

GRAFFITI JUNGLE

Ele Nash



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ONE

Della Wiskin decorated her list of top ten cats with sketches of paw prints. Her long black hair spread across the living room carpet like a storm cloud. This was Della's space. She was marking her territory.

'That girl!' Mum seethed as she left Gigi's bedroom. 'Why does getting dressed have to be such a performance?' The light wrinkles gathered more tightly around her eyes as she glared at her beeping phone.

'I've decided on my Top Ten,' Della said, putting down her very best pen. She glanced longingly at the empty armchair beside her. 'Tabby cats are number one.'

'Well that's great' Mum said, pocketing her phone like she was pocketing something squirmy and alive. Della nodded sadly but Mum hadn't been listening to her. 'Your dad just texted. He has to work overtime at the vet's.' She sighed heavily. 'He can't have you until late tomorrow.'

Was it so bad to be stuck with Della an extra day? The cornflakes she'd eaten for breakfast began to curdle in her tummy.

'I can still go to Dad's.'

Dad's flat was two bus rides away on the opposite side of the city to Mum's. Della spent half her time there, watching non-stop cat documentaries. The walls were painted white, like these walls, but they were clean which made them colder and hard. There were no pets because Dad said he didn't want to come home to more animals after working with them all day. Della used to help at the vet's too – until she accidentally let two dogs, a pregnant three-legged Persian cat and a sickly tortoise escape.

'I'm old enough to sleep at Dad's by myself.' Della hoped Mum would wrap her in a hug and say 'I want you to stay here'. Nothing had felt right since Mackerel went missing. A familiar empty feeling prickled from Della's palms to the soles of her feet.

Mum flopped onto the dining chair. ‘Eleven is *not* old enough to be in a house all night by yourself.’

‘What about in a flat?’

‘Della!’ Mum took a sip of tea – then another. ‘I have to go somewhere this morning. Auntie Li and Joram were going to look after Gigi for me but you can now – Riley will help too.’

‘Why Riley,’ Della moaned.

‘This is his home too, Della.’

‘Juice,’ Gigi said, appearing from the bedroom wearing only a nappy. Her hair was frizzy and matted at the back, a perfect nest for birds.

‘What do you say, Gigi?’

‘Now,’ Gigi said.

Della started to laugh.

‘Don’t encourage her,’ Mum snapped.

‘Where are you going anyway?’ Della asked, heading to the kitchen to get Gigi her juice. Gigi followed, clutching her toy elephant against her bare chest.

‘Oh, nothing to worry about,’ Mum said, airily. ‘It’ll be nice for you three to spend some time together.’

Gigi and Della blinked at each other. Della could almost hear Riley’s snort of laughter from that awful flat he lived in with his mum.

Della forced a smile. ‘We’ll be fine, won’t we?’

Gigi slurped the sippy-cup and picked up something off the floor. ‘Meows,’ she said, and started sucking the toy mouse.

‘Oh no, Gigi. That’s Mackerel’s! Don’t suck it!’

Della grabbed the mouse and put the manky thing in her pocket, to keep it safe for when Mackerel came home.

‘The weather guys might actually have it right,’ Mum said, staring out of the window. ‘I think it will snow. I can always tell.’

Outside, the sky was a sheet of unpromising grey. From here, Della could see the identical block of flats next to theirs and the labyrinth of terraced houses beyond that. Their block was positioned on a steep hill. The main road snaked away towards the city, a distant mesh of uneven shapes.

Della’s eye was caught by a flash of gold near the pub carpark below. The wall was covered in graffiti – the entire city was covered in graffiti. Some of it was proper art, street art, by the Graffiti Godfather, Banksy. But not the pub wall which was covered in scrawled writing and tags – and the missing cat posters Della had put up.

There was the flash of gold again, close to the bins. Was it Mackerel? Della stood on tiptoes and could just see the back half of what looked like a cat. It was the colour of the sand at Weston-Super-Mare and had the oddest-looking spotted bobbed tail. Not Mackerel. She was stripy grey, the colours of the stormy sky, and her tail was long and fluffy.

Gigi was waving her cup at Mum.

‘Fank yoo,’ she said, juice dripping on the floor.

‘Good girl, Gigi!’ Mum, eyes suddenly bright, turned to Della. ‘How about we try something with the broccoli? It needs eating and I’m sure I read somewhere you can replace flour with broccoli.’

Della loved baking with Mum. But Mum had strange ideas that always left a stranger aftertaste.

‘How about,’ Della said slowly, ‘chocolate cake.’

