

Chapter 1

Before there were collars on the cats of Litany there were few mice and even fewer sparrows. Those that were left knew to hide in trees until morning, when children drew chalk illustrations on the concrete of their garages and mothers and fathers drove to their offices. Then, the cats would tuck themselves away under cool porches and atop flower boxes, basking in the sleepy light of day.

In spring, pollen clung to car doors and swingsets. Kleenex packages were shoved into pocketbooks, allergy medication went out of stock in pharmacies. Families whose roots had grown in Litany prepared for the worst part of the year, worse than the blizzards of January or heat waves of July.

On a cul-de-sac on the coastal side of Litany, a young girl sat in her driveway. Her mother was in the kitchen cutting cucumber slices, arranging them on a child-size plate.

The girl finished her chalk drawing, wiping the dust on the frills of her dress. It was pink with teal sequins, an ugly thing.

"Flo, come on in. Did I put sunblock on you before you went out?" The girl's mother called. The girl shook her head, kicking off her sandals and waddling to the kitchen table. "Mm. It isn't too hot today, I guess."

Florence ate her cucumber slices, dipping them in the little bowl of ranch beside her plate. At three years old, she barely spoke. Though it gave her mother a chance to compare her to Einstein, there was something strange about Florence. She was content with the bugs in the backyard and with twisting her pale blonde hair around her finger, weaving little knots in the strands.

Her mother, Beth, was never like that. When she was young, Beth ran through her neighbors' yards with muddy feet, throwing her head back to laugh at the boy next door. She'd had thick hair, golden and shiny. She began to prefer complementary colours before she even started dressing herself.

Now grown, Beth was tired. Her husband didn't make her laugh, she didn't run around yards or down quiet streets. Most sunny afternoons were spent inside anyway, coaxing Florence to eat brussel sprouts or drink 2% milk. They had tried, and failed, to bring Florence to kindergarten early. Although she appeared mature enough, Beth found her daughter cowering behind her legs before they could make it out the door. Beth's husband was somehow dissatisfied with either outcome, telling her Florence wouldn't be happy in school, but that Beth should get a life outside of raising their child. He was harder to figure than any man Beth had loved, and it was just her luck he was the only one that proposed to her.

Since their marriage, Henry and Beth Abbott had made an attempt to be happy. They had a beautiful house and a sweet daughter, and there was nothing inherently wrong with either of them, as long as you ignore Henry's penchant for getting drunk and the cigarettes hidden in Beth's bedside table. She believed everyone had their vices, and hers just wasn't worth shaking. Henry believed her smoking would irritate his asthma and kill him if she kept it up, to which she replied alcohol poisoning was more likely. But he did try, she thought, and he worked hard for her and Florence. That was more than most women she knew could say.

Henry married his high school sweetheart. She was beautiful; the kind of popular that was mysterious and reserved, but that everyone wanted to befriend. He knew how lucky he was, not just for his wife but everything they'd done together. Beth had given him the most incredible gift anyone ever had: their daughter. It just wasn't enough. Most of his old friends would resent him, both for bagging the cutest girl at school and for falling out of love with her.

The problem wasn't that he disliked her, or wished he hadn't been with her in the first place. He just knew there was something missing from his life, and she made it hard to figure out what. At night, she would reach for him in her sleep. He didn't like her scratching on his arm, or that he often woke up with her knees in his back. It confused him. All the strange little things about her used to be endearing, had only made him love her more. Now they were nothing more than annoyances.

When she listened to the music the kids in their high school made, he thought it was cute that she wanted to support them. Now when she put on those same albums, he thought fondly about crushing her CDs under the wheels of his sedan.

Every day, Henry came home to Florence sitting in the window, leaning on her forearms with her head tilted up to the sky. She claimed to be creating a whole world, and Henry used the bits of energy he had left to humor her.

Flo's creativity stunned him. Henry was quite happy with himself, but he knew he was a practical man. Beth had never been quite as down to earth, but her head was in less interesting clouds than those one might think of. Still, their daughter seemed to have universes swirling around in her mind, and made more on a daily basis.

