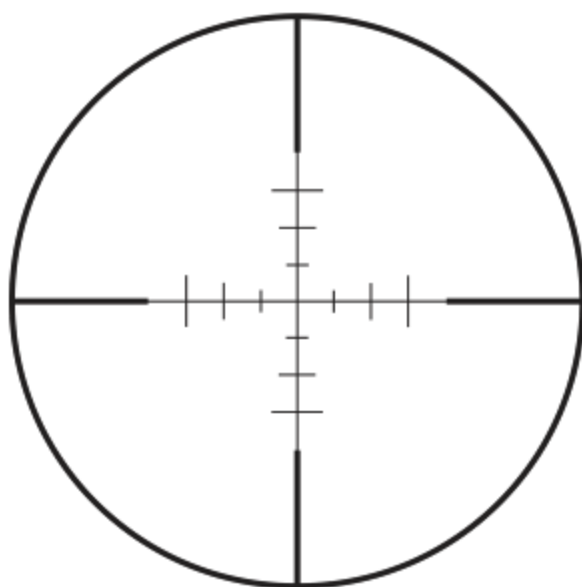


MICHAEL MUCCI



**A Season to**

**KILL**



Published by Rook Publishing of Tempe, Arizona USA,  
[www.rookpublishing.com](http://www.rookpublishing.com).

Story and Primary Text © 2015 Michael Mucci

All rights reserved.

This book is a work of fiction. Any reference or resemblance to events, people, locales or organizations is entirely coincidental and is a product of the author's imagination. The story herein should not be construed as real. The opinions and views of the author do not necessarily reflect the views of Rook Publishing.

No part of this book may be reproduced, whether by: graphic, visual, electronic, film, microfilm, tape recording, or any other means, without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of fair-use as established under current law. All photography and graphics used, are either in the public domain, provided by the author, or contracted for the purpose of this publication.

Acquisitions by Ray Bowler and Phoebe Jones.

Cover image by Nasugraq (Artic-Stock).

Book Design by Milton Trent © 2015

The original text of this book was set in Garamond.

This book was published in the United States of America.

## PROLOGUE

Breathing hard, trailing a cloud of white exhalation, the man stumbles blindly through the snow-whipped woods. The encircling trees loom menacingly, giving no comfort and admitting scant light. He slips on the slick ground and tumbles headfirst into a thicket. Sharp branches rip his cheeks, drawing blood. Gasping, he struggles to his feet. But with his hands bound behind his back he's off balance and he slips again, landing hard on the muddy snow. Pain shoots up his shoulder and he grimaces—but he knows he dare not cry out.

To make any sound will only make it easier for them to find him. To kill him.

He rests on his knees. Chest heaving, sweat soaking his shirt and pants. He looks into the gloomy trees. Nothing—no sign of his pursuers.

What were the chances of getting out alive?

He has lost all sense of direction. The overcast sky gives no hint of the location of the sun. All around him he sees nothing but the endless white snow, the grey sky, and the black swaying trees as high overhead the wind moans through the uppermost branches.

Behind him he hears a sound—a faint snap of a twig. He twists around. He sees nothing but the tree-covered hill that rises to a high crest. There are deer in these woods, and other wild things—perhaps that's what made the sound.

The man knows that if he waits and tries to hide, he will not survive the cold of the night. Months or years hence they will find his frozen and contorted body, or what's left of it after scavengers tear it apart. No, that was not going to happen.

"William Rose is a *survivor*," he mutters through broken teeth. One of the thugs had smashed him in the mouth with his rifle butt before they turned him loose in these wild woods. The man spits red into the snow.

No time to be weak. It's time to move. With his shoulder throbbing in pain the man stands up. Which way to go? To the top of the hill behind him, where he could perhaps see where he was? They had brought him to these woods blindfolded after a ride in the back of a vehicle. He didn't know if he was even still in the state of Pennsylvania, much less anywhere near the borough of Macon. The thugs may have driven him in a big circle or in a straight line out of the state.

Shivering uncontrollably now, the man heads up the hill. He slips again, hitting his knee on a stump. The pain makes him cry out.

*No, he thinks. I cannot give up yet. I cannot give myself away.*

As he struggles to his feet he sees a dark figure watching him from a stand of trees. The person does not move.

