

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

MEG CABOT



the
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CHAPTER ONE

They told me there'd be palm trees.

I didn't believe them, but that's what they told me. They told me I'd be able to see them from the plane.

Oh, I know they have palm trees in southern California. I mean, I'm not a complete moron. I've watched 90210, and everything. But I was moving to northern California. I didn't expect to see palm trees in northern California. Not after my mom told me not to give away all my sweaters.

“Oh, no,” my mom had said. “You'll need them. Your coats, too. It can get cold there. Not as cold as New York, maybe, but pretty chilly.”

Which was why I wore my black leather motorcycle jacket on the plane. I could have shipped it, I guess, with the rest of my stuff, but it kind of made me

feel better to wear it.

So there I was, sitting on the plane in a black leather motorcycle jacket, seeing these palm trees through the window as we landed. And I thought, Great. Black leather and palm trees. Already I'm fitting in, just like I knew I would. . . .

. . . Not.

My mom isn't particularly fond of my leather jacket, but I swear I didn't wear it to make her mad, or anything. I'm not resentful of the fact that she decided to marry a guy who lives three thousand miles away, forcing me to leave school in the middle of my sophomore year; abandon the best—and pretty much only—friend I've had since kindergarten; leave the city I've been living in for all of my sixteen years.

Oh, no. I'm not a bit resentful.

The thing is, I really do like Andy, my new stepdad. He's good for my mom. He makes her happy. And he's very nice to me.

It's just this moving-to-California thing that bugs me.

Oh, and did I mention Andy's three other kids?

They were all there to greet me when I got off the plane. My mom, Andy, and Andy's three sons. Sleepy, Dopey, and Doc, I call them. They're my new stepbrothers.

“Susie!” Even if I hadn't heard my mom squealing my name as I walked through the gate, I wouldn't have missed them—my new family. Andy was making his two youngest boys hold up this big sign that said welcome home, susannah! Everybody getting off my flight was walking by it, going, “Aw, look how cute,” to their travel companions, and smiling at me in this sickening way.

Oh, yeah. I'm fitting in. I'm fitting in just great.

“Okay,” I said, walking up to my new family fast. “You can put the sign down now.”

But my mom was too busy hugging me to pay any attention. “Oh, Susie!” she kept saying. I hate when anybody but my mom calls me Susie, so I shot the boys this mean look over her shoulder, just in case they were getting any big ideas. They just kept grinning at me from over the stupid sign, Dopey because he's too dumb to know any better, Doc because—well, I guess because he might have been glad to see me. Doc's weird that way. Sleepy, the oldest, just stood there, looking . . . well, sleepy.

“How was your flight, kiddo?” Andy took my bag off my shoulder, and put it on his own. He seemed surprised by how heavy it was, and went, “Whoa, what've you got in here, anyway? You know it's a felony to smuggle New York City fire hydrants

across state lines.”

I smiled at him. Andy's this really big goof, but he's a nice big goof. He wouldn't have the slightest idea what constitutes a felony in the state of New York since he's only been there, like, five times. Which was, incidentally, exactly how many visits it took him to convince my mother to marry him.

“It's not a fire hydrant,” I said. “It's a parking meter. And I have four more bags.”

“Four?” Andy pretended he was shocked. “What do you think you're doing, moving in or something?”

Did I mention that Andy thinks he's a comedian? He's not. He's a carpenter.

“Suze,” Doc said, all enthusiastically. “Suze, did you notice that as you were landing, the tail of the plane kicked up a little? That was from an updraft. It's caused when a mass moving at a considerable

rate of speed encounters a counter-blowing wind velocity of equal or greater strength.”

Doc, Andy’s youngest kid, is twelve, but he’s going on about forty. He spent almost the entire wedding reception telling me about alien cattle mutilation, and how Area 51 is just this big cover-up by the American government, which doesn’t want us to know that We Are Not Alone.

