

A MEG THORNE MYSTERY--BOOK #1

NEXT

GIRL

KATE BOLD

N E X T

G I R L

(A Meg Thorne Mystery—Book 1)

K a t e B o l d

Kate Bold

Bestselling author Kate Bold is author of the ALEXA CHASE SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising six books (and counting); the ASHLEY HOPE SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising six books (and counting); the CAMILLE GRACE FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising eight books (and counting); the HARLEY COLE FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising eleven books (and counting); the KAYLIE BROOKS PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising five books (and counting); the EVE HOPE FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising seven books (and counting); the DYLAN FIRST FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising five books (and counting); the LAUREN LAMB FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising five books (and counting); the KELSEY HAWK SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising nine books (and counting); the NORA PRICE SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising five books (and counting); the NINA VEIL FBI SUSPENSE THRILLER series, comprising five books (and counting); of the BARREN PINES PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE series, comprising seven books ; and of the MEG THORNE SUSPENSE THRILLER.

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PROLOGUE

Rachel Martinez shivered as the rain hammered down—hard, cold, relentless. Her hair was soaked, flattened against her head. Her backpack was drenched and twice as heavy as it had been as the worn canvas absorbed the water.

Teeth chattering, she looked for shelter, any shelter, wading through a deep puddle with pieces of trash eddying in it. Great. Now her socks, as well as her shoes, were soaked. The temperature was plummeting, and it was totally dark.

She'd been planning on spending the night in a park, sleeping under the stars, before catching an early bus tomorrow morning and getting *out*.

Out of Boston, away from her miserable family life, her father's rages, her mother's drug-fueled absences, and the tumbledown house that felt more like a trap than a sanctuary. With just enough cash for a bus ride to Atlanta, she'd planned on going there first—and then maybe she could work her way to somewhere along the coast.

Now, the rain was making her rethink everything as she cowered away from the downpour.

She couldn't stay on the main street where there was at least a solid overhang and shelter. She'd tried that, but found that people were looking at her strangely, suspiciously. Sitting down on the sidewalk with a backpack immediately made you different. *Homeless*.

She didn't want anyone to call the police, because although she was nineteen, they might insist she go back home, and she never wanted to see her home again. It wasn't a home. She was going to make a new life for herself.

Sure, she'd had some problems so far. Drugs, flunking a year at school, and then she'd almost gotten more deeply involved in petty crime thanks to misguided friends. At the last minute, she'd pulled herself away, feeling appalled that she'd come so close to doing what they did to make a living. Petty theft, shoplifting, pickpocketing.

Stealing from those who were already struggling? She wasn't going to take that path. She'd found more support from the two other homeless women who'd helped her over the past few days. They'd been gentle, sharing what little they had. But when she'd gone to their meeting point tonight, the two hadn't been there.

Perhaps they were at the other place they used, the one close to the bus shelter. She was going there now to find out, but this rain was now too cold and hard for her to keep on walking.

She was wondering if she'd survive the night. Would this rain ever stop? And how was she going to get dry again in time to board her bus tomorrow?

Ahead of her, there was a restaurant that looked to be open. Perhaps they wouldn't mind if she went inside? Right now, just being able to get somewhere dry and warm would save her. She was shuddering with cold.

But as soon as she put her hand on the door, a waitress rushed over to her, looking at her with watchful eyes, taking in her drowned rat appearance, and the water streaming from her scruffy backpack, and her soaked shoes.

"Sorry, we're closed," she said.

"Please! I just need to get somewhere to dry off," Rachel pleaded. It didn't look closed inside. She could see people sitting at one of the tables, but the waitress shook her head once more, even though there was some sympathy in her expression.

"Manager's orders. I'm just following them," she said. "I'm sorry."

Rachel turned away, feeling stunned by how fast her own perception of herself had changed. She was now thinking of herself as someone who didn't deserve to have a dry place for an hour, or to be allowed into a restroom unless she'd also paid for a meal.

Turning, she trudged away, lashed by the rain again as she headed further into a side of town she didn't know well.

Now, she was so wet and cold that being in the rain didn't make any difference. But as she rounded the corner into a narrow alley that led to the bus station, she found herself glancing behind her anxiously. She was a

woman on her own, out at night, and there were perils waiting that she hadn't yet considered.

Was someone following her?

Checking over her shoulder was difficult because the sodden bulk of her backpack blocked her view and messed with her balance.

There was nobody there—or was there? Had she seen something?

Now, her heart was pounding even harder. So far, she had been focused on the misery of her plight, and she hadn't had a chance to think about anything else—like the fact she could be in danger.

