

MEG CABOT

The best-selling author of **THE PRINCESS DIARIES**

THE MEDIATOR



Love You to Death

THE MEDIATOR^I Love You to Death





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Meg Cabot is the author of many books for young adults, including the phenomenally successful *The Princess Diaries* series, *All American Girl*, *Nicola and the Viscount* and *Victoria and the Rogue*, as well as several books for adults. Meg currently lives in New York City with her husband and one-eyed cat, Henrietta, and says she is still waiting for her real parents, the king and queen, to restore her to her rightful throne.

Visit Meg Cabot's website at www.megcabot.co.uk

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*In memory of A. Victor Cabot,
and his brother, Jack 'France' Cabot*

One

They told me there'd be palm trees.

I didn't believe them, but that's what they told me. They told me I'd be able to see them from the plane.

Oh, I know they have palm trees in Southern California. I mean, I'm not a complete moron. I've watched *90210*, and everything. But I was moving to Northern California. I didn't expect to see palm trees in Northern California. Not after my mom told me not to give away all my sweaters.

'Oh, no,' my mom had said. 'You'll need them. Your coats, too. It can get cold there. Not as cold as New York, maybe, but pretty chilly.'

Which was why I wore my black leather motorcycle jacket on the plane. I could have shipped it, I guess, with the rest of my stuff, but it kind of made me feel better to wear it.

So there I was, sitting on the plane in a black leather motorcycle jacket, seeing these palm trees through the window as we landed. And I thought, Great. Black leather and palm trees. Already I'm fitting in, just like I knew I would . . .

. . . *Not.*

My mom isn't particularly fond of my leather jacket, but I swear I didn't wear it to make her mad, or anything. I'm not resentful of the fact that she decided to marry a guy who lives three thousand miles away, forcing me to leave school in

the middle of my sophomore year; abandon the best – and pretty much only – friend I’ve had since kindergarten; leave the city I’ve been living in for all of my sixteen years.

Oh, no. I’m not a bit resentful.

The thing is, I really do like Andy, my new stepdad. He’s good for my mom. He makes her happy. And he’s very nice to me.

It’s just this moving to California thing that bugs me.

Oh, and did I mention Andy’s three other kids?

They were all there to greet me when I got off the plane. My mom, Andy, and Andy’s three sons. Sleepy, Dopey, and Doc, I call them. They’re my new stepbrothers.

‘Suze!’ Even if I hadn’t heard my mom squealing my name as I walked through the gate, I wouldn’t have missed them – my new family. Andy was making his two youngest boys hold up this big sign that said *Welcome Home, Susannah!* Everybody getting off my flight was walking by it, going ‘Aw, look how cute,’ to their travel companions, and smiling at me in this sickening way.

Oh, yeah. I’m fitting in. I’m fitting in just great.

‘OK,’ I said, walking up to my new family fast. ‘You can put the sign down now.’

But my mom was too busy hugging me to pay any attention. ‘Oh, Suzie!’ she kept saying. I hate when anybody but my mom calls me Suzie, so I shot the boys this mean look over her shoulder, just in case they were getting any big ideas. They just kept grinning at me from over the stupid sign, Dopey because he’s too dumb to know any better, Doc because – well, I guess because he might have been glad to see me. Doc’s weird that way. Sleepy, the oldest, just stood there, looking . . . well, sleepy.

‘How was your flight, kiddo?’ Andy took my bag off my shoulder, and put it on his own. He seemed surprised by how

heavy it was, and went, 'Whoa, what've you got in here, anyway? You know it's a felony to smuggle New York City fire hydrants across state lines.'

I smiled at him. Andy's this really big goof, but he's a nice big goof. He wouldn't have the slightest idea what constitutes a felony in the state of New York since he's only been there like five times. Which was, incidentally, exactly how many visits it took him to convince my mother to marry him.

'It's not a fire hydrant,' I said. 'It's a parking meter. And I have four more bags.'

'Four?' Andy pretended he was shocked. 'What do you think you're doing, moving in, or something?'

Did I mention that Andy thinks he's a comedian? He's not. He's a carpenter.

'Suze,' Doc said, all enthusiastically. 'Suze, did you notice that as you were landing, the tail of the plane kicked up a little? That was from an updraft. It's caused when a mass moving at a considerable rate of speed encounters a counter-blowing wind velocity of equal or greater strength.'

