

# Chapter 1

In a life riddled with painful endings and bright beginnings too few to count, Catherine sought refuge in routine and simplicity. Ordinarily she would have dreaded the choreographed chaos of a graduation ceremony, but this day she embraced it with a light heart. She should have been exhausted from long nights spent hunched over textbooks cramming for finals, but her racing mind made sleep impossible. This was it. The day she'd worked so hard for had finally arrived. Today she would graduate—with honors. Not only had she earned her degree, but more importantly, she'd earned her son.

She slipped into her soft cotton robe and crossed the hall. Paint fumes lingered from her last-minute application of the fluffy white clouds that drifted across the slate-blue walls and ceiling. F-14 Tomcats streaked around and through the puffs, trailing vapor wakes.

The spotless room with its airplane lamp and new furniture smell held an air of expectancy. Crossing to the bookshelf, she knocked over a few stuffed animals. She tossed a Berenstain Bear book onto the desk and another across the bed, pulled out the desk chair and, opening the closet door, tugged the two shirts and a worn jean jacket askew. The jacket slid from the hanger to the floor and she left it where it fell. That was better. Now it had a more comfortable, messy, lived-in look. A little-boy look.

A boy could fall in love with this room. Hopefully her son would.

Catherine allowed herself this rare, brief moment to wish that things were different. If only the past could be erased and she could look up into the stands and see Thomas by Drew's side, smiling proudly at her as she received her diploma. In her fantasy, both Thomas and her son were joining her in California, as excited as she was about their fresh start.

But fantasies, by definition, don't deal in reality. Long ago, Catherine learned to suppress such futile longings. Circumstances had extinguished many of her dreams—like those of a happily-ever-after with her husband and son—but some were well within her reach. Soft light filtered through the blinds as the sun crested the neighboring houses. Drew was probably in the air right now.

A slow smile spread across her face. After four long years she would at last be a real mom.

#

At the conclusion of the interminable ceremony, Catherine scanned the crowd. While her classmates tossed their caps high into the air and others huddled for exuberant group hugs, Catherine impatiently threaded her way through the gleeful graduates, searching for the little boy who owned her heart. Tears sprang to her eyes at the sight of her son all dressed up in a navy blazer and matching tie, looking for all the world like a little prince.

Eyes never wavering from Drew, Catherine skipped down the steps outside Cummings Hall, intent on giving him a huge hug. She'd done it. They'd made it. They'd endured the years of separation and would at last be together.

"Darling, congratulations," Sarah Whittemore cooed as she stepped in front of Drew. Their cheeks brushed as her mother kissed the air near Catherine's ear.

Catherine backed out of the mist of Chanel N°5 threatening to choke her. "Thank you, Mother."

"Another Stanford graduate. Well done, Catherine. Let's see that certificate."

With a tight smile, Catherine endured her father's brief embrace and handed him her diploma case. "This is just the sample. I get the real one in the mail." Bending down to greet her son, a genuine smile warmed her lips. "Hi, Drew. Do I get a hug too?"

Solemn gray eyes stared back at her as he opened his arms and moved near. He seemed to have grown inches since she saw him just a few weeks ago at Easter. Resisting the urge to pick Drew up and squeeze him until he squirmed, she hugged him close and kissed his cheek. She savored the feel of his little arms wrapped around her neck. "I missed you so much."

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, suddenly shy. "Me, too."

A smile trembled on her lips and she pulled in a deep breath before taking his small hand in hers. "That was a long time to sit still. You must be hungry; it's nearly dinnertime by your tummy. Ready to eat?"

He smiled and nodded. Catherine waved at approaching friends before removing her black cap and handing it to Drew to hold while she unzipped the graduation gown. They moved into the cool shade of a huge eucalyptus tree. "That's better. Drew, did you say hello to Brad and Suzanne?"

Drew's gaze traveled up Brad's large body, finally coming to rest on his bearded face. At his grandpa's nudge, Drew stepped forward and extended his hand. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Devonshire."

