



MEG MEDINA

# Chapter 1

Mr. MacInerney drives way too slow, which is weird for a man who spends his life running into burning buildings. It could be that being a fireman has made Kathleen's dad a safety freak, but I think it's really that he likes to show off his Impala. He calls it his baby, after all. It's gold with a convertible roof and whitewall tires. The chrome is sometimes so shiny that Kathleen and I can put on lipstick in its reflection. If you ask us, though, its best feature is the backseat. It's wide and springy, a nice option should the right guy ever happen along. Not that Mr. Mac needs to know—or that we've ever had the chance to test out our theory.

Kathleen fidgets. She just got off work, and we're running out of time before the matinee starts at the Prospect. She leans over the cream-colored seat and rests her chin near his ear. "Dad, step on it. Aren't you supposed to be at the station by now? *Hurry.*"

I see his blue eyes in the rearview mirror. They're clear and smart, just like hers.

"All in good time," he says, smiling.

That's Mr. Mac. Calm, easy. You'd never guess that he's a fireman. He's skinny, with boyish red hair and a quiet voice, not exactly a testosterone specimen, if you know what I mean. Still, he's tougher than he looks, which comes in handy. When the Chiclet gum factory in Sunnyside blew to smithereens in a chemical explosion last fall, Mr. Mac had to dodge chunks of concrete and melted gum that rained down on him as he saved workers whose skin had burned off. He smelled of cinnamon and ash for days.

We've had a lot of fires in the city lately, actually—and not just because old ladies forgot their stoves. Arson fires are smoldering all over the place.

He points at the theater when it finally comes into view up ahead. The line of people snakes all the way down the block. "Looks like you'll have a wait."

"Ugh." Kathleen rolls her eyes. "Drop us off here," she says, pointing at the corner bus stop. "We'll walk the rest of the way."

She grabs my hand and pulls me out to the curb.

Mr. Mac powers down his window before we get too far.

"Be home by dark," he tells us.

Kathleen turns and gives him a look. "Oh, come on. We're nearly eighteen."

"You're *seventeen*, and you promised your mother. She worries."

"Yes. About everything. Don't be crazy."

"By dark," he says again, suddenly looking serious.

I shift on my feet in the pause that follows. I know what the fuss is about, even though no one will say it. It's

that shooting that happened not too far from Kathleen's job. Back in January, somebody shot and killed a secretary while she was kissing her fiancé in his car. Nobody knows who did it. Kathleen and I actually know the exact block in Forest Hills where it happened, since we go there all the time. Sometimes when I meet her after work, we hop off the train at Continental Avenue and walk around that neighborhood, fantasizing about life there. The Tudor houses are huge and sit back on wide lawns that don't have a single kid playing on them. That's nothing like where we live, of course. I live in an apartment, with Mima and my brother, Hector. The MacInerneys have a small yellow house around the corner from our building. It's the one nearest the tracks. Their windows rattle like loose marbles every time the Port Washington train passes through.

Anyway, I step in to save Kathleen.

"We'll be home right after the movie, Mr. Mac. Promise," I say. "Now, be careful out there."

Mr. Mac smiles at me and shakes his head. I've been saying good-bye to him that way since I was in second grade. It always gets him.

He kisses his fingertip and taps the figurine of St. Florian he keeps on his dashboard. "I have your word, then, Nora. Have fun."

He pulls out nice and slow, so everyone can see.

"This is depressing," Kathleen says, looking around at the line. It's a mob of cuddling couples. The pair behind us is even making hamster noises as they kiss.

“Relax. Didn’t we already agree that dating is a pain in the horns?”

She makes a face, but she knows I’m right. One way or another, guys always complicate things for us. When she starting going out with a guy named Lou last year, she got so swept up by his weight-lifting pecs and green eyes that I practically became invisible. Turns out, he was cheating on her the whole time with a girl from the Mary Louis Academy. When it all went down, I was secretly relieved. It sucked to see her cry, but I’d been missing my best friend for a while.

Besides, it’s not as if there aren’t lots of guys waiting to fill his spot. Kathleen has legs like one of those Nair commercial girls. Her boss at Macy’s took one look at her gams and *begged* her to model in the mall’s fashion show last year. She agreed—despite being “objectified”—because she got to keep the clothes. Me? I’m not that lucky. The only thing I model is pastrami when I’m working the slicer at Sal’s Deli.

