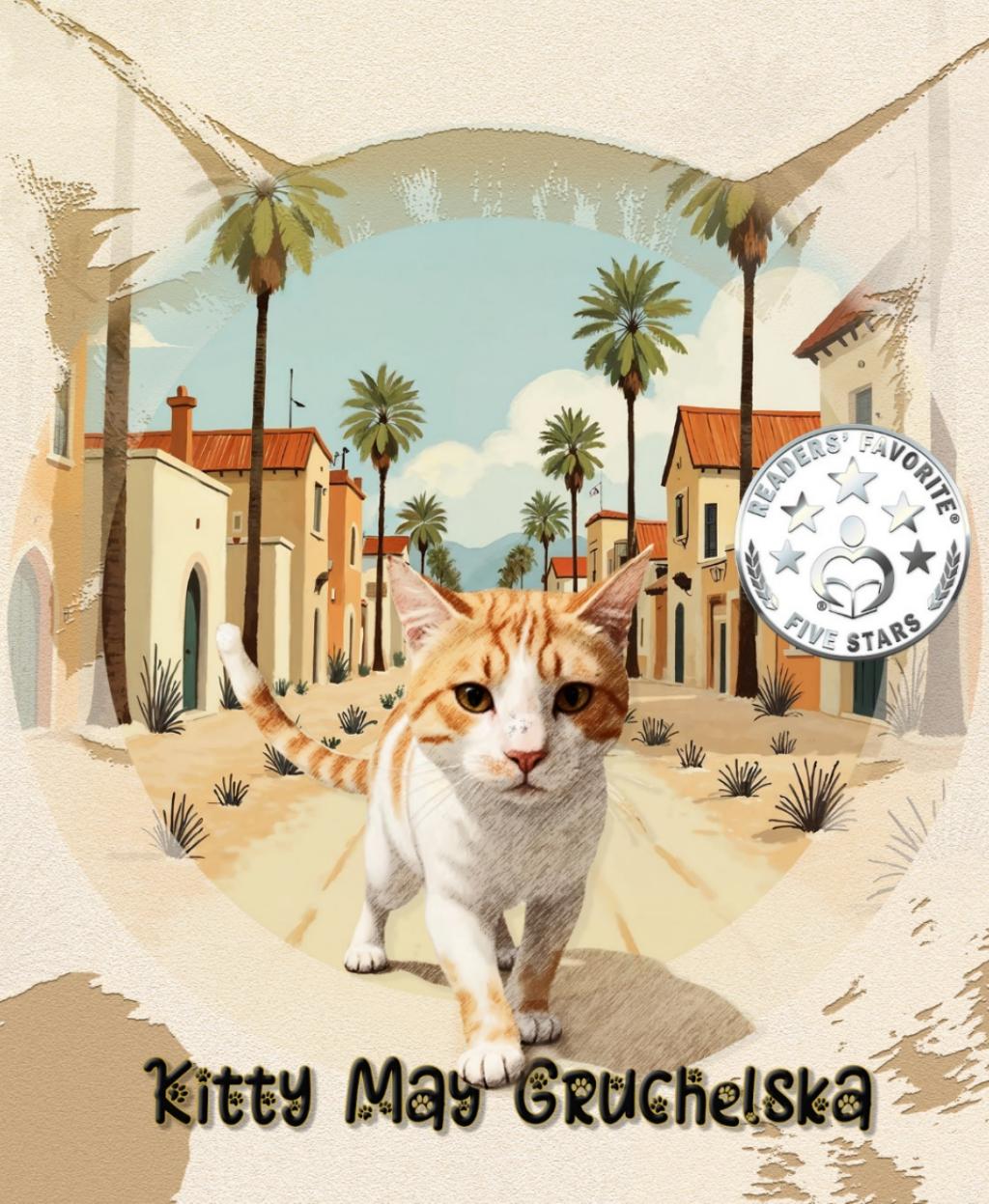


GONZALES

THE STREET CAT



Kitty May Gruchelska

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1

Street Life

In a desert kingdom scorched by the sun, there lived a cat. Not just any cat. A kitty that was about to have an unexpected adventure.

That cat was white with ginger patches, a bit like a cow, although the fur on his stomach was a dusty shade of grey. Long ago, he once had a name, but just used a simple moniker, which was Qitt.

He lived in a sprawling city. In the centre, vast skyscrapers rose like majestic giants, kissing the sky while gazing upon the many cars traversing the city like ants. There was even a building that looked like a huge bottle opener.