“Oh, Susie,” my mom kept saying. “I’m so glad you’re here. You’re just going to love the house. It just didn’t feel like home at first, but now that you’re here . . . Oh, and wait until you’ve seen your room. Andy’s fixed it up so nice. . . .”

Andy and my mom spent weeks before they got married looking for a house big enough for all four kids to have their own rooms. They finally settled on this huge house in the hills of Carmel, which they’d only been able to afford because they’d bought it in this completely wretched state, and this

construction company Andy does a lot of work for fixed it up at this big discount rate. My mom has been going on for days about my room, which she keeps swearing is the nicest one in the house.

“The view!” she kept saying. “An ocean view from the big bay window in your room! Oh, Suze, you’re going to love it.”

I was sure I was going to love it. About as much as I was going to love giving up bagels for alfalfa sprouts, and the subway for surfing, and all that sort of stuff.

For some reason, Dopey opened his mouth, and went, “Do you like the sign?” in that stupid voice of his. I can’t believe he’s my age. He’s on the school wrestling team, though, so what can you expect? All he ever thinks about, from what I could tell when I had to sit next to him at the wedding reception—I had to sit between him and Doc, so you can imagine how the conversation just

flowed—is choke holds and body-building protein shakes.

“Yeah, great sign,” I said, yanking it out of his meaty hands, and holding it so that the lettering faced the floor. “Can we go? I wanna pick up my bags before someone else does.”

“Oh, right,” my mom said. She gave me one last hug. “Oh, I’m just so glad to see you! You look so great. . . .” And then, even though you could tell she didn’t want to say it, she went ahead and said it anyway, in a low voice, so no one else could hear: “Thought I’ve talked to you before about that jacket, Suze. And I thought you were throwing those jeans away.”

I was wearing my oldest jeans, the ones with the holes in the knees. They went really well with my black silk T and my zip-up ankle boots. The jeans and boots, coupled with my black leather motorcycle jacket and my Army-Navy surplus

shoulder bag, made me look like a teen runaway in a made-for-TV movie.

But hey, when you're flying for eight hours across the country, you want to be comfortable.

I said that, and my mom just rolled her eyes and dropped it. That's the good thing about my mom. She doesn't harp, like other moms do. Sleepy, Dopey, and Doc have no idea how lucky they are.

"All right," she said, instead. "Let's get your bags." Then, raising her voice, she called, "Jake, come on. We're going to get Suze's bags."

She had to call Sleepy by name, since he looked as if he had fallen asleep standing up. I asked my mother once if Jake, who is a senior in high school, has narcolepsy, or possibly a drug habit, and she was like, "No, why would you say that?" Like the guy doesn't just stand there blinking all the time, never saying a word to anyone.

Wait, that's not true. He did say something to me, once. Once he said, "Hey, are you in a gang?" He asked me that at the wedding, when he caught me standing outside with my leather jacket on over my maid of honor's dress, sneaking a cigarette.

Give me a break, all right? It was my first and only cigarette ever. I was under a lot of stress at the time. I was worried my mom was going to marry this guy and move to California and forget all about me. I swear I haven't smoked a single cigarette since.

And don't get me wrong about Jake. At six foot one, with the same shaggy blond hair and twinkly blue eyes as his dad, he's what my best friend Gina would call a hottie. But he's not the shiniest rock in the rock garden, if you know what I mean.

Doc was still going on about wind velocity. He was explaining the speed with which it is necessary

to travel in order to break through the earth's gravitational force. This speed is called escape velocity. I decided Doc might be useful to have around, homework-wise, even if I am three grades ahead of him.

While Doc talked, I looked around. This was my first trip ever to California, and let me tell you, even though we were still only in the airport—and it was the San Jose International Airport—you could tell we weren't in New York anymore. I mean, first off, everything was clean. No dirt, no litter, no graffiti anywhere. The concourse was all done up in pastels, too, and you know how light colors show the dirt. Why do you think New Yorkers wear black all the time? Not to be cool. Nuh-uh. So we don't have to haul all our clothes down to the Laundromat every single time we wear them.