Henry wore mostly suits, out of practicality and necessity. He was the newest at his office, despite his four years of employment. Fresh out of high school, business school had seemed like the only trajectory that would get anywhere. Since graduating, his degree proved nothing but its own uselessness. The offices he'd worked at didn't keep him long enough to require an education, letting him go often after a few weeks. It

was hard for him to admit his own flaws, but the continual disappointment left him depressed.

The immediate rejection from so many offices woke him up. He was a father, and a husband, and his parents hadn't paid his way through school for him to drink and neglect his family. When Beth decided to take his name, she said it was only because she knew how special the Abbotts were. Henry needed to prove that. He got a job when Florence was six months, and it was the longest job he'd ever held.

Spring made Beth want to stay away from her cigarettes. Her lungs already invaded by the yellow pollen coating any surface it could find, she began her annual avoidance of smoke in early April.

Florence licked the leftover dressing from her fingers. She tapped her mother's wrist and pointed back to the door, then crouched down to pull on her sandals.

"Wait, let me get the sunscreen. Just in case," Beth said, searching her purse. A small bottle of sunscreen, the cap lost months ago, was stuffed at the bottom. She knew it was there, but the loose change and chapstick and some kind of folded up paper formed a blockade. "Ah. There."

The feeling of sunscreen on her face made Florence uncomfortable. She saw her mother bite her lip, saw blood budding at the cuticles of a finger that usually held a wedding ring. Today that finger was bare. She let her mother rub the sunscreen into her cheeks.

The house across from the Abbotts' was, at the moment, vacated. Their former neighbors had just retired, and wasted no time moving to Florida. Beth couldn't imagine moving there by choice, purposefully subjecting yourself to the heat and humidity and whatever else happens down there. But they were friendly for the seven or eight years she'd lived by them, and she wished them the best as they drove away.

The area surrounding the cul-de-sac was nearly a ghost town. Few of the homes were inhabited, and those that were held silent, lonely people, none of whom had greeted the Abbotts in their first few weeks there. A small grocery store six minutes away, the department store on Main Street, and the restaurants that closed early more often than not, as the dinner rush died out around 4:30. Fisherman brought their catch in, walking down Main Street in the sunset with nets slung over their shoulders to the bait and tackle store, where they'd sell the smallest fish. Those would be made into bait, sold for \$4.50 a pound on Sundays. It was a town that existed in the straight lines of its routine, and all its residents were content to walk along the beach in the summertime,

scrape ice off their windshields in winter, buy fresh bread from the bakery to keep it in business, and allow the cafe to play Elliott Smith each morning.

At the cafe, baristas came and went. The owner Maria was the exception, and she swore up and down she'd die before she retired. She was as much a staple of the town as anything, having moved up from New Mexico in the 50s. Since then, she had become friendly with everyone in town, especially newcomers.

Compliant to routine, Beth visited the cafe at 11:00 each morning. Flo would be propped up on her hip or walking by her side, caught up in the childlike wonder that had almost faded from the town. Beth would order a black iced coffee and a muffin, half of which she'd give to her daughter to eat in the car on the way home. She'd sit Flo up in a high chair beside the fridge; Maria would speak Spanish to the little girl in hopes she'd pick up bits and pieces.

Beth would run across the street to a convenience store, run by a small old man. His name was Albert, and his store was cleverly named "Albert's". He didn't mind that Beth took so long to read her own writing, grocery lists scrawled on the palm of her hand in pen. Albert was an eternally patient man who liked to joke that the only thing he looked forward to was joining his wife in the humble cemetery on the other side of town, covered in dirt. Beth had a hard time responding to that.

"I need, uh, shit. Laundry detergent? Detergent. Sorry," her laugh died in her throat, choked out by the clanging of church bells.

The Litany Catholic Church had sent the Abbotts a *Welcome to Litany* letter the day after they moved in. It began and ended with the phrase, 'see you soon', and as Beth slid the envelope in the trash, she shook her head. She had been to enough churches.