Brad raised a bushy eyebrow at Catherine and removed his dark glasses before hunkering down. Blue eyes twinkled in his sunburned face as he shook the boy's hand. "Mr. Devonshire was my father; I think you could call me Brad."

Drew peeked at his grandpa as if seeking permission; at his disapproving frown, Drew pursed his lips and shook his head. "It's not polite to call adults by their first names."

Suzanne smiled at Drew. "Hi, Drew. You're looking very dapper today."

"Thank you."

"We'd better be going if we don't want to lose our reservation." Her mother turned to Catherine. "You *did* remember to make a reservation—at a nice restaurant?"

"No, Mother," Catherine responded, amused that her mother still tried to treat her like a nine-year-old. "Drew's been so patient during the graduation ceremony that I didn't want to stress him with a long, formal meal. So we're having lunch at home."

"You cooked?" Her mother raised one perfectly sculpted eyebrow.

"Don't worry, I won't be poisoning you," Catherine assured her. "I ordered lunch from Trepario's Deli."

"A deli lunch?"

"Yes, Mother, a deli lunch." *Broaden your horizons. Try something middle class. It'll be good for you.* "You'll love it."

Suzanne frowned. "I hope you weren't counting on me. I've got to scoot on back to work."

"Are you sure?"

"Sorry." She leaned forward and gave Catherine a tight hug, whispering in her ear, "Chin up. Only a few more hours."

"Coward," she muttered under her breath, then louder, "Thanks for coming. Dinner Sunday?"

"Absolutely. See you then." Suzanne gave Brad a quick kiss and said her goodbyes to Catherine's parents before hurrying off.

Catherine brushed stray wisps of hair away from her damp forehead. She was anxious to get out of this heat and on with her new life. "I need to return my cap and gown at the bookstore and then we can go."

"You ladies can cool off in the limo." Her father gestured toward the chauffeur leaning against the illegally parked car. "I'm sure Brad would be happy to return your things." He turned to Brad. "You know where the bookstore is, don't you?"

Catherine stood speechless, embarrassed that her father would order her friend around as if he was some flunky. Though very patient, at forty-six Brad was an astute businessman who had experienced his share of life; he was no raw kid to take the insult. Brad's jaw tensed and a quietness fell over him.

Catherine moved between the men. "I'll go. I have to sign paperwork anyway," she lied. She tugged on Brad's arm, and after a brief moment of resistance he smiled stiffly and lifted the light gown from her arm. "Let's go."

They turned and walked away. "I'm so sorry about my father. He can be—"

"No worries. It's your day—yours and Drew's. But I do think *you* should ride with your family. After all, it's the polite thing to do," he mocked.

"Gee thanks." Thinking about her family, she spun around and, with a broad smile, called out, "Drew? Want to come with us?"

He shook his head. "I'm stayin' with Grandpa."

Catherine forced her face to retain the bright smile and her voice its cheerfulness. "Okay. Be right back."

Little boys liked to stick together with men; they liked to be one of the guys. She shouldn't be hurt. It wasn't a popularity contest, though more and more it felt like one.

Twenty minutes later, Catherine and Brad rounded the Hover tower to see her father sitting on the lip of the fountain with Drew anchored between his knees, deep in conversation. Catherine's stomach knotted at the earnest exchange flowing between her father and son.

*This is not a popularity contest*, she chanted, feeling small and petty at the jealousy seeping through her, poisoning her mind and heart. Then, like a soothing balm, the resentment ebbed as Drew spotted her, grinned, and pulled away from her father to dart to her side.

Catherine snagged Drew's hand and swung it back and forth as they led the men toward the limo. During the thirty-minute drive home, she studied Drew, wondering how to faster melt his reserve. After each separation, it always took Drew a little time to become completely comfortable around her again. She smiled, thrilled that this would be their last awkward re-acquaintance.