But that didn't appear to be a problem in sunny CA. From what I could tell, pastels were in. This one woman walked by us, and she had on pink leggings

and a white Spandex sports bra. And that's all. If this is an example of what's de rigueur in California, I could tell I was in for some major culture shock.

And you know what else was strange? Nobody was fighting. There were passengers lined up here and there, but they weren't raising their voices at the people behind the ticket counter. In New York, if you're a customer, you fight with the people behind the counter, no matter where you are—airport, Bloomingdale's, hot dog stand. Wherever.

Not here. Everybody here was just way calm.

And I guess I could see why. I mean, it didn't look to me like there was anything to get upset about. Outside, the sun was beating down on those palm trees I'd seen from the sky. There were seagulls—not pigeons, but actual big white- and-gray seagulls—scratching around in the parking lot. And when we went to get my bags, nobody even checked to see if the stickers on them matched my

ticket stubs. No, everybody was just like, “Buh-bye! Have a nice day!”

Unreal.

Gina—she was my best friend back in Brooklyn; well, okay, my only friend, really—told me before I left that I’d find there were advantages to having three stepbrothers. She should know since she’s got four—not steps, but real brothers. Anyway, I didn’t believe her any more than I’d believed people about the palm trees. But when Sleepy picked up two of my bags, and Dopey grabbed the other two, leaving me with exactly nothing to carry, since Andy had my shoulder bag, I finally realized what she was talking about: Brothers can be useful. They can carry really heavy stuff, and not even look like it’s bothering them.

Hey, I packed those bags. I knew what was in them. They were not light. But Sleepy and Dopey were like, No problem here. Let’s get moving.

My bags secure, we headed out into the parking lot. As the automatic doors opened, everyone—including my mom—reached into a pocket and pulled out a pair of sunglasses. Apparently, they all knew something I didn't know. And as I stepped outside, I realized what it was.

It's sunny here.

Not just sunny, either, but bright—so bright and colorful, it hurts your eyes. I had sunglasses, too, somewhere, but since it had been about forty degrees and sleeting when I left New York, I hadn't thought to put them anywhere easily accessible.

When my mother had first told me we'd be moving—she and Andy decided it was easier for her, with one kid and a job as a TV news reporter, to relocate than it would be for Andy and his three kids to do it, especially considering that Andy owns his own business—she'd explained to me that I'd love northern California. “It's where they filmed all

those Goldie Hawn, Chevy Chase movies!” she told me.

I like Goldie Hawn, and I like Chevy Chase, but I never knew they made a movie together.

“It’s where all those Steinbeck stories you had to read in school took place,” she said. “You know, *The Red Pony*.”

Well, I wasn’t very impressed. I mean, all I remembered from *The Red Pony* was that there weren’t any girls in it, although there were a lot of hills. And as I stood in the parking lot, squinting at the hills surrounding the San Jose International Airport, I saw that there were a lot of hills, and the grass on them was dry and brown.

But dotting the hills were these trees, trees not like any I’d ever seen before. They were squashed on top as if a giant fist had come down from the sky and given them a thump. I found out later these

were called cypress trees.

And all around the parking lot, where there was evidently a watering system, there were these fat bushes with these giant red flowers on them, mostly squatting down at the bottom of these impossibly tall, surprisingly thick palm trees. The flowers, I found out, when I looked them up later, were hibiscus. And the strange-looking bugs that I saw hovering around them, making a brrr-ing noise, weren't bugs at all. They were humming- birds.

“Oh,” my mom said when I pointed this out.

“They're everywhere. We have feeders for them up at the house. You can hang one from your window if you want.”

Hummingbirds that come right up to your window? The only birds that ever came up to my window back in Brooklyn were pigeons. My mom never exactly encouraged me to feed them.

