A Tale of THREE TABBIES

Jane Lightbourne



Illustrations by Gary Ray Smith

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Nevada Street Press

www.janelightbourne.co.uk

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“There were hundreds of cats, and they were starving. Help was needed, and it was needed at once…”

October 2020, and the world is in the grip of the coronavirus pandemic. On the Greek island of Agrion, forest fires are raging, tourists are scarce, and restaurants are closing.

Life on the streets is tough for stray cats, Silva, Theo and Lila. The three tabbies are hungry, very hungry, and under threat from perils known and unknown. They dream of escape.

Enter two English sisters and their five children who have managed to travel between lockdowns to Agrion. The cousins fall for the three tabbies and are determined to rescue them. But how?

From the author of My Cat Called Red comes an exciting new humorous animal action and adventure chapter book, designed for children aged 8 to 12. Based on real events, A Tale of Three Tabbies is a heart-warming survival story that will appeal to animal lovers of all ages: relevant, contemporary, a tale of hope and humanity, of triumph over danger and adversity against all the odds.

A percentage of royalties from the sale of this book will go to help the very real, very hungry stray cats still in Greece.

This story is dedicated to my sister Debbie.



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Prologue

The Island of Agrion, Greece

June 2020

The kitten raised his pale nose to the air and sniffed. The breeze blew his smoke-coloured fur sideways, towards the sea. Carried on it was a distinct smell, acrid, pungent, that sifted through the resin of the pine trees, the fragrance of jasmine, the salty tang of the sea. It made the kitten's large, expressive eyes water, it hit the back of his throat, and made him sneeze.

"What's that smell?" he asked the pretty cat lying next to him.

The larger cat was his mother, a beautiful brown tabby, graced with the elegance, if not the breeding, of a Bengal, with distinctive stripes across her back and flanks. She was a little too thin, though, as they all were. "The trees are on fire," she told him.

"Why?"

"People say these forest fires are common in Greece now."

The kitten imagined the island's massive pine trees bursting into balls of flame, then turning brown and grey, before finally crumbling into soft piles of ash, the same colour and texture as his fur. "Why?"

"They say the world is getting hotter."

"Why?"

"I don't have the answers, darling. But it isn't our fault; that I do know. It's just too hot."

That was true. At times, the kitten felt as if the whole island were melting. Even the tarmac on the roads occasionally softened and bits of slurry tar stuck to his paws, burning their pads. The wind whipped up dust from the earth that stained his grey coat red. Sometimes, a raging, searing thirst took hold of him.

He couldn't think straight when that happened. It made his little head fizz and crackle. It made him want to throw himself into the sea.

"But why is it too hot?"

The brown tabby didn't answer. She just continued to lie on her side in the shade, occasionally banishing the flies that buzzed around her with a gentle swish of her tail.

The grey kitten lay down next to his mother. He wasn't thirsty now, but he was hungry, as usual. From the position of the sun in the sky he knew that in a short time dinner service would begin at the restaurant. His heart lifted just thinking of the tempting morsels that would be thrown to him by the diners – moist strips of meat; oozing, succulent, fat, juicy meatballs; tasty bones – then sank with the realisation that, because of the Plague, the restaurant had fewer visitors than ever before, and there were just too many cats at the tables. Sometimes, over the course of a whole evening, the kitten would only manage to scrounge one pizza crust, a few chips, or a single scrap of bread. One sad night he'd got nothing at all. But that was better than being attacked and having his prize stolen from him, as others had experienced, thanks to the nasty white cat who controlled the band of cats who lived around the bins opposite the restaurant. Those cats were vicious.

When the kitten went to bed hungry, it was as if some creature with sharp incisors were gnawing away at his insides. It was impossible to sleep, and once the moon was high in the sky he'd have to go out to hunt for scraps. And that was so risky. There was the traffic, of course, and the other cats, who became nasty if you invaded their territory, but then there were rumours of something else, something darker, even more dangerous…

The kitten shivered and shifted. He stretched out his front legs and then his back, extending to his full length so that he resembled a long, very stripy eel. A shadow lingered at the sides of his head, taking on human form. He shook his head to get rid of it. The smell of burning was more intense now. "Suppose the

fire reaches our restaurant and burns that down and we've nothing left to eat?" he asked his mother plaintively.

The pretty tabby blinked sleepily and nuzzled her anxious kitten. "Oh, darling – you can be so gloomy," she told him. "We're right by the sea. The Greeks will never let any fire get that far."

But the kitten wasn't convinced. For the smoke mingled with the fumes from cars and the tar on the roads, its smell eclipsing that of jasmine and the rusty iron of the sea. It followed him as he emerged from his hiding place and made his way slowly towards the restaurant, wrapping itself around the sun so that it seemed to die in a furious haze of fiery red. It hid the first star that usually reassured him because it was always there, glinting in the sky. It weaved its way around his whiskers and made his eyes blink and sting. The smoke got everywhere.