This Middle East city wasn't the best place when you wore a fur coat, so he sheltered where he could in a cool stairwell or hole. The temperatures were so brutal that during the day, everywhere was silent except for a few calls to prayer, the melody filling the air. At night, the city came to life and buzzed with people shopping, eating and drinking cardamom coffee.

Qitt lived in a part of the city called Yasmin, which was in the north. The district had four quarters, with a small park in the middle. There weren't many trees, just a few palms, so neither birds nor their song were common.

Street 122 was part of his territory, but he wasn't the only feline to frequent the area, which had a mix of converted Arabian villas and cube-shaped blocks of apartments. These streets were usually quiet, but recently, the hoomans had started destroying its peace with thunderous metal monsters that kicked up dust and demolished some of his favourite hang outs.

“Holy Meow-roni!”

A truck clattered past and he darted through a small gate, watching the mechanical beast pass, a chunk of rock falling from the back.

Qitt sat behind the gate with relief, although a woman emerged and wafted her hands at him. With a sigh, the forlorn feline wandered to the street, discovering he wasn't alone. A Tuxedo cat skittered from one side of the road to the other. The pattern on his face looked like a black mask that wrapped around his eyes, leaving a white nose and mouth.

“Hey, Batcat, it's gone. You can relax.”

The Tuxedo stopped on the dirt under a palm tree.

“Really?” he panted. “I can still hear it. The noise is ringing in my ears.”

Another truck rattled around the corner, causing both of them to run for cover.

“I was talking about the first one,” said Qitt.

Like most cats, his main goal in life was to patrol the neighbourhood and carry out area inspections. Every day, starting at sunset, he checked if there were any invaders or mischief makers, and encountered Yasmin's regulars on his path.

“There’s a good collection of cardboard boxes around the back of the supermarket again,” said another black and white cat with a drapes pattern on his head. “Sit in one while you can. Here today, gone tomorrow.”

“Great tips as always, Curtains Mackenzie,” said Qitt, “but you know that’s Fast Food Fred’s territory.”

Curtains swiped a paw.

“He’s usually out front anyway. That furball always gets the best bits of burger, shawarma and kebab.”

“Yeah,” said Qitt, “snapped that spot in his paws before any of us realised. Any more tips?”

A sudden noise distracted Curtains and he stopped, wiggled his butt, then shot across the street.

“I guess not.”

Qitt continued on his way, stopping to sniff an interesting aroma on a wall.

Smells like that stinking tabby, Zeus the Terrible.

I still haven’t forgiven him for scratching my nose.

A white fluffy female cat poked her head out from behind an empty plant pot. She stuck her nose in the air when she saw him.

“Ooh, sorry, Miss Snooty Butt,” Qitt said. After a quick whiff of the surrounding air, he added, “Hey, you’re not from around here. In fact... you smell like...*house!*”

“And ew, you smell like *street*.”

“Is there something wrong with that, Miss Oh-I’ve-Got-A-Bell-On-My-Sparkly-Collar?”

She flicked her head, causing the bell to tinkle.

“I have hoomans. You won’t catch me digging around in the trash for Kabsa remains.”

“Hey,” Qitt said, squaring up, “there’s nothing wrong with a bit of freshly discarded chicken and rice.”

Closing his eyes, he smiled, images of lightly spiced chicken pieces dancing in his mind.

“Whatever,” she said, turning to show her back.

While she strutted towards an alleyway by the side of a converted villa, he called out, “I bet your hoomans call you Snowy?”

She paused, huffed, then disappeared.

Batcat came careering down the street.

“Breaking news!” he panted. “Curtains Mackenzie just told me Animal Control is on the loose!”

“What? They never come here.”

“It’s...it’s really bad. They’re dropping some of us in the middle of the desert!”

“How bad can that be?”

Batcat’s body quivered.

“There’s no water, no chicken, and... no cardboard boxes. Cats that go there...never return.”

Both felines sank their stomachs to the ground, the gravity of the threat becoming all too real.

“Sometimes,” Qitt said, “I wish our lives had at least some stability. Everything just gets crazier and crazier every day.”

His stomach growled, which was normal.

“Me too,” Batcat sighed, wandering down the street.

A discarded plastic bag danced in the developing wind, twisting down the road without a care in the world. He watched it, head hung low. It was too light to contain food

and was just a cruel trick. However, Qitt had bigger concerns.