Doc, Andy's youngest kid, is twelve, but he's going on about forty. He spent almost the entire wedding reception telling me about alien cattle mutilation, and how Area 51 is just this big cover-up by the American government, which doesn't want us to know that We Are Not Alone.

'Oh, Suzie,' my mom kept saying. 'I'm so glad you're here. You're just going to love the house. It just didn't feel like home at first, but now that you're here . . . Oh, and wait until you've seen your room. Andy's fixed it up so nice . . .'

Andy and my mom spent weeks before they got married looking for a house big enough for all four kids to have their own rooms. They finally settled on this huge house in the hills of Carmel, which they'd only been able to afford because they'd bought it in this completely wretched state,

and this construction company Andy does a lot of work for fixed it up at this big discount rate. My mom had been going on for days about my room, which she keeps swearing is the nicest one in the house.

‘The view!’ she kept saying. ‘An ocean view from the big bay window in your room! Oh, Suze, you’re going to love it.’

I was sure I was going to love it. About as much as I was going to love giving up bagels for alfalfa sprouts, and the subway for surfing, and all that sort of stuff.

For some reason, Dopey opened his mouth, and went ‘Do you like the sign?’ in that stupid voice of his. I can’t believe he’s my age. He’s on the school wrestling team, though, so what can you expect? All he ever thinks about, from what I could tell when I had to sit next to him at the wedding reception – I had to sit between him and Doc, so you can imagine how the conversation just flowed – is choke holds and body-building protein shakes.

‘Yeah, great sign,’ I said, yanking it out of his meaty hands, and holding it so that the lettering faced the floor. ‘Can we go? I wanna pick up my bags before someone else does.’

‘Oh, right,’ my mom said. She gave me one last hug. ‘Oh, I’m just so glad to see you! You look so great . . .’ And then, even though you could tell she didn’t want to say it, she went ahead and said it anyway, in a low voice, so no one else could hear: ‘Though I’ve talked to you before about that jacket, Suze. And I thought you were throwing those jeans away.’

I was wearing my oldest jeans, the ones with the holes in the knees. They went really well with my black silk T and my zip-up ankle boots. The jeans and boots, coupled with my black leather motorcycle jacket and my Army–Navy Surplus shoulder bag, made me look like a teen runaway in a made-for-TV movie.

But hey, when you're flying for six hours across the country, you want to be comfortable.

I said that, and my mom just rolled her eyes and dropped it. That's the good thing about my mom. She doesn't harp, like other moms do. Sleepy, Dopey, and Doc have no idea how lucky they are.

'All right,' she said, instead. 'Let's get your bags.' Then, raising her voice, she called, 'Jake, come on. We're going to get Suze's bags.'

She had to call Sleepy by name, since he looked as if he had fallen asleep standing up. I asked my mother once if Jake, who is a senior in high school, has narcolepsy, or possibly a drug habit, and she was like, 'No, why would you say that?' Like the guy doesn't just stand there blinking all the time, never saying a word to anyone.

Wait, that's not true. He did say something to me, once. Once he said, 'Hey, are you in a gang?' He asked me that at the wedding, when he caught me standing outside with my leather jacket on over my maid of honour's dress, sneaking a cigarette.

Give me a break, all right? It was my first and only cigarette ever. I was under a lot of stress at the time. I was worried my mom was going to marry this guy and move to California and forget all about me. I swear I haven't smoked a single cigarette since.

And don't get me wrong about Jake. At six foot one, with the same shaggy blond hair and twinkly blue eyes as his dad, he's what my best friend Gina would call a hottie. But he's not the shiniest rock in the rock garden, if you know what I mean.

Doc was still going on about wind velocity. He was explaining the speed with which it is necessary to travel in order to break through the earth's gravitational force. This

speed is called escape velocity. I decided Doc might be useful to have around, homework-wise, even if I am three grades ahead of him.

While Doc talked, I looked around. This was my first trip ever to California, and let me tell you, even though we were still only in the airport – and it was the San Jose International Airport – you could tell we weren't in New York any more. I mean, first off, everything was clean. No dirt, no litter, no graffiti anywhere. The concourse was all done up in pastels, too, and you know how light colours show the dirt. Why do you think New Yorkers wear black all the time? Not to be cool. Nuh-uh. So we don't have to haul all our clothes down to the laundromat every single time we wear them.