The man whips around, desperate to escape his tormenter. He has taken not ten steps before he sees another dark-clad figure. The person holds a hunting rifle.

“Damn you!” he calls out to the figure in black. “What do you want from me?”

*I will remain standing, he thinks. I will not bow down to these criminals.*

Chest heaving as he gasps for air, the man stands still. The figures vanish into the snow, only to appear again. How many are there? The man is too dazed to comprehend. From the trees on the hillside black-clad enemies emerge and come closer to the man. Stalking him.

They gather around him. Silent. Black masks reveal only hard, cold eyes. Their rifles long and deadly.

“It’s getting late,” says one of the masked people. The voice is muffled. Male? Female? Young? Old? The man cannot tell. He knows nothing of these people or why they torment him. The last thing he remembers was going to his car. Suddenly he had been hit on the head. He had woken up in the back of a vehicle, bound and blindfolded. His captors had said nothing. They had hustled him out of the vehicle and marched him into the woods, where they tore off the blindfold. They told him to run. To try to save his life. They would give him a ten-minute head start before the hunt was on.

“Why?” he had demanded. “*Why?*”

One of the masked people had looked at thier watch.

“Mr. Rose, you’re wasting time,” the muffled voice had said.

One of the others had raised his rifle and sneered, “Bang, bang, you’re dead.”

And now, hours later, as the light fades and the air grows colder in the deep woods, the man stands facing his tormenters.

“You’ve asked us why you’re here,” says one of the masked people. “Before you die, you deserve to know. I’m going to remove my mask so that you can see exactly who I am. It will refresh your memory.” The mask comes off. “Remember now? I trusted you and you committed a terrible crime. For this crime you shall be punished.”

“This is crazy!” shouts the man. “You can’t do this! In our country we have police and courts! You can’t just take a man out into the woods and shoot him!”

The mask goes back on. “Yes, I can.” The masked person fires one shot. The sharp sound reverberates through the forest. Startled, a flock of crows erupts into harsh cries and takes off. Silence returns to the deep woods. The only sound is the faint patter of snowflakes as they drift down through the grasping branches of the cold trees.

The man lies in the snow, a perfect hole in his forehead, oozing red. Across the whiteness behind him stretches an ugly patina of red blood and brains. As the pristine white snowflakes gently land on the redness, they too become stained.

“Mission accomplished,” says one of the masked people.

“Let’s get him out of here,” says another.

One of them takes a rope from a deer drag harness and ties it to the man’s feet. In a moment the black-clad figures with their ghastly burden in tow are making their way through trees. Behind them, the easy falling snow begins to cover the red stain under a pristine blanket of white.

## CHAPTER 1



### Eleven years later

“Louella, please calm down,” I said. “Take it easy. Sit down. You want some coffee? A soft drink?”

I had never seen Louella Schmidt so worked up. She had burst into my office like a tornado, right in the middle of my lunch—a thick turkey club on pumpernickel with extra mayo that had been delivered from the coffee shop around the corner. Seeing that she would not be put off, with the wax paper I re-wrapped the half of the sandwich I hadn’t yet eaten and placed it to the side of my desk. I hoped I could get rid of Louella quickly so that my lunch wouldn’t get soggy.

“Soft drink?” she sneered. “How about a shot of whiskey? I’m sure you’ve got some around here. Where is it? In your desk drawer?”

“Now Louella, you’ve got no reason to be accusing me of anything,” I said. To be honest, my hangover wasn’t being helped by her shrieking. I just wanted her to sit down and talk normally so that my head would stop pounding.

“Listen, you’re the sheriff now,” she insisted. “You gotta do something!”

Yes, I was the top dog now. After twenty years serving as deputy, I had been bumped up to the big office. Sheriff Holbrook—God rest his soul—had dropped dead of a heart attack just two days ago. I had been given an unexpected promotion. I knew that many people assumed I couldn’t handle it. I wondered the same thing myself.

“Do something about what?” I said.

“About Roger,” she replied as she fell into the chair opposite my desk.

“What’s he done now?”