"It's lunchtime," Al said, rubbing his hands together and grinning, showing off his missing teeth. "Tell you what, you grab me one of those sandwiches I like, I'll order you a notebook so you can stop giving yourself ink poisoning." He pulled a bottle of laundry detergent from the shelf under his desk. "This is a good one, it's organic. Anything else?"

Beth squinted at the red writing, creased and smudged by her steering wheel. "I don't know, Al. I think we needed Benadryl? Couldn't hurt to get more, I guess," she murmured, picking up a small bottle from the shelf beside the register. "Oh! Sunblock, mine is almost gone."

Al pointed to the aisle that held sunblock, although they both knew Beth was familiar with it. An obsession with sunscreen was just another one of her quirks. She had a tendency for forgetfulness, and tried to make up for it with excessive precautions. Rubbing so much coconut oil into her hair it had begun to fall out, buying more Vaseline in a year than most people do in their entire lives. The tube of sunblock was yellow, and its blue cap would surely not survive through the month. Pocketbooks were like

vortexes, she had found. You know something's in there, but it just won't come to the surface.

With the plastic "Thank You" bag shoved under her arm, Beth returned to the cafe. She ordered a mozzarella and eggplant melt, and leaned against the high chair her daughter sat in. Florence was playing with the crumbs of a scone, a gift from Maria. Sliding an extra \$5 across the counter, Beth watched her daughter. The high chair was beside a bay window, and the sunlight hit Florence's green eyes through a slit in the blinds. Henry had hazel eyes, and Beth's were pale blue. The only relative she recalled with green eyes had been Henry's mother. She had welcomed Beth into the family as if she were her daughter, more graciously than Beth's own parents had ever treated her.

When she died, Beth cut her hair short like hers. Just above the shoulders. Beth's hair was lighter and healthier, and it hung straight instead of the tight curls Henry and his mother both had. Still, it reminded her of the sweet woman who served her baked salmon and zucchini on Saturday nights. Henry didn't notice until Beth mentioned she missed the inches she'd cut off, just to see what he thought. He told her it made her look older.

"Here you go, hon. Is it for Al?" Maria slid the sandwich in a To-Go bag over the counter, meeting Beth's glassy eyes with a smile.

"Mhm. He said he'd get me a notebook," Beth said, holding up the palm of her hand.

"What the hell is that?"

"Grocery list, kinda. I don't know, I just never thought to get myself something like that when I had a perfectly good option."

"Perfectly good usually means functional," Maria laughed, and popped a blueberry into Florence's mouth. "She likes these, you know. Might wanna add them to that list."

"I will. I tried growing some once, actually. Birds got to 'em before I could, though." The door opened, setting off the bell. Maria and Beth glanced towards it, seeing a man neither of them recognized. As out of the ordinary as this was, Maria took to her rehearsed dialogue, and Beth tucked the sandwich bag into her pocketbook and kissed her daughter on the head. "I'll be back in a few, take her off your hands. I really appreciate it."

Maria nodded, busy taking the new man's order. He was getting a lemonade, kind of childish considering he looked just over thirty. But it was his business, not Beth's.

“So,” Beth glanced in the rearview mirror, looking her daughter in the eye. “You like blueberries, huh?”

Florence nodded slowly, fixated on the velcro of her sandals. Her carseat was almost too small, coming up on its third year of use. It had sat stagnant in the backseat of Beth’s Subaru since Henry had bought it, asking for little more than a clean seat cover every now and then. Faded pink butterflies dotted the blue fabric.

“I could get some for you next time I go to the store, if I remember.”

“And lemonade,” Florence mumbled, throwing a chubby arm into the air.

Her mother smiled. “And lemonade.” Sugar-free. Florence was toothpaste-adverse, hated the artificial flavoring. She didn’t need any help rotting her teeth. “We could go to the park later, if you want.”

Flo nodded again, more enthusiastic this time.

“Okay. Park.” Beth’s eyes darted back to her daughter, whose hair was beginning to fall out of the sloppy braid she’d done this morning. The days were getting longer.