But that didn't appear to be a problem in sunny CA. From what I could tell, pastels were in. This one woman walked by us, and she had on pink leggings and a white Spandex sports bra. And that's all. If this is an example of what's de rigueur in California, I could tell I was in for some major culture shock.

And you know what else was strange? Nobody was fighting. There were passengers lined up here and there, but they weren't raising their voices with the people behind the ticket counter. In New York, if you're a customer, you fight with the people behind the counter, no matter where you are – airport, Bloomingdales, hot-dog stand. Wherever.

Not here. Everybody here was just way calm.

And I guess I could see why. I mean, it didn't look to me like there was anything to get upset about. Outside, the sun was beating down on those palm trees I'd seen from the sky. There were seagulls – not pigeons, but actual big white and grey seagulls – scratching around in the parking lot. And when we went to get my bags, nobody even checked to see if

the stickers on them matched my ticket stubs. No, everybody was just like, 'Buh-bye! Have a nice day!'

Unreal.

Gina – she was my best friend back in Brooklyn; well, OK, my *only* friend, really – told me before I left that I'd find there were advantages to having three stepbrothers. She should know since she's got four – not steps, but real brothers. Anyway, I didn't believe her any more than I'd believed people about the palm trees. But when Sleepy picked up two of my bags, and Dopey grabbed the other two, leaving me with exactly nothing to carry, since Andy had my shoulder bag, I finally realized what she was talking about: brothers can be useful. They can carry really heavy stuff, and not even look like it's bothering them.

Hey, I packed those bags. I knew what was in them. They were not light. But Sleepy and Dopey were like, No problem here. Let's get moving.

My bags secure, we headed out into the parking lot. As the automatic doors opened, everyone – including my mom – reached into a pocket and pulled out a pair of sunglasses. Apparently, they all knew something I didn't know. And as I stepped outside, I realized what it was.

It's *sunny* here.

Not just sunny, either, but bright – so bright and colourful, it hurts your eyes. I had sunglasses, too, somewhere, but since it had been about forty degrees and sleeting when I left New York, I hadn't thought to put them anywhere easily accessible. When my mother had first told me we'd be moving – she and Andy decided it was easier for her, with one kid and a job as a TV news reporter, to relocate than it would be for Andy and his three kids to do it, especially considering that Andy owns his own business – she'd explained to me that I'd love Northern California. 'It's where they

filmed all those Goldie Hawn, Chevy Chase movies!' she told me.

I like Goldie Hawn, and I like Chevy Chase, but I never knew they made a movie together.

'It's where all those Steinbeck stories you had to read in school took place,' she said. 'You know, *The Red Pony*.'

Well, I wasn't very impressed. I mean, all I remembered from *The Red Pony* was that there weren't any girls in it, although there were a lot of hills. And as I stood in the parking lot, squinting at the hills surrounding the San Jose International Airport, I saw that there were a lot of hills, and the grass on them was dry and brown.

But dotting the hills were these trees, trees not like any I'd ever seen before. They were squashed on top as if a giant fist had come down from the sky and given them a thump. I found out later these were called cyprus trees.

And all around the parking lot, where there was evidently a watering system, there were these fat bushes with these giant red flowers on them, mostly squatting down at the bottom of these impossibly tall, surprisingly thick palm trees. The flowers, I found out, when I looked them up later, were hibiscus. And the strange looking bugs that I saw hovering around them, making a *brrr*-ing noise, weren't bugs at all. They were hummingbirds.

'Oh,' my mom said when I pointed this out. 'They're everywhere. We have feeders for them up at the house. You can hang one from your window if you want.'

Hummingbirds that come right up to your window? The only birds that ever came up to my window back in Brooklyn were pigeons. My mom never exactly encouraged me to feed them.

My moment of joy about the hummingbirds was shattered when Dopey announced suddenly, 'I'll drive,' and

started for the driver's seat of this huge utility vehicle we were approaching.

'I will drive,' Andy said, firmly.

'Aw, Dad,' Dopey said. 'How'm I ever going to pass the test if you never let me practise?'

