

COLD THREAT

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© 2024 by Nancy Mehl

Published by Bethany House Publishers

Minneapolis, Minnesota

www.BethanyHouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of

Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mehl, Nancy, author.

Title: Cold threat / Nancy Mehl.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2024. | Series: Ryland & St. Clair ; 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2023033574 | ISBN 9780764240461 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764242830 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493445240 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Thrillers (Fiction) | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3613.E4254 C66 2024

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023033574>

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24 25 26 27 28 29 30 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

I dedicate this book to Julius and Nancy Darby.

Julius is a respected Vietnam veteran who loves easily and stands strong for his wife, family, and friends. Nancy is a warrior who fights for her husband, her family, and those she loves. I am so honored to call them my dear friends. Thank you for being a part of my life. I treasure you both.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

JEREMIAH 29:11

PROLOGUE

DECEMBER, TWENTY-FOUR YEARS AGO

I watched as fire devoured the house as if it were a living, breathing monster, ravenous for death and destruction. It took effort not to smile as I observed the fire department desperately trying to quench the ferocious flames, the firefighters slipping and sliding on the snow and ice. But winter is no match for me. They would lose this fight. The nightmare has just begun. Inside they will find my Christmas offering. Those whom I'd judged and executed. The beast was at my command and would destroy any evidence that could lead to me.

"It's perfect," she whispered. "I love it."

I smiled at her. "It was a long time coming."

"But you did it. I'm so proud of you."

I had to blink away the sudden tears that filled my eyes.

"Shouldn't we leave?"

I nodded. She was right. At some point, the police would arrive and would most certainly look through the people gathered across the street since many times those who set fires like to watch their creations dance and light up the night. They might even take pictures. This was the only time I felt comfortable hanging around for a few minutes—before anyone had time to scan the crowd. This was important. The first. My debut performance.

I'd just turned to leave when a couple of police cars pulled up, lights flashing, their blue-and-red beams cutting through the night and the falling snow. I walked down the street, hidden behind a curtain of white. I stopped to watch as they exited their vehicles. The sight only added to my excitement. Two officers approached the fire department chief. As they talked, another officer stood on the sidewalk, staring at the structure that was being consumed. Suddenly, he shouted and pointed up toward the second floor. I had to walk back to see why. I stood behind a tree, trying not to look suspicious. That was when I saw it. A face peering through one of the windows.

"Oh no," she said, her voice breaking. "How did you miss her?"

The officer who'd spotted the unthinkable began to run toward the front door, but two firefighters grabbed him and held him back while another one grabbed a ladder and put it up against the house. It was clearly a child staring at them, her eyes wide with fear. They tried to climb toward her, but it was impossible. The flames from the first floor blocked their way. I felt a wave of anger. She had defiled my righteous mission. I fought to push back my rage. I had no desire to hurt a child. She shouldn't have hidden from me. I would have kept her safe. I sighed in frustration. This was her fault. Now all of us would have to watch as she died. There wasn't anything I could do. I felt the urge to leave, but the police were concentrating on her. No one was focused on the crowd, so I risked staying a minute or two longer.

Suddenly I heard a shout and saw the police officer who'd tried to enter earlier suddenly run toward the compromised house and through the front door before anyone could stop him. What a fool. The monster I'd created was too strong. Now there would be two additional lives sacrificed. This wasn't my mission. Only the guilty were supposed to die. I consoled myself with the knowledge that the blame was theirs. Not mine.

"Maybe he'll get her out," she said quietly.

I didn't respond. I knew she was upset. I couldn't find the words to tell her that it was too late for both of them.

Part of the house collapsed on the other side, away from the window where the

child still stood. Everyone watched in horror. Two firefighters started to follow the officer into the house, but their chief called them back. It was clear they were frustrated, yet the chief obviously thought it was too dangerous for them to enter. He'd probably already written off the officer and the child.

"It's not your fault."

"I know," I said.

I waited for the rest of the structure to fall, but as we all watched, the unbelievable happened. The police officer ran out of the house, something in his arms wrapped up in a blanket. A firefighter ran over to take the bundle from him as the rest of the building collapsed. The officer fell to the ground. I could see his burns from here. It looked as if the cloth from his shirt had melted to his skin and part of his dark hair had burned away. Now he would always remember this night. I felt no anger toward him. Truthfully, I was relieved that the child had a chance. I'd still accomplished my mission. This was a lesson learned. I had checked out the couple carefully, and I'd watched the house. Hadn't seen any evidence of a child. Still, I'd missed something important. I would never make this mistake again.

She sighed with relief. "I'm so glad she's okay."

A thought suddenly struck me. I hadn't seen the child, but had she seen me? Was she now a liability to my mission? As soon as the thought came, I dismissed it. She'd been hiding. Trying to make sure I couldn't find her. She would have been too afraid to look at me knowing I might see her too. Besides, she was so young no one would take her seriously anyway. Even if she had caught a glimpse of me, soon I would look very different. I breathed a deep sigh of relief. I was safe.

