
Gillian McDunn
Caterpillar Summer
BLOOMSBURY

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PART ONE

End & Begin

You and me, me and you. We'll always be together.

– Caterpillar in *Caterpillar & Chicken: The Great Bubblegum Pancake*



1

Cat always kept her brother in the back of her mind, except for the times he was at the front of it.

She might be multiplying fractions in her head while her brain quietly asked, 'Did you cut the tag out of Chicken's shirt?'

She might be studying plants of the tundra biome when her mind questioned whether his teacher was calling him Henry, which he hated.

She might be scooping mashed potatoes on her tray when she wondered, 'Will he be the only first grader left behind at the aquarium?'

On a good day, Chicken liked to wander. On a bad day, Chicken would bolt. But no matter what, Cat loved him as wide as the Golden Gate Bridge, as deep as the sea floor, and as fierce as a shark bite.

The last day of fifth grade, Cat was on alert. Usually the last day of school was messy, noisy, and busy – the kind of day that could easily be too much for Chicken. When he got upset, he couldn't always calm himself. He got more and more tangled up until he overflowed and every feeling came rushing out. Mom called it a meltdown, but to Cat it was tight and sharp. It was the opposite of melting.

When the dismissal bell rang, Cat slid her backpack to her shoulder and hustled double-time to the steps at the entrance. The sky above her was grey and low but inside Cat felt like sunshine. She bounced on the balls of her feet. The bounces said: *summer*, *Atlanta*, and *my best friend*, *Rishi*. If her heart had its way, it would have skittered out of her chest and started vacation without her.

The next day, they'd fly east until they reached Atlanta. Mom would teach a three-week college class, and Cat and Chicken would tag along to see the Krishnamurthys, who moved to Georgia last summer. It had been a year, but Cat still missed going to Rishi's house to play, do homework, and eat dosas. But even from thousands of miles away, he was still her best friend.

Plus, Mom promised they would have a *real* vacation when she wasn't teaching. It would be the first Cat could remember since it was just the three of them.

A stream of kids poured on to the sidewalk, and Cat sidestepped the elbowing boys and twirling kindergarteners.

'Hey, Cat,' said a voice behind her.

Cat turned, expecting to see her brother – but instead, it was Poppy Zhang, the nicest girl in fifth grade. Her cheeks dimpled when she smiled, and at that moment she was dimpling at Cat.

'You crushed that geometry review,' said Poppy.

Maths was Cat's favourite, and geometry was her best. Cat liked geometry's rules. They made her feel organised.

'Thanks,' said Cat. 'You too.'

Poppy laughed. 'I'm not so sure, but thanks.' She tilted her head towards a cluster of girls on the sidewalk. 'A few of us are going to Toy Boat. Do you want to come?'

Of course Cat wanted to go. She could almost taste the mint chocolate chip. But then she thought of her brother.

'I know you watch Chicken after school,' Poppy said. 'You could bring him.'

It would never work. He'd wiggle right off his seat. He'd drip ice cream on the table. He'd drip ice cream on to Poppy Zhang.

Cat shook her head slowly. 'I can't.'

Poppy looked disappointed, but offered Cat a smile. 'See you around.' She hurried to catch up with the others.

Most days, Cat didn't mind watching Chicken. It wasn't his fault that he needed her in the afternoon. It wasn't Mom's fault she worked all the time. It wasn't the Krishnamurthys' fault they moved to Georgia for a new job for Rishi's mom. It wasn't anyone's fault, but Cat's insides didn't feel like sunshine any more.

'Caterpillar!'

She turned halfway before getting caught between a squeeze and a crash.

'Hey, Chicken!' She patted his back until he let go.

She leaned back to see him. He was the kind of kid who wore his day on his face. When his brown eyes crinkled in a good-day grin, she couldn't help but grin back.

Silently, he held out a clenched fist. 'For you, Caterpillar.'

Cat stretched out her hand to receive the daily treasure. The dandelion was wilted, but she turned it gently, like it was made of gold.

'It's beautiful.' She tucked the flower in her pocket and studied his face. 'Good day?'

Chicken shrugged.

Cat raised her eyebrows. The last day of school was chaotic and Chicken didn't like being off schedule. 'Are you sure? No hard times?'

