

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

MEG CABOT

*Runaway*



*An* AIRHEAD *Novel*

I was in my bed at Brandon's beach house, and I was dreaming.

In my dream, Christopher had come to rescue me. He wasn't, it turned out, mad about the whole thing where I'd told him I loved Brandon and not him.

Quite the opposite, in fact. Our reunion was joyful . . . and passionate. It was turning the ice that had been flowing in my veins back to blood . . . warm, rich blood, that was making me hot . . . shove-the-covers-down, hair-sticking-to-the-back-of-my-neck hot.

In my dream, Christopher was kissing me . . . gently at first, playful kisses on the lips, light as the down feathers in the comforter that I'd already pushed past my bare thighs.

Then, as I kissed him back, proving that it was true-I had never loved Brandon. How could I?-the kisses became longer . . . deeper . . . more passionate. My lips parted beneath his as his hands found their way into my hair-spread like a

fan across my pillow-his mouth cool against mine because of the chill outside, the zipper from his leather jacket almost unbearably cold as it pressed against my warm skin as he leaned over my bed, whispering my name. . . .

I was so relieved to learn he hadn't even believed me that bitterly cold morning outside of Dr. Fong's house when I'd said I didn't love him. He'd known Brandon had been making me say it.

He just hadn't known why.

The reason he hadn't believed it was because he'd loved me-the real me-all along. Not me, Nikki, the girl who'd torn his heart out of his chest and thrown it to the ground and then squashed it underneath her Louboutins.

Me, Em. The girl in the photo he'd kept over his desk all those months.

The girl he'd thought was dead for so many months.

Except if that was true . . . if Christopher hadn't believed me . . . why hadn't he called?

Because, a voice inside my dream reminded me,

Christopher doesn't love you anymore.

Wait a minute. I wasn't actually liking this dream after all.

I opened my eyes with a gasp to find a hand pressed to my mouth. This was no dream. This was really happening.

I knew who it was, of course. Who else could it have been? Who else had been trying my doorknob (unsuccessfully, since I'd been careful about locking it every night) all week? The hand over my mouth was masculine. I could tell that just by its size and heaviness, even if, in the darkness of my room, I couldn't see who owned it.

So of course, I did the only thing I could: I clamped down on it with my teeth as hard as I could.

What else was I going to do? Brandon had snuck into my room in the middle of the night to do what guys like Brandon do to girls when they're asleep. How dare he try to take advantage of me when I was dreaming about someone else? Someone I actually liked. . . .

I bit down and didn't let go until I heard bones crunch.

“Ow. Jesus, Em!” the voice cried in a hoarse whisper. The hand ripped away from my face, and for a second, I heard the sound of leather rubbing on leather . . . a sleeve lifting away from the body of a jacket as someone waved his hand back and forth. Wait. My sleep-muddled mind tried to make sense of this. Why would Brandon be wearing a leather jacket inside?

“What did you go and bite me for?” Christopher wanted to know.

My mind reeled. Christopher? In my room? Here, at Brandon’s house? What was Christopher doing here? How had he gotten in? Had I not been dreaming after all? Had he really been kissing me? I sat up so fast, I jostled Cosabella, who’d been curled against my neck.

“Christopher?” I whispered. “Is that really you? Oh, my God, did I hurt you? Are you bleeding?”

“Of course it’s really me,” he whispered. He sounded so annoyed, I wanted to grab his face and go back to kissing it, just like in my dream . . . if that had really been a dream, and not real. Only

Christopher could sound that irritated with me. Wonderful, amazing, easily annoyed Christopher. “Who else would it be? And don’t tell me Stark has been sneaking in here. Was that why the door was locked? I had to use my library card to jimmy the lock. Seriously, if he’s been trying to get in here, I’ll kill him-”

I forgot that I was supposed to be giving Christopher the cold shoulder, on pain of Brandon destroying everything and everyone I loved.

I forgot that I was supposed to be pretending that Brandon and I were an item now.

I was so overwhelmed at finding Christopher sitting on the side of my bed, just like in my dream, that I threw my arms around him, pulling him close and swearing to myself that I was never going to let him go. I didn’t even care that the metal rivets and zipper of his leather jacket were icy cold against the parts of my bare skin that weren’t covered by the matching pink tank top and sleep boxers I was wearing. Just like in my dream.

“Oh, my God, Christopher,” I whispered, breathing

the crisp outdoorsy scent that was still clinging to his short hair. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“I’m glad to see you, too,” he said, putting his arms around me to hug me back. Hard. “And don’t worry about my hand. I’m sure it’s just a flesh wound.”

I laughed. I think I was semihysterical.

But I didn’t care. It felt so good to be in his embrace. Christopher. Christopher was here.

