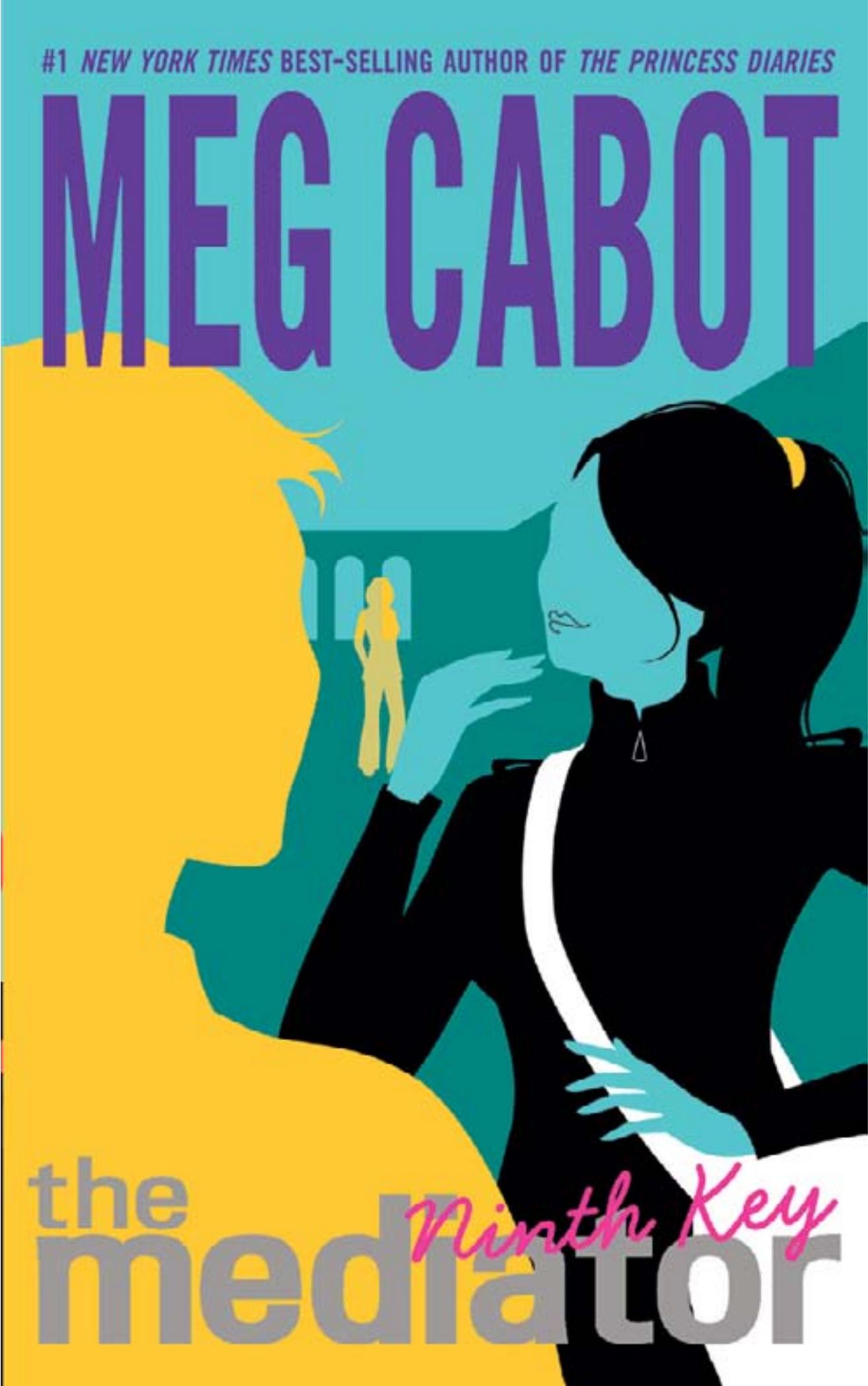


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *THE PRINCESS DIARIES*

# MEG CABOT



the  
mediator *Ninth Key*

# CHAPTER ONE

Nobody told me about the poison oak.