“Uh-oh,” Kathleen says, pulling me close. “Idiot alert.”

I follow her gaze.

Who’s coming toward us? My own ex, Angel—yet another poster child for crappy boyfriends everywhere. He’s holding hands with a curly-haired girl in a tight T-shirt.

Why, God, *why*?

“Hey, look. It’s Betty and Veronica!” Angel stops at our spot and grins. He’s always found it funny to compare us to the blonde and brunette in the Archie comics, since we’re always together. He likes to add that we have the same tits. This pretty much sums up his brains and reading powers.

"No cutting, pal," says a guy behind us.

"Take it easy," Angel says. "We're all together. I was just parking the car, right, Nora?" He flashes a smile and steps closer to me.

"Do I know you?" I ask.

Kathleen gives him her frostiest glare. "He doesn't look familiar at all." She hates Angel almost more than I do, never forgiving him for what she calls "his inexcusably dickish ways." Angel was my first experience with a guy, a fact that I try to forget daily. I blame it on the fact that he has the same puppy eyes as Freddie Prinze, may he rest in peace. But Angel is nothing like the character I fell in love with on *Chico and the Man*, all kindhearted and sexy. Nope. One minute we were kissing in Angel's room, and a little while later he was driving me home, my shirt buttoned wrong and a wad of toilet paper in my underwear to catch the blood. I cried to Kathleen that whole night, worried about babies and all the scabby diseases Miss Sousa covered with great gore during Health and Hygiene. But mostly, I already knew in my gut that Angel had used me, and sure enough, he spread the word to anybody who would listen. I was easy.

"Good-bye, Angel," I say.

His smile fades. "Dykes."

He slings his arm over his girl's shoulder and moves toward the back of the line.

"Smart and classy as always," I say sweetly.

I look up at the marquee and try to shake him off. We've got slim pickings: *Carrie* or *Rocky*. I already sat through *Rocky*

twice with Hector when it first came out in November. (It was his birthday, and I felt bad.) Since then, he has sneaked in and seen it four more times. Now he can quote you every little scene in annoying detail. His favorite part is when they take razor blades to Rocky's swollen eyelids.

"Not *Rocky* again," I say. "I beg you."

Kathleen frowns. "But that leaves *Carrie*." Her voice sounds doomed.

We haven't been much for horror ever since we read that Stephen King book during freshman year. I spent months having nightmares about being burned to death in our school gym. Kathleen was no better. She hates anything about the occult. I think it's all the church her parents make her attend.

"Show?" the ticket guy asks through the window.

"Adriana saw *Carrie*," Kathleen warns me. "She told me the eyes on the statue of Jesus at St. Andrew's glow just like the ones in the movie."

"She's a nutcase," I point out. Adriana Francesca wears black and believes she has been reincarnated from the sixteenth century. She is also, inexplicably, the smartest girl in our English class.

"Come *on*!" somebody yells from the back of the line.

I glare at the guy who said it and turn back to the ticket man. "Two for *Carrie*."

"I don't know about this," Kathleen says as we take our change from under the glass.

"We'll be *fine*," I say.



Well. I stand corrected.

Kathleen's screams were ice picks to my eardrums, especially when Carrie's blue eyes got wide and she unleashed her telepathy.

"Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" Kathleen screamed as Carrie, dripping in pig's blood, slammed the gym doors shut and set off electrocutions and fires.

"I will never forgive you," Kathleen says when we finally reach the lobby again. Her hands are still shaking; her face is pale.

I put a finger in my ear and wiggle it. Her voice sounds muffled, the way it does after we've been to a concert. I don't pay much mind to her threat, though. She said the same thing to me after we saw *The Omen*. The cameraman's decapitation scene nearly did her in. She wore a rosary as a necklace and slept with her parents for a week.

"Some prom, huh?" I say.

"You girls piss yourselves?" Angel's voice makes us turn. His date must be in the john because he's outside the ladies' room, waiting. "Christ, Kathleen, you were loud in there," he says. "*Oh, God! Oh, God!*" he mimics. "It was like you were getting banged."

What I wouldn't give to unleash some telepathic powers myself right now. His private parts would be my first target.

"Really?" I ask him. "I couldn't really hear her over *your* prissy screams, Angel. Did Curly have to hold your hand? Or were you busy pawing her?"