He frowned slightly, looking back at her. 'It was loud when we cleaned our desks, but I did belly breaths until I felt calm.' He inhaled deeply, rounding his stomach, then pushed the air out in a burst.

'Good job using strategies.' She looked him over. Traces of frosting crusted his chin and grey paint streaked his sweatshirt, but overall he looked good. Cleaning a mess was easier than fixing a bad mood.

Down the steps he galloped, art projects and worksheets flying from his backpack like a paper tornado.

Cat sighed. Even if he'd managed the school day, he still

needed her for some things. 'Hold on,' she called after him, gathering his papers. 'You didn't zip up.'

Chicken spun, whirling more papers across the steps.

'All my work from the year,' he announced.

'This is schoolwork?' Cat asked. 'More like an explosion in a paper factory.' She returned the pages to his backpack.

'And sharks? Don't have swim bladders?' Chicken's voice squeaked with excitement, adding question marks that shouldn't be there. Sharks were Chicken's favourite – a surprising choice for a boy who was sweet as marshmallows.

Chicken was still talking. '… But sharks? Have oil in their liver? Which makes them float?'

Listening to Chicken talk about sharks made Cat think about a *specific* shark. A shark they needed every night at bedtime. She rummaged in his backpack, reaching past crumpled papers until her fingers found the edges of a plastic fin. *Whew.*

She zipped the backpack. 'All set.'

Chicken stopped his shark chatter and turned to her. 'Since I had a good day and used my strategies, can we celebrate?'

'What kind of celebration?' She thought of Poppy Zhang. 'Ice cream at Toy Boat?'

Before she could finish, Chicken was already shaking his head. 'I hate that place. Too many eyes watching me.'

Toy Boat's shelves were crowded with vintage action figures and other old toys. Chicken didn't like all the faces. 'They're just toys, Chicken.'

Chicken stuck out his chin. 'I want Chinese buns.'

He loved the sesame-crusted buns with sweet bean paste nestled inside.

'Where is Mama working today?' Chicken asked.

Mom wrote books, taught illustration to college students, and picked up shifts at the Russian bakery. She always said three jobs plus two kids equalled one busy life. Even though she never mentioned Daddy's medical bills, Cat knew they were part of the equation, too.

'She's at home, working on her book,' said Cat.

'Please can we go?' Chicken's eyes were open so wide his lashes curled to his brows. 'I promise to stay out of the way when you pack.'

'Deal,' said Cat.

Together they walked downhill towards Clement Street. Cat gripped Chicken's hand when they crossed streets. Always, in the back of her mind, she was afraid of losing him. It had happened a few times this year, more than Cat wanted to admit. Once, he left the playground swings for the turtle pond. At the aquarium, he ditched the tide pools for the brownbanded bamboo shark. At the grocery store, he fled the spaghetti aisle for the Popsicle freezer. He was impulsive enough to be dangerous, and fast enough to travel far before anyone noticed he was gone.

Chicken tightrope-walked the kerb alongside parked cars. 'Guess what I did at school today.' This was the game they played every day. It was what she used to play with Daddy.

'Hmmmm,' Cat said, pulling her jacket around her. 'Did your class have a snowball fight?'

'No!' Chicken exclaimed, giggling. 'San Francisco has fog, not snow.'

Cat wanted to think of something even more ridiculous so she could hear that laugh again. 'Did you … go skydiving?'

Chicken chuckled. 'No way! Guess again.' They reached Geary and Chicken jabbed the crosswalk button.

'Hold my hand,' Cat said.

Chicken punched the button again. 'We're not crossing yet.'

Cat narrowed her eyes. 'This is a big street and super busy, so hold it, OK?' It was a warning, not a question.

Chicken frowned but held out his hand.

Cat squeezed. The light turned and they hustled across.

'You have one more try,' Chicken reminded her. They were back on the sidewalk, but he hadn't let go. She looked at their clasped hands. Cat's skin was in between Daddy's dark skin and Mom's pale skin. Chicken's skin was a little darker, more like Daddy's.

'One more try? I better make it a good one.' Cat scrunched her face. The grey paint on his sweatshirt and pages of artwork floated into her head. She opened her eyes. 'I think you painted some sharks.'

Chicken's eyes and mouth formed perfect Os. 'How did you know?'