Mum's eyebrows shot up and she looked for a moment quite young and pretty. 'Yes,' she said, kissing Della's surprised cheek and striding purposefully into the kitchen. 'Chocolate broccoli cake! What a fantastic idea.'

The sound of keys in the lock spared Della having to think about making a broccoli cake. Riley strode into the flat with about as much grace as a new-born giraffe.

'There isn't room for you to sleepover,' Della said before she could stop herself. 'I'm staying tonight.'

'My home too,' Riley said, sliding off his trainers. He left the revolting things in the middle of the carpet – on *Della's* space of carpet – and slumped on the armchair. 'Not only yours.'

Without Mackerel, the flat didn't feel like it was her home at all but she wasn't going to let her step-brother know that. 'Well, I have to stay but you can go back to your mum's.'

'Chill, Duller.'

He knew she hated him calling her Duller. Like any self-respecting cat, Della sharpened her fingernails into claws and scratched his eyes out.

She didn't, of course.

But she might yet.

'Where's me breakfast?' he said. Riley talked in warm, slow vowels like his and Gigi's dad, Jack. 'I'm starving.'

He stretched out his long skinny legs. There was a smear of mud on his jeans and his socks didn't match.

Mum came into the living room and gasped.

The walls, a grubbyish white, were now covered in freshly-drawn graffiti.

'Gigi following in me footsteps then?' Riley liked to think of himself as the next Banksy. He was actually a pretty good artist – though Della would never have told him that either.

‘Where is the little...? Gigi? Gigi!’ Mum swept into Gigi’s bedroom.

‘It’ll wash off,’ Della ventured.

Riley, oblivious to the tension, said: ‘Careful if you go out.’

Della narrowed her eyes. ‘Why?’

‘A beast is loose in Ashton Court.’

Mum, muttering about Gigi under her breath, stormed out of Gigi’s bedroom and into hers and Jack’s.

‘Let me guess,’ Della said, rolling her eyes. ‘The beast is Mackerel.’

Riley smiled but it was a mean smile. ‘Probably is. She not home yet?’

‘Not yet,’ Della said, then tried to sound less defensive. ‘She’s just got shut in somewhere.’

Riley raised his eyebrows. ‘Telly said the beast’s as big as a dog. Could be a leopard. Leopards love eating bratty girls.’

‘It will be eating you first seeing as you live just by Ashton Court.’

Mum puffed out of her room and started ransacking the coats cupboard. ‘Gigi,’ then trying to sound less cross, ‘come out now.’

‘Maybe Gigi’s been got by the beast,’ Riley said, his eyebrows even higher.

Della thought of the strange bobbed tail she’d seen earlier and glanced out of the window. But there was only a blue carrier bag fluttering amongst the pub bins.

‘They wouldn’t,’ Della said, thinking hotly of Mackerel somewhere out there, alone. ‘They wouldn’t let a beast – a leopard or *anything* – run around the city anyway.’ Della remembered the beautiful Asiatic lion she’d met on a school trip to the city zoo. He’d been endlessly pacing until Della started talking to him. Then he’d flopped down right against the glass of the enclosure, right in front of her, and sun-bathed on the scented straw. ‘The only wild cat at the zoo is the Asiatic lion

and they'd be sure to catch him again. They're the most endangered large cat species in the world, you know.'

'OK, cat encyclopaedia,' Riley sneered.

Mum swung about the room. 'Gigi, come out now. And would you two stop going on about lions and beasts.'

'Anyways,' Riley said, ignoring Mum's bad-tempered attempts to search behind the curtains. 'The zoo reckons none of their animals are missing. So who knows where the beast has come from. Maybe it doesn't belong anywhere.'

'Everything belongs somewhere even if they're lost.'

'Not like it could survive long out there, mind. Be shot before it kills some little-un.'

'Shot?' A stabbing pain pierced Della's chest. 'Oh! That's horrible. It's not the wild cat's fault it's lost.' Riley smirked and Della narrowed her eyes. 'I bet you're making the whole thing up.'

And then Della noticed Gigi, hiding behind the chair Riley was sitting in. She was still drawing.

'Uh, Mum,' Della said.

Gigi was using Della's pen. Her best pen... which was waterproof.

Mum, hands on hips, stared down at Gigi. 'What do you think you're doing, little lady?'

'Proper art, Gigi,' Riley said, getting up off the chair and out of Mum's livid line of fire. He darted over to the kitchen and started pulling out half a loaf of bread.

'I don't think that'll wash off,' Della said.

'Give me the pen!' Mum snapped.