Catherine leaned close and spoke in a soft, secretive voice. "I've got your room all ready. It's not as big as your bedroom at your grandparents', but I think you'll like it."

Drew shrugged. "I don't need much room. I only have one suitcase."

"That's all? Grandma must have shipped the rest of your things. Don't worry, I'm sure they'll be here soon. Then you can arrange everything the way you want it."

He frowned. "Why would she do that?"

"Do what?" her mother asked.

Catherine looked over Drew's head to her mother. "I was just telling Drew he could unpack and arrange his room the way he liked. When should the rest of his things arrive?"

Her mother glanced uneasily at her father, deferring to him. "Andrew has everything he needs," he said.

In one suitcase? Not likely. Drew's room was filled with all kinds of toys, and he had a closet full of clothes. Her parents made sure that he was properly outfitted for all occasions. One suitcase wouldn't contain a tenth of his stuff. "What?"

"We didn't ship anything."

Catherine's narrowed gaze shifted from one parent to the other. "Why not?"

Her mother glanced at the chauffeur before leaning forward, speaking softly, "Why don't we save this discussion for someplace more private, dear?"

Catherine kept her voice calm and quiet. "We can discuss this now."

"Catherine, this can wait," her father said.

"No, it cannot wait. What's going on?"

"We'll talk in private." Her father sent a knowing glance at Drew, who though his gaze seemed riveted to his iPod, Catherine knew was listening intently to their every word.

"Fine." Catherine sat stiffly next to Drew, her mind racing. What was going on? Why hadn't they brought all Drew's things?

Brad waited outside the clapboard beach house. When they pulled into the drive, he lifted Drew's suitcase from the limo's trunk and slammed the lid, leaving her parents' luggage behind. A subtle, yet clear message that Drew was welcome to stay and they were not. Her parents followed them up the pebble path, looking starkly out of place in their chic, expensive clothes.

Drew immediately ran to the picture window overlooking the sparkling ocean. "Can we play on the beach?"

It was so good to have him back home. Now that Drew was going to live here permanently, Catherine wondered if he'd lose his enthusiasm for the beach or if he'd want to run down there after school every day.

She reached into the closet and pulled out a big Styrofoam board wrapped with a large red bow. "It just so happens that I have right here the latest and greatest in high-tech boogie boards."

Drew's eyes lit up. "Coo-ol."

"Why don't you and Brad check it out? I'll be down a little later."

She waited in silence for Drew to change and for Brad to escort him down to the beach. She watched through the large picture window as Drew lugged the Boogie Board, towels, and sand paraphernalia down the steep steps, smiling when he dropped in the sand and began building a sandcastle with more enthusiasm than skill.

Smile fading, she crossed her arms and faced her parents. "What's going on?"

"Why don't you sit down and we'll talk?" her mother suggested. One carefully manicured hand smoothed back her short, streaked, brown hair.

The situation reminded Catherine of past times she'd been called to task for some childish indiscretion. She wasn't a child anymore and she hadn't done anything wrong this time. They were in her home now; she refused to be intimidated. Catherine took a deep, calming breath.

Her father loosened his tie and removed his suit coat. He rolled up the sleeves of his monogrammed dress shirt and reseated himself beside his wife. Chameleon-like, Eric Whittemore could fit in with any surroundings or any group of people. With a warm smile, a compliment, and a few leading questions, he put everyone at ease without ever exposing himself. It was a great asset in the business world, one he'd cultivated to perfection.

Catherine sighed, suddenly weary of the posturing and the games. Why must dealing with her parents always be so difficult? "Why haven't you brought all of Drew's things?"

“We’ve given a lot of thought to your plans for the future, and we have some concerns that need to be addressed before Andrew leaves us,” her father said.

Her gaze darted between her parents. “What concerns? I have a degree, a job, and a home. I’m fully capable of caring for Drew.”

“We’re not convinced that it’s best to remove Andrew from the only home he’s ever known.”

