

TIME ZERO



*"Compelling, inventive, and richly layered—will appeal both to adult
and young adult readers."*

—Tim O'Brien, author of The Things They Carried

CAROLYN COHAGAN

T I M E Z E R O



by

CAROLYN COHAGAN



SHE WRITES PRESS

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*For my father,
who set a budget at the toy store
but who let me buy as much as I wanted at the bookstore*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The religion that governs the city in *Time Zero* is fictional, yet I've taken its rules from various religions around the world, including those that originate in the United States. Each rule Mina follows is governing the life of a girl somewhere in the world right now.

All I want is an education, and I am afraid of no one.

—MALALA YOUSAFZAI

ONE

HAS ANYONE EVER DREADED A FIFTEENTH birthday more than me?

I lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, and wonder: If I were to stay here, could I prevent the rest of the day from happening? I pull the sheet up over my head and pretend it's still dark outside, that the sun isn't creeping through my window and slowly baking me like a holiday ham. If only the sun were devouring me for real. I would just lie here and welcome the consuming heat, the enveloping flames, and when my parents came to find me, they'd discover a pile of ash in the shape of a girl.

My Offering is tonight. Mother's been planning it for months. She's been running around, excited and anxious, while, as the day's drawn closer, I've become more and more miserable. If only I'd been born a boy.

My bedroom door opens, and Mother walks in. Her hair is pinned in its usual bun, and she's wearing her cleaning clothes. I brace myself for her to snap at me for sleeping in, but she has a strange expression on her face. She sits down beside me on the bed.

"How did you sleep?" she asks.

I shrug.

“You look tired,” she says. “That’s not good.”

Did she really expect me to sleep on the eve of such a depressing occasion?

“I need to tell you something, Mina, but you have to promise you won’t get upset. Today is too important for you to go getting all dramatic like you do.”

I sit up in alarm. “What is it?”

“It’s Nana.”

I can’t breathe until I hear what she says next.

“She fell.”

“But how . . . does that . . . Is she . . . ?” I can’t ask the question.

“She’s alive. She’s been taken to the Women’s Hospital on 14th Street.”

I exhale, saying a small prayer of thanks to the Prophet.

“It sounded as if she were trying to *walk down the stairs*,” Mother says, using a tone that suggests Nana is some toddler who tried to crawl out of her crib. “I can’t imagine what she was thinking.”

“I want to see her,” I say, rising out of bed and heading for my closet.

“Not today,” Mother says. “I have a big list of things for you to do for your party. You can see her tomorrow.”

“But she’ll wonder where I am!” I say, thinking of Nana lying all alone in a strange hospital.

Mother has never approved of Nana or liked the time I spend with her. My grandmother is my favorite person, which is probably odd for a girl my age. But she’s the only

one in my life who really listens to what I have to say, and, more importantly, she tells me the truth about things.

“She knows exactly where you are: preparing yourself for suitors.” Standing, Mother heads for the door. “Before you shower, I have chores for you. The girl I hired won’t be here until noon, so say your morning prayer, get dressed, and come straight to the kitchen.”

“No.”

The word pops out of my mouth, and for a brief moment, I feel brave, but as soon as I see Mother’s face, I know I’ve been stupid. Her azure eyes narrow into slits, so all I see are her ruttled forehead and clenched jaw. She strides toward me, and I don’t even see her raise a hand. I just hear the slap and feel a searing pain on my left cheek.

“I won’t ask again.”

She walks out of the room, letting the door slam behind her.

Tears fill my eyes, but I tell myself they’re for Nana, not the slap. I don’t want Mother to have the satisfaction. I can only hope that Nana knows how much I want to be sitting beside her, holding her hand, talking about her neighbors, my stupid Offering, or maybe Time Zero.

I stop crying.

The Primer. I have to go and get it.

Nana always warned me this day might come, when something might happen to her, and she told me there was one thing I had to do: get the Primer out of her apartment and keep it safe.

Mother doesn’t like Nana, but she would LOSE HER

MIND if she knew how Nana and I were really spending our time together.

My grandmother has been teaching me how to read.

The punishment for teaching females to read is prison. And for me, the girl learning how to read, the penalty is either prison or a public whipping, depending on how long the crime has been taking place. But to Mother, the worst price of all would be the disgrace to our name, which might keep anyone from wanting to marry me.

