

FINDING SANCTUARY, BOOK 3

# RISING DARKNESS

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BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Nancy Mehl, *Rising Darkness*  
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Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
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

Mehl, Nancy.

Rising darkness / Nancy Mehl.

pages ; cm. — (Finding sanctuary ; 3)

Summary: “Years after leaving her Mennonite background, Sophie’s newspaper job gives her access to information she can’t ignore, and when she travels to Sanctuary, Missouri, for answers and recognizes a man she used to love, her own past gets tangled in the dangerous investigation”— Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1159-1 (softcover)

1. Mennonites—Fiction. 2. Women journalists—Fiction. 3. Man-woman relationships—Fiction. I. Title. 2015  
813'.6—dc23

2015015705

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Cover design by Dan Pitts

Nancy Mehl is represented by The Steve Laube Agency.

15 16 17 18 19 20 21      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the One who takes away our ashes  
and gives us beauty instead.

# PROLOGUE

The look on Snake's face when the bullet hit his chest was burned into Terry's mind. No one was supposed to die. They had planned it so carefully. He silently ran over the list in his head: Wait for the guard. Follow him inside. Tie up the guards. Get the money. Get out. It had seemed so easy. One of the guards was working with them, and they'd assumed the other guard would hand over the money without a struggle. But that hadn't happened. Now two guards were dead, and Snake was barely clinging to life.

Terry looked down at his own arm. Thankfully, the bullet had gone right through. It was still bleeding, but he would recover. Snake had caught the worst of it. He couldn't even remember Snake's real name. Did he have a family? He seemed to remember him mentioning a sister, but he had no idea where she was. Did the guards have families? He swore under his breath. Of course they did. Everyone had a family, didn't they? Except for him.

He suddenly noticed his speed. Ten miles over the limit. He slowed down, allowing other cars to whiz past. He couldn't risk being pulled over.

He glanced again at Snake. He was pale and breathing quickly. What could he do to save his partner? Where could he get help? Had the car been reported stolen yet? How much time did he have?

Although it was risky, he decided to take Snake to a doctor he trusted. He'd convince him to help the injured man, if it wasn't too late. He'd seen death before, and Snake was as close to the abyss as anybody could get. He hoped the doc would be quick. He needed to clean up, divide the money, ditch the car, and lie low for a while. Thankfully, he had a friend who'd agreed to hide him until the heat died down. Then he'd buy another car and head to his next destination. A place where he could disappear. A place so safe no one would ever find him.

He had no intention of letting Snake know where he was going. If Snake lived, he couldn't risk giving him too much information. His crimes had graduated beyond theft now. He could face the death penalty.

He ran over everything in his mind once again. Even though he was almost sure he hadn't left anything behind that could lead to his capture, he was smart enough to know that nothing in life was certain. All it took was one slip. One forgotten detail. If he could just get through the next few days while the city of St. Louis buzzed with the story of one of the greatest crimes it had ever seen, his plan would play out. Once he got to Sanctuary, he could fade into the background, disappearing until the world forgot all about him.

## CHAPTER

# ONE

There was something about the smell of a prison that made me feel an almost overwhelming urge to run. It wasn't the high fences that surrounded the facility in El Dorado, Kansas, or the dour-faced security guards, or even the electronic doors that slid shut behind me as I made my way to the room where visitors met with inmates. For some reason, it was the sharp aroma of bleach and disinfectant that made me feel as if something dark lurked beneath the unpleasant smell.

I glanced around the large room at the other visitors who had come to meet with prisoners. Although most of the conversations seemed relaxed, even friendly, there was something about the men who wouldn't be walking out the front door when their visit was over. The panic in their eyes that came from the reality of knowing there was no way out. I shivered involuntarily and stared down at the cold, white tabletop. Even though it was only March, the air-conditioning in the room was turned up high. I pulled my jacket tighter around me, trying not to shake.