My moment of joy about the hummingbirds was shattered when Dopey announced suddenly, “I’ll drive,” and started for the driver’s seat of this huge utility vehicle we were approaching.

“I will drive,” Andy said firmly.

“Aw, Dad,” Dopey said. “How’m I ever going to pass the test if you never let me practice?”

“You can practice in the Rambler,” Andy said. He opened up the back of his Land Rover, and started putting my bags into it. “That goes for you, too, Suze.”

This startled me. “What goes for me, too?”

“You can practice driving in the Rambler.” He wagged a finger jokingly in my direction. “But only if there’s someone with a valid license in the passenger seat.”

I just blinked up at him. “I can’t drive,” I said.

Dopey let out this big horse laugh. “You can’t drive?” He elbowed Sleepy, who was leaning against the side of the truck, his face turned toward the sun. “Hey, Jake, she can’t drive!”

“It isn’t at all uncommon, Brad,” Doc said, “for a native New Yorker to lack a driver’s license. Don’t you know that New York City boasts the largest mass transit system in North America, serving a population of thirteen point two million people in a four-thousand-square-mile radius fanning out from New York City through Long Island all the way to Connecticut? And that one point seven billion riders take advantage of their extensive fleet of subways, buses, and railroads every year?”

Everybody looked at Doc. Then my mother said carefully, “I never kept a car in the city.”

Andy closed the doors to the back of the Land

Rover. “Don’t worry, Suze,” he said. “We’ll get you enrolled in a driver’s ed course right away. You can take it and catch up to Brad in no time.”

I looked at Dopey. Never in a million years had I ever expected that someone would suggest that I needed to catch up to Brad in any capacity whatsoever.

But I could see I was in for a lot of surprises. The palm trees had only been the beginning. As we drove to the house, which was a good hour away from the airport—and not a quick hour, either, with me wedged in between Sleepy and Dopey, with Doc in the “way back,” perched on top of my luggage, still expounding on the glories of the New York City transportation authority—I began to realize that things were going to be different—very, very different—than I had anticipated, and certainly different from what I was used to.

And not just because I was living on the opposite

side of the continent. Not just because everywhere I looked, I saw things I'd never have seen back in New York: roadside stands advertising artichokes or pomegranates, twelve for a dollar; field after field of grapevines, twisting and twisting around wooden arbors; groves of lemon and avocado trees; lush green vegetation I couldn't even identify. And arcing above it all, a sky so blue, so vast, that the hot-air balloon I saw floating through it looked impossibly small—like a button at the bottom of an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

There was the ocean, too, bursting so suddenly into view that at first I didn't recognize it, thinking it was just another field. But then I noticed that this field was sparkling, reflecting the sun, flashing little Morse code SOSs at me. The light was so bright, it was hard to look at without sunglasses. But there it was, the Pacific Ocean . . . huge, stretching almost as wide as the sky, a living, writhing thing, pushing up against a comma-shaped strip of white beach.

Being from New York, my glimpses of ocean—at least the kind with a beach—had been few and far between. I couldn't help gasping when I saw it. And when I gasped, everybody stopped talking—except for Sleepy, who was, of course, asleep.

“What?” my mother asked, alarmed. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” I said. I was embarrassed. Obviously, these people were used to seeing the ocean. They were going to think I was some kind of freak that I was getting so excited about it. “Just the ocean.”

“Oh,” said my mother. “Yes, isn't it beautiful?”

Dopey went, “Good curl on those waves. Might have to hit the beach before dinner.”

“Not,” his father said, “until you've finished that term paper.”

“Aw, Dad!”

This prompted my mother to launch into a long and detailed account of the school to which I was being sent, the same one Sleepy, Dopey, and Doc attended. The school, named after Junipero Serra, some Spanish guy who came over in the 1700s and forced the Native Americans already living here to practice Christianity instead of their own religion, was actually a huge adobe mission that attracted twenty thousand tourists a year, or something.