Where had her two friends gone, and why hadn't they been at their usual spot?

Anyone out on the street after dark was at risk, and particularly a young woman on her own, clearly vulnerable and without a place to stay.

Gritting her teeth, she hurried down the alley, glancing around behind her again and again.

Was somebody following her? Or was it just the incessant drumming of the rain overwhelming her senses and fooling her into thinking so?

The alleyway was claustrophobically narrow, with high, blank walls and the occasional dumpster standing at intervals, looming up in the darkness. And near the end of it was a wide overhang that represented the only shelter from the rain.

She could huddle underneath it, next to the battered wooden door, and then, at least, she could see if anyone was following her. Under this overhang, she might actually get a chance to dry out. Then, perhaps, she could head straight to the bus terminal and wait there.

She could unpack her rucksack and see if anything had survived the deluge. There must be a dry layer of clothing underneath the drenched garments on top.

Although—what was that, ahead of her, at the end of the street?

Was that a person coming her way?

Yes, it was. Through the blasting rain, she caught a clear sight of a dark, tall figure—male, she thought—striding toward her. He was draped in a

raincoat with a hood tugged low, and she couldn't make out his face.

She backed even further into her temporary shelter, nestled up against the door, peering at the rain. Whoever it was had looked as if they were walking with intent. There was something about their demeanor that made her uneasy, and now, she couldn't get a clear view because of the big, bulky dumpsters that were blocking her view.

It would be better to move, to go somewhere safer, even though this man was probably just hurrying to get home and out of the rain himself. Her logical mind was telling her that, but the scared, instinctive side of her brain told her to hide, hide, *hide*.

But then she saw to her surprise that the man had disappeared.

At any rate, there was nobody there now. That made her feel even uneasier. And the feeling of being watched was stronger than ever. It prickled her spine, even over her shivering.

And then, from behind her, she heard a loud, wrenching bang. The door was yanked open, and before she could scream, rough hands tugged her inside.

"You'll pay for this. You'll all pay."

A stinking cloth was shoved over her face, and for a while, those were the last words she heard.

CHAPTER ONE

The alarm blared in Meg Thorne's ears, and she reached for her phone, muting it, sitting up, snapping on her bedside lamp. She hadn't been asleep. For the past few years—actually, ever since she'd turned fifty—she'd found herself wide awake in the small hours of the morning. Getting back to sleep was either difficult or impossible, depending on the day.

Today had been impossible.

She'd spent the time listening to Corrigan snore. The large, long-haired, gray cat, snoozing in the empty space next to her in the double bed, had been getting his beauty sleep, his paws occasionally twitching as he chased imaginary mice in his dreams.

Should she emulate her cat, try to get more shut-eye for an hour, and skip her run?

The thought was tempting, but she shook her head determinedly.

"Use it or lose it," she muttered, a phrase that she'd found herself quoting more and more often in recent years. "You are *going* to complete an Ironman triathlon before your next birthday. Goals, right?"

Apart from the fact that she hated swimming, and she was a poor cyclist as well as a very average runner, she couldn't see any problems with the challenge. Hahaha, Meg thought.

At the last dinner she'd had with her work partner and his family, a discussion had turned into a dare, and the dare had turned into a bet, and now, Meg found herself busy prepping for a midsummer triathlon event that she still didn't believe she was capable of doing. And that was just the buildup to the longer event.

Aaargh. Why had she *taken* that dare? It had been Gabriel Reeves's fault for plying her with red wine so that she became reckless, and it was also her own stubborn fault for not backing out of the dare.

At least today's training schedule called for a run, definitely the best out of the trio of suffering.

She swung her legs out of bed, pulling on her sports bra and tracksuit pants and a bright fluorescent top, because on this late March morning, it was still dark in Boston. She brushed her hair back, clamping it down under a baseball cap.

Since she'd started graying early, Meg had dyed her hair for more than a decade. It had been a number of different colors over the years. She'd pushed the limits as far as she'd been able to, unfortunately hitting a barrier six years ago when the police department she worked for had put their foot down when it came to a pink streak in her then-platinum hair.

Reference had been sternly made to *natural* colors. Rulebooks had been dusted off, and clauses underlined by the chief of police, Whitaker, with sharp strokes of his pen.

Since then, forced unwillingly into a compromise, she'd pushed "natural" to the limits with bright shades of mahogany, auburn, and chestnut. The roots needed retouching every three weeks, but that was a price she was prepared to pay.

"Once a rebel, always a rebel," her husband, James, had said affectionately, amused by the pink hair debacle.

He'd be so proud of her, having taken an idiotic dare to do an extreme fitness challenge. James would have supported her all the way, and that was the deeper reason why Meg wasn't backing out of the challenge now.

