

THE CICADA SPRING (EXCERPT)

By Carolyn McBride

A Potomac Shores Novel



www.makewavespress.com

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DEDICATION

To Betsy Harris, who not only taught high school English, but ignited a passion for writing that
has shaped my life

PROLOGUE

ci·ca·da (sə- 'kā-də): any of a family (Cicadidae) of homopterous insects which have a stout body, wide blunt head, and large transparent wings and the males of which produce a loud buzzing noise usually by stridulation (*Merriam-Webster.com*)

What's all the buzz about on those dog days of summer? The annual cicadas sing the song of summer, a sound reminiscent of long days and warm nights. But every thirteen or seventeen years in the eastern Northern Hemisphere, a buzz-saw serenade drowns out all other insects. It's the urgent, plaintive call of the periodical cicadas.

Periodical cicadas are bigger and creepier than their annual counterparts, with evil-looking red beady eyes. Despite their wings, they're not well equipped for flight and tend to crash into anything and everything when they try. But that's because they're bugs on a mission. They've ingested a love potion from the roots of trees, and they're short on time.

Periodical cicadas of the genus *Magicicada* are the Romeos and Juliets of the insect world. Although they're sometimes called locusts, they aren't interested in devouring every plant in sight. They molt to abandon their wingless nymph stage, leaving their brown exoskeletons attached to tree trunks and branches like a horror movie in miniature, frozen in time. It may seem like a stretch to feel empathy for insects, but these cicadas come in peace. They don't bite anything or eat very much in their brief life span above ground. They're only looking for love, and they're willing to "sing" for it.

Crazy as it sounds, male cicadas are the loudest insect musicians on the planet, rocking out at a hundred decibels or more. For about three months, from late May to the end of July, this giant concert of tiny, screeching violins emerges from the underworld to serenade their lovers with their tymbal, a vibrating membrane in their abdomens. Sound sexy? Imagine billions of cicadas in a symphony of bad karaoke after pining away underground for almost two decades, just tunneling around in their man caves. They're ready for love, and they want their women to know it.

Sadly, only millions of the billions of cicadas survive the predators and car windshields they encounter in their frantic quest for a single mate. Meanwhile, each female cicada attempts to sort through the deafening din to find Mr. Right, and it's a jungle out there. With more than three thousand species of cicadas, most just aren't her type. Timing is everything, as they say. Her mate needs to be on the same cycle as her breed so she can lay eggs in the trees and then get her babies back into the ground to keep the seventeen-year species reunion going—2038 or bust!

The cicada shows us that—even after a very long life in the dark—it's never too late to bust out of our comfort zone and go after love. In fact, it is the very essence of our survival as a species.

PART 1
FLORIDA

CHAPTER 1—RITES OF PASSAGE

AUGUST 2019

They were down to the last goodbye. The dorm room, a small space with twins of everything—desks, chairs, beds—was already partially filled with boxes shipped in advance. Katie squeezed past Belle’s suitcases to look out the window, wondering if she could spy the East River, but was greeted by a close-up view of the adjacent apartments.

“Well, that’s the last of it,” Belle said. “Don’t you need to get to the airport?”

Katie closed the blinds and stiffened. She wanted to make the bed, fluff the pillows, ensure everything was in its proper place, especially the hypoallergenic, bedbug-proof mattress protector. But she knew this was one of those moments when saying nothing was probably best. It wasn’t her turn or her place anymore, and if she tried, she might cry.

She put one foot in front of the other, her eyes focused on the elevator at the other end of the hall as she rolled her carry-on down the narrow corridor past other doting parents. So many couples and families. So many proud, smiling faces happily accepting a gaping chasm in the foundation of their lives. This wasn’t a rite of passage. It was a life quake.

Katie had always supported and encouraged her daughter’s interests. New York City was like oxygen to her seventeen-year-old, who had dreamed of attending college here ever since their first Broadway show. When Belle got accepted into the performing arts school, they had danced around the house to the *Fame* and *Flashdance* soundtracks. *Be careful what you wish for. Some dreams do come true.*

Katie felt the unstoppable shift as the life she had spent nearly two decades building and tending became a part of her daughter’s childhood memories—the small townhouse walking

distance to Belle's schools, the commute from Virginia into DC in the old minivan, the tech job with its never-ending cycle of upgrades and releases. It was stable, consistent, and the best she could do raising a child on her own. Today, the "on her own" part was hitting home. There was no home without Belle.