The firefighters began treating the girl and the officer until an ambulance roared up. It was time to leave. I pulled my jacket tighter and let the darkness and the dancing flakes shroud me as I slipped away, but not before I glanced at the snowman ornament hanging on the tree planted near the sidewalk.

As I walked away, I couldn't help but sing softly, "Frosty the snowman . . ."

CHAPTER ONE

DECEMBER, PRESENT DAY

River Ryland stared at her phone, willing it to ring. Unfortunately, it seemed it didn't respond well to mental telepathy. The pastor at the church she'd started attending with Tony had taught on faith yesterday. He'd brought up Mark 11:24 and Philippians 4:6. From what she could understand, faith was something you needed before your prayers were answered. As a child, she'd listened to her father preach, but he'd never mentioned anything like that. His sermons had been about sin and judgment. How to stay pure. Which was laughable since he ran off with the church's secretary and left his daughter, son, and wife behind, humiliated and without any way to survive financially.

As she continued to eye her phone, she wondered if she should start believing that God would bring more clients to Watson Investigations. Was it okay to have faith for something like that? It was clear that faith was important to God, but she didn't want to treat Him like some kind of genie in a lamp who would bring her whatever she asked for. What was His will, and what was selfishness? She sighed quietly. Life with God was proving to be interesting.

She glanced over at her partner, Tony St. Clair, and asked herself the question she'd posed so many times. What was he doing here? She'd had to leave the FBI. Severe PTSD had made it impossible for her to continue working as a behavioral analyst. Tony had been shot by the Salt River Strangler, the serial killer who'd tried to kill

her, and was still dealing with some of the aftereffects. Even so, he could have gone back to work. Instead, he talked her into starting this detective agency. They'd only had two cases so far. The results had been positive. One case had to do with teachers at a local high school selling drugs—something they stumbled across. The teachers were arrested, and the drug trade shut down. No paying client with that one. The other case had been pro bono. They'd solved that too. Thankfully, someone connected with the case—not their client—had given them a generous stipend. But how long would that last without some new cases? Was asking herself that question a lack of faith? She really didn't know the answer.

Tony's long legs were crossed, his feet up on his desk. He was leaning back in his chair, writing in a notebook. He reminded her of Benedict Cumberbatch. His curly dark hair was longer than most FBI agents had worn their hair. His long eyelashes sheltered eyes that sometimes looked blue and other times appeared to be gray. Tony was an enigma. A handsome man who never dated. He used to. Before the shooting. There were definitely some women at church who had him in their sights, but he clearly wasn't interested. Of course, she wasn't dating either. Didn't want to. Right now, she just wanted to figure out who God wanted her to be. It was hard to believe He needed a private investigator. She didn't see that among the gifts listed in the Bible.

"Okay, God," River whispered. "I'm asking You to make this agency successful. I thank You for hearing me. And . . ." She gulped. "And I thank You for our new cases." There. She shook her head. Weird, but Pastor Mason would be proud of her. She jumped when Tony's phone rang.

River listened closely. If this was a case . . . Well, Pastor Mason also said something about patience. Surely answers to prayer didn't happen this quickly. If so, she should have started praying this way a long time ago.

"Slow down, Dad," Tony said. "I'm not sure I understand."

River was almost relieved that it was Tony's father. If it actually had been a new case . . . well, it would have freaked her out a little. She began to straighten her desk again, only slightly listening to Tony's conversation. It seemed to be a little one-sided.

Finally, Tony said, "I've got to call you back, Dad. Let me talk to River and see what she thinks. You know her mother is ill." Pause. "All in all, doing pretty good. She has full-time help now." Another pause. "Okay. I'll phone you in a bit."

After he hung up, he pulled his feet off his desk and sat up straight in his chair. His blue sweater was the same color as his eyes . . . when they were blue. Why was she paying attention to his eyes? She gave herself a virtual kick in the pants and

realized that Tony looked upset.

"Everything okay?" she asked.

"No, not really."

"Is your dad all right? Your mom?"

"No," he said, cutting her off. "They're fine. And before you ask, my sister's good too." He looked away and cleared his throat. Something he did when he was troubled or thinking. Finally, his eyes met hers. "I told you that when my dad was a rookie police officer, before he was promoted to detective, he was badly burned in a fire?"

She nodded. She remembered the story. It was hard to forget. "He saved a little girl's life."

"Yes. Well, they found two bodies in the house after the fire was put out. The little girl was the granddaughter of the couple. Thank God, Dad got her out in time."

"Yeah. Your father's a hero."

Tony smiled. "Don't say that to him. He won't put up with it. I also told you that they never found the person responsible?"