My question was not facetious. Roger Sharpe had done a lot of things in his thirty years as a citizen of the borough of Macon, Pennsylvania. Most of the things he had done had not been good. As a juvenile, it was car theft when he was sixteen, dope possession at seventeen. Each time he was caught he got sent home to his stepfather, who probably beat the crap out of him. Then came the

adult transgressions: assault and battery, disorderly conduct, threatening a police officer (that would be me), public intoxication. Nothing real serious, but a very discouraging pattern of behavior.

In my jurisdiction, people like Roger Sharpe were not uncommon. They prowled the streets and back roads, rootless, angry, looking for a quick solution to a bad problem. In my twenty years in law enforcement I had gotten pretty good at handling them. You might say that I was empathetic. Times were tough in Macon and they were getting tougher. The Great Recession had hammered the local economy. Many of the coal mines were shuttered. Houses had been foreclosed on, people had lost their jobs, and more than a few had become desperate. Given the stress that so many people were under, I figured it was my job to manage local crime, not eradicate it. Just do my best to keep folks from killing each other or taking each other's stuff, and hope for better times. Nothing reduces petty crime faster than a new factory opening up in town.

I knew who the local troublemakers were, and I moved against them when they gave me no choice. During the past few months, Roger Sharpe had risen to the top of my list. I had heard talk that his knucklehead behavior had morphed into something more sinister, and that he was running a meth operation out of his house. To me, getting drunk and picking a fight in the parking lot of the Moonlite Bar is a manageable transgression. Running a meth lab is something else entirely. You're making a highly addictive and potentially lethal product, and you're running the risk that you'll blow up your house and possibly half the neighborhood. Cooking crystal meth will move you from my nuisance list to the roster of serious criminals.

But against Roger Sharpe we had no hard evidence. No one was talking, at least not to us. And our measly sheriff's department budget prevented us from doing anything remotely resembling what you see on television cop shows. No, the strategy that Sheriff Holbrook had followed, and which I saw no reason to change, was to follow the law, keep an eye on Roger Sharpe, and wait patiently until he did something stupid.

"Roger hasn't *done* anything," replied Louella. "He's *gone*."

"Gone? As in, disappeared?"

"Yes. Disappeared."

"When did you last see him?"

"Yesterday evening, at his house. He took his car to get an oil change. He came back around six, and then at seven he said he had to go out and he'd be back by eight. I went out, did some errands, and came back to his house at quarter to eight. He never showed up."

I rubbed my temples and thought about my turkey club getting soggy in its wax paper cocoon. Personally, I didn't give a rat's ass whether Roger Sharpe had fallen off the face of the earth. If he vanished, it would save me the trouble of building a case against him. It wasn't just me who felt that way—I knew plenty of people in town who would be happy if Roger Sharpe dropped dead on the sidewalk. They'd just walk around his body.

Nevertheless, a citizen had come to my office with a concern. As the top law enforcement officer in town, I couldn't pass the buck. I was duty bound to listen to her and respond.

"Louella," I said, "I want to ask you some questions. I hope you don't mind if I finish my lunch while we're talking."

She nodded. With a feeling of relief I retrieved my sandwich. Unprofessional? Yes. Did I care? No.

In between bites, I asked her the usual stuff. Roger hadn't been behaving strangely. She had tried to call him but his phone went to voicemail. They hadn't been fighting. Because of his criminal record, the only job he could get was doing maintenance at the local Wal-Mart, and he hadn't gone to work that morning. His supervisor had called her asking where he was.

"What was he wearing when you last saw him?" I asked.

"Blue jeans and a gray sweatshirt," she replied. "Dark blue parka and his Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cap. Yellow with a black visor."

Then an idea came into my head. Before Louella Schmidt walked into my office, the department never had enough evidence to get a search warrant for Roger Sharpe's house. Now I had my excuse to have a look.

"Louella, do you have a set of keys to his house?"

"Yes," she said. "We've been talking about my moving in with him. It would save us eight hundred bucks a month if I could get rid of my apartment. In this economy, with people getting laid off left and right, it's dumb to pay for something if you don't have to. But Roger has kept asking me to wait. He says he's not ready yet. Maybe after the holidays, he says. In January it'll be a year since his stepdad passed away. He says he may be ready then. I guess he feels weird bringing me into the house where his stepdad lived for so many years. So I'm a sort of a friend with keys. I slept there last night because I was waiting for him. He was supposed to come home."