The door to the room opened, and a guard led a man in. I almost didn't recognize him. Tom Ford had changed. His dark, greasy hair was cut short, and his acne-scarred face had cleared. He was still small, but his matchstick-thin arms now had muscles. It seemed bizarre to think he was actually healthier now than he had been as a free man. He didn't meet my gaze as he approached the table where I waited for him. When he sat down, the chains around his ankles rattled.

"He needs to be back in his cell in thirty minutes," the guard said brusquely before he turned and walked over to stand next to another guard who leaned against the wall. I smiled at them but was rewarded with blank stares. I had the distinct feeling they felt the friends and family of prisoners were as guilty as their charges—as if they were somehow responsible for their criminal behavior.

The guard who had led Tom into the visitors' room watched me with narrowed eyes, his expression bordering on antagonism. His attention made me uncomfortable, so I swung my gaze back to Tom, who appeared to be ignoring me. I began to feel claustrophobic and extremely uncomfortable.

Finally, Tom looked up and frowned at me. "You're that reporter from the newspaper in St. Louis, right? When you called here, I told you not to come. That I changed my mind."

I nodded and swallowed several times, trying to calm my ragged nerves.

"Why didn't you listen? It's not like anyone's beatin' down the doors to talk to me. No one else even bothered to answer my letters."

I took a deep breath. "I want to hear what you have to say." My voice was nearly a whisper, and I forced myself to breathe

in and out slowly. I had an important task to accomplish. I needed to focus and finish what I came to do.

“I was wrong to write to your paper,” Tom said gruffly. “Terrance Chase is dead.”

“Did your letter have anything to do with that special on TV?” I asked.

He didn’t respond, just stared down at the table.

“That show brought a lot of attention to the robbery—and Chase. What did you see that prompted you to write to us?”

Still no answer. Just a cold glare, probably designed to make me back off.

“Over six million dollars stolen. Two guards dead, along with Chase’s partner.”

No reaction. I met his gaze head-on.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” I said finally.

“I ain’t never met you. I’d remember.”

I managed a small smile. “The name Sophie Bauer didn’t help?”

He shook his head. “Still don’t know you.”

“I’m Sophie. Sophie Wittenbauer.”

He still looked confused, and I wanted to slap him.

“From Kingdom?” Bringing up the small Mennonite town in Kansas where I’d grown up made my stomach clench. Breaking free from that place had been the best thing I’d ever done, and I was certain everyone in Kingdom felt the same way.

This time his jaw dropped, and recognition chased away his perplexity. “You look totally different. Your hair’s different. And you’re not . . .” He colored and pursed his lips.

“Fat?”



I'd had my ugly, dishwasher-blond hair cut short and streaked. Now I wore it in a cute bob I felt looked good on me. Of course, losing so much weight had changed me more than anything else. And trading my one simple, faded, dirty black dress for attractive modern clothes made a world of difference, too. Thinking about the dress I'd worn in Kingdom—two sizes too small and with a hem that reached to my ankles—made my stomach turn over. I would never be that person again. Gone was the unkempt teenager I had once been. And good riddance.

“You look different, too,” I said.

He nodded. “Prison will do that to you.”

“So will changing your life.” I clasped my hands together on top of the table because I didn't know what else to do with them. “After I left Kingdom, I got my GED. I'm working my way through college and will earn a degree in a little over a year. Right now I'm working for the *St. Louis Times*.” I neglected to tell him my current assignment was obituaries and the occasional restaurant review. But hopefully, Tom Ford would be my ticket to writing bigger stories. Stories that mattered.

He stared off into the distance. “Yeah, I understand. I'm hopin' to get another chance someday, too. But right now I'm lookin' at a long stretch.” His eyes locked on mine. “That's why I wrote those letters. Thought maybe my information about Terrance Chase might get me a deal. But nobody believed me. Nobody even got back to me. Until you, that is.”

