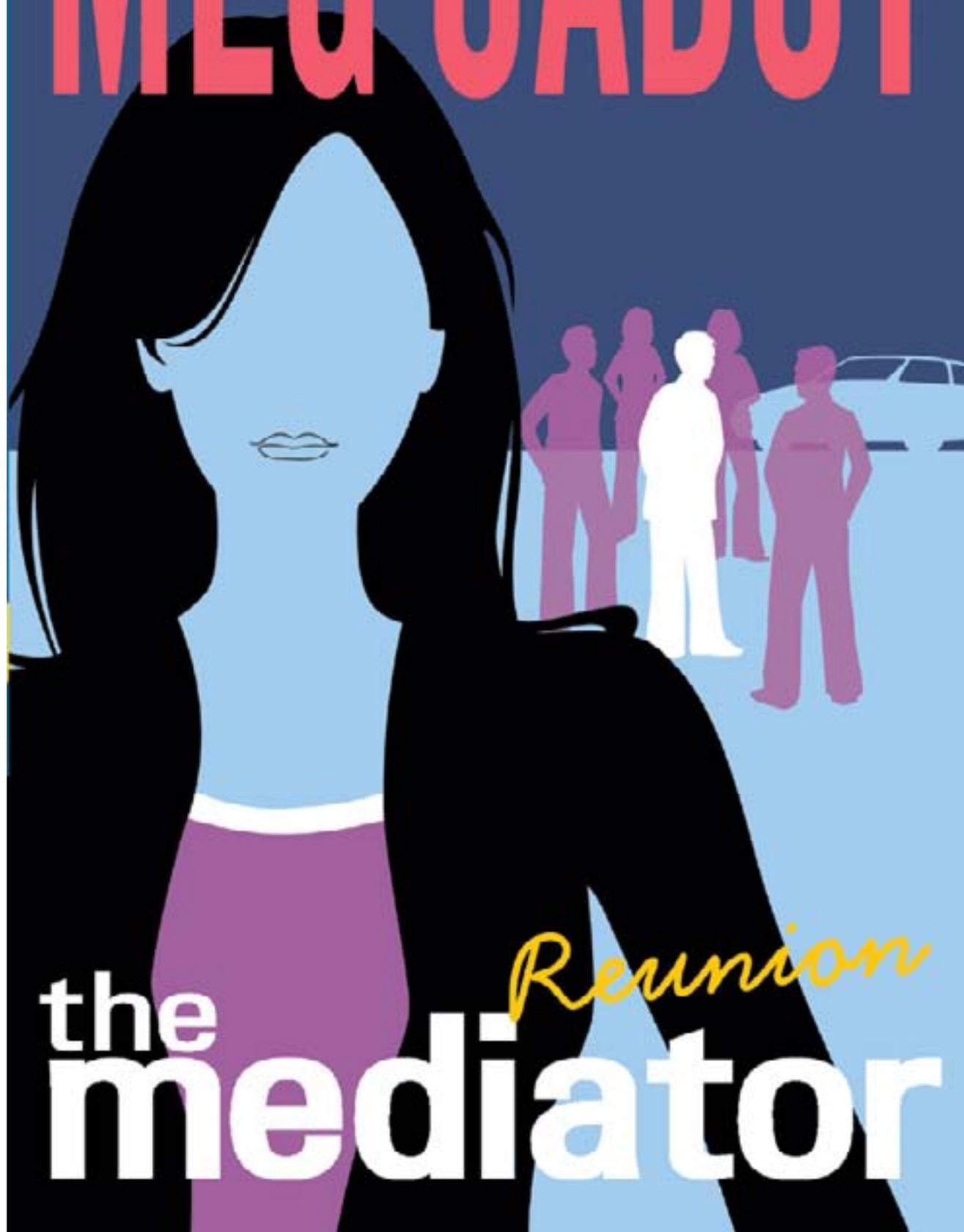


#1 NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THE PRINCESS DIARIES

MEG CABOT



Reunion
the
mediator

CHAPTER ONE

“Now this,” Gina said, “is the life.”

I was forced to agree with her. The two of us were stretched out in our bikinis, taking in the rays and balmy seventy-five-degree weather on Carmel Beach. It was March, but you wouldn't have known it by the way the sun was pouring down on us.

Well, this was California, after all.

“I mean it,” Gina said. “I don't know how you do it every day.”

I had my eyes closed. Visions of tall, icy Diet Cokes were dancing in my head. If only they had waiter service on the beach. It was the one thing missing, really. We'd already finished all of the sodas in our cooler, and it was a really long walk up the stairs from the beach to Jimmy's Quick Mart.

“Do what?” I murmured.

“Go to school,” Gina said, “when you’ve got this fabulous beach just a mile or so away.”

