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*Darkest
Hour*

the
mediator

CHAPTER 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 neighborhood 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 neighborhood 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 program, 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 labor 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 alternatives—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.

Okay. 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 overly 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? Yeah, they are the kind of people who tend to tip. Generously.

The money, I must say, has gone a long way toward 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 8:00 in the morning every day.

That's right. 8:00 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 pinup 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 labor 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 toward 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 colorful four-letter words beneath his breath, then shouted, “I’m coming, already,” and stomped outside.

It was already 7:45, 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,” 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. Capiisce?”

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-colored 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 okay, 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, okay, 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 as blue as the ocean just beyond the Pebble Beach golf course, 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. Okay, 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 behavior, 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 onto a terrace overlooking the sea. Rick and Nancy Slater were paying six hundred dollars a night for their view, which was one of the Monterey Bay, sparkling turquoise under a cloudless blue sky. From their suite you could see the yellow slice of beach upon which, were it not for my well-meaning but misguided stepfather, I would have been whiling away my summer.

It isn't fair. It really isn't.

“Okay, big guy,” I said, after taking in the view for a minute or two and listening to the soothing pulse of the waves. “Go put on your swim trunks. We’re hitting the pool. It’s too nice out to stay inside.”

Jack, as usual, looked as if I’d pinched him rather than suggested a fun day at the pool.

“But why?” he cried. “You know I can’t swim.”

“Which is exactly,” I said, “why we’re going. You’re eight years old today. An eight-year-old who can’t swim is nothing but a loser. You don’t want to be a loser, do you?”

Jack opined that he preferred being a loser to going outdoors, a fact with which I was only too well acquainted.

“Jack,” I said, slumping down onto a couch near where he lay. “What is your problem?”

Instead of responding, Jack rolled over onto his stomach and scowled at the carpet. I wasn’t going to let up on him, though. I knew what I was talking about, with the loser thing. Being different in the American public—or even private—educational system is not cool. How Paul had ever allowed this to happen—his little brother’s turning into a whiny little wimp you almost longed to slap—I couldn’t fathom, but I knew good and well Rick and Nancy weren’t doing anything to help rectify the matter.

It was pretty much all up to me to save Jack Slater from becoming his school's human punching bag.

Don't ask me why I even cared. Maybe because in a weird way, Jack reminded me a little of Doc, my youngest stepbrother, the one who is away at computer camp. A geek in the truest sense of the word, Doc is still one of my favorite people. I have even been making a concerted effort to call him by his name, David . . . at least to his face.

But Doc is—almost—able to get away with his bizarre behavior because he has a photographic memory and a computerlike ability to process information. Jack, so far as I could tell, possessed no such skills. In fact, I had a feeling he was a bit dim. So really, he had no excuse for his eccentricities.

“What's the deal?” I asked him. “Don't you want to learn how to swim and throw a Frisbee, like a normal person?”

“You don’t understand,” Jack said, not very distinctly, into the carpet. “I’m not a normal person. I—I’m different than other people.”

“Of course you are,” I said, rolling my eyes. “We’re all special and unique, like snowflakes. But there’s different, and then there’s freakish. And you, Jack, are going to turn freakish, if you don’t watch out.”

“I—I already am freakish,” Jack said.

But he wouldn’t elaborate, and I can’t say I pressed too hard, trying to find out what he meant. Not that I imagined he might like to drown kittens in his spare time, or anything like that. I just figured he meant freakish in the general sense. I mean, we all feel like freaks from time to time. Jack maybe felt like one a bit more often than that, but then, with Rick and Nancy for parents, who wouldn’t? He was probably constantly being asked why he couldn’t be more like his older brother, Paul. That would

be enough to make any kid feel a little insecure. I mean, come on. Heidegger? On summer vacation?

Give me Clifford any day.

I told Jack that worrying so much was going to make him old before his time. Then I ordered him to go and put on his swimsuit.

He did so, but he didn't exactly hurry, and when we finally got outside and onto the brick path to the pool, it was almost 10:00. The sun was beating down hard, though it wasn't uncomfortably hot yet. Actually, it hardly ever gets uncomfortably hot in Carmel, even in the middle of July. Back in Brooklyn, you can barely go outdoors in July, it's so muggy. In Carmel, however, there is next to no humidity, and there's always a cool breeze from the Pacific. . . .

Perfect date weather, actually. If you happened to have one. A date, I mean. Which, of course, I

don't. And probably never will—at least with the guy I want—if things keep up the way they've been going.

Anyway, Jack and I were tripping down the brick path to the pool when one of the gardeners stepped out from behind an enormous forsythia bush and nodded to me.

This wouldn't have been at all odd—I have actually gotten friendly with all of the landscaping staff, thanks to the many Frisbees I have lost while playing with my charges—except for the fact that this particular gardener, Jorge, who had been expected to retire at the end of the summer, had instead suffered a heart attack a few days earlier, and, well . . .

Died.

Yet there was Jorge in his beige coveralls, holding a pair of hedge clippers and bobbing his head at

me, just as he had the last time I'd seen him, on this very path, a few days before.

I wasn't too worried about Jack's reaction to having a dead man walk up and nod at us, since for the most part, I'm the only one I know who can actually see them. The dead, I mean. So I was perfectly unprepared for what happened next. . . .

Which was that Jack ripped his hand from mine and, with a strangled scream, ran for the pool.

This was odd, but then, so was Jack. I rolled my eyes at Jorge, then hurried after the kid, since I am, after all, getting paid to care for the living. The whole helping-out-the-dead thing has to play second fiddle so long as I'm on the Pebble Beach Hotel and Golf Resort time clock. The ghosts simply have to wait. I mean, it's not as if they're paying me. Ha! I wish.

I found Jack huddled on a deck chair, sobbing

into his towel. Fortunately, it was still early enough that there weren't many people at the pool yet. Otherwise, I might have had some explaining to do.

But the only other person there was Sleepy, high up in his lifeguard chair. And it was pretty clear from the way Sleepy was resting his cheek in one hand that his shutters, behind the lenses of his Ray-Bans, were closed.

“Jack,” I said, sinking down onto the neighboring deck chair. “Jack, what’s the matter?”

“I . . . I t-told you already,” Jack sobbed into his fluffy white towel. “Suze . . . I’m not like other people. I’m like what you said. A . . . a . . . freak.”

I didn't know what he was talking about. I assumed he was merely continuing our conversation from the room.

“Jack,” I said. “You’re no more a freak than

anybody else.”

“No,” he sobbed. “I am. Don’t you get it?” Then he lifted his head, looked me straight in the eye, and hissed, “Suze, don’t you know why I don’t like to go outside?”

I shook my head. I didn’t get it. Even then, I still didn’t get it.