Gigi's cry was a roar. Mum managed to pull her out from behind the chair and hoick her up onto her hip. Riley held the box of eggs. Della tried to take them from him. 'Mum wants to bake with those.'

Gigi still clutched the pen. Riley, though, let go of the egg-box. Taken by surprise, Della knocked the lid and the eggs smashed on the floor.

Mum thrust Gigi at Della.

'I have to go out now. I'll be back after lunch. There's plenty of food in the cupboards. Just make sure Gigi eats something green – and jelly doesn't count. And get this flat tidy by the time I get back.'

'I've got the footy match to go to!' Riley grumbled.

'I'm not looking after Gigi by myself,' Della whined.

'That's enough,' Mum barked. 'Call on Auntie Li and Joram if things get too difficult.'

'We'll manage,' Della glared at Riley.

Riley shoved the last slice of bread in his mouth just as Mum left, slamming the door behind her.

'Let's hope the beast doesn't get her, eh?'

Della scowled wondering, if she was a wild cat, who she would eat first.

TWO

After Riley called her Duller for the fourth time, Della left him to clean up the kitchen on his own. She and Gigi took charge of organising their bedroom instead.

‘See how much better it is now?’

Della made a slow sweep of her hand around their bedroom. It was really Gigi’s bedroom with a second-hand bed shoved against the wall for Della to sleep in every other week. Della had never minded, never noticed before, how forlorn the bed looked because Mackerel had always been there to cuddle up with.

Gigi sucked Fanty’s ear. Della chewed her lip – she needed Gigi on side if she was ever going to give up the waterproof pen. Where had she hidden it? Della glanced at the Little Mermaid bedroom clock. An hour of baby-sitting left. Where had Mum gone anyway?

‘Maybe she’s gone for good,’ Riley said when Della entered the little kitchen carrying Gigi. It was decently tidy – though the broken eggs had left a white smear where they’d spattered the carpet.

‘Don’t say that. Are those sesame seeds I can smell?’

‘Found these in the cupboard.’ He pulled out a tin of *barazek* cookies. ‘Guessing Auntie Li gave them us.’ Riley pulled a face at Gigi and she laughed.

Della’s mouth watered. Unlike Mum, Auntie Li could cook. Auntie Li wasn’t a real aunt to any of them. But she insisted they call her that because all her own nieces and nephews, her entire family except for Joram, were far away in another country.

‘Baz-rack!’ Gigi said. Her smile was full of stubby teeth.

She grabbed one of the biscuits in her mucky fist and wriggled to get down. Della put her on the clean-ish floor and took a cookie too, inhaling the delicious buttery smell, before texting Mum:

‘Everything is good here. The flat is TIDY!’

Riley, having read the text over her shoulder, said: ‘You’re a keen-bean.’

'I'm not,' Della hissed. 'And anyway, *you've* cleaned the kitchen.'

Gigi was busy carefully placing Fanty in her toy pushchair – and dropping fresh crumbs all over the floor.

Riley shrugged. 'Just wiped a cloth cross the worktop. Trust me, compared to our ma's flat, this place is spotless. And don't bother about lunch. I found something behind the toaster.'

'Gross, Riley. I'm not eating anything that's been stuck behind the toaster.'

He tugged at his jeans pocket. The jeans were too small. All of Riley's clothes were too small. 'So you don't want this then?' He held out a £10 note.

'Riley! Where did you find that?'

'I just said: *behind the toaster.*'

'We can't spend it. Mum'll go spare. Maybe she hid it there for shopping.'

'Who hides money behind a toaster? Nah, it's been lost back there. Let's go get chips.'

Della's stomach rumbled extremely loudly. Or was it Riley's? 'I don't know...'

Della's mobile buzzed with a reply from Mum. '*The traffic is terrible and I'm running late. I'll be home in a couple of hours.*'

Della blinked at the screen. 'A couple of hours?'

'Probably an excuse,' Riley said, crunching on another cookie. 'She's got a strop on 'cos you're here, most likely.'

Della whirled. 'She's stuck with you too.'

'Chill, Duller.'

The urge to scratch out his eyes was overwhelming. She dug her nails in her palms. '*It's Della!*'

'Whatever, Dell-*argh*. Any rate, I'm meeting me mates before the footy.'

'But...'

'I'm not missing the match! It's City versus Rovers.'

‘But what about,’ Della side-eyed Gigi, now happily feeding Fanty the last cookie. The tin was empty. ‘I’m not old enough to babysit.’

Riley snorted. ‘You’re hardly a babba. You can watch the little-un for a couple of hours. Ask Auntie Li to help – or Joram. He’s your boyfriend, isn’t he?’

