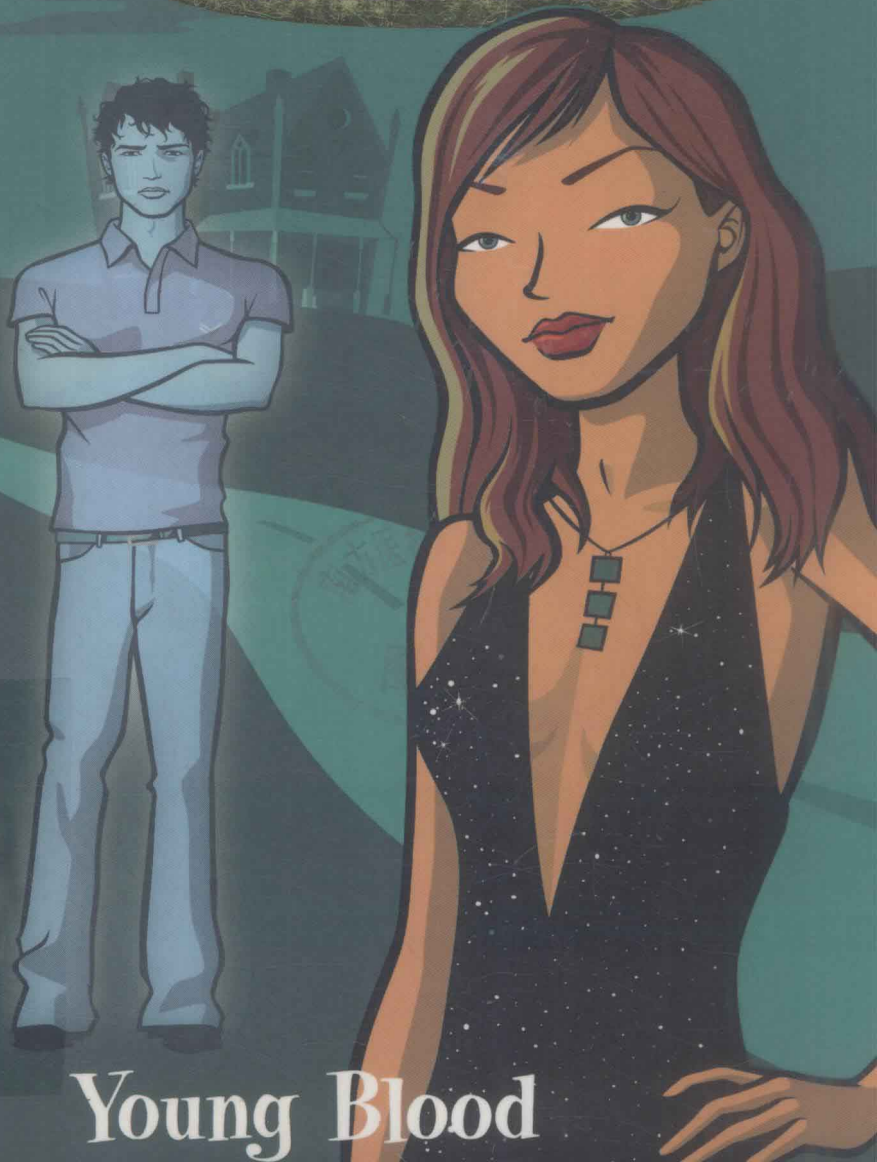


MEG CABOT

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

THE MEDIATOR



Young Blood

THE MEDIATOR⁴ Young Blood



MACMILLAN



First published 2001 as *Darkest Hour* under the author name Jenny Carroll
by Simon Pulse, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, USA

This edition published 2005 by Macmillan Children's Books
a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
www.panmacmillan.com

Associated companies throughout the world

ISBN 0 330 43740 2

Copyright © Meg Cabot 2001

The right of Meg Cabot to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or
transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written
permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized
act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal
prosecution and civil claims for damages.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by Intype Libra Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out,
or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

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. With her husband and one-eyed cat, Henrietta, Meg divides her time between New York City and Florida.