Thinking of James caused pain to lance through Meg, the tearing agony of loss that never went away, even after four and a half years. Sometimes, she could go days without feeling it, but when it hit, it was as intense as it had always been.

She tied her shoes, stood up, and stretched, bending her legs and arms, getting the blood circulating. A pair of weights stood on the writing desk in the corner. She'd get to those when she came back from her run.

A run always meant more than simple exercise. When Meg headed out, she chose her route with another goal in mind.

Corrigan jumped off the bed with a gruff meow. He followed her, keeping her in the beam of his lamp-like yellow eyes as she headed through to the

kitchen.

He'd been more James's cat after being adopted as a kitten eight years ago, and had tolerated Meg. Now that she was the only one available, he had gradually come around, and even cuddled up beside her on the bed.

"You're a demanding prima donna," Meg told him affectionately, as she tipped kibble into his bowl and checked he had enough water, and that the cat door to the backyard was open so he could go out and lie in the sun or shred her plant pots in which she still tried to grow herbs.

"You're all set," she told him, as he stalked out in a dignified way, clearly offended that she'd spoken to him at all at this early hour.

Now, it was time to head out.

On the hall table was the photo Meg treasured—the one of herself and James and James's daughter, Naomi—his child from his first marriage. He'd been widowed after his wife had been killed in a car crash.

She'd met James when he was thirty-six and Naomi was eight. She'd loved being a stepmom and having Naomi as an adopted family member.

Now, Naomi was working in Hong Kong. She'd been in her first year of college when James had been murdered, and Meg and Naomi had drifted apart since then—or perhaps the murder had forced them apart.

"Morning, my lovelies," she said to the photo, just like she'd done in the mornings when James had been alive.

She opened the door of her hillside home, looking around her at the twinkle of lights from the suburbs below, the swathe of darkness from the park that she usually ran through—but not today. Today, she had another place she was going to explore.

Nobody else was around. Her neighbor to the left also got up early and they often greeted each other on the road, but today, she didn't see him, and she went down alone.

Meg patted her pocket, checking that she had her phone at the ready. Even off duty, she was always on duty. She never said no to a callout. She could thank her decades of police training and experience for that.

She headed out, breathing in the freshness of the air, the silence of the quiet suburb, which had an expectant feel to it at this hour of the morning. At this time of the day, the place felt like an old friend. The sense of peacefulness was familiar to her, and welcome, as if this was the stage where Boston was sleepily blinking its eyes before waking up fully.

She settled into a slow jog. In addition to a distinct lack of swimming and cycling expertise, Meg admitted that she wasn't much of a runner. Speed had never been her forte, and as she'd gotten into her fifties, she had found that small injuries that would have meant nothing a decade or two ago could be surprisingly troublesome now. Best to avoid them.

Usually, her running route took her along the edge of a greenbelt and through the park that she'd seen from her window. But today, she'd decided to follow the route that she'd memorized last night.

It led her into the city, and as she ran, the street blocks got more crowded, the buildings higher, the streets clogged with cars. She wasn't going to the inner city—not quite—but she was going partway there.

As she headed along the sidewalk, she had to break the rhythm of her running, because there were parked cars, and loose paving stones, and in places the pavement was dug up for repairs. She ran alongside a wall with a massive display of graffiti art, the paint now peeling and some new, less artistic scrawls more recently added and spoiling the display.

There were a couple of historic buildings on the right, their facades gracious, beautiful examples of Georgian colonial architecture, with their symmetrical design, rectangular windows, and decorative pilasters. The buildings were in need of repair, though. They were run-down. They'd be sold as fixer-uppers, and in this neighborhood, who'd buy?

This was it, right here. She stopped, breathing hard, as she reached an elderly tenement building, four stories high, the glass door leading into the lobby smeared and dirty. There were handwritten name cards next to the doorbells.

She scanned down the list, looking for the one she wanted, feeling anxiety surge inside her as she wondered if the name would be here.

When she last looked at the old case files of a criminal who'd been arrested soon after James's murder, she'd found out he lived in apartment ten after his parole, following a prison sentence for a stabbing.

If he was home, she wanted to see him. Maybe even ask him questions and see if he'd been involved in the crime.

As she was waiting, her hand hovering over the buzzer, debating the merits of actually ringing the bell, the entrance door was opened from the inside.

A woman in her thirties, with a tired, olive-skinned face, wearing the uniform of a department store, headed out, her purse clamped firmly under her arm. She gave Meg a suspicious look, but Meg knew that as a slim, wiry, older woman in running gear, she would trigger zero alarm bells.