“It is hard,” I admitted, my eyes still closed. “But graduating from high school continues to be considered one of life’s important achievements. I mean, I’ve heard that without a high school diploma, one doesn’t have a hope of acquiring one of those high-powered service positions at Starbucks that I know I’ll be angling for upon graduation.”

“Seriously, Suze,” Gina said. I felt her stir next to me, and opened my eyes. Gina had leaned up on her elbows, and was scanning the beach through her Ray-Bans. “How can you stand it?”

How, indeed? It was gorgeous. The Pacific stretched out as far as the eye could see, turquoise blue darkening to navy the closer it got to the horizon.

The waves were huge, crashing up against the yellow sand, tossing surfers and boogie boarders into the air as if they were pieces of driftwood. To our far right rose the green cliffs of Pebble Beach. To our left, the huge, seal-strewn boulders that were the stepping stones for what eventually turned into Big Sur, a particularly rugged section of the Pacific coastline.

And everywhere, the sun beat down, burning away the fog that earlier that day had threatened to ruin our plans. It was perfection. It was paradise.

If only I could have gotten someone to bring me a drink.

“Oh my God.” Gina tilted her Ray-Bans and peered over the rims. “Check this out.”

I followed her gaze through the tortoiseshell lenses of my Donna Karans. The lifeguard, who’d been sitting in his white tower a few yards away from our

towels, suddenly leaped from his chair, his orange flotation device clutched in one hand. He landed with catlike grace in the sand, then suddenly took off toward the waves, his muscles rippling beneath his darkly tanned skin, his long blond hair flowing behind him.

Tourists fumbled for their cameras while sunbathers sat up for a better look. Gulls took off in startled flight, and beachcombers hurried to move out of the lifeguard's way. Then, with his lean, muscular body making a perfect arc in the air, he dove into the waves, only to come up yards away, swimming hard and fast for a kid who was caught in an undertow.

To my amusement, I saw that the kid was none other than Dopey, one of my stepbrothers, who'd accompanied us to the beach that afternoon. I recognized his voice instantly—once the lifeguard had pulled him back to the surface—as he vehemently cursed at his rescuer for attempting to

save his life, and embarrassing him in front of his peers.

The lifeguard, to my delight, cursed right back at him.

Gina, who'd watched the drama unfold with rapt attention, said, lazily, "What a spaz."

Clearly, she had not recognized the victim. Gina had, much to my astonishment, informed me that I was incredibly lucky, because all my stepbrothers were so "cool." Even, apparently, Dopey.

Gina had never been particularly discriminating where boys were concerned.

Now she sighed, and leaned back against her towel.

"That," she said, shoving her sunglasses back into place, "was extremely disturbing. Except for the part when the hot lifeguard ran past us. That I

enjoyed.”

A few minutes later, the lifeguard came trudging back in our direction, looking no less handsome in wet hair than he had in dry. He swung himself up to his tower, spoke briefly into his radio—probably putting out a B.O.L.O. on Dopey: Be On the Look Out for an extremely stupid wrestler in a wetsuit, showing off for his step-sister’s best friend from out of town—then returned to scanning the waves for other potential drowning victims.

“That’s it,” Gina declared suddenly. “I am in love. That lifeguard is the man I am going to marry.”

See what I mean? Total lack of discrimination.

“You,” I said disgustedly, “would marry any guy in a swimsuit.”

“That’s not true,” Gina said. She pointed at a particularly hairy-backed tourist sitting in a Speedo

a few yards away with his sunburned wife. “I do not, for instance, wish to marry him.”

“Of course not. He’s taken.”

Gina rolled her eyes. “You’re so weird. Come on, let’s go get something to drink.”

We climbed to our feet and found our shorts and sandals, then wriggled into them. Leaving our towels where they were, we picked our way across the hot sand toward the steep steps that led up to the parking lot where Sleepy had left the car.

“I want,” Gina declared, when we’d reached the pavement, “a chocolate shake. Not one of those fancy gourmet ones they sell around here, either. I want a completely fake, chemically enhanced one, like they have at Mickey D’s.”

“Yeah, well,” I said, trying to catch my breath. It was no joke, climbing up all those steps. And I’m in

pretty good shape. I do a kickboxing tape practically every night. “You’re going to have to go into the next town for it because there aren’t any fast food places around here.”

Gina rolled her eyes. “What kind of hick town is this?” she complained in mock outrage. “No fast food, no traffic lights, no crime, no public transportation.”

But she didn’t mean it. Since her arrival from New York City the day before, Gina had been agog at my new life: envious of my bedroom’s glorious ocean view, enraptured by my new step-father’s culinary abilities, and not in the least contemptuous of my stepbrothers’ attempts to impress her. She hadn’t once, as I’d expected her to, told either Sleepy or Dopey, both of whom seemed to be vying for her attentions, to get lost.