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

Also by Meg Cabot

The Mediator 1: Love You to Death

The Mediator 2: High Stakes

The Mediator 3: Mean Spirits

The Princess Diaries

The Princess Diaries: Take Two

The Princess Diaries: Third Time Lucky

The Princess Diaries: Mia Goes Fourth

The Princess Diaries: Give Me Five

The Princess Diaries: Sixsational

The Princess Diaries Guide to Life

The Princess Diaries Princess Files

All American Girl

All American Girl: Ready or Not

Nicola and the Viscount

Victoria and the Rogue

Teen Idol

Coming soon

The Mediator 5: Grave Doubts

The Mediator 6: Heaven Sent

The Princess Diaries: Guide to Christmas

And for adults

The Guy Next Door

Boy Meets Girl

Every Boy's Got One

In memory of Marcia Mounsey

One

Summer. Season of long, slow days and short, hot nights.

Back in Brooklyn, where I spent my first fifteen of them, summer – when it hadn't meant camp – had meant hanging out on the stoop with my best friend Gina and her brothers, waiting for the ice-cream truck to come by. When it wasn't too hot, we played a game called War, dividing into teams with the other kids in the neighbourhood and shooting each other with imaginary guns.

When we got older, of course, we quit playing War. Gina and I also started laying off the ice cream.

Not that it mattered. None of the neighbourhood guys, the ones we used to play with, wanted anything to do with us. Well, with *me*, anyway. I don't think they'd have minded renewing acquaintances with Gina, but by the time they finally noticed what a babe she'd grown into, she'd set her sights way higher than guys from the 'hood.

I don't know what I expected from my sixteenth summer, my first since moving to California to live with my mom and her new husband . . . and, oh, yeah, his sons. I guess I envisioned the same long, slow days. Only these, in my mind, would be spent at the beach rather than on an apartment building's front stoop.

And as for those short, hot nights, well, I had plans for those, as well. All I needed was a boyfriend.

But as it happened, neither the beach nor the boyfriend materialized, the latter because the guy I liked? Yeah, he so wasn't interested. At least, as far as I could tell. And the former because . . .

Well, because I was forced to get a job.

That's right: a *job*.

I was horrified when one night at dinner, around the beginning of May, my stepfather Andy asked me if I'd put in any summer employment applications anywhere. I was all, 'What are you *talking* about?'

But it soon became clear that, like the many other sacrifices I'd been asked to make since my mother met, fell in love with, and married Andy Ackerman – host of a popular cable television home-improvement programme, native Californian, and father of three – my long hot summer lazing at the beach with my friends was not to be.

In the Ackerman household, it soon unfolded, you had two alternatives for how you spent your summer break: a job, or remedial tutoring. Only Doc, my youngest stepbrother – known as David to everyone but me – was exempt from either of these, as he was too young to work, and he had made good enough grades that he'd been accepted into a month-long computer camp, at which he was presumably learning skills that would make him the next Bill Gates – only hopefully without the bad haircut and Wal-Mart-y sweaters.

My second-youngest stepbrother, Dopey (also known as Brad) was not so lucky. Dopey had managed to flunk both English and Spanish – an astounding feat, in my opinion, English being his native language – and so was being forced by his father to attend summer school five days a week . . .

when he wasn't being used as unpaid slave labour on the project Andy had undertaken while his TV show was on summer hiatus: tearing down a large portion of our house's backyard deck and installing a hot tub.

Given the alternative – employment or summer school – I chose to seek employment.

I got a job at the same place my oldest stepbrother, Sleepy, works every summer. He, in fact, recommended me, an act which, at the time, simultaneously stunned and touched me. It wasn't until later that I found out that he had received a small bonus for every person he recommended who was later hired.

Whatever. What it actually boils down to is this: Sleepy – Jake, as he is known to his friends and the rest of the family – and I are now proud employees of the Pebble Beach Hotel and Golf Resort, Sleepy as a lifeguard at one of the resort's many pools, and me as . . .

Well, I signed away my summer to become a hotel staff babysitter.

OK. You can stop laughing now.

Even I will admit that it's not the kind of job I ever thought I'd be suited for, since I am not long on patience and am certainly not over fond of having my hair spat up in. But allow me to point out that it does pay ten dollars an hour, and that that does not include tips.