Nana said that if anything ever happened to her, I had to get the Primer we were using out of her apartment as soon as possible, before the Teachers, the religious authorities, could find it. It's incriminating evidence; plus, Nana wanted me to have it so that one day I could pass on the gift of reading to my own daughter, just as her mother passed it on to her, and her mother before that.

I need to leave immediately. If Nana's apartment is empty, there's no telling who could be there—neighbors, vagrants. She lives in a rougher neighborhood than we do, and anyone could turn her in if they found a forbidden artifact.

I've never snuck out of our apartment before, and the punishment from Mother will be severe, especially on the day of my Offering. I weigh the problem in my mind and whisper a prayer, hoping God might give me guidance, but instead I hear Nana's silvery voice.

Go, Chickpea. Run.

I've always been her Chickpea, a nickname I started to hate a few years ago, when I decided it was a baby name.

What if no one calls me Chickpea ever again? The tears threaten to well up, but I swallow and hold them back. Not yet. I have to get this done.

I quickly get dressed in plain cotton pants and a T-shirt. Grabbing a cloak from the closet, I throw it over my clothes. I take my veil from on top of the dresser and fit the band around my forehead, snapping the back closed just above a modest ponytail. The veil's rectangle of fabric reaches from my temple to my chest, covering my face but leaving the back of my head exposed. The gauzy black material allows me to see out, while no one can see in.

Tiptoeing out of my room into the hallway, I stand at the head of the stairs and see that the living room is clear. A low monotone voice on the radio drifts out of the kitchen: *God created the family to provide the uttermost love, comfort, and morality that one can imagine. It is a man's job to support the family, and a woman's job to support the man.*

It's midmorning. Father's at work, and my brother is off training to be a Teacher, so it's only Mother at home, but my disobedience will be the most infuriating to her. I need to accept now that if I manage to sneak out of the apartment, there will be a beating waiting for me when I get home.

But I made a promise to Nana.

I take a deep breath, lift my cloak away from my feet, and race down the stairs and across the living room, not bothering to see whether my mother is standing in the dining room. If she is, she'll start screaming at me soon enough.

I make it to the front door, and there's no sign of her, so my hand reaches for the doorknob. Then I'm turning it and stepping into the hallway. *Am I actually doing this?*

I close the door behind me, hear it click, and pray for forgiveness for disobeying my parents. I run down the hallway, hoping the prying neighbors don't decide to stick their noses out in the next ten seconds. Diving into the stairwell, I sprint down the stairs, seven flights. They are only half-lit, but I know them with my eyes closed, having lived here my entire fifteen years.

We live in a tall building in Midtown, better than most, because my father works in energy. The poor neighborhoods have more guards, more Twitchers, and much less light. Barely anyone on the Lower East Side, in the slums, can afford electricity.

I slow down as I reach the bottom floor, pushing on a door that leads out to a marbled corridor. I try to catch my breath—to look as if everything is normal. Our building has a constant rotation of doormen. The one on duty right now, Rab, is the hairy one who smells like an old armpit. He would love to report to the Teachers that I left home without permission.

Anytime I'm without my father or brother, my leaving home is considered questionable. Luckily, I take Nana groceries every week. I pray that Rab doesn't realize that this isn't grocery day. I keep my head down to avoid looking at his froggy face and overgrown mustache, wishing that in my cloak and veil I looked like every other young girl living in the building, but I know that my fair hair sets me apart.

I feel his eyes following me.

“Peace,” he mutters.

“Peace,” I echo.

Gliding by him, relieved he hasn’t stopped me, I shove open the big glass doors that lead outside. I lift my hand to block the glare of the sun. The heat is so oppressive that when I take a breath, it’s like inhaling hot metal. Within seconds, my cloak is sticking to my body, and the synthetic fabric releases a stale, sour odor. I scold myself for not having washed it the day before.

There are two armed men that always guard our building. They’ve never told me their names, so, privately, I call them Toots and Buddy, names I got from the Primer.

I grab my bike, which leans against the back alley of our building next to dozens of other bikes. I walk it to the street and look up the avenue. Hundreds of women on bikes fly by, their cloaks billowing behind them like bat wings. I climb onto my bike and scoot into the modesty basket, which surrounds the seat and looks like the top of a baby’s high chair. The basket assures that no man is subjected to the movement of my hips when I ride.