“There have been a lot of rumors about Terrance Chase. Especially after that TV special. But most of the information has been bogus. Just people wanting to insert themselves into the investigation. The overwhelming belief is that Chase is

dead. An old friend of his swears to it. Says Chase was ambushed and killed. The money taken.”

Tom shrugged. “Maybe I was wrong. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

I sighed. “Look, Tom. I saw a copy of your letter. You sounded convinced that Chase is alive, and that you know where he is. Then suddenly you change your mind? It doesn’t make sense. Are you afraid of something?”

Tom grunted. “In here?” His gaze darted around the room and then came back to settle on me. The bold, cocky expression he’d been exhibiting slipped a notch. His voice was so soft, I could barely hear him say, “Of course I’m afraid.”

A chill ran through me. I wanted this story. Even if I had to lie. “You don’t have to worry,” I said, ignoring a brief twinge of conscience. “Talk to me off the record. I won’t print anything you don’t want me to. But if you give me something I can use to find Chase, I could go to bat for you. You know, try to get you a reduced sentence.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’ll need more than that. You gotta get me outta here, Sophie. Less time and a new prison. Someplace where no one knows me. I . . . I feel like I’m being watched all the time. Ever since I sent those letters.”

Part of me wanted to tell him the truth. That I had no ability to help him. That I was just a peon at the paper. But what came out of my mouth was fueled by my determination to be *somebody*. To prove I wasn’t the worthless human being my father had told me I was. An image of his leering face floated through my mind, and I felt ill. “You have my word. I’ll do everything I can to protect you. My paper has a lot of contacts. With people who can help you.”

He appeared to consider my offer. Once again his eyes scanned the room. The tension in his expression tugged at my emotions, but I couldn't back down now.

"Tell me why you changed your mind about sharing what you know," I said. "And tell me the truth."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I got a note. Found it stuck under my breakfast plate."

"What did it say?"

"Snitches get stitches."

I raised my eyebrows. "No mention of Terrance Chase? How do you know the note was about him?"

He scowled at me. "Believe me, I know. This isn't summer camp, Sophie. When you get warned, you gotta take it serious. You ain't never been in prison. You don't understand."

"Did you talk to anyone about your suspicions?"

Tom shook his head. "There's only one guy here I trust. A guard. He's been helpin' me get my mail out. After I sent the letter to your newspaper, he came and warned me that I shouldn't let my mail go through the warden's office anymore. I could bring lots of trouble on myself. He smuggled all my other letters out of here himself."

I frowned at him. "I'm glad you have someone you can trust, but I still don't understand how you know that note was about Chase."

He sighed dramatically. "It's the only thing I been sayin' that someone would get upset about. Maybe I was overheard. Or someone snatched a letter. I don't know. If one of these guys got wind Chase was alive, they'd be all over it. For the money."

"Okay. Let's put that aside for a moment. I have some other questions."

“Off the record. Like you said.”

I nodded. “Off the record.”

“Go on.”

“The only reason I put any stock in your letter was because I remembered a guy named Terry I saw you talking to once. If my memory is correct, he looked a lot like Terrance Chase. If it *was* him, maybe you really do know something the authorities don’t.”

“It was him all right.”

I couldn’t keep the skepticism out of my voice. “Why would a guy who got away with over six million dollars be hanging out with you?”

Tom smiled. “You mean why would he waste time with a lowlife punk like me?”

I wouldn’t have put it that way, but I didn’t correct him. It was exactly what I’d been thinking.

“First of all, I didn’t know who he was back then. He called himself Terry Martin.” Tom shrugged. “I used to make some money selling license plates I knew weren’t gonna be missed for a while. Terry was in the area for some reason. Don’t know why. When he heard about my services, he asked for help. That’s all there is to it.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Who wouldn’t miss their license plates?”