'Lucky guess.'

He looked at her like she was a genius. She bumped him lightly with her hip.

Clement Street was known as San Francisco's 'other' Chinatown. It wasn't much of a tourist destination, but it still bustled with shoppers and traffic. Chicken pushed open the bakery door, releasing a blast of warm, sweet air. Chicken jumped from square to square across the chequered linoleum floor. Cat knew he was playing the hot lava game.

Cat ordered and paid, then handed Chicken the crinkly bakery bag with three sesame buns inside. Her pineapple bun was in its own bag, which she held carefully as they walked back outside to the cool afternoon. Together they stood on the sidewalk and gazed at the wedding cake in the window. Clement Street was familiar to them, but there were always new things to see. They wandered past the Burmese restaurant, the furniture store, and the bar where Irish music played at night.

Chicken's favourite place on Clement was the fish market. He didn't like the smell, so he pinched his nose shut as they stood on the sidewalk and viewed the murky tanks.

Cat was thinking about the last day of fifth grade, which meant the first day of sixth grade was less than three months away. Chicken would be in second grade, but for the first time they'd be in different schools. This worried Cat. Her brother struggled more than most kids. Sometimes he needed the music turned down. Another time, he might need a sock seam straightened. Cat was the best at helping

him, but how could she be there for him when her middle school was six blocks away?

A single lobster scrabbled in its tank, its claws banded in blue. Below, a tank of crabs brawled. A fat crab climbed across the others like it was their king. She reached over to nudge Chicken, but her elbow met empty space.

She turned. No seven-year-old boy with brown skin and curly hair. No grey backpack, no yellow-striped shirt. She looked up the block, then whirled the other way. Her stomach twisted. He was gone.

'Chicken?' she called.

A guy with rings in his ears strolled by, carrying a paper cup of coffee. He looked up from his phone to nod at the market window. 'No chicken. Plenty of fish.' He laughed to himself and kept walking.

Not helpful. She scowled as he passed.

In the produce market, short bananas dangled above glossy eggplant and bumpy avocados. Pale cabbages were stacked in mountains, dried roots looked like interplanetary visitors, but there was no Chicken.

To find her brother, she had to think like him. She headed down the street. Chicken loved the pizzeria that gave them balls of fresh dough to play with, but their doors were locked until dinnertime. The pharmacy was small and it took one peek to see he wasn't there. Back towards the fish market, she dodged shoppers and weaved through a group of people with piercings. A woman pulling a metal shopping cart talked

loudly in Mandarin. A bus stopped and a wave of people crushed on to the sidewalk.

Cat circled back to the fish market, glancing at the shimmering fish. She felt underwater too – she couldn't breathe the air. A delivery truck roared by, rumbling her insides.

'Chicken!' she yelled. There was no answer.

When the bus pulled away from the kerb, something across the street caught her eye. Outside the bookstore, a statue of a gnome-like clown guarded the bargain books with a wide smirk. Chicken had loved it since he was a baby. He called it the Book Elf.

She looked both ways, then ran across. There was no sign of him. She burst into the bookstore. A pink-haired woman was behind the counter.

'Have you seen my brother?' Cat asked.

The woman looked up. 'Who's your brother?'

'He looks like me, but this high.' Cat held up her hand to a spot on her ribs. 'Short hair, grey backpack.'

The woman shrugged. 'I haven't seen any kids.'

Cat was back outside in a flash. The woman called to her, but Cat kept going. No one could help her now. Her heart raced. The world swirled green and grey as tears popped in her eyes. She wiped them away. Crying wouldn't help Chicken.

And then she saw them.

On the other side of the statue, from under one of the bargain tables, there were two blue sneakers. Small ones, attached to skinny legs.

She walked over and squatted down. 'Chicken.'

When he looked at her, his face broke open in a smile. In one hand was a sesame bun with some bites chomped out of it. In the other was a book. 'I found one of Mama's!' He held it up, the familiar caterpillar and chicken on the cover. 'By Amanda Gladwell.'

Cat leaned her forehead against the table. Her heart hadn't slowed, hadn't lowered itself from where it sat sideways in her throat. 'Chicken. Why are you under here?'

'I was done with the fish,' he explained patiently. 'I went to see the Book Elf.'