“But what are you doing here?” I whispered.

His hold on me loosened just enough so that he could look down into my face. Sometime while I’d been sleeping, a partial moon must have come out . . . I could see its faint glow through a crack in the curtains on the far side of the room. It didn’t let in enough light for me to see him by, because his back was to it and he was thrown into silhouette by its glow. But he, I knew, could see me.

“Did you really think I’d believe you, of all people, were in love with Brandon Stark?” he asked, in a softly chiding voice. “It may have taken me a while to figure out who you really are now, Em. But give me some credit. And now that I do know it’s you,

I'm certainly not going to let you go that easily." My heart gave a little somersault inside my chest. I kept holding on to him. I don't think I could have let go of him, either, even if he'd wanted me to. Which, thank God, he didn't.

He leaned down and kissed me, and I realized, as our lips touched, that I hadn't been dreaming . . . that really had been him kissing me. Kissing me awake. No wonder I'd been so hot. . . And that his kisses were doing to me again what they'd done to me before, making me feel warm and protected in a way I hadn't felt since . . . well, since the last time I'd been in his arms, all too briefly back in my room at the loft during Lulu's holiday party.

And just like then, before I was entirely aware of what was happening, Christopher's hands were gently cradling my face as his lips moved over mine . . . . . and then I was sinking . . . sinking slowly back against the soft pillows behind me, with Christopher on top of me. Somehow, he'd shed that annoying leather jacket, and he was half on, half off the bed.



But definitely half on me, a sensation I couldn't say I didn't find enjoyable. I knew there were things we needed to say. Things I needed to know, things I needed to tell him.

But how could I when his lips were doing such interesting things to mine, and his hands-oh, his hands-had moved away from my face to tug at my . . .  
“Christopher,” I said breathlessly, pulling my lips from his. It was the hardest thing I think I'd ever had to do. In the darkened room, there was nothing I wanted to do more than just let him keep doing what he was doing.

But I couldn't. Someone had to stay sane. And I had a pretty good idea that it wasn't going to be him.

“We have to focus,” I said.

“Focus,” he repeated. I could see that his blue eyes, so close to mine, were half-lidded and looked dazed. “Definitely.”

He lowered his head to kiss me again.

But as much as I longed to let him, I knew I couldn't.

“No.” I ducked out from beneath him and moved to the far side of the bed, where Cosabella was sitting, licking herself. I pulled her onto my lap to use her as a kind of doggy boy-defense shield. “I’m serious. I’m happy to see you, too. But we have to talk. What are you doing here?”

Christopher seemed to pull himself together. He lost the dazed look—well, some of it—and said, sitting up straighter, “I think it should be obvious what I’m doing here, Em. I’m here to rescue you.”

My heart gave another one of its crazy somersaults. Seriously, everything this boy said—and did—was causing my internal organs to do acrobatics.

“Rescue me?” Never in my life had anyone said anything as sweet to me. He had come all the way from New York to rescue me? Just when I had given up all hope that anyone I knew was even thinking about me. Except Lulu and my mother. And my agent, Rebecca, of course. “Oh, Christopher . . .”

It was all I could do to keep from crawling back across the bed and into his arms.

But that, I knew, would be a huge mistake. Because I wouldn't have the strength to crawl out of his arms again . . . not until things had gone way further than either of us were ready to handle . . . at least right now.

Pushing some of my sleep-tossed hair out of my eyes, I resolved to follow my own advice and focus. "How did you even get in here?" I asked. "Brandon keeps this place locked up tighter than Fort Knox." He pulled a small, sleek box from the pocket of his coat.

"Universal code grabber," he said. "Just the latest of my cousin Felix's many do-it-yourself hacking devices he's been working on to keep himself entertained. This one can run something like a million potential code combinations a second before it finds the right one. Used it to open Brandon's garage door."

I stared at the little metal box in his hand. Okay. This was definitely something I wouldn't dream. I wasn't so sure Christopher's cousin Felix belonged under house arrest in his mother's basement. I think

maybe he belonged on the payroll of some tech corporation in Silicon Valley.

“I suppose that’s how you bypassed the security system, too,” I said.

“Oh, no,” Christopher said, casually slipping the box back into his pocket. “I just typed in Brandon’s password for that once I got inside. I figured he’d be stupid enough to use his name-and I was right.” I couldn’t help smiling at that one.

“So we’re just supposed to walk on out of here,” I said, “the way you came in?” “Pretty much,” he said. “You ready?”

I had to laugh at that. The idea of me just walking out of Brandon’s house and away from my problems with Christopher like-well, like it was that easy.

Where could we even go? It wasn’t, like, with my face, we wouldn’t be instantly recognized anywhere we went.