I wasn't really listening to my mother. My interest in school has always been pretty much zero. The whole reason I hadn't been able to move out here before Christmas was that there had been no space for me at the Mission School, and I'd been forced to wait until second semester started before something opened up. I hadn't minded—I'd gotten to live with my grandmother for a few months, which hadn't been at all bad. My grandmother, besides being a really excellent criminal attorney, is an awesome cook.

I was still sort of distracted by the ocean, which had disappeared behind some hills. I was craning my neck, hoping for another glimpse, when it hit me. I went, “Wait a minute. When was this school built?”

“The eighteenth century,” Doc replied. “The mission system, implemented by the Franciscans under the guidelines of the Catholic Church and the Spanish government, was set up not only to Christianize the Native Americans, but also to train them to become successful tradespeople in the new Spanish society. Originally, the mission served as a—”

“Eighteenth century?” I said, leaning forward. I was wedged between Sleepy—whose head had slumped forward until it was resting on my shoulder, enabling me to tell, just by sniffing, that he used Finesse shampoo—and Dopey. Let me tell you, Gina hadn’t mentioned a thing about how much room boys take up, which, when they’re both nearly

six feet tall, and in the two-hundred-pound vicinity, is a lot. “Eighteenth century?”

My mother must have heard the panic in my voice, since she turned in her seat and said

soothingly, “Now, Suze, we discussed this. I told you there’s a year’s waiting list at Robert Louis Stevenson, and you told me you didn’t want to go to an all-girls school, so Sacred Heart is out, and Andy’s heard some awful stories about drug abuse and gang violence in the public schools around here—”

“Eighteenth century?” I could feel my heart starting to pound hard, as if I’d been running. “That’s like three hundred years old!”

“I don’t get it.” We were driving through the town of Carmel-by-the-Sea now, all picturesque cottages—some with thatched roofs, even—and beautiful little restaurants and art galleries. Andy

had to drive carefully because the traffic was thick with people in cars with out-of-state licenses, and there weren't any stoplights, something that, for some reason, the natives took pride in. "What's so bad," he wanted to know, "about the eighteenth century?"

My mother said, without any inflection in her voice whatsoever—what I call her bad-news voice, the one she uses on TV to report plane crashes and child murders, "Suze has never been very wild about old buildings."

"Oh," Andy said. "Then I guess she isn't going to like the house."

I gripped the back of his headrest. "Why?" I demanded in a tight voice. "Why am I not going to like the house?"

I saw why, of course, as soon as we pulled in. The house was huge, and impossibly pretty, with

Victorian-style turrets and a widow's walk—the whole works. My mom had had it painted blue and white and cream, and it was surrounded by big, shady pine trees, and sprawling, flowering shrubs. Three stories high, constructed entirely from wood, and not the horrible glass-and-steel or terra-cotta stuff the houses around it were made of, it was the loveliest, most tasteful house in the neighborhood.

And I didn't want to set foot in it.

I knew when I'd agreed to move with my mom to California that I'd be in for lots of changes. The roadside artichokes, the lemon groves, the ocean . . . they were nothing, really. The fact was, the biggest change was going to be sharing my mom with other people. In the decade since my father had died, it had been just the two of us. And I have to admit, I sort of liked it like that. In fact, if it hadn't been for the fact that Andy made my mom so obviously happy, I would have put my foot down and said no way to the whole moving thing.

But you couldn't even look at them together—Andy and my mom—and not be able to tell right away that they were completely gaga over each other. And what kind of daughter would I have been if I said no way to that? So I accepted Andy, and I accepted his three sons, and I accepted the fact that I was going to have to leave behind everything I had ever known and loved—my best friend, my grandmother, bagels, SoHo—in order to give my mom the happiness she deserved.

But I hadn't really considered the fact that, for the first time in my life, I was going to have to live in a house.