'You can practise in the Rambler,' Andy said. He opened up the back of his Land Rover, and started putting my bags into it. 'That goes for you, too, Suze.'

This startled me. 'What goes for me, too?'

'You can practise driving in the Rambler.' He wagged a finger jokingly in my direction. 'But only if there's someone with a valid licence in the passenger seat.'

I just blinked up at him. 'I can't drive,' I said.

Dopey let out this big horse laugh. 'You can't drive?' He elbowed Sleepy, who was leaning against the side of the truck, his face turned towards the sun. 'Hey, Jake, she can't drive!'

'It isn't at all uncommon, Brad,' Doc said, 'for a native New Yorker to lack a driver's licence. Don't you know that New York City boasts the largest mass-transit system in North America, serving a population of thirteen point two million people in a four thousand square mile radius fanning out from New York City through Long Island all the way to Connecticut? And that one point seven billion riders take advantage of their extensive fleet of subways, buses, and railroads every year?'

Everybody looked at Doc. Then my mother said, carefully, 'I never kept a car in the city.'

Andy closed the doors to the back of the Land Rover. 'Don't worry, Suze,' he said. 'We'll get you enrolled in a driver's ed course right away. You can take it and catch up to Brad in no time.'

I looked at Dopey. Never in a million years had I ever

expected that someone would suggest that I needed to catch up to *Brad* in any capacity whatsoever.

But I could see I was in for a lot of surprises. The palm trees had only been the beginning. As we drove to the house, which was a good hour away from the airport – and not a quick hour, either, with me wedged in between Sleepy and Dopey, with Doc in the ‘way back’, perched on top of my luggage, still expounding on the glories of the New York City Transportation Authority – I began to realize that things were going to be different – very, very different – than I had anticipated, and certainly different from what I was used to.

And not just because I was living on the opposite side of the continent. Not just because everywhere I looked, I saw things I’d never have seen back in New York: roadside stands advertising artichokes or pomegranates, twelve for a dollar; field after field of grapevines, twisting and twisting around wooden arbours; groves of lemon and avocado trees; lush green vegetation I couldn’t even identify. And arcing above it all, a sky so blue, so vast, that the hot-air balloon I saw floating through it looked impossibly small – like a button at the bottom of an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

There was the ocean, too, bursting so suddenly into view that at first I didn’t recognize it, thinking it was just another field. But then I noticed that this field was sparkling, reflecting the sun, flashing little Morse code SOSs at me. The light was so bright, it was hard to look at without sunglasses. But there it was, the Pacific Ocean . . . huge, stretching almost as wide as the sky, a living, writhing thing, pushing up against a comma-shaped strip of white beach.

Being from New York, my glimpses of ocean – at least the kind with a beach – had been few and far between. I couldn’t help gasping when I saw it. And when I gasped, everybody

stopped talking – except for Sleepy, who was, of course, asleep.

‘What?’ my mother asked, alarmed. ‘What is it?’

‘Nothing,’ I said. I was embarrassed. Obviously, these people were used to seeing the ocean. They were going to think I was some kind of freak that I was getting so excited about it. ‘Just the ocean.’

‘Oh,’ said my mother. ‘Yes, isn’t it beautiful?’

Dopey went, ‘Good curl on those waves. Might have to hit the beach before dinner.’

‘Not,’ his father said, ‘until you’ve finished that term paper.’

‘Aw, Dad!’

This prompted my mother to launch into a long and detailed account of the school to which I was being sent, the same one Sleepy, Dopey, and Doc attended. The school, named after Junipero Serra, some Spanish guy who came over in the 1700s and forced the Native Americans already living here to practise Christianity instead of their own religion, was actually a huge adobe mission that attracted twenty thousand tourists a year, or something.

I wasn’t really listening to my mother. My interest in school has always been pretty much zero. The whole reason I hadn’t been able to move out here before Christmas was that there had been no space for me at the Mission School, and I’d been forced to wait until second semester started before something opened up. I hadn’t minded – I’d gotten to live with my grandmother for a few months, which hadn’t been at all bad. My grandmother, besides being a really excellent criminal attorney, is an awesome cook.

I was sort of still distracted by the ocean, which had disappeared behind some hills. I was craning my neck, hoping for another glimpse, when it hit me. I went, ‘Wait a minute. When was this school built?’