The kitten shook his head again, determined to shake the fear out of it. Fires and plagues might scare humans, but for cats it had to be business as usual.

His sister, also a silver tabby, was already among the cats waiting outside the restaurant, her dainty paws kneading the ground, her eyes green as forest ferns. The male tabby took his place next to her, among cats of all shapes and sizes: some sleek, others mangy; some older than him, others even younger, little more than newborns. He listened to the clash and clatter of plates, and to the mewing of the cats, their throats thrumming with purrs as they waited for service to start.

As it happened, on that occasion the cats only had to wait a few minutes for the restaurant to open its doors. But they would happily have waited for an eternity. Their patience was infinite, because, you see, they had no choice. It was on these things – the generosity of the food portions and of the restaurant's owner, the abundance of diners, the inattentiveness of the waiters – on all these things that their very lives depended.

Part 1

The Holiday

Chapter 1

A Legal Bubble

October 2020

"Holy Moses," the cabby muttered to himself. "This has to be the largest bubble I've ever seen." He adjusted his mask so that it covered his nose and then stepped out of his cab, hopping nervously from one foot to the other.

The group advancing towards him now consisted of five children and two women. The children had a great deal of hair between them – the majority of it red, as far as the cabby could make out – and their ages appeared to range from eight to twelve. The two women also had a quantity of red hair and one of them was wearing spectacles.



“We’re legal,” the woman with the spectacles told him with a smile.

“And I’m Justin Bieber,” the cabby retorted with a grin, folding his arms and effectively barring the door to his gleaming black cab. The two women might be a couple, of course, which would make the bubble legal, but they looked too similar for that, and the children too close in age to be siblings.

Before the driver could stop her, the other lady moved swiftly to the other side of the cab, followed by three of the children.

“Hold on a minute!” the cabby yelped.

The lady with the spectacles waved her phone in front of his face. “It’s fine.”

“Is that so?”

“I’m divorced,” she explained, “which means I’m allowed to form a support bubble, and my sister Emma and her children are in it.”

The cabby sighed and started to load the boot with the cases. This took quite a while. Finally, he shut the boot and got behind the wheel, scratching his head.

The lady who had spoken sat beside him, adjusted her mask and glanced sideways at him. She looked rather shifty behind their lenses of those spectacles that were misting up with the breath trapped by her mask. “I’m Jess,” she said. She waved her hand at the children behind her, the back of the cab already a riot of colour and noise. “Three of the kids are mine and two are Emma’s. They’ll settle down soon; don’t you worry.”

The cabby sighed. Heathrow from South-East London was a great fare, but his profit would go up in smoke if they were stopped by the police. There were seven people in his cab now. He hadn’t seen such a crowd since total lockdown had started back in March.

“Here’s a copy of my divorce certificate,” Jess told him, showing him her phone again. “I’ve downloaded it for Passport Control.”

He couldn’t begin to read the document on that tiny phone. “Lady, it’s not worth my licence-”

“Oh, please,” the other sister begged through the Perspex screen. “Lockdown

has been partially lifted anyway. This holiday is legal, we promise!"

Jess smiled happily in agreement.

The driver nodded. Who was he to ask further questions? Business was bad. In spite of the recent minimal easing of restrictions, most people were still too scared to go anywhere at all.

After a while, it became obvious the two women were related because, apart from the evident similarities in their appearance, they didn't seem to get on. They were rowing already: over the price of the cab, and the decision to get a cab in the first place, and a black cab to boot.

"I told you so, Em," he heard Jess mutter. "Look, it's ten pounds already! And we're only in Deptford."

"We've been over this," her sister retorted. "A black cab was the only option."

Clearly the two mothers were a handful, let alone their kids. While the cab was stationary at a light its driver glanced in his rear-view mirror. Four of the children were squashed together along the back seat, like sardines in a tin. The remaining child, with golden-red plaits, was sitting in the seat that backed onto his. The oldest girl was staring out of the window with a truculent expression; the oldest boy had a fringe that virtually covered his eyes. Children looked much older than they were these days, so the driver couldn't be sure how old they were. Another girl had very red, very curly hair, and then there was a boy with brown hair and large, soulful eyes. The kids' hair was so long you could barely tell boy from girl. (Though that wasn't the fault of this motley crew, the cabby had to concede, only that of the crazy world in which they were living, where you couldn't get a haircut for love or money.)

"How old are the children exactly?" he asked Jess when they'd stopped again.