The desert often yielded its mighty power. Sometimes it roared, sending sand spinning in a storm like a giant's sneeze. Grains of sand stung his eyes like bees disturbed from their hive. It was time to find shelter to avoid the incoming sandstorm. Just in time, he squeezed into a hole under an AC unit.

While waiting, he wondered if he'd even partially fill his belly that night. There was little he could do until it abated, so an early sleep beckoned. Curling into a tight croissant shape, he nestled among the dust and dirt, reciting the feline prayer before slumber.

“Meow I lay me down to sleep,
I purr-ay Sky Cat my soul to keep,
If I die before I wake,
I purr-ay Sky Cat my fleas to take.”
(Meowthew 17:12).

Only the toughest survived. Existence offered uncertainty for most of Yasmin's kitties, but most of them looked out for one another. Little did he know how much his life would change.

2

The Hoomans

Qitt was loafing on the corner of the street, watching the world go by. Curtains Mackenzie joined him, adopting a sphynx position.

A small van cruised along the intersecting road, turning into Street 122. The two cats' ears pricked and swivelled, their eyes tracking the van's movements. It stopped about halfway down the street, which wasn't unusual. But this was no ordinary day.

Two hoomans spilled out of the van – a man and a woman. They weren't young bloggers or influencers, nothing that glamorous, but they looked older and wiser.

The van had stopped outside a villa, which had the shape of a mini-castle with a turret on each end. It had been split into a number of apartments, and the cats didn't know hoomans already lived there.

“Kitty,” said the man, “can you grab this bag?”

“Okay, Jack,” she said. “It has my English teaching materials in it.”

They heaved their luggage from the vehicle and gave the driver a tip.

“What's all that stuff?” Qitt asked Curtains.

Their heads turned left and right while watching the hoomans unload some boxes.

“I think this indicates they are going to live there. Which means...”

“Food. Please say food.”

“...we’ll need to use surveillance to determine if they’re hostiles or not. Remember, most of these hoomans aren’t our friends.”

“But they look nice,” said Qitt. “We could even gain a feeding station. They might even have...chicken!”

The villa gate was open so the two cats edged closer, catching a glimpse of the courtyard beyond, where the two hoomans stood.

“We could have a table and chairs out here,” Kitty said, looking at the space.

“When it’s not boiling hot,” Jack added, producing the apartment key.

Batcat joined the pair of felines, taking up the rear for additional safety.

“Looks like we’ve got new hoomans on the street. Willing to bet a rotting chicken drumstick they’ll put out food for us?”

Curtains lay on his side.

“I’ll wager half an old burger that they’re just like all the others.”

The new hoomans disappeared inside for a moment, then reappeared to sit on their doorstep. They held a can of soda each and began to drink.

“I’m going to think positive,” said Qitt. “You know, long ago, I had hoomans for a while. Unfortunately, they just disappeared one day, but it was nice while it lasted.”

Curtains and Batcat broke into guffaws.

“You’re not thinking of adopting hoomans again, are you?” said Curtains. “After what happened last time?”

Sheepish, Qitt batted a paw at a passing fly.

“No...no! I didn’t mean that. I just...want to give them a chance. I’m going to bet a fresh half of a shawarma that they put food out. I know it. I can feel it in my whiskers.”

The three felines loafed together, conducting their first surveillance mission while the new hoomans chatted.

“I hope we’re going to stay longer this time,” said Jack. Kitty swigged from her soda can.

“With any luck, the university will be a great place to work.”

“Promise you won’t complain?”

She batted her eyelashes.

“I always find a reason to complain.”

Qitt raised to a seated position.

“They’re breaking out a plastic bag. And you know what that means!”

Kitty and Jack put their empty cans in the little plastic bag. All three cats groaned, their bodies slumping to the dusty ground.

After a while, Kitty changed the subject.

“I wonder how those two ginger kittens near the hotel are getting on.”

“They were pretty cute and friendly,” Jack commented, putting some additional trash into the bag.

“I wish we’d brought them here so they can have a better life.”

“Maybe we should go back and scoop them,” said Jack, “although I don’t know what the other residents would say.”

Both hoomans stood, like they were ready to move.

“I’ve decided something,” said Kitty.

“What crazy idea do you have now?”

“I want an orange cat.”

They disappeared inside the apartment and closed the door. Qitt leapt to his feet in excitement.

“Did you hear that? Did you understand what she said?”

“Cat?” said Curtains.

“I swear she said she wants an orange cat.”

Batcat released a long meow of disdain.

“You’re dreaming.”

