bad news to Senator Steven Mills.

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