Oh, they told me about the palm trees. Yeah, they told me plenty about the palm trees, all right. But nobody ever said a word about this poison oak business.

“The thing is, Susannah—”

Father Dominic was talking to me. I was trying to pay attention, but let me tell you something: poison oak itches.

“As mediators—which is what we are, you and I, Susannah—we have a responsibility. We have a responsibility to give aid and solace to those unfortunate souls who are suffering in the void between the living and the dead.”

I mean, yeah, the palm trees are nice and everything.

It had been cool to step off the plane and see those palm trees everywhere, especially since I'd heard how cold it can get at night in northern California.

But what is the deal with this poison oak? How come nobody ever warned me about that?

“You see, as mediators, Susannah, it is our duty to help lost souls get to where they are supposed to be going. We are their guides, as it were. Their spiritual liaisons between this world and the next.” Father Dominic fingered an unopened pack of cigarettes that was sitting on his desk, and regarded me with those big old baby blues of his. “But when one’s spiritual liaison takes one’s head and slams it into a locker door . . . well, you can see how that kind of behavior might not build the sort of trust we’d like to establish with our troubled brothers and sisters.”

I looked up from the rash on my hands. Rash. That wasn’t even the word for it. It was like a fungus. Worse than a fungus, even. It was a growth. An

insidious growth that, given time, would consume every inch of my once smooth, unblemished skin, covering it with red, scaly bumps. That oozed, by the way.

“Yeah,” I said, “but if our troubled brothers and sisters are giving us a hard time, I don’t see why it’s such a crime if I just haul off and slug them in the—”

“But don’t you see, Susannah?” Father Dominic clenched the pack of cigarettes. I’d only known him a couple of weeks, but whenever he started fondling his cigarettes—which he never, by the way, actually smoked—it meant he was upset about something.

That something, at this particular moment, appeared to be me.

“That is why,” he explained, “you’re called a mediator. You are supposed to be helping to bring

these troubled souls to spiritual fulfillment—”

“Look, Father Dom,” I said. I tucked my oozing hands out of sight. “I don’t know what kind of ghosts you’ve been dealing with lately, but the ones I’ve been running into are about as likely to find spiritual fulfillment as I’m going to find a decent New York City–style slice of pizza in this town. It ain’t gonna happen. These folks are going to hell or they’re going to heaven or they’re going on to their next life as a caterpillar in Kathmandu, but any way you slice it, sometimes they’re gonna need a little kick in the butt to get them there. . . .”

“No, no, no.” Father Dominic leaned forward. He couldn’t lean forward too much because a week or so before, one of those troubled souls of his had decided to forgo spiritual enlightenment and tried to snap his leg off instead. She also broke a couple of his ribs, gave him a pretty nifty concussion, tore up the school real good, and, let’s see, what else?

Oh, yeah. She tried to kill me.

Father Dominic was back at school, but he was wearing a cast that went all the way down to his toes, and disappeared up his long black robe, who knew how far? Personally, I didn't like to think about it.

He was getting pretty handy with those crutches, though. He could chase the late kids up and down the halls if he had to. But since he was the principal, and it was up to the novices to hand out late slips, he didn't have to. Besides, Father Dom was pretty cool, and wouldn't do something like that even if he could.

Though he takes the whole ghost thing a little too seriously, if you ask me.

“Susannah,” he said, tiredly. “You and I, for better or for worse, were born with an incredible gift—an ability to see and speak to the dead.”

“There you go again,” I said, rolling my eyes, “with that gift stuff. Frankly, Father, I don’t see it that way.”

How could I? Since the age of two—two years old—I’ve been pestered with, pounded on, plagued by restless spirits. For fourteen years, I’ve put up with their abuse, helping them when I could, punching them when I could not, always fearful of somebody finding out my secret and revealing me to be the biological freak I’ve always known I am, but have tried so desperately to hide from my sweet, long-suffering mother.

And then Mom remarried and moved me out to California—in the middle of my sophomore year, thanks very much—where, wonder of wonders, I’d actually met someone cursed with the same horrible affliction: Father Dominic.

