



COLD
PURSUIT

RYLAND + ST. CLAIR

BOOK 1

NANCY
MEHL

AUTHOR OF THE QUANTICO FILES SERIES

RYLAND & ST. CLAIR

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Poem in the prologue is from William Shakespeare's *Othello*.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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I dedicate this book to two of the best people I've ever known, Leon Shook and his dear wife, Linda.

Linda, you and Leon have touched so many lives. Your love was so special and such an inspiration. He loved to call you "my girl," and enjoyed telling everyone how beautiful you are and how much you made him laugh. What a great gift. I know he wouldn't have traded his life with you for anything else in the world. You made him so happy.

Until the day you're finally reunited with your beloved Leon, I pray that God will meet all your needs and keep you safe within His hands.

Synesthesia is a neurological phenomenon in which the stimulation of one sense triggers an instantaneous and involuntary experience in another. In other words, it causes two or more senses to cross. People with Synesthesia may be able to “hear” color, or “taste” sound. There are many kinds of Synesthesia, and people who have it sometimes have more than one type.

—The Synesthesia Network

PROLOGUE

River Ryland was convinced that madness exists only a breath away from genius. The man who stood in front of her and Tony had proven this to be true. He'd kept his identity hidden from the FBI's best. Now River and Tony's lives were about to end, and there was no one to save them.

Moonlight caused the river to sparkle as if it were layered with precious jewels. But the image didn't provoke a sense of beauty. It spawned a feeling of terror so deep and evil that her body betrayed her. She couldn't move. Why were they even here? She and Tony were behavioral analysts for the FBI, not field agents. They wrote profiles for the agents who were trained to confront insanity. A call from another agent had brought them here. "Come and see," she'd said. "It's important. I think we got it wrong."

This was someone they trusted. Someone whose opinion mattered. Jacki was so smart. So naturally intuitive. And so surely dead. Why hadn't River been alerted by the quiver in her voice? Why hadn't the profiler profiled her friend and

realized she was in trouble? She'd failed Jacki, Tony, . . . and herself. And now, without a miracle, she and Tony were going to die on the bank of this killer river—with moonlight standing guard over their execution.

“Come closer,” the man said to River, his face resembling a Greek theater mask. Was it Comedy or Tragedy? She wasn't sure. She couldn't think. Even though she willed her feet to move, she stayed where she was. It was as if her shoes had been glued to the ground. But that wasn't possible, was it?

The man swung his gun toward Tony. “I said move. If you don't, I'll shoot your friend.”

River forced her feet from the spot where she stood. It took every ounce of strength and willpower she possessed. She locked her eyes with Tony's. Slowly, she made her way toward the man in the moonlight, his gun glinting in the soft light as he pointed it at her. A line from Shakespeare's *Othello* echoed in her mind. *It is the very error of the moon; She comes more nearer earth than she is wont and makes men mad.*

She turned her face toward the man who planned to take her life. She knew she shouldn't panic. She knew how to fight. How to defend herself. She hated feeling so helpless. So afraid. This was the moment she desperately needed to summon the trained agent inside of her. The one who knew how to confront evil. Yet she was aware of how powerful this man was. How deadly. He'd killed eleven women that they knew of, not counting Jacki, but he'd teased authorities with letters claiming up to eighty. Although it sounded impossible, it wasn't. Transient women went missing every day. Hookers. Teenagers living on the streets. The number could be right. The one truth that was indisputable? No one had ever survived him. No one.

When she was close enough to smell his sour breath, in one

quick move, he swung the gun back toward Tony and fired four times. Tony fell to the ground.

River started to scream his name, but before she could make a sound, the killer's hands were around her neck, squeezing. Choking the life out of her. Suddenly, something clicked on in her brain, like her alarm clock in the morning. She had to help Tony—if it wasn't already too late. She struggled, hitting at this horror of a human being. This man full of death and destruction. Then she rolled her eyes back in her head and stopped breathing, holding her breath for dear life. And that's exactly what it was. Life. Hers and Tony's. She went limp, hoping the monster would think she was dead.

He finally dropped her on the ground and walked toward his car. She needed to gulp in air but was afraid he'd hear. Breathing in a little at a time hurt her chest, yet she had no choice. She began to crawl quietly toward the gun he'd taken from Tony. It lay only a few feet away. She had no idea where hers was, but that didn't matter.