Tucking the bottom of my veil into my cloak, I pedal into the flock of women. We fly down the avenue as one, mobbing the street, leaving only a scant path for the rare electric bus or taxi, which females are forbidden to take alone.

I’m picking up speed, when a thought flashes across my mind and my foot misses the pedal. *I don’t know if any new Ordinances were announced today.* Mother listens to the radio

every morning so that we'll know whether the Teachers have declared any new rules. I was so focused on the Primer that I walked out without even thinking about them. *Nyek.* The street curse slips out before I can stop it.

I keep pedaling, but I look to my left and then to my right. I see that the woman cycling next to me is in black, because she's married, and that next to her is a young girl wearing a cloak in the same shade of purple as mine, with a veil the same size as mine. We also wear the same-shaped white canvas shoes. *Praise God. The clothing Ordinances haven't changed since yesterday.*

The Teachers enforce God's laws, as set forth in the Book, but they also regularly dictate new laws, which protect us as a people and test our dedication to the Faith.

My moment of panic has passed, and my legs and shoulders relax into the rhythm of pedaling, until I imagine Nana urging me on: *quickly, Chickpea!* I pump the pedals harder, my tires bumping over the huge potholes and cracks in the long-neglected street.

On the next block, I spot one of the huge posters of Uncle Ruho, our Divine Leader, looking down on me. He has a short black beard, a bushy mustache, and a small, knowing smile. On his left cheek he has a thick, dark mole that my brother says looks like a tick that's filled to the brim. Uncle Ruho is a direct descendent of the Prophet, so God chose him to keep us safe. As long as I've been alive, he's been our leader. His eyes make me uncomfortable. No matter where I go in the city, I feel like they're watching me.

I see that someone has dared to spray graffiti on the

bottom of his poster. The paint is green, and the shape is like an ear, or maybe a leaf. It must have happened just seconds ago, or the authorities would've already covered it up. I look around, wondering if the culprit is near. Does he look guilty? Is he like me, heart beating, palms sweating? I want to look at the graffiti more closely, but I don't dare. What if someone suspects I had something to do with it?

It's time to turn east, toward the market, but a turn west would take me to the hospital where Nana is. *I could just stop by quickly, make sure she's okay.* But I know how upset she'll be if I haven't taken care of the Primer, so I weave through several bikes to get on the east side of traffic. When I see my turn, I swerve and jerk my bike to the left. Through the whirring of bike wheels and flapping of cloaks, I hear several women cursing at me as I almost knock someone from her bike. I yell an apology and make my turn.

I reach the market. The smell of roasted pork hits me first, followed by the seductive aroma of hot pastries and empanadas, alongside hints of mint, basil, and oregano emanating from the spice stalls. The sharp stench of the horses used to cart in vegetables from the Fields lies beneath everything. Men holler loudly, announcing their daily produce. Most days, I like to get off my bike and meander through the stalls, to watch the butcher haggle over a goat shank or the hardware man overcharge for his lightbulbs, but today I'm in too much of a hurry. I hustle through the rest of the market and turn right down the next avenue.

One more block, and I've finally arrived at Nana's apartment. After leaning my bike against a rusted, disintegrating

mailbox, I try to walk calmly toward her building. What if Twitchers have already been here? If they've found the Primer, they could be at the hospital, interrogating Nana right now, preparing to take her to the Tunnel.

Before I was born, the Teachers closed off one of the main passages into the city, a huge tunnel for cars that ran under the river. They sealed off one end and turned the rest of it into a prison. Once you're locked up, you have no way out but the front door, and you have to sleep at night knowing there are ten stories of water above you. I had nightmares about the Tunnel growing up. I think it's why I've always hated small spaces and can't stand the thought of being underground.

I can't bear to think of Nana there. I try to keep the fear from fully crystallizing in my mind. The bike ride, the heat, and the anxiety cause perspiration to pour down my forehead and chest. My cloak is drenched.

I approach the guards at the entrance to Nana's building. I'm at her apartment regularly, but if the door guards know she's in the hospital, perhaps they won't let me pass. They stand as tall and motionless as the street lamps next to them. Like Uncle Ruho, they have short beards and stern expressions.

They let me pass without any reaction. I exhale.