And let me just say that the people who stay at the Pebble Beach Hotel and Golf Resort are . . . Yeah, they are the kind of people who tend to tip. Generously.

The money, I must say, has gone a long way towards healing my wounded pride. If I have to spend my summer in mindless drudgery, earning a hundred bucks a day – and frequently more – amply compensates for it. Because by the time the summer is over, I should have, without question, the

most stunning fall wardrobe of anyone entering the junior class of the Junipero Serra Mission Academy.

So think about *that*, Kelly Prescott, while you spend your summer lounging by your father's pool. I've already got *four* pairs of Jimmy Choos, paid for *with my own money*.

What do you think about that, Little Miss Daddy's AmEx?

The only real problem with my summer job – besides the whiny children and their equally whiny, but loaded, parents, of course – is the fact that I am expected to report there at eight o'clock in the morning every day.

That's right. EIGHT A.M. No sleeping in for old Suze this summer.

I must say I find this a bit excessive. And believe me, I've complained. And yet the management staff at the Pebble Beach Hotel and Golf Resort have remained stubbornly unswayed by my persuasive arguments for refraining from offering babysitting services until nine.

And so it is that every morning (I can't even sleep in on Sundays, thanks to my stepfather's insistence that all of us gather around the dining table for the elaborate brunch he prepares; he seems to think we are the Camdens or the Waltons something) I am up before seven . . .

Which has, I've been surprised to learn, its advantages.

Although I would not list seeing Dopey without a shirt, sweating like a pig, and gulping OJ from the carton as one of them.

There are a lot of girls who go to my school who would, I know, pay money to see Dopey – and Sleepy, too, for that matter – without a shirt, sweat or no sweat. Kelly Prescott, for instance. And her best friend, and Dopey's sometime flame, Debbie Mancuso. I myself do not understand the attraction, but then I can only suppose that these girls have

not been around my stepbrothers after a meal in which beans played any sort of role on the menu.

Still, anyone who cared to see Dopey do his calendar pin-up imitation could easily do so for free, merely by stopping by our house any weekday morning. For it is in our backyard that Dopey has been, from approximately six in the morning until he has to leave for summer school at ten, stripped to the waist, and performing rigorous manual labour under the eagle eye of his father.

On this particular morning – the one where I caught him, once again, drinking directly from the juice carton, a habit of which my mother and I have been trying, with little success, to cure the entire Ackerman clan – Dopey had apparently been doing some digging, since he left a trail of mud along the kitchen floor, in addition to a dirt-encrusted object on what had once been an immaculate counter (I should know: it had been my turn to 409 it the night before).

‘Oh,’ I said, as I stepped into the kitchen. ‘Isn’t that a lovely picture.’

Dopey lowered the orange-juice container and looked at me.

‘Don’t you have somewhere to be?’ he asked, wiping his mouth with the back of a wrist.

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘But I was hoping that before I left, I could enjoy a nice glass of calcium-fortified juice. I see now that that will not be possible.’

Dopey shook the carton. ‘There’s still some left,’ he said.

‘Mixed with your backwash?’ I heaved a shudder. ‘I think not.’

Dopey opened his mouth to say something – presumably his usual suggestion that I chew on some piece of his anatomy – but his father’s voice called from outside the sliding glass doors to the deck.

‘Brad,’ Andy yelled. ‘That’s enough of a break. Get back out here and help me lower this.’

Dopey slammed down the carton of OJ. Before he could stalk from the room, however, I stopped him with a polite, ‘Excuse me?’

Because he wore no shirt, I could see the muscles in Dopey’s neck and shoulders tense as I spoke.

‘All right already,’ he said, spinning around and heading back towards the juice carton. ‘I’ll put it away. Jeez, why are you always *on* me about crap like—’

‘I don’t care about *that*,’ I interrupted him, pointing at the juice carton – although it had to have been making the counter sticky. ‘I want to know what *that* is.’

Dopey looked where I’d moved my finger. He blinked down at the dirt-encrusted oblong object.

‘I dunno,’ he said. ‘I found it buried in the yard while I was digging out one of the posts.’

