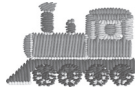


KATE SOLLY

The
**Paradise Heights
MINIATURE
RAILWAY
BUST-UP**

 **affirm
press**



CHAPTER TWO

‘Are you nervous?’ George placed Fleck’s strong latte on the table and they both looked out the cafe window. Alice slept peacefully in her pusher.

Fleck wrapped her hands around the glass, as if to anchor herself. ‘I want to say I’m not nervous. I want to say I’ve got this. But I’ve got no idea what I’m doing. I’m definitely making this up as I go along.’

‘Ah, you can come and join the club with the rest of us.’ George picked a newspaper off a nearby table. ‘Do you want to do the quiz while we’re waiting?’

‘Yes. Definitely.’

George stood at the table, flipping through the pages. Fleck loved the quiz. She loved every sort of brainteaser, from daily Wordles and Waffles, to the Friday cryptic in *The Age*. The challenge of puzzles soothed her brain and untangled her thoughts. In theory, she loved physical jigsaws too, even though her lifestyle didn’t currently support them (Alice would surely eat the pieces). But her favourite puzzle of all was a real-life mystery.

Fleck opened her ‘everything book’. On the outside, it was a very

unassuming A5 exercise book; but Fleck's everything book contained all of her drafts for greeting card messages, meal plans, to-do lists and now, her detective notes. She flipped open to the page with the sticky bookmark: the Mystery of the Purple Tags.

The paint had been her first clue. Fleck had pocketed a pebble that had been covered in the paint that had been used to graffiti George's cafe. The tag, 'TACO', had been scrawled once on George's Kitchen, and several times on the shops on the other side of Highett Road.

Fleck had taken the pebble with the purple metallic paint on it to Bunnings after school, with Sam, Norah and Alice in tow. The paint section had a large rainbow wall of paint sample cards. Sam had collected thirty-seven different cards in the brightest colours he could find. Norah had amassed seventeen, all in Snorkel Sea (which she dubbed Batman Blue). She was incensed when Fleck suggested she couldn't have a whole pile all of the same colour. Sam had lots. Norah wanted lots as well. Sam, meanwhile, couldn't possibly give up any of his paint cards because they were actually all his favourites. He could never get rid of his favourites. Not any of them.

Sally the paint specialist wore a green apron covered in gold pins. She gave Fleck a conspiratorial wink and told her not to worry. Then she had told Fleck that the purple stone looked like car paint, not house paint, and that they didn't stock it in purple.

If Fleck were more creative, she would make her everything book beautiful. She had seen a lot of aspirational reels on social media of bullet journal design. They always seemed to pop up on her phone when she was feeding Alice late at night. They were all inky pens and washi tape and calligraphy and stickers. Apart from the occasional colourful title using Sam's textas, Fleck's everything book was rather plain, aesthetically speaking.

The notes Fleck made after her visit to Bunnings were in blue biro.

She supposed she could have dressed them up by cutting out little hearts from the paint sample cards – which Norah and Sam had swiftly abandoned on the car floor – and pasting them in. As it was, the only thing stuck on the page was the pink duck sticky note, and that had nothing to do with the case. It was only there because Fleck had shoved it between the pages when it had fallen off the fridge. And she still hadn't got around to chasing it up. Argh.

George frowned at the newspaper. 'I can't find the quiz.'

'Did you check the lift-out?'

'Ah!' George walked across to the bench by the window where the lifestyle supplement lay and began flipping through it.

Fleck ran her thumb over her handwriting. She didn't write in calligraphy and she didn't use decorative flourishes, but she still found this page beautiful in its own way. It was satisfying information. Delectable data. It was a record of an activity that brought her joy.

The notes for the next section were written up in green ink. Fleck had chosen a quiet time of day to visit Supercheap Auto and she hadn't brought the kids with her.

'I reckon you're looking at Daytona Violet right there.' The man in the paint section was short and stocky and his name tag read 'Phil'. He squinted at the rock a moment longer, then moved to the shelves. 'Let's see if I'm as good as I think I am.' He scanned the small pots as he spoke. 'You're not going to find many cars on the road these days that aren't white, black, silver or grey. You've got your reds and you've got your blues, but they're only maybe twenty per cent. So if you're talking about purple or green or orange, you're talking about one, maybe two per cent of cars on the road. Not each. All together those colours are two per cent.' He pulled some pots off the shelf. 'Something like this is what we call a hero colour. It's attention-grabbing, but it only ever sells in lower numbers and it'll only be available for a few years.' He held up

the pots. ‘So here we’ve got BMW Daytona Violet, Midnight Plum and Passion Berry Pearl. Let’s see if I’m right.’ He unscrewed each pot and painted a small stripe onto a sample strip. Then he held the strip against the rock.

‘It’s definitely that one.’ Fleck pointed to the first streak.