"I think that it would be a very good idea if you and I went to the house and you allowed me to have a look inside. There may be evidence that will tell us where he is."



Louella frowned. “Well—I don’t know. Roger doesn’t like having people come around. He says he likes having his privacy.”

I shrugged. “Hey, if you don’t care, then I don’t care. I’ll file a missing person’s report, but unless I can investigate, then there’s not much I can do.”

Louella thought for a moment. Having finished my sandwich, I balled up the wax paper and tossed it in the trash.

“Well, I suppose you’d better,” she sighed. “If you think it’s necessary.”

“Yes, I do.”

Fifteen minutes later Louella’s car turned into a narrow driveway off the road that skirted the old cemetery. I followed in my cruiser. The driveway looked as if it had been plowed a few days earlier—the jumbled heaps of snow had been freshened by the smooth layer of new flurries that had fallen the night before. It had been a cold December, with early season storms and more snow than usual. The kids liked having the snow days off from school, but having vehicles slide off the roads because people were driving too fast made my life more difficult. You have to respond to the scene, get their statement, figure out what happened, write ‘em a citation if they broke the law, get the tow truck, and get the road clear. More often than not, the people spinning out or driving their cars or pickup trucks into snowbanks were hunters from out of town who didn’t know the roads. It all comes with deer season—but it’s hard to complain because the hunters spend big money in Macon, and the sport has become an important part of the local economy.

I had seen the Sharpe property on Google maps, but this was my first time visiting. The one-story frame house was nondescript: black-shingled roof, four windows across the front (no shutters), white vinyl siding, red front door. I parked behind Louella and got out of the cruiser. Overhead, the sky was heavy grey—more snow was on the way. It seemed like days since we had seen the sun.

Louella put her key in the lock. The door clicked open.

“After you,” I said. I wanted to make sure that she couldn’t claim that I forced my way in.

After stomping my feet on the black rubber mat to shake off the snow, I went through the door and entered the living room. Wide-screen television, an old sofa and a few chairs, an Exercycle in the corner. Above the fake fireplace was a painting of a sailing ship. The place smelled of cheap cologne and old nylon carpet.

“Roger lives here alone?” I asked.

“Yes. His stepdad willed the house to him. The stepdad had no other relatives, I guess. I told Roger that the property taxes would be expensive, but he said not to worry. He grew up in this house, so I guess he doesn’t want to sell it. He’s attached to it.”

I went into the kitchen. In the sink were some dirty dishes. I looked at the refrigerator—people always put stuff on their refrigerators. There was a Pittsburgh Steelers season calendar, a few photos of Roger with Louella, and a coupon for a discount at a local Mexican restaurant. No phone numbers or anything personal. On the kitchen table were newspapers and magazines—*Outdoor Life* and *People*.

“You can see it all looks pretty normal,” said Louella. “I’m sorry it’s kind of messy. I was just so worried about Roger that I didn’t bother to clean up this morning. I’ll bet you think I’m a terrible housekeeper. It usually looks better than this.”

“I understand,” I said. “Let’s see the bedroom.”

I saw the bedroom. And the bathroom and the basement. Nothing out of the ordinary. No signs of a crime. No meth lab.

“Okay, let’s have a look in the garage,” I said.

“Umm, I don’t know about that,” said Louella.

“What do you mean you don’t know about that?”

“I never go in there.”

“You never park your car in there?”

“It’s a one-car garage, and Roger always tells me that his Mustang has to be kept out of the weather. He says, ‘You’ve got a Toyota. It can stay outside. My car is going to be a classic some day. It’s got to stay in the garage.’”

I knew that Roger drove a ten-year-old Mustang GT that was worth about twenty thousand dollars. Not exactly a classic, but you know how some guys get about their cars. They pamper them as if they were priceless heirlooms.

“I’m sure Roger will understand that you were concerned about his safety,” I said. “Let’s have a look.”

With a little sigh Louella opened the back door. The walkway hadn’t been shoveled, and as we trudged our way to the garage, which was a stand-alone structure some distance from the house, I wished I had worn my boots. In front of the garage the old snow had been shoveled away from the door, but the previous night’s fresh layer had not been disturbed. I grasped the handle and pulled up.