Once through the door, I make my way across the empty lobby to the stairwell. No doormen in this part of town. Nana lives on the fourteenth floor, but the elevator doesn't work. She has a bad knee, and it's almost impossible for her to climb these stairs. That's why I bring her gro-

ceries every week. I once asked her why she couldn't just come to live with us. Given that Sekena, my best friend, lives with her parents, plus three of her grandparents, and they're all crammed into the apartment next to ours, it doesn't seem like a big deal for us to fit Nana in. When I brought it up, though, Nana just clucked her tongue and said it wasn't part of God's plan.

I wince. If she'd been living with us, she wouldn't have tried to go down the stairs. She could have asked *me* to get whatever it was she suddenly needed so badly.

Seeing no one else in the stairwell, I grasp the bottom of my cloak and pull it up as high as my knees. I jog up the stairs as fast as I can, trying not to imagine exactly where she fell. Panting, I concentrate on the pain in my lungs, hoping it will distract from the fear gnawing at my heart. What will I do if Nana doesn't make it?

Reaching floor fourteen, I pull open the heavy metal door, gasping for air. I curse when I see there's a Twitcher outside Nana's apartment. *Nyek*.

Twitchers are the highest-ranking members of the City Guard. Along with their colossal handguns, always on display, they wear black jumpsuits, black gloves, and thick black helmets. Their mirrored face shields narrow into a point, making them resemble the ants that swarm the streets on garbage day.

This one hasn't seen me yet, which is normal. Twitchers are all wired for down-net; they get constant news and orders sent straight to their helmets and projected inside their visor grid. Standing guard, they might seem to be

doing nothing, but watch them long enough and you'll see it—they *twitch*. Even their hands twitch as they type back responses through their wired gloves. They must use up half the electricity in the city. I would never call one a Twitcher to his face. I don't want to get shot.

I approach the guard, lowering my gaze. I wait for him to speak first, because he's male and I'm female.

There's a long pause before he says, "Peace," and through the helmet the voice is distant and metallic, as if he's answering through a pipe.

"Peace," I respond.

"What are you doing here?" he demands.

Me? What is *he* doing here? I keep my eyes down. "I need to enter my grandmother's apartment."

His head slowly moves up and down as he uses the Senscan attached to the side of his helmet to examine me. I don't need to worry about spiritual infractions—my cloak is the proper color and length; my hair is bound; I'm not wearing makeup, nail polish, or perfume; the clothes underneath my cloak are sufficiently modest—but I squirm anyway. I hate being scanned. Does he think I'm bringing a bomb into Nana's apartment or something? Once the Senscan has told him that my DNA matches Nana's, one would think he'd let me in.

Finally, the Senscan's light goes from red to green, which means I've passed. He asks, "What is your reason for entry?"

"She wants her prayer beads." I ask God to forgive my lie.

Another excruciatingly long pause. Part of me wants to turn around and run. His fingers twitch, so I assume he's

typing in new information. The Senscan turns red again as he looks me up and down one more time. What's he checking now? All the information that exists about me in the world should have come up on his first scan.

Sekena and I have spent hours speculating about how much the Senscan can see. If it can see through our cloaks, can't it see through our clothes, too? Are Twitchers walking around the city all day, looking at naked girls? Sekena says, "Absolutely not. The Book says seeing a woman's flesh makes a man crazy with desire and turns the world into chaos." So she believes the Twitchers can't see that much, or they wouldn't be able to control themselves. I guess I agree with her, but it's not making me feel any better as the Senscan creeps down my body for the second time.

Finally, the light goes green again, and the guard says, "I'm surprised she would own prayer beads."

Why? What does *that* mean? Was he checking Nana's records, too? I search for something to say. "She uses them every time she prays, and I'm sure they'll help with her healing, God willing."

After pausing again, he says, "There's no light."

At first it seems like a religious message, and then I realize he's talking about the apartment.

He says, "There was a report of looting, so we turned off the electricity to discourage anyone else."

I nod my head. He stands to the side, and I can see that the lock on the door has been broken.

"Keep it quick," he says.

When I enter the living room, the only light comes

from the open door behind me. Nana covers her windows with old cardboard. Even fourteen stories up, she's afraid of being watched.