Only Father Dominic refuses to view our “gift”

in the same light as me. To him, it's a marvelous opportunity to help others in need.

Yeah, okay. That's fine for him. He's a priest. He's not a sixteen-year-old girl who, hello, would like to have a social life.

If you ask me, a "gift" would have some plus side to it. Like superhuman strength or the ability to read minds, or something. But I don't have any of that cool stuff. I'm just an ordinary sixteen-year-old girl—well, okay, with above ordinary looks, if I do say so myself—who happens to be able to converse with the dead.

Big deal.

"Susannah," he said now, very seriously. "We are mediators. We aren't . . . well, terminators. Our duty is to intervene on the spirits' behalf, and lead them to their ultimate destination. We do that by gentle guidance and counseling, not by punching

them in the face or by performing Brazilian voodoo exorcisms.”

He raised his voice on the word exorcisms, even though he knew perfectly well I'd only done the exorcism as a last resort. It's not my fault half the school fell down during it. I mean, technically, that was the ghost's fault, not mine.

“Okay, okay, already,” I said, holding up both hands in an I-surrender sort of gesture. “I'll try it your way from now on. I'll do the touchy-feely stuff. Jeez. You West Coasters. It's all backrubs and avocado sandwiches with you guys, isn't it?”

Father Dominic shook his head. “And what would you call your mediation technique, Susannah? Headbutts and chokeholds?”

“That's very funny, Father Dom,” I said. “Can I go back to class now?”

“Not yet.” He pattered around with the cigar-ettes, tapping the pack like he was actually going to open it. That’ll be the day. “How was your weekend?”

“Swell,” I said. I held up my hands, knuckles turned toward him. “See?”

He squinted. “Good heavens, Susannah,” he said. “What is that?”

“Poison oak. Good thing nobody told me it grows all over the place around here.”

“It doesn’t grow all over the place,” Father Dominic said. “Only in wooded areas. Were you in a wooded area this weekend?” Then his eyes widened behind the lenses of his glasses. “Susannah! You didn’t go to the cemetery, did you? Not alone. I know you believe yourself to be indomitable, but it isn’t at all safe for a young girl like yourself to go sneaking around cemeteries even if you are a mediator.”

I put down my hands and said, disgustedly, “I didn’t catch this in any cemetery. I wasn’t working. I got it at Kelly Prescott’s pool party Saturday night.”

“Kelly Prescott’s pool party?” Father Dominic looked confused. “How would you have encountered poison oak there?”

Too late, I realized I probably should have kept my mouth shut. Now I was going to have to explain—to the principal of my school, who also happened to be a priest, no less—about how a rumor had gone around midway through the party that my stepbrother Dopey and this girl named Debbie Mancuso were going at it in the pool house.

I had of course denied the possibility since I knew Dopey was grounded. Dopey’s dad—my new stepfather, who, for a mostly laid-back, California kind of guy, had turned out to be a pretty stern disciplinarian—had grounded Dopey for calling a friend of mine a fag.

So when the rumor went around at the party that Dopey and Debbie Mancuso were doing the nasty in the pool house, I was pretty sure everyone was mistaken. Brad, I kept insisting—everyone but me calls Dopey Brad, which is his real name, but believe me, Dopey fits him much better—was back home listening to Marilyn Manson through headphones, since his father had also confiscated his stereo speakers.

But then someone said, “Go take a look for yourself,” and I made the mistake of doing so, tiptoeing up to the small window they’d indicated, and peering through it.

I had never particularly cared to see any of my stepbrothers in the buff. Not that they are bad looking or anything. Sleepy, the oldest one, is actually considered something of a stud by most of the girls at Junipero Serra Mission Academy, where he is a senior and I am a sophomore. But

that doesn't mean I have any desire to see him strutting around the house without his boxers. And of course Doc, the youngest, is only twelve, totally adorable with his red hair and sticky-outy ears, but not what you'd call a babe.