Just then, his date comes out, waving her hands to dry



them. She gives me a cool look and pushes out her chest. She'll learn soon enough, I guess.

"Let's go," I say as I pull Kathleen away.

Kathleen keeps glancing at her watch as we eat at Gloria Pizza next door. It's only five thirty, but she's antsy.

"You realize that we haven't had a home-by-dark curfew since the summers of junior high," I say. "It's like we're twelve-year-olds instead of high-school seniors. You're lucky I like you."

"I know. I'm sorry. It's ridiculous," she says. "I don't know what the hell is up with them."

"The dead girl."

Kathleen gives me a look. "Please. This is New York. It's not like she's been the only person killed this winter."

I bite into my pizza. True enough. People are getting offed all over the city; I heard it's the worst crime year on record already.

"Maybe we should look on the bright side," I tell her. "We could have truly psycho mothers like Carrie's."

Kathleen looks stricken. "God, she *was* scary." She shakes red-pepper flakes onto her slice of Sicilian. "What kind of mother tries to plunge a knife into your chest?"

I chew on that for a second. There are other ways to kill your kid, a little bit every day. I think of the days Mima loses her cool. "*Son unos demonios*," Mima says about me and Hector, just loud enough for us to hear. We're devils. "There are little knives," I say.

“Huh?”

“You look fat today. That tight dress makes you look like a *cualquiera*.”

She nods slowly and mimics Mrs. MacInerney’s voice perfectly. “Oh, sweetie, you broke out again. . . .”

“Exactly.” I yank on a long string of melted cheese until Kathleen breaks it with her finger. “And your mom is one of the *nice* ones.”

We finish up as soon as we can, but by the time we step outside, the sky is deep purple, and the neon signs for the shops are bright. We hurry along, but my guess is that we’ll have fifteen minutes, tops, before it’s officially dark. Mrs. MacInerney will turn up their police scanner and start pacing. I hate that thing. It makes it an all-day crime show at their place: four channels, one for the firehouse where Kathleen’s dad works, and the other three for police stations nearby. No wonder they get worked up.

“We’re going to miss it,” Kathleen says, pointing at the bus ahead. We run full speed, but just as we reach the stop, the doors snap shut and the driver pulls away.

“Hey, wait!” I pound on the door, still jogging alongside. But in a great display of MTA customer service, he just plays deaf and keeps going.

“Crap,” Kathleen says, waving off the cloud of diesel smoke left behind. We’re both out of breath. “Now I’m going to hear crime statistics all night.”

“Let’s take the 28 instead,” I say, looking down the street. Another bus is idling at the corner, and the driver

is still reading his newspaper by dome light. The 28's route has a stop a little farther from home, but at least we won't have to waste twenty minutes waiting. "We'll get off by St. Andrew's and walk."

The only other passengers with us are three Indian women wearing bright saris the color of spring flowers. They're clustered near the driver, where they are looking unsure of where to get off. Kathleen and I have the backseat to ourselves.

We pass Murray Hill Bowling Lanes, its gigantic bowling pin reflecting in the window. You'd never know it, but Small's Adhesives, where Mima works, is directly under that place. Twenty women packing tape all day long, or at least as long as their boss, Mr. Small, will pay them. When I was little, I thought it was the best place to work. I loved the neon pin and how the bowling balls rumbled like thunder overhead.

"We should have gone bowling instead of going to that dumb movie," Kathleen says as the bus drives by. "How am I going to be able to sleep?"

"You want a real nightmare? How about picking up athlete's foot again from those shoes? *No, gracias.*"

"You just hate to lose."

Not true. I hate everything about bowling. The dim lights of the alley, the nubby little pencils, the boozy men who check us out when we reach down for the ball. I don't even keep the score straight: all those x's and slashes for spares and strikes. Most of the time, I just draw smiley faces and give Kathleen all the points she wants.

Personally, I can't wait for summer, when there will be a

lot more to do. High school will finally be behind us, hallelujah. And to kick things off, we can celebrate our eighteenth birthdays. Kathleen and I were born only one day apart, although people always think I look older than the twenty-four hours I have on her.

The bell tower of St. Andrew's finally comes into view as we round the bend. You can see its relief sculpture of the crucifixion against the sky for blocks.

"This is us." I yank the signal cord. "Come on."

