

One



Cate McDermott

SHE'S NOT HERE.

It's the most important day of my life.

I stand at the front of the stage wearing my blue-and-gold high school graduation regalia while the orchestra behind me plays an interlude. I moisten my clarinet's reed and dare another glance beyond the blinding stage lights. Maybe Mom slipped into the darkened auditorium during my solo performance, removed the "Reserved for Susan McDermott" sign from center seat, row six, and settled in to listen.

Her seat is empty.

Everyone else's family is here, standing room only, all the way back to the double doors where grandparents and parents, brothers and sisters, distant relatives, and friends of friends of friends hold bouquets and balloons. Cheer. Support. Love.

Why? Because graduating as valedictorian and featured soloist at Wharton College Preparatory Academy, an elite all-girls school in the heart of New York City, is a big deal. The highest honors. The culmination of everything I've worked for since grade school. But apparently, none of it matters to Mom.

She knew I'd be giving a speech—she'd insisted on proofreading it.

She knew I'd be performing the third movement of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto in A Major*—she'd heard me practice for months.

She knew a Very Important Person—Ms. Elise Thomas from the Kingston Music Conservatory—would attend.

As an incoming freshman, I'm one of five finalists contending for a year-long study-abroad performance scholarship in Europe. Ms. Thomas will critique my arpeggios and trills, finalize her recommendations, and change the direction of someone's life—hopefully mine—forever.

But far more important to me than any speech, performance, ceremony, or scholarship is the person who isn't here.

She promised.

Beside me, the conductor waves her baton. Behind me, the violins and violas play lightly while the cellos and basses answer with warm, vibrant tones. I lift the clarinet to my lips and press my fingertips against the cool metal keys. I take a quick breath and glance across the wooden stage.

Mom could be watching from the wings.

No.

Only the stage manager, with his headset and flashlight, stands behind the thick, burgundy curtains.

I'd begged Mom not to take a last-minute business trip to Japan. This is the most important week of my life. But she went anyway because Susan McDermott's career always has, and always will, come first.

I meet the inquisitive, brown-eyed gaze of my best friend, Lara Alvarez, seated in the flute section. Her arched eyebrows ask the question I don't want to answer.

Is she here?

I shake my head.

As the final measures approach, my heart sinks, and I can only conclude what I've always suspected but have been too afraid to put into words.

Mom loves her career more than she loves me.

A surge of anguish I've suppressed my entire childhood pours into

every fingering, every note—a cry of longing and the ache of knowing I will never be enough.

Then it's over.

The audience rises in thunderous applause and shouts of praise. "Fabulous, Cate! Bravo!"

Mozart would be pleased. Mom missed the whole thing.

I bow and smile, fighting the sting of tears behind my eyes.

Back in the orchestra room, Lara gives me a reassuring hug. "You okay?"

If there is ever a person who can pull me out of a funk—and there have been many funks—it's Lara. I can't help but smile a bit. "Sure. I'm okay."

We've been inseparable since we met as toddlers, back when our families lived across from each other on the fifth floor of our New York City high-rise.

She disassembles her flute and snaps the case shut. "Ready?" she asks, waiting for me to head out to the courtyard where the families are gathered.

I wave her ahead. I have no family waiting for me. "I'll catch up."

She hesitates, giving me a concerned gaze, then cuts through the crowded room.

The gravity of Mom's absence returns, and my chest tightens. I slip into a seat in the far corner, away from the bursts of laughter and excited chatter filling the room. If I talk to anyone, I might cry. McDermotts don't cry.

Never let them know how you feel.

Susan McDermott, a former federal prosecutor, was always sharing with me what she called her "courtroom wisdom," but I couldn't help wondering if she was talking about herself. Had someone broken her heart? I may never know—she doesn't talk about her past. Or cry, either.

I pull my clarinet apart, swabbing each piece before tucking it in its case. I run my fingertips over the velvety black fabric. If only I were small enough to crawl inside and lie down, taking refuge in the empty spaces between the mouthpiece and the bell. Then I'd shut the lid so no one could find me. And close my eyes in the darkness. And fall into a deep sleep. Then maybe, just maybe, the aching

embarrassment, disappointment, and heaviness pressing on my chest will cease.