And not just any house, either, but, as Andy proudly told me as he was taking my bags from the car, and thrusting them into his sons' arms, a nineteenth-century converted boardinghouse. Built in 1849, it had apparently had quite a little reputation in its day. Gunfights over card games

and women had taken place in the front parlor. You could still see the bullet holes. In fact, Andy had framed one rather than filling it in. It was a bit morbid, he admitted, but interesting, too. He bet we were living in the only house in the Carmel hills that had a nineteenth-century bullet hole in it.

“Huh,” I said. I bet that was true.

My mother kept glancing in my direction as we climbed the many steps to the front porch. I knew she was nervous about what I was going to think. I was kind of irked at her, really, for not warning me. I guess I could understand why she hadn't, though. If she'd told me she had bought a house that was more than a hundred years old, I wouldn't have moved out here. I would have stayed with Grandma until it came time for me to leave for college.

Because my mom's right: I don't like old buildings.

Although I saw, as old buildings went, this one was

really something. When you stood on the front porch, you could see all of Carmel beneath you, the village, the valley, the beach, the sea. It was a breathtaking view, one that people would—and had, judging from the fanciness of the houses around ours—pay millions for; one that I shouldn't have resented, not in the least.

And yet, when my mom said, “Come on, Suze. Come see your room,” I couldn't help shuddering a little.

The house was as beautiful inside as it was outside. All shiny maple and cheerful blues and yellows. I recognized my mom's things, and that made me feel a little better. There was the pie-safe she and I had bought once on a weekend trip to Vermont. There were my baby pictures, hanging on the wall in the living room, right alongside Sleepy's, Dopey's, and Doc's. There were my mother's books in the built-in shelves in the den. Her plants, which she'd paid so exorbitant a price to have shipped because

she'd been unable to bear parting with them, were everywhere, on wooden stands, hanging in front of the stained-glass windows, perched on top of the newel post at the end of the stairs.

But there were also things I didn't recognize: a sleek white computer sitting on the desk where my mother used to write out checks to pay the bills; a wide-screen TV incongruously tucked into a fireplace in the den, to which shift-sticks were wired for some sort of video game; surfboards leaning up against the wall by the door to the garage; a huge, slobbery dog, who seemed to think I was harboring food in my pockets since he kept thrusting his big wet nose into them.

These all seemed like obtrusively masculine things, foreign things in the life my mother and I had carved out for ourselves. They were going to take some getting used to.

My room was upstairs, just above the roof of

the front porch. My mother had been going on nervously for almost the entire trip from the airport about the window seat Andy had installed in the bay window. The bay windows looked out over the same view as the porch, that sweeping vista that incorporated all of the peninsula. It was sweet of them, really, to give me such a nice room, the room with the best view in the whole house.

And when I saw how much trouble they'd gone to, to make the room feel like home to me—or at least to some excessively feminine, phantom girl . . . not me. I had never been the glass-topped dressing table, princess phone type—how Andy had put cream-colored wallpaper, dotted with blue forget-me-nots, all along the top of the intricate white wainscoting that lined the walls; how the same wallpaper covered the walls of my own personal adjoining bathroom; how they'd bought me a new bed—a four-poster with a lace canopy, the kind my mother had always wanted for me and had evidently been unable to resist—I felt bad about how I'd

acted in the car. I really did. I thought to myself as I walked around the room, Okay, this isn't so bad. So far you're in the clear. Maybe it'll be all right, maybe no one was ever unhappy in this house, maybe all those people who got shot deserved it. . . .

Until I turned toward the bay window, and saw that someone was already sitting on the window seat Andy had so lovingly made for me.

Someone who was not related to me, or to Sleepy, Dopey, or Doc.

I turned toward Andy, to see if he'd noticed the intruder. He hadn't, even though he was right there, right in front of his face.

My mother hadn't seen him, either. All she saw was my face. I guess my expression must not have been the most pleasant, since her own fell, and she said with a sad sigh, "Oh, Suze. Not again."