Jess turned around to point out the children. "That's my oldest, Archie, with the long fringe. He's twelve," she told him. "Lucy, his cousin, the one who

looks so moody, is Emma's oldest girl. She is twelve too; almost thirteen. Then there's Jack, her brother." She pointed out the boy with the mournful eyes. "He just turned eleven. Anna, with the golden plaits, is my oldest daughter; she's ten. The girl with the very curly hair is Ruby, my youngest. She's eight."

Ruby beamed happily and waved at the cabby, shaking her long red curls.

The driver nodded. "Off anywhere nice, then?" he asked her.

"Agrion island."

"Where's that?"

"Greece," Ruby announced with pride.

The cabby nodded wisely and switched on the radio. But in spite of the soothing music, he was increasingly aware of the chaos in the back of his cab. Archie, who was clearly trouble, had smuggled in a fizzy drink and inevitably, some of it had spilled already. Behind him, the cabby could hear slurping, burping and rustling.

"Bit early for sweets, isn't it?"

Jess sighed audibly. The cabby slumped further down in his seat; his eyes fixed on the road. He made a mental note to clean the entire rear seating area once the group had left it.

The children were clearly excited – very excited – about the trip.

"One of my friends hasn't left the house for six months," he could hear one child saying.

"And we're off to Greece," laughed another.

"Greece," echoed a third.

"Shame we haven't got our phones to take photos."

The cabbie glanced in his rear mirror in time to catch Lucy trying to steal her mum's phone from her bag, while Archie bleated about TikTok.

"We decided to leave all iPhones behind, locked in the safe," Jess explained. "Lucy's furious about this. She is, after all, almost a teen. But they all need a break from social media. It's poisonous," she grumbled.

The driver couldn't agree more. The pandemic had made screen addicts of them all. He suspected his wife was addicted to Netflix, and the dog as well. But taking a load of tweens on a beach holiday with limited screens, well, that was a bold move for sure.

As far as he could glean from the conversation behind his back, the children did in fact have access to one screen that they called the Old iPad – to be shared between them. Another iPad – nicknamed the Purple iPad, also substandard, he understood, with a screen that had cracked in several places and never been repaired – had been promised but left behind; an act viewed by the kids as positively traitorous. Jack, with the mournful eyes, a rather pale, sickly-looking child, was apparently some sort of genius but didn't read, while Ruby, the youngest, read a great deal, the cabby was told by her mother, but not if there was a screen around.

The rest were a Lost Cause where books were concerned.

The cab had just crossed the river and was stuck in traffic when the children had their first fight.

"I get to choose, and we're watching The Hangover on the plane," announced Archie.

"We downloaded After," grumbled Lucy.

"You're watching neither – not suitable," Jess piped up.

"We downloaded The Hangover first anyway," Archie complained, pushing his long and somewhat greasy fringe from his eyes.

"Liar," Lucy shot back.

"Read your book instead," Jess told her son.

Archie folded his arms. "I will not. I'll just stare out of the window."

"Don't worry – he'll be reading by the end of the holiday," Emma reassured her sister.

"He won't, Em. I know my own kid."

“Mum, I forgot my book,” whined Ruby.

“You can borrow my Kindle. Put your mask on, Archie.”

“It is on.”

“Put it over your nose.”

“Please, ladies – they have to wear their masks,” pleaded the cab driver.

“Jack where is your mask?” his mother asked him.

“I left it behind,” said the boy with the soulful eyes.

The driver decided to let that go. What was he supposed to do – turn around? They were already in Chelsea.

“Anna, darling, your mask is filthy,” Jess told the girl with the long golden plaits.

“I feel sick,” moaned Ruby. Then, after a reasonable interval “Can we get some sweets at the airport?”

“You’ve got some already,” her aunt told her.

“No – just Archie, and he’s so stingy, he won’t share.”

“Only if you read on the plane.”

As if the kids weren’t enough of a trial, the two women began yet another row the moment they hit more traffic on the Hammersmith Flyover.

“It’s your fault, Em,” Jess said. “Too lazy to get the Tube.”

“What about Covid? And the suitcases and the steps?”

“It would have been good for the kids.”

“What? Covid?”

“Exercise.”

“Why is there so much traffic?” they both appealed to the driver at last.

The cabby shrugged. How would he know? Why couldn’t they just leave him out of it? Yes, the country was still in some sort of lockdown, but the traffic was as bad as ever.

He was so relieved to finally pull up at Heathrow. He couldn’t get the group

out of his cab fast enough, jumping out to help them with their bags and waving them swiftly through the revolving glass doors and into the airport. Good riddance to those crafty, screen-deprived kids, he thought, as he bent over to wipe sticky spilled drink off the back seat. The trip didn't look to be much of a holiday for their long-suffering mums. Though he had to admit, any trip might be a blessing these days. But a family getaway with five tweens and one screen – no. He felt no envy, he told himself, as he turned his cab's nose back towards the city smoke. No, no envy at all.