Cat crawled under the table, pressing against him. She leaned against the wall of the bookstore and breathed in the smell of poster paint, no-tear shampoo, and bean paste. Six sesame seeds stuck to his chin. Tears popped in her eyes again for no good reason.

She picked at one of the seeds, but it was stuck tight. 'You know you can't run away.'

Chicken squirmed from her fingers. 'I didn't *run*. I walked.'

'Oh, no,' she snapped. He wouldn't get away with that. 'You know what I mean – you have to stop disappearing! You could have been smashed by a car. Or you could have been taken!'

Chicken blinked slowly. He tilted his head to the side. 'But I *didn't* get smashed or taken. I'm right here.'

'Don't do it again,' Cat said sharply. Then, more softly, 'Don't run off. You scared me.'

They pulled in their feet and watched a crowd of legs

walk past. She looped her hand through Chicken's backpack while he turned the pages of their mother's book. The wall was cool on her back. The book made her brother giggle. As he read, he pointed at Chicken's antics and Caterpillar's expressions.

This was what happened to the real-life things Cat and Chicken did. Mom turned them into a story, a Caterpillar & Chicken book that kids couldn't get enough of. In books, their problems were solved in a clever thirty-two pages.

Real life was more complicated. Mom counted on Cat to watch Chicken. But if Mom knew about Chicken running off, she might not let Cat watch him any more. Then the stack of hospital bills would never get smaller. If Mom knew Chicken was disappearing, she would fall apart. Cat and Chicken were all Mom had.

Chicken traced the patterned endpapers with his small fingers. 'Cat?'

She squeezed his shoulder. 'Yes?'

He nodded at her hand. 'Are you going to eat that?'

The pineapple bun. She handed it to him.

He took a bite and made a silly face, crossing his eyes. They laughed, huddled under the table like it was their secret cave. But even then, Cat held his shoulder. She had to keep him safe.



2

Cat grasped Chicken's hand the entire four-block walk to their apartment building. Chicken hopped up the steps one by one while Cat hunted in her backpack for the key.

Each apartment in their building had its own floor, like a layer cake. Someone had numbered the block out of order, and the building's paint was peeling, but 544 was the only home Cat had ever known. She unlocked the door. Chicken dumped his backpack and sped down the hall.

'Shhhh!' Cat whisper-shouted, pointing at the closed door of Mom's studio. 'She's working.'

He didn't answer. Shaking her head, she picked up his backpack and hung it on its hook.

In the living room, books were scattered on the coffee table. Plastic trains criss-crossed the country on their

half-finished game of Ticket to Ride. An ivy plant suffered in the corner.

Next was Mom's studio, which she said had the best light in the apartment. Sometimes she played music or a podcast while she worked, but today was quiet.

After that was Cat and Chicken's room, where Chicken was already unloading the metal can that held his marble collection. To keep things quieter for the apartment downstairs, Mom had found a piece of carpet, but it was too big for the room. It curled along the edges of the wall like an upside-down slice of melted cheese.

The kitchen had a fake-marble vinyl floor and butter-coloured counters. Pale yellow tiles continued above the sink and two were painted with a little Dutch girl and boy. The girl had a pointed hat, pink cheeks, and looked straight forward. Her brother in wooden shoes was by her side.

'I bet you never lose *your* brother,' Cat muttered under her breath.

A door with a rectangle of frosted glass led from the kitchen to Mom's bedroom. It had once been the dining room and was the room Cat loved best. A chandelier hung above the patchwork-quilt-covered bed. Bookshelves with stained glass doors surrounded the fireplace. The fireplace didn't work, but even the idea of it made the room cosier.

Each week, Mom helped Cat wash and braid her hair into the perfect French braid. Cat's hair took a long time to comb

out, which tried both their patience. But afterwards, when they sat on Mom's bed and her fingers pulled just right – not too loose and not too tight – and her hair went *slip-slip-slip* into the braid, it was the best part of Cat's week.

Some nights, after Chicken was snoring in the bottom bunk, a buttery popcorn smell came from the kitchen. She and Mom would stretch out on the patchwork quilt, with the enormous bowl between them. Mom usually picked a movie from a long time ago, when people made questionable fashion choices.

