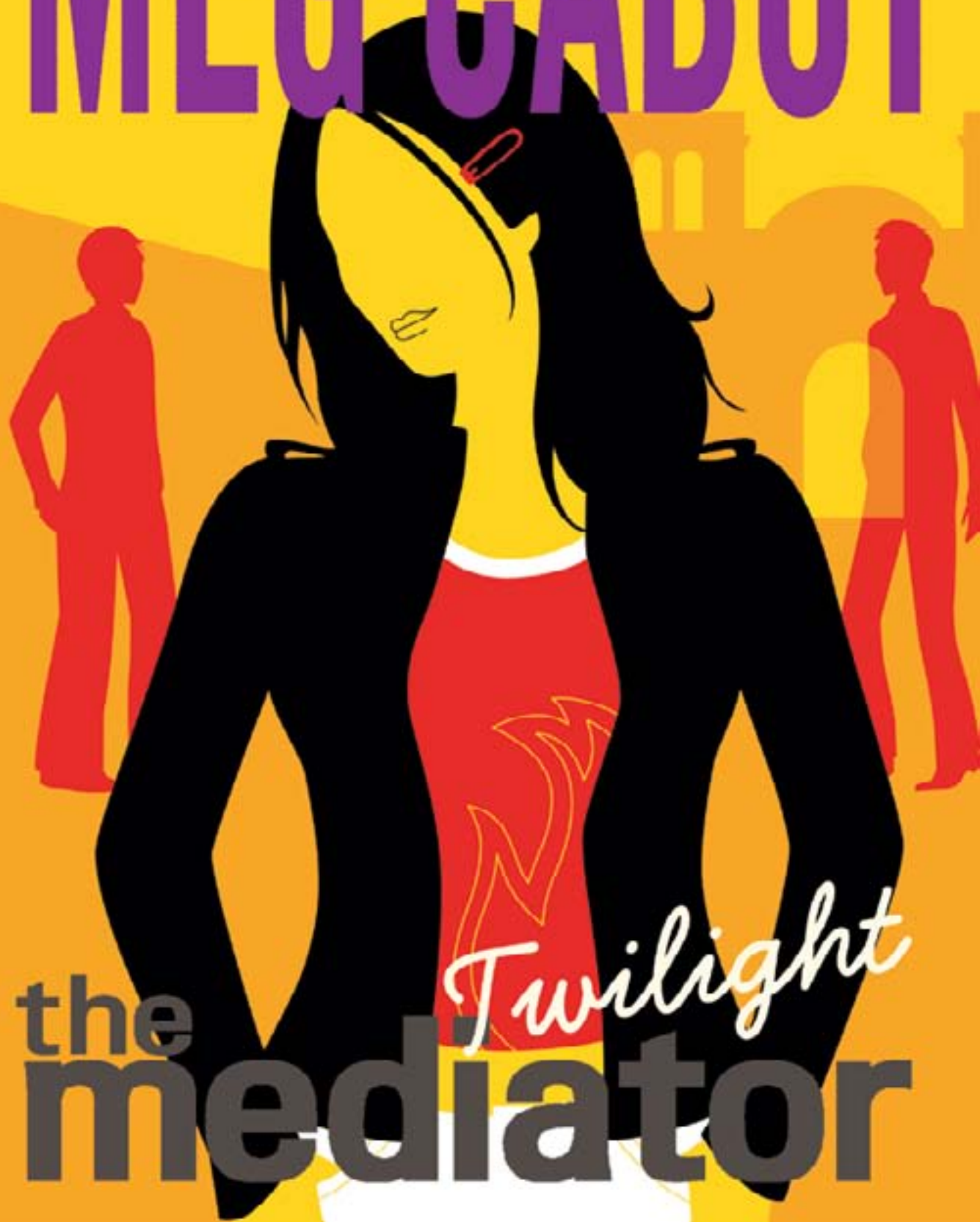


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *THE PRINCESS DIARIES*

MEG CABOT



the
mediator

Twilight

CHAPTER ONE

I found the stone exactly where Mrs. Gutierrez had said it would be, beneath the drooping branches of the overgrown hibiscus in her backyard. I shut off the flashlight. Even though there was supposed to have been a full moon that night, by midnight a thick layer of clouds had blown in from the sea, and a dank mist had reduced visibility to nil.

But I didn't need light to see by anymore. I just needed to dig. I sunk my fingers into the wet soft earth and pried the stone from its resting spot. It moved easily and wasn't heavy. Soon I was feeling beneath it for the tin box Mrs. Gutierrez had assured me would be there. . . .

Except that it wasn't. There was nothing beneath my fingers except damp soil.

That's when I heard it—a twig snapping beneath the weight of someone nearby.

I froze. I was trespassing, after all; the last thing I needed was to be dragged home by the Carmel, California, cops.

Again.

Then, with my pulse beating frantically as I tried to figure out how on earth I was going to explain my way out of this one, I recognized the lean shadow—darker than all the others—standing a few feet away. My heart continued to pound in my ears, but now for an entirely different reason.

