

Two

FIESTA DE GRADUACIÓN!

The Alvarez family celebrates everything, and Lara's graduation is no exception. Blue and gold streamers flutter above the dining room table, and the sharp scent of onions, cilantro, and jalapeños hangs warm in the air—fresh salsa, the good homemade kind.

Mrs. Alvarez places a pan of bubbling cheese enchiladas on the table, then cuts and serves them while Mr. Alvarez scoops rice and beans.

"Mmm. Smells amazing." I breathe in the spicy steam as I hand the plates to the twins, grateful I accepted their invitation to join them for dinner. My cell phone buzzes, and the name of Mom's assistant flashes on the screen. I slip the phone into my pocket.

Mr. Alvarez notices. "Is that your mother? Would she like to join us?"

"No. She's probably still flying somewhere over the Midwest." And eating, no doubt, her usual dinner of tofu and steamed broccoli.

Mrs. Alvarez passes a bowl of blue corn tortilla chips. "Such an exciting day. So many reasons to be thankful."

What am I thankful for?

Things? Like our rooftop apartment Mom bought two years ago,

with the Jacuzzi and lap pool? I have more luxuries than most of my classmates.

Opportunities? I just delivered the valedictorian speech and performed a solo at my graduation ceremony. I hope to be awarded a study-abroad scholarship.

Friends? I'm sharing a meal with my very best friend, Lara. Loving people surround me. Mr. Alvarez, who's always willing to help me with my physics homework. The twins, who invite me to play their video games. Mrs. Alvarez, who's cared for me since Mom started law school at NYU, through her years as a federal prosecutor and her rise to partner at the international law firm Parker, Sherwood, Kline—and now, McDermott.

Family—?

I glance at the empty seat beside me, reserved for Mom. She won't show up. She never does. I swallow my sadness with a bite of enchilada, but this is not the time to mope, not when the Alvarez family has welcomed me.

"Thank you for inviting me to dinner," I say. "And I want to say how proud I am of Lara, who was honored today as Outstanding French Student. She's brilliant and kind. I couldn't ask for a better friend."

The twins clap and hoot as I squeeze Lara's hand.

"Merci beaucoup," she says, grinning.

The enchiladas are steamy-hot and spicy, the tortilla chips crisp and salty, the colas icy and refreshing. Mr. Alvarez offers to refill my plate, but I can't eat another bite.

"I have an announcement," Mrs. Alvarez says, clapping her hands. "I made a surprise for you girls to bring to camp tomorrow."

Mrs. Alvarez is always baking something for someone. She hurries into the kitchen and returns with a rectangular white box. She pulls off the cover and removes a handful of fluffy pink tissue paper, revealing dozens of sugar cookies shaped like woodwind and brass instruments, all with finely detailed keys and valves. "They're a special treat for the kids in your sectionals."

"Wow, Mom." Lara jumps up from the table and wraps her arms around her mother's shoulders. "They're amazing. Thank you so much."

Mr. Alvarez studies a trumpet. "These are remarkably accurate, Lily."

I examine a piccolo's black frosting and silver piping and nibble the corner. The cookie is melt-in-your-mouth tender, the frosting creamy and sweet.

The twins protest. "Hey! Why does Cate get one?"

"Yours are on the countertop," she says. The boys race into the kitchen and pretend to play the cookies before popping them into their mouths.

Lara's parents refuse our offer to help with cleanup, so we excuse ourselves and head to her bedroom to pack for camp. She closes the door.

Everything in Lara's room is pink. Fuzzy pillows rest on her bed, and twinkle lights glow overhead. Even the air in her room smells pink from the sugary-sweet aroma of her favorite candle—Strawberry Lemonade. She lays her suitcase on the carpet—also pink—unzips it, and flips open the cover.

I plop onto the carpet. "I love your family."

"Yeah?" She pulls a packing checklist off her desk. "You can have Tornados One and Two."

I wouldn't mind a sibling or two, no matter how much of a mess they made. And a father. I've wished for a dad for as long as I can remember. Shaving cream and razors cluttering the bathroom sink. Running shoes kicked off beneath the coffee table. Pressed suit pants, fresh from the cleaner, hung in the hall closet beside Mom's dresses.

Lara's camp clothes sit in tidy piles on her bed. Mrs. Alvarez must have spent the entire day washing and ironing. The box filled with instrument cookies rests on her desk, secured with a large pink-and-white striped bow.

"Your mom really takes care of you, doesn't she?"

"Sure." Lara pulls a pink floral bathrobe from her closet. "But your mom takes care of you too."

I thumb through a crisp stack of shirts. "Not like this."

"She paid music camp tuition for both of us all these years, remember? And how about your fancy clarinets?"

Sure. Mom provides me with a privileged life. The kind people dream about. But it's not my dream, and I'm not really sure it's her

dream either. I just wish she were home to enjoy it with me instead of always jetting out of the country. I wish we could swim laps like we used to—back at the YMCA—before promotions came fast and furious, like she was racing up a ladder to conquer the moon.

Now we have a pool we never use and a grill as cold and clean as the day she bought it. What I'd give to sit with her, barefoot beside the fire pit, eating Chicken Alfredo and talking for hours beneath a diamond-studded sky.

"—and the pink sandals, okay?"

"Huh?"

Lara tosses a T-shirt at my head. "You're not listening again."

"Something about sandals?"

"Yes. Can we run upstairs and raid your closet?" She digs through her drawers for socks. "I want to borrow your pink polka-dotted summer dress for the Firefly Dance."