She heard him close the trunk. She scrambled as quickly as she could until her fingers closed around the barrel of the gun, but before she could pick it up, he was behind her. He hit her on the head, and she felt herself losing consciousness. She could only stare up at the moon and hate it for watching this happen.

The next sensation she experienced was throbbing pain in her head and neck. Her first reaction wasn't relief, it was surprise. The pain was awful, but didn't that mean she was alive? A flash of euphoria gave way to terror when she realized she couldn't move. Where was she? Why was she wet? She couldn't see anything, and her hands were bound in front of her. Her fingers reached out and touched something hard. What was

it? When she realized she was trapped inside some kind of container—and that water was leaking in—she screamed out in horror. She was in a large chest. All of the Strangler’s victims had been found in the Salt River, and most of them were inside old trunks. But they’d been dead when they went into the water, and she was still alive. He’d done it on purpose because she’d come too close. He needed more than her death. He wanted her to experience the terror he knew his madness could create.

River struggled with all her might, but she couldn’t get free. She pulled her hands up to her mouth and tried to use her teeth to rip through the duct tape wrapped around her wrists. She realized immediately that there was too much of it. She couldn’t make enough progress to help herself before she was completely submerged. The river was seeping in, slowly but surely. She was on her side, and half of her head was already under water. She cried out in terror as she tried to push herself onto her back so she could clear her nose and mouth, but there wasn’t enough room. As hope faded, she did something she never thought she’d do again. Something she hadn’t done in many years. She prayed.

“God, please. If you’re real, if you care anything about me, save me. Get me out of here. I’m sorry I’ve been so angry at you. If you give me another chance . . .” She couldn’t get the rest of the words out because water filled her mouth and she began to choke. She’d swallowed some of it, and she couldn’t catch her breath. She was suffocating. Drowning. Just when she’d decided to give in to the inevitable and let death overtake her, something flashed in her mind. Right before the Strangler hit her . . . there was something. A movement on the hill behind them. Was someone watching? Had they gone for help? Was there a chance? As much as she wanted to believe it, another

part of her thought it would be best to just relax and float away. Hope only brought disappointment, and she'd experienced too much of it. Still, she couldn't help but grab onto a slim chance that . . .

That's when she felt it. Movement. Something jostled the trunk. Was she being lifted out of the river? As the water level began to decrease inside the trunk, River began to cry. She was going to live. "Thank you, God," she croaked. "Thank you."

HE WAS CONVINCED he'd been born to be exceptional. He was certainly smarter than these weak, feckless creatures who revolved around his genius. Was he a god? Or was he a demon? Who was smarter, God or Lucifer? It seemed Lucifer had certainly ruined the plan of the Almighty. If God was really the Creator of all things, how was it that one of His creations was able to rebel and cause such havoc on Earth? Seemed to him that the devil was the winner of that particular contest.

So, on whose side was he working? Being honest about it, he didn't really care. He only knew that the desire to rid the world of those who were unworthy of life burned in him like a fire. One that he had no power or will to quench. It was his destiny. His reason for living. His fate had been decided for him many years ago, and he'd accepted it gladly. Lucifer or Jehovah. It didn't matter.

Some would call what he'd done sin. But what was sin anyway? Perhaps it was the road less traveled because of fear of retribution. He didn't fear judgment. His god didn't threaten him. Instead, he only fueled the glorious desire that clawed and scratched inside him, demanding release.

He especially enjoyed pitting himself against those who called themselves righteous because they had the ability to forgive. Forgiveness was for the feeble-minded. He would never forgive. He hated anyone who considered themselves moral or spiritually justified and had promised the voice that whispered in the darkness that he would never fail to respond to its unending song of reckoning against them.

He laughed suddenly, the sound echoing around him. These idiotic cattle thought they'd defeated him, but he had a surprise for them. All he had to do was wait. They would rue the day they'd tried to cage him.

The killing hadn't stopped. It had only just begun.

CHAPTER *ONE*

Brian woke up shivering again, calling out for his mother and father. As he looked around the small room he rented in the rundown boarding house, reality sunk in. He had no idea where his parents were, and even if he could find them, they didn't want him. They'd stuck him in that residential facility until he was eighteen, like some kind of unwanted dog left in the pound. They'd paid the hospital boatloads of money for all those years, yet when he'd been released there was no family waiting to take him home. So why was he still having the same nightmare? Would it ever leave him alone?