Cat would tell silly stories and Mom's big, crashing laugh warmed the room. Or Cat might whisper something awful, like the time every girl except for Cat showed up to class with their nails the same shade of lavender, from a birthday party Cat hadn't been invited to. A hug from Mom hadn't fixed it, but it had pulled Cat's heart from the bottom of the Mariana Trench to somewhere around sea level.

Mom had been working constantly, so they hadn't had a movie night in months. The most recent time, they'd stood at the window together. Cat had looked all the way past the schoolyard and the thick trees of the Presidio to the tiny red light on top of the Golden Gate Bridge.

'They turned it on tonight,' Cat had said.

Mom squinted. 'Turned what on?'

'The light,' answered Cat. 'Sometimes it's on and sometimes it's not. Tonight it's on.'

'Oh, honey,' she said. 'That light is there every night.'

Cat frowned. She knew it *wasn't* always there. Mom leaned her chin against the top of Cat's head.

'At times, the fog gets in the way,' Mom continued. 'But the light shines anyway, no matter what.'

Mom was like that light on the bridge, Cat decided. Even when they were separated by a wall of drawings and deadlines, she was still there. The thought was enough to get Cat through anything.

She glanced at the clock, automatically adding three hours for Georgia time, wondering if she could squeeze in a video chat. Chicken's marbles were *click-click-click*ing as he sorted them into piles. Her stomach growled, the two bites of pineapple bun long forgotten, but maybe she could talk to Rishi before she made dinner.

She grabbed her tablet from the kitchen counter and clicked Rishi's name, but there was no answer. Later, she'd look over his emails, the ones that described the swimming, boating, and fishing adventures they'd have. Three weeks of glow sticks and marshmallows, three weeks of fireflies and floating in a lake under a big blue Georgia sky. Cat was up for anything.

Cat opened the fridge. Before, her dad had always cooked for the family. Cat remembered how easily the knife fit into his big hands when he chopped vegetables. One at a time, he handed her eggs to crack and mix in her own little bowl. He never minded if she got bits of shell in it. He always made her feel like her help was important.

Cat turned the stove's dial and put bread in the toaster. Mom's studio door was still closed. Cat wouldn't miss that closed-door feeling when they were together in Georgia. She cracked the eggs and whisked them, adding salt and pepper, then poured them in the skillet and pulled out three plates. Stirring the eggs, she called to Chicken, 'Peanut butter on your toast?'

'Yeah!'

She spread peanut butter and cut apples. Chicken might not touch the apple slices, but Cat would know she tried. She grabbed his favourite hot sauce, the one with the wooden cap and the picture of the lady dressed in white. Chicken had a need to put hot sauce on everything.

Chicken padded into the room. 'Is Mama eating with us?'

Cat paused. 'I'll check. Go wash your hands.' She grabbed Mom's plate and walked down the hallway. There was a chance that Mom would eat with them, but it was more likely she'd grab a few bites while she was working.

When Cat walked into the studio, Mom looked tired. The skin under her eyes was purplish, but still, she beamed at Cat. 'Hey, sweet Caterpillar.'

Cat winced. She'd asked Mom to stop calling her that.

'I made eggs,' she said, lifting the plate.

Mom looked apologetic. 'I'm not at a good stopping point.'

When Mom worked, she had a hard time changing gears, especially when there was a big deadline.

'I'll leave your food.' Cat pushed aside a stack of envelopes to make a spot.

Mom reached for Cat's hand and held it. Cat looked down. Mom wore Daddy's silver wedding band on her thumb. One side was wrapped with yarn to make the finger hole smaller, so it wouldn't slip off. When he was alive, he let Cat try it on whenever she wanted. She could easily fit three of her little-girl fingers inside it. That had been a long time ago.

'Honey,' Mom said. 'I can tell something's wrong.'

Cat's insides spun guiltily. Did Mom somehow know that Chicken had run away again?

'I think I know what's bothering you,' Mom continued, rubbing her eyes. 'I've been working a lot – leaning on you too much.'

Cat felt extra mixed up. It wasn't right to keep secrets from Mom. On the other hand, Mom didn't need any more stress. Chicken was safe, that was what mattered.

'It's fine. I understand.' The words felt thick.