“Jesus, Simon,” she’d said when I’d questioned her about it, “they’re hotties. What do you expect me to

do?”

Excuse me? My stepbrothers, hotties?

I think not.

Now, if it was hotties you wanted, you didn't have to look any further than the guy who manned the counter at Jimmy's, the little convenience store right across from the stairs to the beach. Dumb as an inflatable pool toy, Kurt—that was his name, I swear to God—was nevertheless stunning, and after I'd placed the sweating bottle of Diet Coke I'd secured from the refrigerated case on the counter in front of him, I gave him the old hairy eyeball. He was deeply absorbed in a copy of Surf Digest, so he didn't notice my leering gaze. I guess I was sun-drunk, or something, because I just kept standing there staring at Kurt, but what I was really doing was thinking about someone else.

Someone whom I really shouldn't have been

thinking about at all.

I guess that's why when Kelly Prescott said hi to me, I didn't even notice. It was like she wasn't even there.

Until she waved a hand in my face and went, "Hello, earth to Suze. Come in, Suze."

I tore my eyes off Kurt and found myself looking at Kelly, sophomore class president, radiant blonde, and fashion plate. She was in one of her dad's dress shirts, unbuttoned to reveal what she wore beneath it, which was an olive-green bikini made out of yarn. There were skin-colored inserts so you couldn't see her bare skin through the holes in the crochet.

Standing next to Kelly was Debbie Mancuso, my stepbrother Dopey's sometime girlfriend.

"Oh my God," Kelly said. "I had no idea you were

at the beach today, Suze. Where'd you put your towel?"

"By the lifeguard tower," I said.

"Oh, God," Kelly said. "Good spot. We're way over by the stairs."

Debbie went, way too casually, "I noticed the Rambler in the parking lot. Is Brad out on his board?"

Brad is what everyone but me calls my stepbrother, Dopey.

"Yeah," Kelly said. "And Jake?"

Jake is the stepbrother I call Sleepy. For reasons unfathomable to me, Sleepy, who is in his senior year at the Mission Academy, and Dopey, a sophomore like me, are considered these great catches. Obviously, these girls have never seen my

stepbrothers eat. It is truly a revolting sight.

“Yeah,” I said. And since I knew what they were after, I added, “Why don’t you two join us?”

“Cool,” Kelly said. “That’d be gr—”

Gina appeared, and Kelly broke off mid-sentence.

Well, Gina is the kind of girl people break off mid-sentence to admire. She’s nearly six feet tall, and the fact that she’d recently had her hair done into a mop of prickly-looking copper-colored tendrils, forming a four- or five-inch aura all the way around her head, only made her look taller. She also happened to have on a black vinyl bikini, over which she’d tugged on shorts that appeared to be made from the pull tabs off of a lot of soda cans.

Oh, and the fact that she’d been out in the sun all day had darkened her normally café au lait skin to the color of espresso, always startling when

combined with a nose ring and orange hair.

“Score,” Gina said excitedly, as she thumped a six-pack down onto the counter next to my Diet Coke. “Yoo-hoo, dude. The perfect chemical compound.”

“Um, Gina,” I said, hoping she wasn’t going to expect me to join her in consuming any of those bottles. “These are some friends of mine from school, Kelly Prescott and Debbie Mancuso. Kelly, Debbie, this is Gina Augustin, a friend of mine from New York.”

Gina’s eyes widened behind her Ray-Bans. I think she was astonished by the fact that I had, since moving out here, actually made some friends, something I had certainly not had many of, besides her, back in New York. Still, she managed to control her surprise and said, very politely, “How do you do?”

Debbie murmured, “Hi,” but Kelly got straight

to the point: “Where did you get those awesome shorts?”

It was while Gina was telling her that I first noticed the four kids in evening wear hanging out near the suntan lotion rack.

You might be wondering how I’d missed them before. Well, the truth of the matter is that, up until that particular moment, they hadn’t been there.

And, then, suddenly, there they were.

Being from Brooklyn, I’ve seen far stranger things than four teenagers dressed in formal wear in a convenience mart on a Sunday afternoon at the beach. But since this wasn’t New York, but California, the sight was a startling one. Even more startling was that these four were in the act of heisting a twelve-pack of beer.

I’m not kidding. A twelve-pack, right in broad

daylight with them dressed to the nines, the girls with wrist corsages, even. Kurt's no rocket scientist, it's true, but surely they couldn't think he would simply let them walk out of there with this beer—particularly in prom wear.

Then I lifted up my Donna Karans in order to get a better look at them.

And that's when I realized it.

Kurt wasn't going to be carding these kids. No way.

Kurt couldn't see them.