Kathleen is quiet as we hop out the back exit and start for home, but her eyes keep drifting upward the closer we get to the church. Suddenly she stops and reaches for my hand.

"What?" I say.

"His eyes . . ." she begins. Her face starts to twist into panic mode.

"Stop it," I tell her. "You're imagining things."

"I am not," she whispers. "I've been dragged to this church every Sunday my whole life. I know what the damn statue is supposed to look like." She squeezes my hand tight. "Adriana was right. Jesus's eyes are turning bloodred right now. Look."

I don't wait for more.

Suddenly we're running like horses startled by a pistol. We race for the corner, round 158th Street, and head down the hill toward home. I haven't moved this fast since elementary school, though, and I guess I'm out of practice. In no time, a stitch in my side stabs at me, and pizza sauce starts to rise from my stomach. I'm going to puke.

“Wait,” I say, gasping.

We bend over and strain for breath. When my heart finally slows enough for me to speak, I straighten.

St. Andrew’s is far behind us, but no one is out, as far as I can tell. It’s completely dark now. In the daytime, this is a quiet stretch, lined on either side by a few old houses with tiny front yards. We’ll have to walk beneath the train trestle, after which comes the block of buildings where I live.

I think sheepishly of Mima, who always tells me not to walk this way alone, especially not at night. A thousand times she’s warned me, and I always sneer at her dramatic lectures about this patch of weeds and broken glass, about the dark corners where a girl could be pushed, dragged off to the dead end, and then God Knows What. It has always seemed so stupid, so *Mima*.

But now . . .

I stare ahead at the gaping shadows we’ll have to walk through and wish we had just waited for the next bus. I think of the graffiti and the broken bottles in there, the smell of urine that sometimes chokes you when you walk by. Suddenly I think of the murder in Forest Hills.

“We just need to get past the underpass. We’ll get close and run,” I whisper as Kathleen and I link arms.

I practice our sprint in my mind the way athletes do. We’ll race through that patch and break through to the other side, victorious. It will take only a few seconds, no more.

But as we get closer, my feet slow down, and it feels as though I’m trying to walk through molasses. Kathleen

slows down, too. Each tree trunk we pass makes us skittish. Anyone could be hiding behind there in the shadows.

I hear a man's voice in my head.

*Hey, girls.*

*Click, click, click*, like a gun cocking over and over.

*It's just our boots*, I tell myself, closing my eyes. *Move faster.*

But behind my eyelids, an ugly picture waits. Kathleen's pretty white coat is soaked with blood as she lies on the ground.

"I don't want to," Kathleen whispers suddenly. "Let's go back. We can call my mom from a pay phone. She'll be pissed, but she'll get us."

I pause, unsure. Northern Boulevard seems so far behind us, and the shops are all closed and dark. We're already at the trestle. We'll only have to run twenty, maybe thirty steps. We're practically adults, aren't we? Nearly eighteen, as Kathleen always says. Not scared little girls.

"We're almost there," I say stubbornly. "We're just psyched out from the stupid movie."

And with that, I pull us into the darkness.

The temperature has dipped again for the night, and the spring chill makes me shudder. "We're fine," I say.

"We're fine," Kathleen repeats.

*Click, click, click.*

But Kathleen stops again. This time, she raises her finger and points ahead without a sound. A parked car has come into view. It's up on the sidewalk, headlights off. Why didn't we see it before?

Someone is definitely inside.

The door opens, and I suck in my breath as a tall man slips out of the driver's side and faces us.

Everything happens quickly after that. A bright light shines in our faces, blinding us. In that fraction of a second, I see a gun at his waist, one of his arms outstretched. I don't even have time to scream. Instinctively I yank Kathleen to the ground and cover my head, waiting for the blast.

But a second later, instead of gunshots, I hear footsteps running in our direction. And another person—a woman—stands over us. She's young, with long dark hair, and she flashes a silver badge from inside her jacket.

"Police," she says.

I stare at her from the ground, confused. My mouth is completely dry, but I'm soaked in a chilly sweat.

I struggle to my feet, trying to make sense of things. Police? These two cops staring down at us look barely older than we are. They're in jeans and boots, like us. If it weren't for their NYPD badges, it could be a joke.

"You looked like you were running from something. Anything wrong?" she says as she helps Kathleen to her feet.