He began to pick at a piece of loose skin next to one of his fingernails. “Lots of folks in the country near Kingdom only drive to nearby small towns and back and forth to church. They don’t pay no attention to the numbers on their plates. And some of the Mennies have trucks they don’t use that much. I switched out their tags with those of the guys

my dad arrested. Most of them wasn't gonna be drivin' for a while so they wouldn't realize their plate was gone. If it was a newer plate, I could guarantee almost a year of safe driving."

Tom sounded almost proud of his ingenuity. When I frowned at him, his expression changed.

"I'm not saying it was right. Back then, all I cared about was makin' money. And gettin' somethin' over on my dad."

Tom's father had been the sheriff assigned to the county where I used to live. His son's illegal activities had cost him his job.

"How is your father?"

Tom shook his head. "He died last year. Heart attack." He bit off the piece of dead skin and picked it off his tongue. Then he flicked it on the floor.

"Oh, Tom. I'm so sorry." And I was. Saul Ford had been a terrible sheriff, but in the end, he'd tried to do the right thing. Even though it had meant his son would spend years of his life locked up in prison.

"Me too. But we made up, you know. He stood by me. Came to see me every week." Tom quickly wiped away a tear that snaked down his cheek. He sniffed several times and then fought to regain the tough-guy bravado he'd obviously created to make it through life in prison.

"I'm glad. I know he loved you, Tom."

"Don't wanna talk about that no more," he said in a raspy voice.

"Okay." I actually felt sorry for him. Something I'd never expected to experience when it came to Tom Ford. "Then let's get back to Terrance Chase. When you saw him, it was . . .

what . . . a few years after the robbery? Why would he wait so long to get new tags?”

Tom shrugged. “It’s easy to fake stickers, you know, for different years. But the metal tag is different. His was shot. He needed new Missouri plates. Two of ’em. I happened to know about an old farmer who died while visiting his family in a small town not far from Kingdom. I took his plates. His truck was just sittin’ in a field. No one cared about those plates. Then I told Terry about another guy who could make new stickers. That way you don’t have to steal ’em. They can tear if you’re not careful. After that, he was set for a while.”

“Did you ever see Terrance again?”

“No. There wasn’t a chance. I got arrested for . . . well, you know.”

Yes, I knew. For some reason, neither of us seemed willing to talk about that. “When did you realize who he really was?” I asked.

“That special on TV. Just like you guessed.”

The guard who’d led Tom into the room glanced in our direction, so I checked my watch. We still had time left. Hopefully, he wasn’t going to pull the plug early.

“If Chase *is* alive, why do you think you know where he is?”

“Because I heard somethin’ I wasn’t supposed to,” Tom said. “When I met Terry at a local diner to give him his plates, he was on the phone. I heard him talkin’ to someone. At first I didn’t pay no attention, but after seein’ that show, I got to thinkin’ about it. Then I read a story about a kidnapping case. Some Mennie . . .” He flushed. “Sorry. Some Mennonite boy turned out to be a stolen kid. He was being hidden away in a small town in Missouri. The name

of the town was the same as the name I heard Terry say on the phone.”

“I’m not Mennonite anymore, Tom. You don’t have to apologize to me.”

He blushed. “I shouldn’t use that word anyway. My dad used it all the time, and now I don’t even realize when I say it.” He stared into my eyes. “I’m sorry, Sophie. For everything. I used you, and it was wrong. I know that now. I’ve had a lot of time to think in here, and I’m not proud of the things I done back then—when I knew you.”

I was shocked to hear him apologize. This wasn’t the same Tom Ford I’d known when I’d lived in Kingdom. But even though he seemed sincere, I wasn’t ready to absolve him.

“Are you sure Terry was talking about a town?” I asked, ignoring his apology.

Tom shook his head. “Not at first. But after I saw the story about the kidnapped kid, I put two and two together.”

“Do you know who he was talking to?”

“No. It was kind of a weird conversation.”

The guard who’d been watching us took a step forward. We certainly hadn’t been talking for thirty minutes. Why did he seem so concerned about our conversation?