"Mom. Earth to Mom." Belle pushed the elevator button and squeezed Katie's arm.

"Give me five minutes. I just want to meet my roommate, okay? I'll see you outside. Love ya."

Belle gave Katie a quick peck on the cheek. So quick, as if someone might mistake the annoyingly nurturing yet oddly mute woman for someone that Belle might actually need. This was just another handoff of sorts, she told herself as the elevator descended ten floors. She had provided Belle with all the necessary training and preparation. Katie was a master of successful launches as an IT systems director, and she had intentionally made herself dispensable. They were rightfully moving from the implementation phase to the run-and-maintain phase, that was all. But it was happening too fast.

As Katie waited on the sidewalk, she imagined moving into one of the pricey brownstones that faced the old brick dorm, a converted hotel from the 1920s. She could make Belle's life easier—do her laundry, cook dinner, keep the bedbugs away. A few minutes later, two young women waved to the doorman and hugged like best friends under the green awning. Katie's heart did a somersault when she realized the taller student in a leotard and leggings, hair pulled back into a sleek ballet bun, was her daughter. She watched as Belle slipped on the familiar jersey—"Coffee and Choreography"—the one from the regional dance championship last summer when her squad had placed second.

This was it. The final moment. Katie wanted to run, to prolong the inevitable, but it was too late. Belle headed toward her with a brisk gait of freedom and confidence, all lean arms and

legs in a hurry, and a huge smile Katie tried to mimic. Belle had already stepped over the line into her new life.

“Mom, my roommate’s so awesome! She’s a ‘Mainiac’—like from Maine! How cool is that? Her uncle has a lobster boat!”

Belle had spent countless hours on her grandparents’ boat, the *Potomac Princess*, and water was in her blood as much as dance. The fun memories seemed so distant now as Katie took in her daughter, trying to capture everything from head to toe. She watched as Belle put her arms through the straps of her pink leather backpack. Katie instinctively reached around to check the zippers, reminding her to keep her wallet in the center section.

“You’ve got the mace from your dad?” Katie’s ex-husband planned to visit Belle for parents’ weekend to coincide with a conference in the city.

Belle rolled her eyes. “Yes, Mom.”

“And your subway pass?”

Belle’s mouth twisted into a mix of a grin and a scowl. “It’s an app, Mom.” She held up her phone. “I’ve got to be at orientation in thirty minutes. It’s on the west side of campus, so I need to, um, leave.”

“Oh, well, I could walk with you?” Katie asked optimistically. She felt like a lost dog, unsure of what to do without someone holding the leash. Their Old English sheepdog, Darwin, had planted himself between the growing line of suitcases and the front door as if he could herd Belle away from greener pastures. Even the dog shared Katie’s mindset.

“Mom, I’m walking with Tate.” Belle motioned toward the girl leaning against the building, head bent over her cell phone.

“Oh, well. . . .” The tears were just under the surface, and Katie battled to suppress them. *It’s not the end. It’s not the end. It’s not the end.* She pulled Belle into her, breathing in her hair while fervently saying a silent prayer that she would see and touch her again soon. She smiled and kissed her cheek. But she couldn’t let go.

“I’ll text you after orientation,” Belle said, as she extracted herself from Katie’s arms and backed away, eyeing her mother as if she feared she would collapse. She mouthed “I love you” and blew a kiss.

Katie held her suitcase with her legs and caught the imaginary kiss in two hands, bringing it to her heart. She gulped for air and, in a single exhale, said, “I’ll text you when I board my flight. I love you, too, superstar.”

And with a small wave, she released her daughter into the world.

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“The world is your oyster, Katie,” Ben said facetiously, slathering another squishy shellfish with horseradish and a spritz of lemon juice at an oyster bar in the harbor.

Katie and her brother were rarely in the same time zone, and she’d received his text in the cab on the way to LaGuardia: *“Hey sis, how you holding up? Mom’s worried about you. Come to Boston for the weekend. I go back to Delhi Sunday night.”* By the time the cab had arrived at the airport, Katie had changed her flight.

Her little brother, who towered over her at six-foot-three, had lured her with the promise of sailing and a Beethoven symphony at the Hatch Shell. Three hours later, Katie had Ubered directly to his forty-two-foot yacht, one of the few he could stand up in and manage single-handedly in the ocean. He usually traveled a lot as a cofounder of a successful software company, and he’d never been interested in putting down real roots, the kind on a firm

foundation of soil, anyway. He lived aboard *SeaQueL* at Constitution Marina but sailed the blue water Catalina south in the winter.