She nodded again, then waited for him to finish. It was obvious what was coming next. She swallowed. Was this just coincidence? Of course, this was Tony's dad. They couldn't charge him anything for their services. River should have mentioned in her prayer that they needed a *paying* case. She didn't realize God was so literal.

Trust Me.

Although she hadn't heard an audible voice, it was so clear it made her jump.

Trust Me.

She swallowed hard. "Uh, he wants us to help him solve a twenty-year-old crime?" she said. Why was her voice squeaky? "Why now? I mean, I assume he tried to close this case himself. From what you told me, he's an excellent detective."

"He is, but he's retiring."

"And he wants this solved before he leaves?"

Tony nodded. "In a way. You see, there were two other similar murders with the same MOs in Des Moines not long after that one. The police arrested someone. Charged him with all three. Dad was never sure they got the right person."

"You never told me that."

"I never went into details because I thought it was a closed case."

"So, your father wants to make certain the case is truly closed before he leaves? It's still a really cold case. You know how tough they are to solve after so long."

"Well, except he says it's happened again."

"In Des Moines?"

Tony shook his head. "No, up in Burlington, Iowa, where they are now. They moved there years ago because Dad felt it was a better place to live. He was convinced that Des Moines was getting too big. Too dangerous. He wanted a slower-paced life. A safer place for Mom. Truthfully, I think he had a tough time working in Des Moines. He couldn't get anyone he worked with to believe they'd arrested the wrong person for those murders."

"Wait a minute. So, your dad thinks the killer followed him?"

He shrugged. "He doesn't know, although I agree that it seems strange. Look, I know you have questions. I do too. Can you come to Burlington with me so we can write a profile? He wants to see if we can add something to what he has so far."

River hesitated a moment.

"I know you're thinking about your mom. Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have asked. I can go alone. I shouldn't have put you on the spot."

River shook her head. "You're not. Now that we have Mrs. Weyland, I may be able to come with you."

Hannah, the young woman who had come in to help River's mother during the day, had quit after finding out she was pregnant. She'd recommended her aunt, who had recently lost her husband. Agatha Weyland was sixty-three years old and had nursed her husband through Alzheimer's. When Hannah told her she was pregnant and had to leave her job, Mrs. Weyland had begged her to set up an interview with River. At first, she wasn't sure if it would work since Mrs. Weyland wanted to move in.

"I just can't stay in my house anymore," she'd told River when they talked. "Too many ghosts. Hannah and her husband love the house and they've offered to buy it. I was goin' to move into an apartment, but if you have a spare room . . ." Her hazel eyes had filled with tears, and River had been touched by her. But would she change her mind and quit once she was stronger? She didn't want Rose to get used to someone and then have her leave. River's mother was still dealing with Hannah's quitting. She had loved and trusted the young woman.

"I'm not lookin' for anything temporary," Mrs. Weyland had said as if reading River's mind. "I intend to take care of your mother until . . . well, until she no longer needs me."

This time it was River's turn for tears.

"Oh, honey," the older woman had said, taking River's hand. "I know what Alzheimer's is like. I know how to take care of your precious mama. My Harold was a happy man until the day he died. I learned how to go with him wherever he was . . . and how to be whoever he needed me to be. We were happy, and your mother will be happy too. You have my word."

River had really wanted to hire Mrs. Weyland, but she was certain Rose wouldn't give up another one of her rooms. She'd gotten upset when River and Tony had moved her original sewing space to another room even though they set it up exactly the same. They'd moved things around so River could be closer to her mother in case she needed help during the night. Now she'd have to give up her sewing room completely, even though she never used it. River was prepared for a meltdown. But after spending a couple of hours getting to know Mrs. Weyland, Rose had said, "Can't we just move the things in the sewing room down to the basement, River? Either Agatha could move in there, or you could move into that room, and Agatha could be right next to me."

Although she was more than surprised by her mother's request, she quickly agreed. River moved into the old sewing room, and Mrs. Weyland set herself up next to Rose.

"Let me talk to Mrs. Weyland," she told Tony. "She's barely had time to get to know my mother. She might feel uncomfortable with me leaving town so soon. How long do you think we'll be gone?"

"Why don't we say the rest of the week?" he said. "I think that's enough time to create a profile. My father's already put together a murder book, although I'm not sure how much information he's been able to get his hands on. Hopefully, we'll at least have some pictures and reports."

"Okay, but if Mrs. Weyland or my mother is uncomfortable . . ."

"I'll go alone and bring everything back with me." He frowned. "I'd really like you to talk to my dad. See if he can convince you the cases are related. I know that's not what we do when we write a profile, so we'll be using our ace deductive skills as well."

River laughed. "I'll call Mom now, but you might as well plan on going alone. My mother will probably have a conniption fit."

"A conniption fit? Where do you get these expressions? I truly think an old lady lives somewhere down deep inside you."

River picked up her phone, stuck her tongue out at Tony, and dialed Mrs. Weyland.