And as for Dopey . . . well, I particularly never wanted to see Dopey in his altogether. In fact, Dopey is just about the last person on earth I'd ever wish to see naked.

Fortunately, when I looked through that window I saw that reports of my stepbrother's state of undress—as well as his sexual prowess—had been greatly exaggerated. He and Debbie were only making out. This is not to say that I wasn't completely repulsed. I mean, I wasn't exactly proud that my stepbrother was in there tongue wrestling with the second stupidest person in our class, after himself.

I looked away immediately, of course. I mean, we've

got Showtime at home, for God's sake. I've seen plenty of French kissing before. I wasn't about to stand there gawking while my stepbrother engaged in it. And as for Debbie Mancuso, well, all I can say is, she ought to lay off the sauce. She can't afford to lose any more brain cells than she already has, what with all the hair spray she slathers on in the girls' room between classes.

It was as I was staggering away in disgust from the pool house window, which was situated above a small gravel path, that I believe I stumbled into some poison oak. I don't remember coming into contact with plant life at any other time this past weekend, being a generally indoors kind of girl.

And let me tell you, I really stumbled into those plants. I was feeling light-headed from the horror of what I'd just seen—you know, the tongues and all—plus I had on my platform mules, and I sort of lost my balance. The plants I grabbed on to were all that saved me from the ignominy of collapsing on

Kelly Prescott's redwood pool deck.

What I told Father Dominic, however, was an abridged version. I said I must have staggered into some poison oak as I was getting out of the Prescotts' hot tub.

Father Dominic seemed to accept this, and said, "Well, some hydrocortisone ought to clear that up. You should see the nurse after this. Be sure not to scratch it or it will spread."

"Yeah, thanks. I'll be sure not to breathe, either. That'll probably be just about as easy."

Father Dominic ignored my sarcasm. It's funny about us two both being mediators. I've never met anybody else who happened to be one—in fact, until a couple of weeks ago, I thought I was the only mediator in the whole wide world.

But Father Dom says there are others. He's not sure

how many, or even how, exactly, we precious few happened to be picked for our illustrious—have I mentioned unpaid?—careers. I'm thinking we should maybe start a newsletter or something. The Mediator News. And have conferences. I could give a seminar on five easy ways to kick a ghost's butt and not mess up your hair.

Anyway, about me and Father Dom. For two people who have the same weird ability to talk to the dead, we are about as different as can be. Besides the age thing, Father Dom being sixty and me being sixteen, he's Mister Nice himself, whereas I'm . . .

Well, not.

Not that I don't try to be. It's just that one thing I've learned from all of this is that we don't have very much time here on Earth. So why waste it putting up with other people's crap? Particularly people who are already dead, anyway.

“Besides the poison oak,” Father Dominic said. “Is there anything else going on in your life you think I should know about?”

Anything else going on in my life that I thought he should know about. Let me see. . . .

How about the fact that I’m sixteen, and so far, unlike my stepbrother Dopey, I still haven’t been kissed, much less asked out?

Not a major big deal—especially to Father Dom, a guy who took a vow of chastity about thirty years before I was even born—but humiliating, just the same. There’d been a lot of kissing going on at Kelly Prescott’s pool party—and some heavier stuff, even—but no one had tried to lock lips with me.

A boy I didn’t know did ask me to slow dance at one point, though. And I said yes, but only because

Kelly yelled at me after I turned him down the first time he asked. Apparently this boy was someone she'd had a crush on for a while. How my slow dancing with him was supposed to get him to like Kelly, I don't know, but after I turned him down the first time, she cornered me in her bedroom, where I'd gone to check my hair, and, with actual tears in her eyes, informed me that I had ruined her party.

“Ruined your party?” I was genuinely astonished. I'd lived in California for all of two weeks by then, so it amazed me that I had managed to make myself a social pariah in such a short period of time. Kelly was already mad at me, I knew, because I had invited my friends CeeCee and Adam, whom she and just about everyone else in the sophomore class at the Mission Academy consider freaks, to her party. Now I had apparently added insult to injury by not agreeing to dance with some boy I didn't even know.