But Mom was shaking her head. 'I'm working hard so I can relax when we're on our trip. After I finish teaching for the day, I'll be all yours.'

Mom sighed, still holding Cat's hand. 'I depend on you, but I know you can handle it. You're the glue holding the three of us together.'

Cat squeezed her eyes shut. The words crowded inside her. If Mom knew about Chicken wandering away, she

wouldn't be so sure Cat could handle things. But she couldn't say anything, not when Mom needed Cat's help. She would tell her another time, when Mom was feeling relaxed.

Mom reached out and gave Cat a quick squeeze. Cat hugged her back.

'Tell Chicken I'll check on him soon, OK?'

Cat nodded. She shut the door gently behind her.

At the table, she gulped her eggs, which were cold, and then Chicken helped her clear the plates.

'Bath?' he asked.

Cat looked at the clock. 'No time tonight. Face and teeth.'

She scrubbed the dishes, then placed them in the drying rack. Chicken came out of the bathroom in jammies, shirt on backwards.

'Let me see,' she said.

He opened his mouth wide to show Cat. She checked behind his ears.

'Good job. Do you want a book?'

'No!' said Chicken.

Cat raised her eyebrow. 'No book?'

'I don't want *a* book. I want ten books,' he answered, grinning.

'One book! And only when your head touches the pillow.'

He was already running, sock-feet slipping on the wood floor. She gave him a head start before chasing after him, skidding down the hall.

'I won!' he said when she came in. His blanket was pulled up to his chin and he held a Caterpillar & Chicken book, the same one he read on Clement Street.

Cat smiled. 'Scoot over.'

She opened the book.

THE BIG TRAIN TRIP

CHICKEN:
I want to go to the trains!

CATERPILLAR:
We will take a big train trip.

(Caterpillar and Chicken arrive at the train station, Caterpillar pulling all the luggage.)

CATERPILLAR:
I will buy the tickets for our big train trip.

(Caterpillar buys tickets.)

(Caterpillar and Chicken sit on the benches at the train station.)

CONDUCTOR:
All aboard!

CATERPILLAR:
Let's go, Chicken! Let's go on our big train trip!

CHICKEN:
No.

CATERPILLAR:
We are taking a big train trip.

CHICKEN:
No!

CATERPILLAR:
Don't you want to go on a big train trip?

CHICKEN:
NO!

CATERPILLAR:
You said you wanted to go on the train!

CHICKEN:
I wanted to go TO the trains. I do not want to go ON the train.

(Caterpillar looks at train tickets and imagines money flying away.)

(Caterpillar and Chicken sit on a bench with luggage around them. Chicken is happy, looking at the trains and holding an ice-cream cone. Caterpillar looks furious and has a dark grey scribble above her head.)

Cat glanced at Chicken, who had fallen asleep as she read. He gripped his plastic shark in one hand. She looked at the book cover. Back when Chicken was in pre-school, he loved trains more than anything. He'd asked the same thing – to go to the trains – and Mom bought tickets. At the train station, Chicken was a bubbling-over kind of happy. But when they'd tried to board, Chicken had what Mom called an epic meltdown. Same as in the book – he wanted to go *to* the trains, he did not want to go *on* the trains.

Cat flipped pages to the one where Caterpillar was furious, a charcoal cloud scribbled over her head. In the newer books, Caterpillar wasn't ever angry. She was always sweet and kind, never even frustrated, no matter what Chicken did.

In real life, the train day had been the opposite of funny. In the station, Chicken screamed, and Mom was the human version of a grey scribble cloud. Cat had figured out that Chicken hadn't wanted to take a trip. He'd wanted to watch the trains go by. That's what Mom meant when she called Cat the glue. Errands, making dinner, and packing suitcases were only part of it. Cat was the problem solver,

the one who knew Chicken well enough to know the difference between what he said and what he meant.

Chicken dug his bony elbow into Cat's ribs. She rolled away, listening to his slow breathing. The closet door had been flung open, probably when Chicken picked out his pyjamas. She needed to pack. She'd get up and do that soon, but for now she would close her eyes. It had been a long day, and she needed a minute. The foghorns on the Golden Gate Bridge bleated their different tones. Cat listened for the pattern. Even with the thickened summer fog, even though Cat couldn't see it, she knew the little red light glowed on.