“Tom, don’t talk to anyone about Chase,” I said quickly. “Not even the guard you trust, okay? And stop writing letters. In fact, get rid of any notes or letters you have that mention him.”

Tom frowned. “Okay. But my friend won’t say nothin’.”

“What if he accidentally slips? Or someone overhears you talking to him? Please don’t take any chances. Shut this down. I don’t want you to get hurt.” Although I sounded concerned

for his safety, in my heart I knew my main goal was to protect my story. I felt guilty, but I quickly dismissed it. Investigative reporters lie all the time. It's part of the job.

“Okay,” he said softly. “I’ll get rid of everything. And I’ll keep quiet.” He leaned in a little closer. “Anything you can do would help, Sophie. Find Terry Chase and then get me a deal for sending you in the right direction.”

“I’ll do my best. Don’t worry,” I said. “You just be careful. If I find anything helpful, I’ll keep your name out of it. Except with the district attorney who prosecuted you. He’s the one who can get your sentence reduced. Of course, I can’t guarantee anything, Tom. All I can do is try. Do you understand?”

He nodded. “Just do what you said. Don’t tell nobody about me until you can get me outta here. Write down this number. Use it if you want to get a message to me. They listen in on prisoners’ phone calls.”

I took a notepad and a pen from my purse. “All right.”

Tom quickly rattled off some numbers, which I wrote down. Then I put my pen and notebook back in my purse.

I noticed the guard say something to his buddy, who frowned. He began walking toward us. “Tom, where is this place? The place you think Chase might be hiding?”

Tom saw the guard, too, and he blinked quickly, fear shining in his eyes. “It’s called Sanctuary,” he said in a whisper. “Sanctuary, Missouri. It’s a Mennie . . . I mean, a Mennonite town.”

I felt as if my heart had turned to lead and dropped all the way to my toes. “A . . . a Mennonite town?”

He nodded. “You should understand that. Great place to hide, huh?”



If I still believed in God, I'd have found this information funny. God's way of messing with me. The last thing I ever wanted to do was set foot in a town that reminded me of Kingdom. But my desire for a job as a crime reporter outweighed my revulsion toward my Mennonite background. "Do you know anything else?" I asked quickly. "Anything that could help me find Chase?"

"I don't think so. But there was a strange thing he said that didn't make no sense."

"Can you repeat it? Exactly?"

He nodded, his eyes locked on the guard who was definitely headed our way. "He said, 'It's safe. It's protected by an angel.'" Tom shook his head. "Terry wasn't religious. I'm sure about that. I never could figure it out."

"Time's over." The guard stood next to our table, glowering at us.

"It hasn't been thirty minutes," I said, looking at my watch. "You can't . . ."

"It's all right," Tom said brusquely. "I ain't got nothin' to say to you, lady. I told you that. Don't bother me no more. I mean it." He looked up at the guard. "Get me outta here."

The guard motioned for Tom to stand up. Before he led him away, Tom's eyes met mine. The panic I saw there shook me to my core.

The other guard came over and stood next to my table.

"I'll walk you out, ma'am," he said.

His hawklike features were accented by a crew cut that began with a sharp V at the top of his forehead. His dark-brown eyes glared a hole through me.

I got up and walked toward the exit, the guard close on

my heels. When we reached the first door, he unlocked it, and we headed toward the last exit. There was no sound in this part of the prison except the *tap, tap, tap* of my heels and the slight squeak of his shoes. They blended together in an odd and disturbing song. For some reason, the peculiar symphony made beads of sweat break out on my forehead. When we reached the final exit, the guard's arm shot past me and held the door shut. I turned and found myself staring up into his face. His expression made me take a quick breath.

"I'd advise you not to take your friend too seriously," he said in a low voice. "It could cause you both some trouble you don't want."

With that, he unlocked the door and held it open. I hurried out of the prison, the guard's words and the final expression on Tom's face fighting for the right to claim the fear that made my heart beat so hard I wondered if the people who walked past me could hear it.