Phil grinned broadly. ‘What did I tell you? Daytona Violet. You’ll find this one on BMW M3s and M4s.’

‘Okay. I’ve got a weird question for you.’

‘Shoot. I love weird questions.’

‘Is this the sort of paint people might use to graffiti a wall?’

Phil snorted. ‘Maybe if they’re rich and stupid. This sort of paint costs three or four times the price of normal spray paint. I don’t know why you’d use it to tag a wall. Bit of a waste if you ask me.’

Fleck had spent a lot of time looking at cars after that. She’d noticed purple cars and learned what BMW M3s and M4s looked like. But she’d never spotted a purple BMW.

George smoothed the quiz page open. ‘Okay, let’s look at what we got here. One-pointers. Let’s go. “Which Australian animal is renowned for leaving uniquely cube-shaped droppings?”’

‘Haha. Wombat!’

‘Wombat is correct.’

Fleck cast another look out of the window. Not there yet. She gazed across the street at the shops on Highett Road: the café on the corner where Dima worked occasionally, the vacant shop, the Rotary Recycle op shop, the takeaway pizza shop and the other fish and chip shop (the good one was on Peppercorn Street). With the exception of the op shop, they all had purple graffiti on them. They all had campaign posters for the upcoming state election, too. Even the empty shop had a campaign poster in the window. And the side wall of the café had a large placard on it, the size of a real-estate ad. The café, beside a small car park and

playground, was the last building of the strip. The six-foot-tall headshot with its bold writing smiled benevolently at all the city-bound traffic on Highett Road. Nathan Garland for Ashthorn.

‘Right. Question two is hardly worth reading but here we go. “What kind of animal is AA Milne’s Eeyore?”’

‘Ugh. Too easy. Donkey. Next!’

Fleck had kept a watchful eye while she was at the train station or park or any places where graffiti tended to be. She was looking for the ‘TACO’ tag. It wouldn’t have been hard to spot. There was something amateur about it. It seemed far too legible to be a tag. But there were no ‘TACO’ tags anywhere. The only place they seemed to exist was on the Highett Road shops. There were none even on Peppercorn Street, the smaller perpendicular street which hosted more shops.

‘Okay. Question three is a bit trickier. “Which instrument is largest: bassoon, oboe or piccolo?”’

‘Oh. That’s tough. I mean, I know it’s not piccolo.’

‘Yeah, the clue is kind of in the name there.’

‘But bassoon or oboe? Which one is the bassoon again?’

‘It’s the musical instrument.’

‘Oh yeah. Thanks. Big help.’

‘Don’t look at me! I don’t know this one.’

‘I think the bassoon is big. It sounds big.’

‘You don’t know what a bassoon is, but you know what it sounds like?’

‘No, I mean the name sounds big!’

‘Okay. Let me check. Bassoon is right!’

Fleck looked out the window again. ‘Heads up. Here he is.’

The car pulling into the space outside George’s Kitchen was like a giant ad for Nathan Garland. It looked similar to the graphic on the campaign poster, with the same headshot of Garland in a suit

and tie, the same bold block letters spelling ‘NATHAN GARLAND, CANDIDATE FOR ASHTHORN’, the same cursive font spelling ‘Getting it done’. It was one of those vinyl skin decals that covered the entire car. Nathan Garland himself got out of the car, looking ruddier and more unkempt than his campaign photo. He was talking on his phone as he walked towards the cafe.

‘No. No. I’m telling you, we’ve got to—no. No, I need you to listen. Yes, well, Head Office are a bunch of—They are. They’re a bunch of—no. No. Just get it done, okay? Okay? I’m hanging up now. Goodbye. Goodbye. Get it done.’

Nathan jabbed at his phone and then looked up as if surprised to discover himself in the cafe. He blinked and put his phone in his pocket. The cafe was small, the size of one room, and Fleck and George were the only other people in it. Nathan pointed at Fleck and squinted, head tilted to the side. ‘Are you Sandra from the Wattle Park Residents Association? Are you the one who emailed me to set this up?’

Fleck smiled politely. ‘I am the one who emailed you.’

Nathan sat down across from Fleck. He turned to George. ‘I’ll have a full-cream magic. Do you know how to make a magic?’

Fleck had to credit George. He said, ‘Coming right up!’ with perfectly friendly intonation. There was nothing in George’s smiling bearded face that betrayed what Fleck knew he must be thinking: *arrogant prat*.

Nathan turned to Fleck. ‘Okay, Sandra, let’s make this quick. I’m sorry I was late to get here. Musbrook Highway was down to one lane of traffic because this government insists on pouring taxpayer money into white elephant infrastructure projects in areas that are already over-serviced while neglecting growth areas and public transport deserts. Meanwhile, it’s impossible to drive anywhere without sitting in gridlock for half an hour. Mismanagement is what it is. Classic mismanagement.’