The space was cold and empty—that is, there was no car. Just the usual stuff that people keep in their garages—an old snow blower, a lawn mower, folding chairs, trash cans, tires, paint cans. No meth lab.

Over my head were the joists and planks of a second floor.

“What’s upstairs?” I asked Louella.

“Roger’s stepdad built a little workshop for himself,” she said. “That’s all I know. I’ve never been up there.”

In the corner of the garage was a steep ladder with flat rungs, like you would see on a ship. I went to it and looked up. At the top was a wooden door secured with a padlock on a hasp.

“You’d better let me have a look,” I said.

“I don’t have the key,” said Louella. “Roger would kill me if I went up there. I shouldn’t even be in here, in the garage. Maybe we should go. He’s not here. His car isn’t here.”

“Louella, he may be up there. He may be injured or sick. Don’t worry, I’ll take responsibility. If Roger wants to get mad, he can get mad at me. We need to find out if he’s anywhere on this property. I need your permission to go up there.”

“Okay,” she said. “I guess you’d better check it out. Go ahead.”

On a table was a big screwdriver. I took it and went up the ladder. I jammed the screwdriver into the hasp and twisted hard. As the plywood of the door gave way with a sharp splintering sound the hasp fell free. I pushed open the door, hauled myself up the last rungs of the ladder, and stood under the low sloping roof.

Into my nostrils came a sharp smell like cat urine. In the dim light from the small windows at each end of the room I saw tables, a propane tank, plastic soda bottles, rubber tubing, burners, coffee filters—all the equipment needed for a home meth lab. The distinctive reek of the chemicals confirmed that this was an active crime scene.

“What do you see?” called Louella.

“He’s not up here,” I called back. “Just like you said—it’s a workroom. Does he spend much time in the garage?”

“I don’t know,” replied Louella. “We have different work schedules. I come here maybe three days out of the week. Whenever I’m here at the house, he’s with me.”

*He’s with you, all right, I thought. You’re nothing but a booty call. That’s why he doesn’t want you moving in.*

“Okay,” I said as I backed down the ladder. “You say you’ve never been up there?”

“Never,” she replied. “Why? Is something wrong?”

I looked at her big brown eyes. They were full of trust. This was the question I asked myself: should I place her under arrest right now, right here in the garage? Slap the cuffs on her as an accessory to drug manufacturing—a felony that carries a penalty of up to ten years in prison and a fine of up to one hundred thousand dollars?

No. There was no point in doing that. I could not imagine that Louella would have allowed me to come to the house if she were part of a meth operation—but hey, sometimes people are amazingly stupid. When the time was right we'd dust the workroom for fingerprints and build our case the way any police department did. If we found evidence that Louella was involved, we'd take her in.

We left the garage. As I pulled down the door I said to Louella, "Because Roger is missing and we can't rule out that a crime has been committed, I need you to stay out of this garage. I'm going to let you take your personal belongings from the house, but then I'm going to seal it up. Okay? So let's go back inside and you can take what belongs to you."

"Why?" she asked. "I don't understand—"

"It's just routine," I lied with a smile. "I'm sure that Roger will come back safe and sound, and your life will go back to normal. But until then I need you to stay away from this house. It's just a matter of procedure."

She reluctantly agreed. In the house I watched as she took some toiletries from the bathroom and a few articles of clothing from a drawer in the bedroom. My hunch about Roger was right—at least about his relationship with Louella. For someone who spent three nights a week at the house, she didn't have much stuff there. He let her visit but not put down roots.

As the gray sky pressed down with the promise of more snow, I followed her out of the driveway.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael Mucci, a graduate of Penn State University, grew up in a small town in central PA. Over the past 25 years, Michael has lived and worked in Mexico, the United Kingdom, Zimbabwe and South Africa. He has travelled to over 40 countries and enjoys exploring, hiking, collecting antiques and ancient artifacts and spending time with friends, family and his cat Jynx at his home in Southwest Florida. *A Season to Kill* is Michael's debut novel.

[www.MichaelMucciAuthor.com](http://www.MichaelMucciAuthor.com)