“Jesus,” Kelly said, when she heard this. “He's a

junior at Robert Louis Stevenson, okay? He's the star forward on their basketball team. He won last year's regatta at Pebble Beach, and he's the hottest guy in the Valley, after Bryce Martinson. Suze, if you don't dance with him, I swear I'll never speak to you again."

I said, "All right already. What is your glitch, anyway?"

"I just," Kelly said, wiping her eyes with a manicured finger, "want everything to go really well. I've had my eye on this guy for a while now, and—"

"Oh, yeah, Kel," I said. "Getting me to dance with him is sure to make him like you."

When I pointed out this fallacy in her thought process, however, all she said was, "Just do it," only not the way they say it in Nike ads. She said it the way the Wicked Witch of the West said it to the winged monkeys when she sent them out to kill

Dorothy and her little dog, too.

I'm not scared of Kelly or anything, but really, who needs the grief?

So I went back outside and stood there in my Calvin Klein one-piece—with a sarong tied ever-so-casually around my waist—totally not knowing I had just stumbled into a bunch of poison oak, while Kelly went over to her dream date and asked him to ask me to dance again.

As I stood there, I tried not to think that the only reason he wanted to dance with me in the first place was that I was the only girl at the party in a swimsuit. Having never been invited to a pool party before in my life, I had erroneously believed people actually swam at them, and had dressed accordingly.

Not so, apparently. Aside from my stepbrother, who'd apparently become overwarm while in Debbie Mancuso's impassioned embrace and had

stripped off his shirt, I was wearing the least clothes of anybody there.

Including Kelly's dream date. He sauntered up a few minutes later, wearing a serious expression, a pair of white chinos, and a black silk shirt. Very Jersey, but then, this was the West Coast, so how was he to know?

"Do you want to dance?" he asked me in this really soft voice. I could barely hear him above the strains of Sheryl Crow, booming out from the pool deck's speakers.

"Look," I said, putting down my Diet Coke. "I don't even know your name."

"It's Tad," he said.

And then without another word, he put his arms around my waist, pulled me up to him, and started swaying in time to the music.

With the exception of the time I threw myself at Bryce Martinson in order to knock him out of the way when a ghost was trying to crush his skull with a large chunk of wood, this was as close to the body of a boy—a live boy, one who was still breathing—I had ever been.

And let me tell you, black silk shirt notwithstanding, I liked it. This guy felt good. He was all warm—it was kind of chilly in my bathing suit; being January, of course, it was supposed to be too chilly for bathing suits, but this was California, after all—and smelled like some kind of really nice, expensive soap. Plus he was just taller enough than me for his breath to kind of brush against my cheek in this provocative, romance-novel sort of way.

Let me tell you, I closed my eyes, put my arms around this guy's neck, and swayed with him for two of the longest, most blissful minutes of my life.

Then the song ended.

Tad said, “Thank you,” in the same soft voice he’d used before, and let go of me.

And that was it. He turned around and walked back over to this group of guys who were hanging out by the keg Kelly’s dad had bought for her on the condition she didn’t let anybody drive home drunk, a condition Kelly was sticking strictly to by not drinking herself and carrying around a cell phone with the number of Carmel Cab on redial.

And then for the rest of the party, Tad avoided me. He didn’t dance with anybody else. But he didn’t speak to me again.

Game over, as Dopey would say.

But I didn’t think Father Dominic wanted to hear about my dating travails. So I said, “Nope. Nada. Nothing.”

“Strange,” Father Dominic said, looking thoughtful. “I would have thought there’d be some paranormal activity—”

“Oh,” I said. “You mean has any ghost stuff been going on?”

Now he didn’t look thoughtful. He looked kind of annoyed. “Well, yes, Susannah,” he said, taking off his glasses, and pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger like he had a headache all of a sudden. “Of course, that’s what I mean.” He put his glasses back on. “Why? Has something happened? Have you encountered anyone? I mean, since that unfortunate incident that resulted in the destruction of the school?”

I said, slowly, “Well . . .”