‘I’m not Sandra, by the way. My name is Felicity. You can call me Fleck.’

‘Wait. You’re not Sandra? What’s going on?’

Fleck sipped her coffee. ‘I wanted to talk with you about something important.’

Nathan hesitated. ‘Are you affiliated with the Residents Association or are you just a crank? I have another meeting in the city that I’m already late for. Are you one of the Teals trying to wind me up?’

Fleck shook her head. ‘No. I genuinely do want to talk to you about the graffiti.’

Nathan looked mildly reassured. ‘That graffiti is yet another classic symptom of government mismanagement. Did you know they’re planning to close the Paradise Heights police station in September? All over the place they are slashing funding and—’

Fleck cut him off. ‘Yes, but I wanted to talk specifically about the purple tags down Highett Road. Those are your buildings, aren’t they?’

‘They are. I’ve been directly impacted by the government’s neglect of law and order in this electorate.’

‘It’s a rather convenient narrative for you, wouldn’t you say? George was telling me about how you had a full camera crew here with you last week filming a spot for one of the current affairs shows. It seems like that graffiti artist played right into your hands. Wouldn’t you agree?’

‘I wouldn’t know anything about that. I was in Canberra when it happened. I came back from my trip to find my property had been vandalised. Look, I have places to be. What’s this about?’

Fleck looked at him levelly. Then she looked past him out of the window. ‘You have a nice car, Mr Garland. I’ve seen it all over the place.’

‘What? Okay. Sure. It’s nice.’ Nathan shifted in his seat impatiently.

‘Is it a BMW M3?’

‘Yes.’

‘And they did a good job with that ad. It covers the whole car. What do they call that? A skin?’ Fleck peered at the car.

‘It’s a custom vinyl skin. Yes. But hold on—’

‘A custom vinyl skin. So you can’t see any of the car’s actual paintwork with that on. That car could be any colour,’ Fleck said.

‘Sure. Look, if that’s all we’re here to talk about—’

‘There’s a gap, you know.’

‘What?’ Nathan looked disconcerted.

‘There’s a tiny gap. At the back. Where the number plate is.’ Fleck lifted her chin. ‘I took a look at it the other day when it was parked across the road. The skin doesn’t run right to the edge. You can see that the car underneath is purple. Actually, it’s Daytona Violet. Exactly the same colour as the tags down Highett Road.’ She watched him carefully. ‘It was you.’

‘What are you talking about? What was me?’ Nathan’s forehead was shiny.

‘You’re the one who graffitied your own shops.’

‘That’s impossible. I was in Canberra,’ Nathan said.

‘Okay, so you got one of your lackeys to do it. But you were the one behind it all,’ Fleck said.

Nathan stood up. He planted his hands on the table and loomed over Fleck. ‘Who even are you? Why do you think you can just call me in here and start accusing me of things? Those are some serious allegations you are making. What – are you threatening me?’ His voice was raised. His whole face gleamed with sweat and there seemed to be a rash creeping up his neck.

George materialised beside Fleck. He set Nathan’s coffee on the table and remained at Fleck’s right shoulder. ‘How about you take a seat, mate?’ His tone was feather light.

Nathan remained standing, but he eased back a little. ‘I don’t even

understand why this is an issue for you,' he said in a sullen voice. 'It was my property that was vandalised. Why do you care?'

'Because this cafe was tagged, too. More than once.'

Nathan gave a start of surprise. 'What? That wasn't – what do you mean?'

'That purple paint of yours is a bugger to clean off.' George had not returned to his usual station behind the counter. He stood beside Fleck, watching Nathan steadily.

Nathan sat down. He seemed to have lost all of his bluster. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. Twice. After a moment, he spoke. 'I know I said I had nothing to do with it and I have no idea of where that paint came from and of course, I stand by that assertion.' Nathan put his hands face down on the table. 'Having said that, your plight has caught my attention. I have a heart for small business owners and I would like cover any cleaning costs you may have incurred as a result of this vandalism.' He paused and sipped his coffee. 'And while I know nothing of the graffiti artist involved, I get the sense that this was a mistake on their part. I don't think they realised that your shop should be off limits. I'm certain that anybody involved would want to apologise.' He drew in a long breath and exhaled. 'But this is mere conjecture on my part, of course. I want to cover your costs. I'm hoping we can say no more about it. Agreed?'

Fleck offered a smile. 'I'm so glad you have agreed to cover costs. I went to the trouble of drawing up an invoice for you.' She produced the document and handed it over.

Nathan looked at the invoice. A slight wavering at his throat was the only indication that he'd noticed the generous rate Fleck had awarded George for his labours. 'Consider it done.' He folded the invoice in half. 'And can I get this coffee put into a takeaway cup? I really do have to go.'