Moving forward, Meg gave her a quick nod of acknowledgment as she grasped the door, as if this woman had saved her looking for her key. Then, as the woman hurried off in the direction of the bus stop, she headed into the building.

Meg took the stairs to the third floor, keeping the apartment number in her mind. When she reached the third floor, she headed along to number ten. Her legs were aching now, stiffening up immediately as she slowed her pace.

Even though Meg tried to convince herself that this was unlikely to lead anywhere, that it was going to be no more than a waste of her time like all the other leads, she couldn't help a fierce hope from surging in her heart as she reached the door.

Raising her hand, she knocked on the door, hard.

The sound echoed inside the apartment. She waited, breathless.

There was only silence, which was then broken by footsteps. Not coming from inside, though. The steps were coming from down the corridor, and Meg swung around as a man approached. Stocky, gray-haired, wearing motor repair shop overalls, he looked at her in a curious way.

Meg guessed he was about to walk on past, but she stepped forward, with questions in her face and an open expression—approachable, friendly,

no threat.

“Do you know who lives here?” she asked innocently.

He stared at the apartment, and then at her.

“There was a man living here for a couple of months. Dark hair, tattoo on his neck?” There was a question in his words, and she gave a small, encouraging nod. “I saw him on my way to work, but never knew his name. I think he left, though. When I came past last week, I saw a whole lot of trash outside the apartment, and the door was open.”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

Bill Parry was his name. That, she knew from her search of the criminal records, pinpointing the violent offenders who might possibly know something about James’s death.

“I never really knew him. Why you looking?” He asked the question in a reluctant way, as if he didn’t want to be dragged into any unnecessary drama but curiosity had gotten the better of him.

“Just following up on a possible connection with someone I used to know,” she said. As she spoke the words, a crushing disappointment filled her, causing unexpected tears to well up. She swallowed quickly, controlling her emotions.

She wasn’t going to tell him more—that she was a homicide detective, following up on her husband’s cold case in her spare time, in the vain hope that she might blunder into the answers and find closure to a tragedy that had ripped her life apart.

Maybe he saw something in her face, because he gave a small shrug in which she now saw a hint of sympathy, and then he turned away, hurrying in the direction of the stairs.

Meg sighed, not allowing defeat to crowd in.

This man hadn’t been a certainty, only a possibility. He’d been locked up for a couple of years soon after her husband’s murder, after being arrested for a stabbing following a botched robbery. She’d tracked him through the system, but like the others that she’d tried to keep track of over the years, it wasn’t easy to follow his movements.

The MO was the same. James had been stabbed while in his car, in the basement parking lot at the back of a convenience store. There had never been any answers to the crime, and in an effort to make herself feel she was doing something, Meg had recently started digging.

Maybe she could find the killer—who she suspected must have been a robber. James's wallet had been missing when police had arrived at the scene. Meg remembered it—a soft, rather battered leather item that had been one of her first gifts to him.

His life in exchange for a couple of hundred dollars? She still couldn't think of that trade because of the anger that surged.

One day, she was going to find James's killer.

Now, though, she had to get to work. Remembering her workload, Meg knew there should be news on another case she'd been busy with, and that got her blood pumping all over again.

Hopefully, this morning would lead to a breakthrough.

CHAPTER TWO

As soon as Meg walked into the central Boston police department's back office, she picked up the tension in the air.

The station commander's office door was closed, and she could hear Whitaker's voice, sharp and businesslike, behind it. If the door was closed, it meant he was in a meeting with a superior officer, and that was a telltale sign that something was up. And her partner, Gabriel Reeves, was waiting at his desk, glancing at the door. That was another sign.

Two of the team headed out, giving Meg a quick, perfunctory good morning that she returned.

Heading over to Gabe's desk, Meg said, "Morning. What's up?"

Gabe stared at her through hooded eyes. His face, with dark hair and chocolate-brown skin, was heavily featured. Usually, either a naturally good-natured expression or a tired cynicism might take center stage. Today, his expression was guarded.

"Morning, Meg," he said. "Dunno. Boss told us to stand by, and then blustered in there. He's been on the phone and in meetings since then. I guess there's a new case coming in."

She nodded. That sounded likely, and if so, then they'd be called in at any moment for a briefing.

"Any news on the McGee manslaughter?" she asked. That case had been top of her mind this morning—a local businessman who'd been killed in a hit-and-run while out cycling. Meg was sure she could track the perpetrator down, but it depended on being able to get hold of critical camera footage.

Gabe sighed, his expression now solidifying into a darker look.

"We've got a problem with traffic camera footage," he said. "The footage can't be released yet, because apparently someone has to sign it off, and that very important person is on leave."