Catherine stiffened. His home was with her. He was her son. She tamped down her mounting panic. Despite her resolve, her voice rose in volume. “I want Drew with me.”

Her father’s expression grew stern. “We understand what you want. But moving Andrew away from his friends and all that is familiar to him, from all the advantages he has enjoyed, to live out here with you and your lover, is not something we want for our grandson.”

Catherine’s eyes narrowed. She didn’t care what they wanted. Drew was *her* son. Taking a cleansing breath, she struggled to remain calm and reasonable. “Brad is *not* my lover; he’s just a friend. You met his girlfriend, Suzanne. I pay my half of the bills in this house.”

Her father waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “Your mother and I agree that it’s inappropriate for you and Andrew to live with him. It sets a bad moral example for Andrew.”

Catherine studied her parents carefully, trying to decipher the real problem. The Brad moral thing was just a distraction. There was a bigger issue at stake here—a more important agenda. “All right. I have a female friend whom we could share an apartment with. It won’t take long to make arrangements.”

“Catherine, darling, think of Andrew,” her mother broke in. “I know you miss him dreadfully, but what would you be doing to him by dragging him away from his family, friends, and home, moving him out here where everything is so . . .” With raised eyebrows and a dubious expression pasted on her face, she waved a hand at the small room. “So different? At home he has your father’s and my undivided attention. He attends the best school. He has good friends from quality families. He has every advantage. What can you offer him? You have to work. Who would watch him while you’re working?”

*My love*, she wanted to shout at them. *I can offer him my love, which is far more than either of you can give him.* But she kept that tirade to herself. They were finally getting somewhere. Her parents were worried that their grandson might have to grow up with something less than the best money could buy. She could understand that.

“My hours at the store are flexible, and I work at home a great deal. When I need to go into work, I can bring Drew with me. As for schools, the education system here is excellent.”

They watched her silently, as if waiting for a rebellious two-year-old’s tantrum to wear the child out. Why weren’t they responding? She’d offered a mature, reasonable answer to their concerns. Why didn’t they say something?

Then it hit her; they wanted Drew.

Realization energized her like a double shot of espresso. She bolted to her feet and locked her arms tightly about her waist to quell the sickening quiver in her stomach. “I could go on and on explaining, but I’d be wasting my breath. Wouldn’t I?” Her glance ping-ponged between her parents, accusing. “You never intended for him to live with me, did you?”

“It would be better for you both if you were to move back home,” her father stated calmly, as if explaining that a third chocolate sundae would probably make her sick.

“Move back? Are you crazy?” she blurted. “I have a job. I have a life here.”

“And Andrew has a life in Chicago.”

“But this is my home now.” Her sweeping gesture encompassed the quaint little beach cottage, and her sketches and tools scattered across her work desk. This was the new life she’d worked so hard to achieve for her and Drew. This was home.

“But not Andrew’s. Consider what’s best for your son, Catherine. Think about all the advantages you want him to sacrifice, just to be with you. Don’t be selfish. You can have it all—just come home.”

*Selfish?* Catherine turned away. Chest heaving, she blinked back fearful, angry tears. Her first instinct was to grab her son and run far away, someplace her parents could never find them. But it wouldn’t work. Blowing out a deep breath, she peeked at her father. He lounged on her couch, but she recognized the predator behind his sharp eyes. He’d hunt them down and take Drew from her forever. She knew without a doubt that he would. She needed time to think this through.

Forcing deep, even breaths to calm her racing heart, Catherine moved to the end table and picked up a framed photo of her and Drew on his first birthday. He looked so sweet with his plump baby cheeks and silly grin. She crossed to the window, watching as Brad dragged a laughing Drew on the Boogie Board through the surf.