“You,” I said, climbing slowly, shakily, to my feet.

“Hello, Suze.” His voice, floating toward me through the mist, was deep, and not at all unsteady...unlike my own voice, which had an unnerving tendency to shake when he was around.

It wasn't the only part of me that shook when he

was around, either.

But I was determined not to let him know that.

“Give it back,” I said, holding out my hand.

He threw back his head and laughed.

“Are you nuts?” he wanted to know.

“I mean it, Paul,” I said, my voice steady, but my confidence already beginning to seep away, like sand beneath my feet.

“It’s two thousand dollars, Suze,” he said, as if I might be unaware of that fact. “Two thousand.”

“And it belongs to Julio Gutierrez.” I sounded sure of myself, even if I wasn’t exactly feeling that way.

“Not you.”

“Oh, right,” Paul said, his deep voice dripping with

sarcasm. “And what’s Gutierrez gonna do, call the cops? He doesn’t know it’s missing, Suze. He never even knew it was there.”

“Because his grandmother died before she had a chance to tell him,” I reminded him.

“Then he won’t notice, will he?” Despite the darkness, I could tell Paul was smiling. I could hear it in his voice. “You can’t miss what you never knew you had.”

“Mrs. Gutierrez knows.” I’d dropped my hand so he wouldn’t see it shaking, but I couldn’t disguise the growing unsteadiness in my voice as easily. “If she finds out you stole it, she’ll come after you.”

“What makes you think she hasn’t already?” he asked, so smoothly that the hairs on my arms stood up . . . and not because of the brisk autumn weather, either.

I didn't want to believe him. He had no reason to lie. And obviously, Mrs. Gutierrez had come to him as well as me, anxious for any help she could get. How else could he have known about the money?

Poor Mrs. Gutierrez. She had definitely put her trust the wrong mediator. Because it looked as if Paul hadn't just robbed her. Oh, no.

But like a fool, I stood there in the middle of her backyard and called her name just in case, as loudly as I dared. I didn't want to wake the grieving family inside the modest stucco home a few yards away.

“Mrs. Gutierrez?” I craned my neck, hissing the name into the darkness, trying to ignore the chill in the air . . . and in my heart. “Mrs. Gutierrez? Are you there? It's me, Suze. . . . Mrs. Gutierrez?”

I wasn't all that surprised when she didn't show. I knew, of course, that he could make the undead disappear. I just never thought he'd be low enough

to do it.

I should have known better.

A cold wind kicked up from the sea as I turned to face him. It tossed some of my long dark hair around my face until the strands finally ended up sticking to my lip gloss. But I had more important things to worry about.

“It’s her life savings,” I said to him, not caring if he noticed the throb in my voice. “All she had to leave to her kids.”

Paul shrugged, his hands buried deep in the pockets of his leather jacket.

“She should have put it in the bank, then,” he said.

Maybe if I reason with him, I thought. Maybe if I explain . . . “A lot of people don’t trust banks with their money—”

But it was no use.

“Not my fault,” he said with another shrug.

“You don’t even need the money,” I cried. “Your parents buy you whatever you want. Two thousand dollars is nothing to you, but to Mrs. Gutierrez’s kids, it’s a fortune!”

“She should have taken better care of it, then,” was all he said.

Then, apparently seeing my expression—though I don’t know how, since the clouds overhead were thicker than ever—he softened his tone.

“Suze, Suze, Suze,” he said, pulling one of his hands from his jacket pocket and moving to drape his arm across my shoulders. “What am I going to do with you?”

I didn't say anything. I don't think I could have spoken if I'd tried. It was hard enough just to breathe. All I could think about was Mrs. Gutierrez, and what he'd done to her. How could someone who smelled so good—the sharp clean scent of his cologne filled my senses—or from whom such warmth radiated—especially welcome, given the chill in the air and the relative thinness of my windbreaker—be so . . .

Well, evil?

“Tell you what,” Paul said. I could feel his deep voice reverberating through him as he spoke, he was holding me that close. “I'll split it with you. A grand for each of us.”

I had to swallow down something—something that tasted really bad—before I could reply. “You're sick.”

“Don't be that way, Suze,” he chided. “You have

to admit, it's fair. You can do whatever you want with your half. Mail it back to the Gutierrezes, for all I care. But if you're smart, you'll use it to buy yourself a car now that you finally got your license. You could put a down payment on a decent set of wheels with that kind of change, and not have to worry about sneaking your mom's car out of the driveway after she's fallen asleep—”

“I hate you,” I snapped, twisting out from beneath his grip and ignoring the cold air that rushed in to meet the place where his body had been warming mine.

“No, you don't,” he said. The moon appeared momentarily from behind the blanket of clouds overhead, just long enough for me to see that his lips were twisted into a lopsided grin. “You're just mad because you know I'm right.”

I couldn't believe my ears. Was he serious? “Taking money from a dead woman is the right thing to

do?”