"The one with the spaghetti straps?"

"That's the one."

"Ah. Hoping a certain trumpet player will be there again this year?"

She nods, trying and failing to hide her grin. "He's OHPA."

One Hundred Percent Adorable.

Lara coined the acronym. She's been boy-crazy since we were ten.

"And your pink sandals," she continues, "since you never wear them."

"Sure, sure." I roll her beach towel like a taquito and wedge it into a deep pocket in the suitcase. "I have way too many pink sandals."

"Must be nice."

"It's not like my mother and I spent the afternoon shopping. She just passed a store in London one day and had her assistant buy and ship them to me."

"Well, it's the thought that counts."

"Hmm."

Lara stops mid-fold. "Maybe you should try to understand your mother."

"Understand *her*?" I can't hide my surprise. "She should try to understand *me*."

Lara stares blankly.

"I have a closetful of pink sandals, right?"

“So?”

“What’s my favorite color?”

“Blue.”

“Exactly.”

I toss a bag of toiletries into the suitcase. “My mother has missed a lot of events in my life, but this time ... well ... this one is unforgivable.” I hate the pettiness in my voice, but aren’t I allowed to be angry?

Lara shakes her head. “Nothing is unforgivable.”

She doesn’t get it. Her family life is perfect. She’ll never understand what it’s like to live in my shoes. Except maybe the pink ones.

We close her suitcase and then lie on the carpet, staring at the twinkling lights casting dancing shadows on the ceiling.

“I can’t believe we’re high school graduates,” she whispers.

“Me neither. We’re adults now. We have to do adult things.”

After summer, for the first time since we met, Lara and I will follow our separate paths, attending different universities, pursuing different dreams—hers in education, mine in music—living parallel lives. Our community service at camp will be our last summer together.

My throat thickens. “We’ll always be best friends, right, Lara?” Mom’s voice echoes in my mind.

Sometimes best friends break up.

“Of course. Friends forever.” She laces her fingers with mine. “You’re going to be my maid of honor someday.”

“And you’re going to be my children’s Auntie Lara. No matter what happens, we’ll always stick together.”

Lara extends her pinky. “Cohorts—”

“—in crime.” I wrap mine around hers.

“Two peas—”

“—in a pod.”

“Deal?”

“Deal.”

I close my heavy eyelids, my body weary and depleted. The soft pink carpet cushions me. Twinkling lights glow overhead, and the fragrance of strawberries fills the air as I drift asleep.

* * *

"Hey." Lara nudges my side. "Wake up."

"Hmm."

"Your phone is buzzing again."

I pull it from my pocket and squint at the screen. Another string of messages from Mom. I turn the phone face down and close my eyes.

"Who is it?" she asks.

"Nobody."

Lara's up on one elbow. "Cate."

"It's my mother. Her plane must have landed. Finally."

She nudges my shoulder. "Answer her."

"No."

"Come on, Cate. We're adults now, right?" She leans close to my ear. "Let it go."

The wounds are too fresh, too raw to let go and move on like Mom didn't destroy me today. I'm not ready to forgive her. Not even close. Not sure it'll ever be possible.

My phone buzzes repeatedly, then stops. I exhale a long breath.

A few minutes later, Mr. Alvarez knocks on Lara's door and swings it open. "Cate, your mother called me. She said she's been trying to reach you."

I bolt upright.

"She wants you to go to your apartment and pack for camp."

"Of course. Thank you, Mr. Alvarez."

He closes the door.

A rush of dread sweeps through me. "Ugh."

Lara stands and pulls me to my feet. "Come on, crabby. Let's go."

"I'm not crabby." But she's right. Lara deserves better than moodiness from her best friend, especially on graduation day. I give her a quick hug. "Sorry."

She smiles. "I know."

It's time, as they say, to face the music. I've managed to avoid Mom's calls, but she found a way to get through to me anyway.

Fine.

I'll go home, but on my terms. I'm determined not to let her steal the little joy I've had today. When she returns from the airport, I'll ignore her completely. It won't be difficult, since I'll already be asleep.

By morning, Lara and I will be on our way to Connecticut for the entire summer, and in the fall, I'll be gone.

Long gone.

I thank the Alvarez family for dinner, accept a foil-wrapped plate for Mom, and grab my cap and gown from the closet where Mrs. Alvarez hung it earlier.

Lara and I walk down the hallway to the elevators. I scan my security card, and we watch the lighted numbers tick upward as the elevator carries us to the sixty-fourth floor. When the doors open, we step into the McDermott private entryway, which Mom had decorated with Italian designer chairs, leather sofas, and crystal lamps. Our residence is the only apartment on the entire top floor. Had I known when Mom bought this place two years ago that she'd never be home long enough to enjoy it, I would have begged her to let us stay downstairs in our old studio across from the Alvarez apartment.

I miss our early days—when it was just Mom and me—eating mac and cheese straight from the pot and falling asleep together on an air mattress. She used to tuck little notes into my lunchbox or stick them on my bathroom mirror, each one marked with a pink swirly heart—her signature design. A secret code.

I'll always love you.

Before I fell asleep every night, she'd press a tender kiss right where my parted hair met my forehead, and whisper, "I'll always love you, Catie Bear." It was the two of us against the world.

But lately?

We're worlds apart.

When we reach the apartment's front door, I raise my security card to swipe, but Lara yanks me back by the elbow.

"Cate," she whispers. "Stop."