‘No, he is not!’ Della said and snatched the £10 note out of Riley’s hand. ‘Gigi and I are off to the chippy. Come on, Gigi.’

‘See you down there,’ Riley said, snatching the note back again and rushing out the door.

‘Riley!’

Gigi wheeled her toy pushchair to the front door and glowered up at Della.

Della sagged. ‘Do you have to bring that?’

Gigi nodded.



Dressing Gigi in the red all-in-one with attached mittens was a little like muzzling an angry dog. Getting Gigi and the toy pushchair down the stairs was like tempting a stubborn horse with only a rotten carrot. Della had recently studied analogies in English. She was pretty good at them. They had to take the stairs, even though their flat was on the eighth floor; Gigi hated the moaning sound of the lift – moaning like Jack and Riley when City lost the footy.

Riley waited for them outside the chippy. His cheeks were pink. Looking at his bare arms made Della shiver.

‘It’s freezing,’ she said, wrapping her coat tighter. Gigi looked like a puffed up red starfish in hers. She rattled the little pushchair to a stop at Riley’s filthy trainers. ‘I’m starving. What do you want?’

‘You took too long,’ he said.

‘You try getting her out of the flat quickly.’

His eyes slid sideways, to a group of lads wearing scarves in the City’s colours. They chucked chips at each other. ‘The money’s gone,’ he said with a wince.

Della grew suddenly hot. ‘What? How? What?’

Gigi picked up one of the chips off the floor and ate it before Della thought to stop her.

‘Mickey took it. Just now.’

‘Mickey?’ Della expected to see Mickey legging it. At thirteen, he was forever in school detentions and was even known to the police. ‘Well that’s great,’ Della groaned, clutching her empty stomach.

Riley shrugged an apology. ‘Listen, I’m going to hang with me mates now. You go back to the flat and bake some magic. See you after the match.’

They both watched Gigi as she picked up another two chips off the floor. She fed one to Fanty and stuffed the other one in her mouth.

‘You’re going to the game like that?’

He shrugged down at his bare arms. ‘If our da ever texts me back. He’s got the tickets.’

‘Oh, here.’ Della took off her denim jacket.

‘Thanks.’ Riley glanced over at the boys then quickly put the jacket on. ‘See you, young-uns!’

‘Don’t hurry back,’ Della said, meaning the exact opposite. Gigi quickly shoved Fanty’s chip in her mouth. ‘Back to the flat for broccoli cake?’

Gigi held up her arms. ‘Carry.’

Della staggered back up the hill carrying Gigi and the toy pushchair. The painted terraces were all grey and the block of flats loomed darkly under a threatening sky. Even the usually green park beyond was like steel. The only colour in the place was from the graffiti, kids wanting to mark their

territory. Riley's name was amongst them – well, not his name but his tag-name: Rt (read it like ar-tee). R for Riley and t for... Della had no idea. Unlike most of the tags along the pub wall though, Riley's came with a painting. Mackerel had her own spray-painted portrait. Della's missing cat



posters fluttered around it.

'It's a concrete jungle, Gigi,'

Della said. For a moment, the

graffiti appeared to grow,

choking the place like ivy.

Painted trees and word vines

climbed up the concrete walls.

One day, maybe graffiti would reach the eighth floor and devour their flat. 'A graffiti jungle,' she

said and looked to Gigi for confirmation that this was her

best analogy yet – or was it a metaphor?

'Pleece,' Gigi squealed, kicking her legs and making it

even harder to carry her. Gigi

loved the police because her

favourite kids' TV programme

had a character called PC Penguin. The police car worked its way slowly down the hill. Gigi waved.

The moustachioed officer waved back. Gigi sang the programme's theme tune.

Della called for Mackerel until she was hoarse. The blue bag rustled against the pub's graffiti'd wall like it was shivering. Was the animal Della saw before still around? She stopped shouting. What if it was the beast Riley was going on about? One of the bins lay on its side, black bags spewing free of the lid. But there was no sign of any beast – or Mackerel.

Della's feet dragged. The block of flats was ominously quiet; everyone was at the footy match or in the pub to watch it or indoors out of the cold.

'Can we get the lift just this once, Gigi,' Della puffed, staring longingly at the lift doors at the opposite end of the entrance.

'Meow,' Gigi said in her ear.

'Mackerel?'

Della spun back to the entrance doors.

There was a cat, standing beneath the stairwell on a small pile of blankets hidden amongst abandoned pushchairs and broken mobility scooters.

It was a large cat.

The largest cat Della had seen in her life.

And it looked very much like a leopard wearing feathers on its ears.