Meg stared at him blankly. "And nobody else can sign it off?"

She felt as if she was repeating a line that she'd recited many times before. Why was red tape such an obstruction? That footage had been promised by Monday morning, and she'd planned to spend the first hour or two of the day working through it, on the hunt for what she needed, remembering the pain in the victim's fiancée's eyes.

Signing off the footage? That was patently ridiculous.

"Nobody else can get it?"

"Apparently not. Only one person who's the right grade to allow it to be released, and he's on a camping trip, out of signal, back tomorrow evening."

"This job is not what it used to be. I don't ever remember red tape being such an issue. When did this happen, Gabe? When did we get so tied up in it that we can't actually do the jobs we're being paid to do? It's gotten much worse in the last few years."

She breathed in an angry sigh as Gabe shrugged in a resigned way.

As Meg inhaled, she realized the air smelled of coffee, with a sugary overtone that meant someone had been indulging in sweet treats. She was going to take a guess who that someone was.

"You got donuts in that bag?" she said, looking down at the brown paper carrier bag stashed away behind Gabe's desk.

Now, the cynicism was center stage as he regarded her.

"What happened to no sugar on weekdays?" he asked, with a quirk of his heavy brows. "What happened to triathlon training? I'm going to win that hundred-dollar bet, you realize?"

She gave a wry grin, Gabe's teasing going some small way to dissolving her bad mood.

"Sugar is needed now," she said. "And my training is going just fabulously."

That was a lie, but anyway.

"My girls spoke about you this weekend," Gabe said, lifting the bag onto his desk, placing it next to the framed photos of the two pretty, dark-haired, sparkling-eyed teens. "They said they want to be as slim as you are when they're old, and what are your diet secrets?"

Meg spluttered as Gabe gave a wry smile. *Old?* Just wait till she saw them again!

Selecting a sugar-and-cinnamon-dusted donut from the bag, Meg bit into it. She had a hardboiled egg in her purse. Good protein, right there, and here she was, weakening because the lack of evidence had soured her mood.

"My diet secrets include absolutely no sweet treats during the working week," she said. This was a particularly good donut. Light, freshly made, and not too sickly sweet.

"I'll be sure to tell them," Gabe said with a grin.

"And morning runs," Meg added, deciding to recommend the nicest part of her torturous exercise regime.

"That, they don't seem as keen on," Gabe admitted. "I'm not much of a runner, and Mindy's even worse." She saw his face warm at the mention of his wife, who was as vivacious as she was curvaceous.

"There's plenty of time," Meg said. "When I was a teen, I hated running. I really only got into it in my thirties. Tell them to do whatever's fun for them. At that age, I loved canoeing."

And she'd had the opportunity to do it, growing up in a large, luxurious family home that had river frontage. She'd been able to go straight out onto the water in the early mornings before the au pair had gotten her ready for school.

Meg couldn't help feeling vaguely ashamed of her wealthy heritage—her granddad had invented, and produced, a series of machinery parts that were used in large-scale agriculture, and it had set the family on a path to wealth, which Meg's dad had inherited. She'd gotten a large trust fund that had provided her with a monthly income since she was twenty-one, but she'd never touched the trust fund, living off her cop's salary.

Naturally, the fact that she was a cop was a source of surprise and embarrassment to the Thorne family, and she had very little to do with any of her family these days.

She finished the donut. It had improved her mood, although she still felt guilty when she thought of the hardboiled egg waiting loyally in her laptop bag.

And then her boss's door opened, and Whitaker looked out.

Slim, ferret-faced, gray-haired, and businesslike, Whitaker had an ability to be all things to all people when he chose.

Right now, with the area commander heading out, he was brisk efficiency itself, with a deferent charm that Meg knew he could turn on and off at will.

"Absolutely, Commander," he was saying, as he quickly ushered the superior officer across the office and bade him goodbye at the main door. "We'll get a team onto it straight away. I'm grateful you came by. And look out for my report later."

"Thanks, Whitaker," the area commander said, shouldering his laptop bag and getting out his car keys, looking impressed by his subordinate's efficiency, which was well laced with charm.

Normally, Meg didn't get Whitaker's charming side. Years of friction, capped off by the pink hair debacle, had soured their relationship. Now, his demeanor changed completely as he turned to her and Gabe, and he gave her no more than a brief glower before saying, "Thorne and Reeves. We've got a new case just landed in South Boston. There have been renovations taking place at an old hotel building, and they've found bodies in one of the foundations. It's imperative that this is handled quickly, and that it doesn't slow down their work or cause things to explode in a storm of bad publicity. Get to the scene, stat."