Drew hardly resembled the chubby, carefree baby in the photo. He’d changed so much in the four years they’d been apart. Summers, snatched vacations, and nightly telephone calls were poor substitutes for daily interactions. She hadn’t been there to comfort Drew through bouts of croup. She missed his first day of kindergarten. The few holiday school productions she’d attended were so adorable that she’d been utterly miserable when she missed the others.

Her resentment boiled. Childhood was a special time, and she’d given up so much of Drew’s for this college education, for her independence—their independence. Drew lost his first tooth last month and she hadn’t been there to play tooth fairy. What for? So her parents could go back on their word and steal her child? No way.

With her thumb, Catherine rotated the heavy diamond engagement ring about her finger. Her father’s plans had forced her to miss hundreds of precious moments with her son, but no more. She didn’t know what to do, but she knew she’d have to be careful. Her father was a powerful man. She’d need to keep calm and be clever. *Think. Think.*

Catherine returned the picture to the end table. *Calm, Catherine, not defensive. Use affirming sentences.* “I understand that you’re looking out for Drew’s best interest; however, I feel that he’s young and he’ll adjust quite easily. He’ll grow to love it here.”

“But why should he have to?” her mother asked. “You never did. We never ripped you away from all that was familiar to send you two thousand miles from the only home you’d ever known, to live a life without all the advantages and comforts you were used to. You didn’t, why should Andrew?”

Catherine squared her shoulders and faced her parents. “Because I’m his mother and he belongs with me. I have a job I like and a life here. I want my son.”

“Quit,” her father said, as if her job were as inconsequential as a telemarketer phone call.

“I’m sure your father knows somebody in the jewelry business who would be happy to hire you in Chicago,” her mother said with a meaningful look at her father. “Eric?”

“Something could probably be arranged,” he admitted.

Something could be arranged; she’d heard that before too. Well, she wasn’t fooled. Not this time. They wanted Drew and they weren’t going to give on this. This was nonnegotiable to them. But they were confident. Too confident. They had to have an ace. But what could they possibly hold over her this time?

She faced them. “Look, it doesn’t have to be this way. I know you love Drew and he loves you. I would never try to keep you apart.” She forced out the lie. “I’m grateful to you for taking such good care of him while I’ve been away, but I’m his mother and my life is here.” She added in a quiet voice. “I want to stay here, in this house on the beach, design jewelry, and raise my son. Here. In California.”

“Then I’m afraid that we’re going to have to insist Andrew remain with us.” Her father frowned. “I’ve been about as patient with you as I can. I didn’t say a word when you blew fifty-five thousand dollars a year on an art degree.

“I sent you to one of the most prestigious schools in the world. You could have been a doctor, a lawyer, or an architect.” He waved his arm wide for emphasis. “With a business degree from Stanford, even a woman could write her own ticket. But you wanted art. You want to design jewelry? Fine. But I will *not* allow you to ruin Andrew’s life too.” He sighed, seemingly weary. “Listen to us for once, Catherine. Trust us to know what’s best for you and Andrew.”

Catherine wanted to snort at his word “trust.” She would *never* trust them again. She was no longer the insecure, powerless child she’d been four years ago. Years of therapy, making a few good friends, working, going to school, and living in California healed her; she’d become a stronger person. Her parents had forced her apart from her son for her own good, to grow up; well, she had.

Catherine took a deep breath and turned, staring at them boldly. “He stays with me.”

Her father spoke in a quiet, deliberate voice. “Don’t be foolish.” He leaned forward and eased to the edge of his seat. “When you left for college, you gave us custody of your son.”

“Temporary custody. Those papers made you his *temporary* guardians. For medical emergencies.” She faltered. Her bravado evaporated and a cold sweat chilled her body. “That’s what you said.”

Here was their ace.

Her father tilted his head and raised an eyebrow in a knowing look. “Legally, your mother and I are Andrew’s guardians. We decide what is best for him. And we agree that your situation here is sufficient evidence of your immaturity.”

He paused to gain her full attention. “I’m sorry, Catherine, but if you want to be with your son, you need to move back home.”