Before they'd kicked him out, the social worker at the hospital had found him a job, but if he wanted to keep it, he had to visit a therapist every week. He hated going, but he couldn't walk away from his job. Although he didn't make much, at least he could pay for this room. Fredric, a kind man who'd worked in the hospital cafeteria, had helped him find this rooming house and had even paid his rent for two months. Brian was grateful for Fredric's help, but this place was really awful. Paint peeling off the walls. A shared bathroom for all three rooms on

this floor, which was usually dirty. The guy who lived across the hall drank and didn't flush the toilet. And at night the cockroaches came out. Brian didn't blame Fredric. He'd done everything he could with his limited funds. Brian blamed his parents. They were rich. They could have helped him. Kept him safe. Brian hated them with every fiber of his being.

When he was very young, they were attentive—even loving. But as he grew older, and they realized he was *different*, everything changed. Although he'd never met his father's father, he'd heard the whispers—that Brian was crazy, just like his grandfather had been. When he first began to tell his parents what he was experiencing, they seemed concerned. Then when doctors informed them he was hallucinating and that he needed professional help, the way they looked at him changed. The word *schizophrenia* became his enemy—and his identity.

At first, his father appeared to care for his broken son, but as his mother applied pressure, he began to distance himself—just as she had. It was clear he wasn't the child they'd wanted. And then his brother was born. And his sister. They were perfect. As he grew older and his problems began to increase, it was obvious that his mother only saw him as an embarrassment. Something that interfered with their perfect lives. Thankfully, in their eyes, God had shown them mercy and given them the children they deserved, so sending him away solved their dilemma. He had a memory of his parents fighting one night. His father wanted Brian to stay with them, but his mother had threatened to leave him and take his ideal children away. Finally, his father gave in. Brian hated him even more than his mother for caving in to her demands. For turning his back on the son that needed him so desperately. After he went to live in that terrible hospital with its white walls, disinfectant smells,

locked doors, and abusive staff, his parents began to visit him less and less. The more he begged them to take him home, the more uncomfortable they became, and by the time he was thirteen, they stopped coming altogether. As he remembered the anger he'd felt, bad words swirled around in the air, each letter a different color. As they turned red, he mouthed the words he saw, and rage built inside him. He would need to release it soon.

Suddenly his alarm clock went off, causing the air around him to pulsate. He hit the alarm and pushed himself up from the bed. It was an especially cold November. The blanket he'd purchased from Goodwill wasn't enough to keep him warm, especially in this drafty room, but it was all he could afford if he wanted to pay his rent and eat. As his teeth chattered, the word *cold* floated in front of his eyes. He couldn't hold back a sneeze that made his mouth feel funny. He swiped at the bad words that started flying around his head.

"Stop it!" he said loudly. Immediately, he put his hand over his mouth. What if someone complained because he was too loud? No matter what, he couldn't lose this room. He had nowhere else to go, and he didn't want to live on the streets. That was a nightmare he couldn't face.

The afternoon sun shone through a gap in the curtains on his window, but it brought no warmth. He took off his sweatpants and sweatshirt and hurried over to the decrepit chest of drawers where he kept his clothes. He pulled out his work pants and some clean underwear. Then he went over to the hooks on the wall where he hung his three work shirts. There was only one clean shirt left. He'd have to go to the laundromat tomorrow. That could be a problem since he had to see his therapist in the morning. He'd have to wake up early to

get everything done. He glanced at the clock on the top of his dresser. Four o'clock. He needed to leave by five-thirty to get to work on time. At least the cleaning company left him alone, since they trusted him and knew he would get the job done. As long as he had a place to live and he could keep his fifteen-year-old car running, he would keep showing up.

His supervisor usually only showed up once a week to collect Brian's time sheet. He used to check his work, but he didn't anymore. Most importantly, the man never gave him *the look*. Brian hated that look. The one he saw on his parents' faces before they'd shipped him off. Rage burned inside him toward *normal* people who laughed at him and treated him as less than human. As he headed toward the bathroom, the word *blood* pulsated in front of his eyes, and he could almost taste its sugary aroma in his mouth.