“Good job, Cate,” a violinist shouts from across the room, bringing me back to reality.

I wave as she heads out the door. “Thanks.”

“Have a happy summer,” she says.

“You too.” But I’m not sure how I’ll ever recover from the worst day of my life.

As hard as I fight it, a gloomy shadow of melancholy overtakes me, heavy and slow, like thick, black paint dripping down a wall. The tassel on my cap sticks to my cheek. My gown clings to my skin. I have to get out of here.

“C-C-C-Cate!” Lara has returned to the orchestra room. She places her hands around her mouth and shouts. “Hurry up, buttercup. The Very Important Person is waiting for you.”

Ms. Thomas.

I shove the clarinet case under my arm and squeeze through the slow-moving crowd.

“Excuse us, puh-lease.” Lara pulls me through the bouquets, balloons, and regalia. “Very Important Clarinetist coming through. *Excusez-nous, s’il vous plaît.*”

She leads me to the courtyard, where the early-June evening air feels wonderfully cool against my face. I inhale deeply and compose myself. A woman dressed in a navy-blue business suit chats with Lara’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Alvarez, and their twin eight-year-old boys.

“Here she is,” Lara announces. “Told you I’d find her.”

The woman extends a firm handshake to me. A clean, understated scent—refined and professional—follows her movement.

“Hello, Miss McDermott. I’m Elise Thomas, Director of the Kingston Music Conservatory. Fabulous performance, young lady. Brilliantly played.”

A rush of pride warms my cheeks. “Thank you. I’ve been a clarinetist since grade school. I hope to join the New York Philharmonic someday.”

She nods with approval. “That’s what I like to hear. How is your community service progressing?”

“I earned fifty hours this year tutoring the younger students in

algebra. And tomorrow morning”—I link my arm with Lara’s—“we’re heading to the St. Regis Summer Music Program in Connecticut to run woodwind sectionals. By July, I’ll have more than the hundred hours I need to qualify for the scholarship.”

“Excellent.” Ms. Thomas extends her hand once more. “The committee will contact your camp director to check on your progress. We’ll make a decision soon.”

Lara whispers in my ear. “I’ll bet they choose you.”

I’m the luckiest person in the world to have Lara as my best friend. She’s always been my cheerleader. Still, anxiety prickles beneath her confidence in me. Music is all I’ve ever known. If I don’t succeed as a musician ... who am I?

The twins insist we gather for a family picture, and the gloominess I shook earlier settles over me again.

A family photograph.

Only it isn’t my family, even though they try to be one to me.

Lara searches for a classmate to take the picture. Mrs. Alvarez wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into the group. “Why don’t you join us for a celebratory dinner?”

“Oh, no—I shouldn’t. I don’t want to impose.”

She smiles warmly. “We’re not going to allow you to eat dinner alone, especially tonight, of all nights.”

Lara rejoins our group with a student to take our picture. “My mom made a huge pan of enchiladas, Cate. Extra cheese. Just the way you like them.”

“We’re having a fiesta,” says one of the twins.

“Okay, everyone,” the classmate says, holding up Lara’s phone. “Say cheese.”

“Cheese enchiladas,” the twins shout.

Lara turns toward me with an expectant smile. “Well? Are you coming?”

Returning to an empty apartment, ordering takeout, and spending Friday evening alone watching inane sitcoms makes my stomach twist. I can’t do it again. Not tonight. “Sure, but only if none of you mind.”

“Of course not.” Mr. Alvarez leans toward his wife. “Susan should’ve been—”

Mrs. Alvarez shushes him, but I hear him anyway.

“Okay, it’s settled.” Lara slips her arm through mine, her warmth easing the tightness in my chest. “You’re coming with us.”

She steers me toward the crowded parking lot. I scan one last time for Mom’s company car. It isn’t there.

Unlike Susan McDermott, I can’t suppress my emotions forever. Tears slip free.

“Hey,” Lara whispers, her eyebrows furrowing with concern. “Are you okay?”

I nod, but she knows I’m lying.

She presses a tissue into my hand. “Come on. Let’s go.”

We climb into the Alvarez family’s minivan, and as the door shuts, so does my heart.

It will take more than an apology from Mom to pry it open again.