I'm too stunned to answer. Sure, I've watched plenty of *Charlie's Angels*, but I've never had a live encounter with a female cop. This one is nothing like Farrah Fawcett Majors with her big hair and lip gloss.

Kathleen is the first to speak. "We were just . . . running, I guess." She taps her cheek and winces at the blood on her fingertip. There's a scrape. She must have hit the ground hard.

“Just running?” the cop asks. “Not drinking or tipsy, right?” She pauses as Kathleen and I exchange looks. “You girls have ID?”

My heart is pounding now. It’s no big deal for Kathleen — her dad’s a firefighter. But you can’t always trust a cop, especially not if you have the wrong skin color or a last name like López. Look at that kid in Brooklyn. A cop shot him in the head on Thanksgiving Day for the big crime of being black and standing in front of his building around the time somebody else reported a robbery. Randolph Evans was fifteen.

Kathleen fumbles in her purse for her license as the blood starts to drip down her face.

“We’re not drunk,” she says. “You scared us, that’s all.”

I hand over my school bus pass, which is all I’ve got to prove who I am.

“MacInerney.” The cop holds her flashlight to read the cards. “López.”

I try not to look nervous. Cops brought Hector home last summer. They picked him up at Kissena Park for carving graffiti of a penis into the park benches. He told them the benches were so old and broken down, his artwork made them look better.

Would they remember that, or make the connection?

Kathleen puffs up a little. “That’s right. My dad is Patrick MacInerney, with the fire department. He’s with Engine Company 258 in Sunnyside. We live right around the block.”

I hold my breath. *Good thinking, Kathleen.* I once watched Mr. Mac get out of a speeding ticket by mentioning



he was a firefighter. Apparently there's a network of civil servants giving one another a free pass when they break laws.

The cop hands back our IDs.

I look from her to her partner, waiting.

"You're going to have a nice lump," she finally says to Kathleen. "You need a ride home? I can explain to your parents."

My stomach seizes up. Very bad idea. What would Mima say if she finds out the cops stopped me under the trestle in the dark? Not to mention Manny, our super, and the neighbors, who gawk and gossip about anybody they can.

"I live in that building right over there." I point at the next corner. "We can walk. I'll get Kathleen cleaned up at my place."

"Yeah, I'm totally fine," Kathleen adds quickly.

Silence.

I try not to stare at their guns. "Can we go?" I ask. "It's kind of cold out here, and her parents are expecting us."

The cops look at each other, a secret message passing between them. "Go right home," the guy finally says.

We hurry off, too shaken to look back at them or ask any of the million questions running through our minds.

"Holy crap," Kathleen whispers when we finally step into the lobby of my building. The bump on her cheekbone is bright red. "What are they doing hiding like that? There's nobody to arrest around here, is there?"

We look at each other, but neither one of us mentions the girl in Forest Hills aloud.

I take a look at her scrape. Sure enough, a lump is rising fast. "Wait here."

I run upstairs, pop a few cubes out of the ice tray, and am back out the door before Mima can even ask what I'm doing.

Kathleen presses the compress against her face for a few minutes, as we think of a good explanation for her parents. It's never easy with underdeveloped lying skills like hers, but I coach her as best I can.

"Just say you fell, and leave out the part about missing the bus," I tell her. "It's easy. You could have fallen getting off the Q12, see? Those stork legs of yours could have tripped you up, right? Tell them you're late because I was patching you up."

I stand behind the glass doors and watch her race around the corner for home. When she's gone, I climb the stairs slowly. I don't stop on my landing, though. Instead, I go all the way up to the roof and prop open the door.

It's blustery up here, but I can still see the cops' darkened car under the trestle. The sight of them leaves me uneasy. I've watched enough episodes of *Baretta* to add things up. They're decoys, I'm sure of it, and they're here to lure somebody in.

Two cops dressed to look like teens are being used as bait?

I cross back over the roof and head for our apartment, thinking. I won't sleep tonight, but it's not because of *Carrie* or the eyes of some statue turning red.

It's because I know plenty about bait, thanks to all those times I've been fishing with Kathleen and Mr. Mac.

Fake lures don't fool the prize fish you're trying to catch.

It's always the real worm, hopelessly writhing on the hook, that draws what you want from the dark.

# Burn Baby Burn

Meg Medina

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