I expect to see chaos, a ransacked room, but everything seems intact. Glancing to my right, into the kitchen, I can see cupboards flung open and pots and pans on the floor. The looters must have been searching for food. So maybe we're okay.

I can't have the Twitcher watching me, so I shut the door behind me, plunging myself into blackness.

I hear Nana's voice say, *You can do this. You've been in this apartment hundreds of times.* From memory, I walk to Nana's comfy flowered chair. Her scent permeates it, and, for a moment, I pause and breathe her in: warm bread, jasmine soap, and the mint salve she uses on her knee. I want to hug the air that she's left behind.

I shove my hand under the seat cushion, and there it is. *Praise God.*

I pull it out—*gently, Chickpea*—and, after brief consideration, I pull up my cloak and stick the Primer in the back of my pants, praying that the Twitcher doesn't decide to scan me again. I'm about to head for the front door, when I remember the prayer beads.

Nana keeps them with her jewelry, but getting to her hiding spot is going to be a little complicated in the dark. Shuffling around her armchair, arms in front of me, I aim for what I think is the bathroom. I overshoot to the right, stubbing my toe on the wall. I stifle a small cry, then feel along the wall until I reach the door.

Once I've felt the edge of the door, I drop to the ground. Feeling the bathroom tile beneath me, I crawl on all fours until I've reached the cabinet underneath the sink. It's closed, which is a good sign. Hopefully, whoever sacked the apartment didn't think they would find anything worthwhile in here.

I open the cabinet, feeling around with my hands. I touch toilet paper, some sort of metal can, something bristly—the toilet brush, *disgusting*—and then my hand lands on the simple cardboard box I'm looking for. I pull it out and stick my hand inside.

Nana always says that no man will touch anything that has to do with feminine products. That's why she keeps her valuables in a tampon box. She thinks this is especially entertaining now that she is well past her menses. "A man's embarrassment will keep him from considering basic biology," she says. "What dolts."

She loves the word "dolt" almost as much as the word "git," which, she has explained, means "moronic jerk." When she says it, you don't really need the definition. Her delivery tells you *everything*.

I hear the front door open, a voice booming inside: "You've had long enough."

All I've found is a tangle of necklaces and earrings. "Coming now, sir!"

"Why are you taking so long?" All of a sudden, the Twitcher is standing in the entrance to the bathroom, holding a flashlight whose batteries alone must be worth two thousand BTUs. "Looking for fuel to steal?"

“No, I . . . just can’t find the beads.”

Stepping into the bathroom, the guard snatches the tampon box away from me. Using the beam from his flashlight to sift quickly through the jewelry, he finds the prayer beads in no time. For a second, I’m relieved, but then he pulls out Nana’s opal ring and sticks it in his own pocket.

I’m horrified.

“Time to leave now,” he orders.

I follow him out, and once we’re in the hallway, he shoves the prayer beads in my face. “It will be a good recovery, God willing.”

“God willing,” I echo. I grab the beads, but I still can’t believe he’s taken Nana’s ring. And what’s to stop him from going back inside and stealing the rest of her jewelry? I want to ask him how a man of God can justify such an action, but the contraband I’m concealing is too valuable. Bowing low and muttering, “Peace,” I start to walk away from him backward, in case the shape of the Primer is visible underneath my cloak.

He says, “Peace,” in response, but he’s no longer paying attention to me. He’s already receiving new data, uploading information, and plugging back into the world of men.

I reach the exit, spin, shove the door open, and run down the stairs. When I reach the tenth floor, I pause for a moment and look back up the stairwell to make sure he isn’t following me. When I’m certain the coast is clear, I try to catch my breath. Am I dizzy from the running or from the number of laws I’ve broken today?

Looking out the large windows, I can almost see the whole city. It must be close to midday, because the sun is high in the sky, reflecting off buildings in Midtown, so bright that the light sucks the color out of everything, making sidewalks and cars glow white. I can see all the way to the Fields in the Park, to the canals on the West Side and the pig farms on the East.

The Wall blocks my view of the river. Father once told me the Wall is over seventy feet high, reaching around the entire island. It keeps us safe from the Apostates, and brought peace after the Dividing, but I wish I could see the water and the land on the other side. What's going on over there? Is there anyone left? What I would really like to see is the famous statue that once greeted so many immigrants. Nana told me she was called the Statue of Liberty—at least, she was before the Prophet removed her head.