And what about Steven, and Nikki, and their mom? I know I’m not related to them-except by blood-but I owed them something for the way they’d fought

for me, even if it hadn't worked. Steven had gotten so mad at Brandon for agreeing to Nikki's insane plan, he'd finally had to leave the dining room entirely, for fear-he'd told me later, when I'd met him in the hallway as I'd been coming up to bed-that he'd smash Brandon's face in. Later, he'd come into my room, telling me that we had to get out of there before both Nikki and I ended up dead.

But go where? Steven could always rejoin his naval unit and slip back under the sea in the submarine he'd left to look for his missing mother. But what about Mrs. Howard, who couldn't even use her credit cards or pay a bill for fear of Stark Enterprises tracking her down?

Or Nikki, who chose to remain so blindly ignorant of the role she'd played in causing all of this heartache?

I wanted to tell Christopher all these things.

But first, I had to tell him the most important thing of all-besides the fact that I was madly in love with him, which I was pretty sure from the previous few minutes' makeout session he already knew.

“Christopher,” I said, breathlessly, “Nikki told us. She told us what she tried to blackmail Brandon’s dad over. What she overheard that got her killed . . . and me into this mess in the first place.”

He reached out and smoothed some of my hair away from my face. I closed my eyes for a second or two, relishing the warmth from his fingers as they swept my skin. A wave of desire slammed into me with all the force of a dodgeball hurled by Whitney Robertson.

Bad. I had it bad for this guy.

“Go on,” he said.

“It just . . .,” I said, opening my eyes again when his hand fell away from my face. “It doesn’t make any sense, is the thing. Nikki says she overheard Mr. Stark and a bunch of his cronies chuckling in his office over the fact that new Stark Quarks are going to arrive with some kind of undetectable spyware-bundled with the new version of Journeyquest—that’s going to upload all of the information the user taps into it—any information he ever enters into any websites, Priceline, Facebook, e-mails, that kind

of thing. And all of it is going to be stored on the mainframe at Stark Corporate. All of it.”

I looked at Christopher and shrugged.

“That’s it?” he asked, his eyebrows raised.

“That’s it,” I said, nodding. “Nikki swears. She didn’t hear them say anything else. She says they were all congratulating one another and toasting over it. I mean, I guess an undetectable tracking software is pretty advanced, but one in three PCs in America has spyware on it already and their owners don’t even know. What’s the use of having all that information-and we’re talking about data from hundreds of thousands of homes, maybe millions, because the Stark Quark is going to be the lowest-priced laptop in history-if Stark’s just going to store it on the mainframe? It’s not like they said they were going to use it for anything. And you know the people who are going to be buying the Quarks-they’re pretty low-end-aren’t rich. It’s not like Stark’s going to be getting the credit card numbers of, like, millionaires or anything. That’s why I don’t understand how this could be worth killing Nikki

Howard over. What's the big deal?"

The moon had shifted. Now a shaft of its light fell full on Christopher's face, and I could finally see him properly for the first time since I'd woken to find him in my room . . . and in my bed.

And for a second, I thought I spotted a glimpse of the dark supervillain that I had been convinced he'd turned into after reports of my "death," and his decision to try to avenge it . . . that supervillain I thought was gone for good when he realized I wasn't dead after all.

But no. The darkness-and hate-were still there.

Maybe they would never go away.

And I was going to have live with the knowledge that I was the one who was responsible for that.

"Why does anyone commit murder?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I-" I blinked. "How should I know?"

"Three reasons," Christopher said. He held up one finger. "Love." Another finger. "Revenge." And finally, a third finger. "Profit. They tried to kill Nikki Howard when she threatened to expose the truth



about them.”

“So?” I shook my head. “I still don’t-”

“Robert Stark definitely has a plan for how he’s going to profit from the information he’s stealing from the people who buy his new PCs,” Christopher said. “What we need to do is figure out what that is. And how we’re going to make him pay. We’ve got a lot work ahead of us. We better get on it. Get dressed and let’s go.”

I started disentangling my legs from the sheets.

“Steven and his mom are going to be fine,” I said.

“I can probably get them up and out, no problem. But I’m not sure how we’re going to convince Nikki to come along with us willingly. She likes it here just fine.”

“Wait,” Christopher said, putting a large hand on my shoulder. “What are you talking about?”

“Nikki,” I said, looking at him in the moonlight. Something about his expression told me that the evil supervillain was not only back, but here to stay.

“She’s not going to want to go. But she has to, of course. It’s not safe for her here.”

“Em,” Christopher said. His voice was cold. “I don’t care about Nikki Howard. I’m here to rescue you. Not her.”

“But.” I blinked at him. “We can’t just leave her behind.”

“Oh, yes,” he said, “we can.”