I gingerly lifted what appeared to be a metal box, about six inches long by two inches thick, heavily rusted and covered in mud. There were a few places where the mud had rubbed off, though, and there you could see some words painted on the box. The few I could make out were *delicious aroma* and *quality assured*. When I shook the box, it rattled. There was something inside.

‘What’s in it?’ I asked Dopey.

He shrugged. ‘How should I know? It’s rusted shut. I was gonna take a—’

I never did find out what Dopey was going to do to the box, since his older brother Sleepy walked into the kitchen at that moment, reached for the orange-juice carton, opened it, and downed the remaining contents. When he was through, he crumpled the carton, threw it into the trash compactor, and then, apparently noticing my appalled expression, said, ‘*What?*’

I don't get what girls see in them. Seriously. They are like *animals*.

And not the cute fuzzy kind, either.

Meanwhile, outside, Andy was calling imperiously for Dopey again.

Dopey muttered some extremely colourful four-letter words beneath his breath, then shouted, 'I'm *coming*, already,' and stomped outside.

It was already seven forty-five, so Sleepy and I really had to 'motor', as he put it, to get to the resort on time. But though my eldest stepbrother has a tendency to sleepwalk through life, there's nothing somnambulistic about his driving. I punched in at work with five minutes to spare.

The Pebble Beach Hotel and Golf Resort prides itself on its efficiency. And it is, in fact, a very smoothly run operation. As a staff babysitter, it's my responsibility, after punching in, to ask for my assignment for the day. That's when I find out whether I'll be washing strained carrots or burger fixings out of my hair after work. On the whole, I prefer burgers, but there's something to be said for strained carrots: generally the people who eat them can't talk back to you.

When I heard my assignment for that particular day, however, I was disappointed, even though it was a burger-eater.

'Simon, Susannah,' Caitlin called. 'You're assigned to Slater, Jack.'

'For God's sake, Caitlin,' I said to Caitlin, who was my supervisor. 'I was stuck with Jack Slater yesterday. *And* the day before.'

Caitlin is only two years older than me, but she treats me like I'm twelve. In fact, I'm sure the only reason she tolerates me is because of Sleepy: she is as warm for his form as every other girl on this planet . . . except, of course, me.

'Jack's parents,' Caitlin informed me, without even looking up from her clipboard, 'requested you, Suze.'

'Couldn't you have said I was already taken?'

Caitlin did look up then. She looked at me with cool, blue contact-lensed eyes. 'Suze,' she said. 'They *like* you.'

I fiddled with my bathing-suit straps. I was wearing the regulation navy-blue swimsuit beneath my regulation navy-blue Oxford T-shirt and khaki shorts. With *pleats*, no less. Appalling.

I mentioned the uniform, right? I mean, the part where I have to wear a uniform to work? No kidding. Every day. A uniform.

If I'd known about the uniform beforehand, I never would have applied for the job.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I know they like me.'

The feeling isn't mutual. It isn't that I don't like Jack, although he's easily the whiniest little kid I have ever met. I mean, you can see why he's that way – just take a look at his parents, a pair of career-obsessed physicians who think dumping their kid off with a hotel babysitter for days on end while they go sailing and golfing is a fine family vacation.

It's actually Jack's older brother I have the problem with. Well, not necessarily a *problem* . . .

More like I would just rather avoid seeing him while I am wearing my incredibly unstylish Pebble Beach Hotel and Golf Resort uniform khaki shorts.

Yeah. The ones with the pleats in them.

Except, of course, that every time I've run into the guy since he and his family arrived at the resort last week, I've been wearing the stupid things.

Not that I care, particularly, what Paul Slater thinks about me. I mean, my heart, to coin a phrase, belongs to another.

Too bad he shows no signs whatsoever of actually wanting it. My heart, that is.

Still, Paul – that's his name; Jack's older brother, I mean: Paul Slater – is pretty incredible. I mean, it isn't just that he's a hottie. Oh, no. Paul's hot *and* funny. Every time I go to pick Jack up or drop him off at his family's hotel suite, and his brother Paul happens to be there, he always has some flippant remark to make about the hotel or his parents or himself. Not mean or anything. Just funny.