Katie tapped her local craft IPA against Ben's and took a big sip. "It's Belle's oyster now, not mine. Being without her is going to hit me even harder when I get back home. But it really helped to be out on open water today. Sometimes you forget how quickly you can change your point of view."

That afternoon, they had sailed between the islands and out past the iconic Boston Light into Massachusetts Bay. Since they'd gotten a later start, they settled for seafood back onshore instead of whale watching. They sat at an outdoor picnic table in the Seaport District around the corner from the city's aquarium and art museum.

"And Mom was okay with you extending your trip?"

Their mother was often abroad, too, as the owner of a heritage travel agency. Katie was the constant, the caretaker, the one who watered her mother's aloe plants and watched her cats while she was traveling.

"She owes me! And Darwin doesn't bother her cats. She loves to know we're hanging out together, you know that. She always says, 'You never really value your siblings until your parents are gone.' But I want you to know I value you *now*. You've got a kick-ass boat!"

"She's a beauty, for sure."

The server arrived to spread out big sheets of parchment paper. They leaned back and groaned happily as he dumped the clambake onto their table, a heaping of lobsters, mussels, clams, potatoes, and corn on the cob. They settled in with their crackers and bowls of warm butter. What a difference a flight made.

"Well, it's your turn, Katie. What's your plan now that Belle is launched?"

“So says the consummate bachelor. Paying tuition is my plan,” Katie said flatly. She knew wanderlust fueled her brother’s veins, but she wasn’t used to being untethered. It seemed as if anything was possible—an uncomfortable sensation she hadn’t felt in many years. Today, she’d flown in a different direction and turned her day around. *Could I really do the same thing with an entire life?*

Katie’s phone dinged, and she reached for it, hoping to hear from Belle, but it was just another text from that relentless recruiter. The position seemed like a long shot, and Katie had promised to respond next week after she got her daughter off to college.

“Everything okay?” Ben asked.

She picked at the label on her beer bottle. “Yes. No. I don’t know. There’s this job opportunity, but it’s in Miami. I just don’t know whether I should pursue it. If I got it, it would mean leaving Mom, and I’m not sure I can do that.” She told Ben about the recruiter from a cruise line who had been pursuing her for the past couple of months. She’d finally agreed to a virtual interview, but the recruiter was pushing her to schedule it in person.

“Throw off the bowlines, sea sister! You can always say no. Mom and Dad left their hometown, and so did I. If you stay at the dock, you might always wonder what distant shores you could reach.” Ben had a boat quote, or two or three, for every occasion, which often merged into something that sounded like sage advice from a drunken pirate. “Home is where your anchor drops.”

“Shut up and eat your lobster, Captain,” Katie teased, throwing a lobster claw at him. “You were born a programmer, not a poet.”

That evening, Katie sat in the cockpit rereading her texts with Belle, a running update about her class schedule, professors, and new friends topped off with pictures of her decorated

dorm room. Katie zoomed in to make sure Belle had made her bed. Everything was as it should be.

“Aren’t you chilly?” Ben handed her a checkered blanket from the cabin to ward off the New England air that already hinted of autumn in August, and then returned to his floating office below.

Katie looked around at the city lights illuminating the harbor in a soft glow. On the adjacent dock, the tall masts of the frigate ship USS *Constitution*, the oldest ship still afloat, stood in stark contrast to the modern sailboats and powerboats. Just beyond was the white pillar of Bunker Hill Monument, a granite memorial to one of the first battles in the Revolutionary War. The historic markers proclaimed that time would stand still in this port, on that hill, forever recognizing the significance of what took place there.

Katie realized she didn’t even have a photograph to mark this monumental day. She wanted to cling to it forever, but she couldn’t drop an anchor or cement it to the ground. A snapshot wouldn’t do it justice, anyway. This parenting rite of passage was one of many milestones that had already passed, a bright bulb in the string of colorful lights of a life well-lived. Although there were dark gaps between each light, the rope was always there, connecting one to the next.

Katie looked at her phone again, scanning the texts from the recruiter. She drafted a response, her thumbs wavering as she reviewed her words: *“I can be there in person on Monday. Please text me the address.”* She selected the enter key, gingerly stepping onto the tightrope, and then sent her message into the darkness.