“Obviously,” he said. The moon had disappeared again, but I could tell from his voice that he was amused. “She doesn’t need it anymore. You and Father Dom. You’re a couple of real pushovers, you know. Now I’ve got a question for you. How’d you know what she was blathering about, anyway? I thought you were taking French, not Spanish.”

I didn’t answer him right away. That’s because I was frantically trying to think of a reply that wouldn’t include the word I least liked uttering in his presence, the word that, every time I heard it or even thought it, seemed to cause my heart to do somersaults over in my chest, and my veins to hum pleasantly.

Unfortunately, it was a word that didn’t exactly engender the same response in Paul.

Before I could think of a lie, however, he figured it

out on his own.

“Oh, right,” he said, his voice suddenly toneless.

“Him. Stupid of me.”

Then, before I could think of something to say that would lighten the situation—or at least get his mind off Jesse, the last person in the world I wanted Paul Slater to be thinking about—he said in quite a different tone, “Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m beat. I’m gonna call it a night. See you around, Simon.”

He turned to go. Just like that, he turned to go.

I knew what I had to do, of course. I wasn’t looking forward to it . . . in fact, my heart had pretty much slipped up into my throat, and my palms had gone suddenly, inexplicably damp.

But what choice did I have? I couldn’t let him walk away with all that money. I’d tried reasoning with

him, and it hadn't worked. Jesse wouldn't like it, but the truth was, there was no other alternative. If Paul wouldn't give up the money voluntarily, well, I was just going to have to take it from him.

I told myself I had a pretty good chance at succeeding, too. Paul had the box tucked into the inside pocket of his jacket. I'd felt it there when he'd put his arm around me. All I had to do was distract him somehow—a good blow to the solar plexus would probably do the job—then grab the box and chuck it through the closest window. The Gutierrezes would freak, of course, at the sound of the breaking glass, but I highly doubted they'd call the cops . . . not when they found two thousand bucks scattered across the floor.

As plans went, it wasn't one of my best, but it was all I had.

I called his name.

He turned. The moon chose that moment to slip out from behind the thick veil of clouds overhead, and I could see by its pale light that Paul wore an absurdly hopeful expression. The hopefulness increased as I slowly crossed the grass between us. I suppose he thought for a minute that he'd finally broken me down. Found my weakness. Successfully lured me to the dark side.

And all for the low, low price of a thousand bucks.

Not.

The hopeful look left his face, though, the second he noticed my fist. I even thought that, just for a moment, I caught a look of hurt in his blue eyes, pale as the moonlight around us. Then the moon moved back behind the clouds, and we were once again plunged into darkness.

The next thing I knew, Paul, moving more quickly than I would have thought possible, had seized my

wrists in a grip that hurt and kicked my feet out from under me. A second later, I was pinned to the wet grass by the weight of his body with his face just inches from mine.

“That was a mistake,” he said, way too casually, considering the force with which I could feel his heart hammering against mine. “I’m rescinding my offer.”

His breath, unlike my own, wasn’t coming out in ragged gasps, though. Still, I tried to hide my fear from him.

“What offer?” I panted.

“To split the money. I’m keeping it all, now. You really hurt my feelings, you know that, Suze?”

“I’m sure,” I said as sarcastically as I could. “Now get off me. These are my favorite low-riders, and you’re getting grass stains on them.”

But Paul wasn't ready to let me go. He also didn't appear to appreciate my feeble attempt to make a joke out of the situation. His voice, hissing down at me, was deadly serious.

“You want me to make your boyfriend disappear,” he asked, “the way I did Mrs. Gutierrez?”

His body was warm against mine, so there was no other explanation for why my heart went suddenly cold as ice, except that his words terrified me to the point that my blood seemed to freeze in my veins.

I couldn't, however, let my fear show. Weakness only seems to trigger cruelty, not compassion, from people like Paul.

“We have an agreement,” I said, my tongue and lips forming the words with difficulty because they, like my heart, had gone ice cold with dread.

“I promised I wouldn’t kill him,” Paul said. “I didn’t say anything about keeping him from dying in the first place.”

I blinked up at him, uncomprehending.

“What . . . what are you talking about?” I stammered.

“You figure it out,” he said. He leaned down and kissed me lightly on my frozen lips. “Good night, Suze.”

And then he stood up and vanished into the fog.

It took me a minute to realize I was free. Cool air rushed in to all the places where his body had been touching mine. I finally managed to roll over, feeling as if I’d just suffered a head-on collision with a brick wall. Still, I had enough strength left to call out, “Paul! Wait!”

That's when someone inside the Gutierrez household flicked on the lights. The backyard lit up bright as an airport runway. I heard a window open and someone shout, "Hey, you! What are you doing there?"

I didn't stick around to ask whether or not they planned on calling the cops. I peeled myself up from the ground and ran for the wall I'd scaled a half hour ago. I found my mom's car right where I'd left it. I hopped into it and started my long journey home, cursing a certain fellow mediator—and the grass stains on my new jeans—the whole way.

I had no idea that night how bad things were going to get between Paul and me.