And I think he's smart, too, because whenever he isn't on the golf course with his dad or playing tennis with his mom, he's at the pool reading. And not your typical pool book, either. No Clancy or Crichton or King for Paul. Oh, no. We're talking stuff by guys like Nietzsche, or Kierkegaard.

Seriously. It's almost enough to make you think he's not from California.

And of course it turns out, he's not: the Slaters are visiting from Seattle.

So you see, it wasn't just that Jack Slater is the whiniest kid I've ever met: there was also the fact that I wasn't really all that enthused about his hottie brother seeing me, yet again, in shorts that make my butt look roughly the size of Montana.

But Caitlin was totally uninterested in my personal feelings on the matter.

'Suze,' Caitlin said, looking down at her clipboard again. 'Nobody likes Jack. But the fact is, Dr and Mrs Slater like you. So you're spending the day with Jack. Capeesh?'

I sighed gustily, but what could I do? Aside from my pride, my tan was the only thing that was really going to suffer from spending yet another day with Jack. The kid doesn't like swimming, or bike riding, or Rollerblading, or frisbee tossing, or anything, really, to do with the great outdoors. His

idea of a good time is to sit inside the hotel room and watch cartoons.

I'm not kidding, either. He is, without a doubt, the most boring kid I ever met. I find it hard to believe he and Paul came from the same gene pool.

'Besides,' Caitlin added, as I was standing there, fuming. 'Today is Jack's eighth birthday.'

I stared at her. 'His *birthday*? It's Jack's *birthday*, and his parents are leaving him with a sitter all day?'

Caitlin shot me a severe look: 'The Slaters say they'll be back in time to take him to dinner at the Grill.'

The Grill. Whoopee. The Grill is the fanciest restaurant at the resort, maybe even on the entire peninsula. The cheapest thing they serve there costs about fifteen dollars, and that's the house salad. The Grill is so *not* a fun place to take a kid on his eighth birthday. I mean, even Jack, the most boring child in the world, couldn't have a fun time there.

I don't get it. I really don't. I mean, what's wrong with these people? And how, seeing the way they treat their youngest child, had their other one managed to turn out so . . .

Well, *hot*?

At least, that was the word that flashed through my mind as Paul opened the door to his family's suite in response to my knock, then stood there grinning down at me, one hand in the pocket of his cream-coloured chinos, the other clutching a book by someone called Martin Heidegger.

Yeah, you know what the last book I read was? That'd be *Clifford*. That's right. The big red dog. And OK, I was reading it to a five-year-old, but still. Heidegger. Jeez.

'All right. Who called Room Service and ordered the pretty girl?' Paul wanted to know.

Well, OK, that wasn't funny. That was actually sort of sexually harassing, if you think about it. But the fact that

the guy saying it was my age, about six feet tall, and olive-complected, with curly brown hair and eyes the colour of the mahogany desk in the hotel lobby, made it not so bad.

Not so bad. What am I talking about? The guy could sexually harass me anytime he wanted to. At least *someone* wanted to.

Just my luck it wasn't the guy I wanted.

I didn't admit this out loud, of course. What I said instead was, 'Ha ha. I'm here for Jack.'

Paul winced. 'Oh,' he said, shaking his head in mock disappointment. 'The little guy gets all the luck.'

He held the door open for me, and I stepped into the suite's plush living room. Jack was where he usually was, sprawled on the floor in front of the TV. He did not acknowledge my presence, as was his custom.

His mother, on the other hand, did acknowledge me: 'Oh, hi, Susan. Rick and Paul and I will be on the course all morning. And then the three of us are meeting for lunch at the Grotto, and then we've got appointments with our personal trainers. So if you could stay until we all get back, around seven, we'd appreciate it. Make sure Jack has a bath before changing for dinner. I've laid out a suit for him. It's his birthday, you know. OK, buh-bye, you two. Have fun, Jack.'

'How could he not?' Paul wanted to know, with a meaningful glance in my direction.

And then the Slaters left.

Jack remained where he was in front of the TV, not speaking to me, not even looking at me. As this was typical Jack behaviour, I was not alarmed.

I crossed the room – stepping over Jack on my way – and went to fling open the wide French doors that led out on to a terrace overlooking the sea. Rick and Nancy Slater were paying six hundred dollars a night for their view, which