“Don’t you know what this means?” said Qitt, gesturing with a paw to his body. “I’m orange. And I’m a cat.”

Curtains slapped him on the back.

“You’re mainly white with a few orange patches. Big difference.”

“Well, I’m partly orange then. Close enough.”

Batcat yawned, rose and stretched.

“You still haven’t learned from last time, have you? We can’t trust them.”

Curtains rested a paw on Qitt’s shoulder.

“Look, we’re free range cats. We can zoom whenever we please, even down the whole street if we want. Every day is a mystery. Some days we get lucky with food, but we don’t need no hoomans to rule our lives, then discard us when it suits them. Don’t think about adopting. Save yourself the disappointment.”

His two companions walked towards the far end of the street, which tended to be quieter. Qitt sighed and followed, glancing over his shoulder. He thought he caught a glimpse of Zeus the Terrible Tabby, but it was brief. However, an anxious thought crossed his mind. What if Zeus had his beady eyes on those hoomans too?

3

The Food Mystery

Over the next few days, Qitt kept an eye on the villa whenever possible, passing by the gates in case he was right about the food supply. His stomach growled like it contained an emaciated monster, but he didn't lose hope.

One particular day, he crossed paths with Zeus. Ready for confrontation, Qitt lowered his chin and braced his back legs. To his surprise, Zeus smirked and slinked past without as much as a swat or a hiss.

Something's wrong.

He's never like this.

Needing to know the latest updates, Qitt approached Curtains Mackenzie, hopeful of an answer.

“You worry too much,” he told him. “He probably found a large portion of Kabsa in the trash.”

“I swear he’s getting food from the new hoomans. I feel it in my gut.”

Curtains swiped a paw.

“That’s probably a rancid bit of shawarma in your stomach.”

Qitt sloped off to his favourite spot behind the AC to wait for sunset. He needed to prove Curtains wrong.

Once the call to prayer had graced the air, hoomans began moving on foot or in their cars. Qitt waited until the rush had subsided. Now was the time to discover the truth behind Zeus’s smirk. He crept towards the villa, looking for evidence.

At first, everything looked normal. The gate was closed and he couldn't hear humans talking. Maybe he had made a mistake and the newcomers were just like the rest. He was about to leave when he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. Two plastic bowls. Had he been right all along?

Qitt approached, examining each one in turn. One bowl contained water and grateful for the opportunity to drink, he lapped some of it. After quenching his thirst, he stuck his nose in the other bowl.

I knew it!

There's a food conspiracy!

While the bowl was empty, it had a distinct odour of something meaty.

Bingo!

Someone is indeed putting out food.

Sauntering down Street 122, he discovered Batcat skittering between parked vehicles.

“What’s up?” said Qitt.

Batcat gave a feline kind of shrug.

“Nothing.”

Hmmm, doesn't seem like it.

What am I missing?

Curtains was none the wiser.

“The eternal optimist, aren’t you?” he said to Qitt.
“Plastic bowls mean nothing.”

He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the disappointment, but his gut niggled, and not because of rotten food. There was still a mystery.

Later that week, a new kitty appeared on the scene. It was a female tabby with subtle splashes of ginger. Qitt spotted

her checking the empty plastic bowl. Like Batcat, she was easily startled and jumped when Qitt lapped water from the second container.

“Don’t sneak up on me like that!” she scolded.

“I wasn’t sneaking.... Anyway, this isn’t your district.”

She batted a paw at him.

“Does it have your name on it?”

“Well, no, but...there’s not enough food for all of us.”

She jerked her head in the direction of the empty bowl.

“Evidently, there is.”

Without another word, she darted across the road and disappeared through a gap in a gate.

They’re all privy to it.

Except me.

And I claimed dibs on those boomans too.

The solution was clear. He’d need to stake out the premises and discover the truth once and for all. Qitt would also need to do it alone and couldn’t count on Curtains or the others. He sat behind a palm tree, patient and determined.

Nothing happened that first evening and he wondered if he was wasting his time. Tabby stopped by the gate, followed by Batcat, although Zeus was absent. It seemed most of the cat community were expecting a miracle too.

He returned the next day and started the surveillance earlier, praying to Sky Cat to deliver. The two bowls were in place and the street was free of cats. Qitt positioned himself behind the palm tree, wishing he had a chicken wing to nibble to pass the time.

Sure enough, the gate clicked, creaked and swung open. Both new hoomans emerged, Jack holding an object in his hands. He bent down and placed something in one of the containers.

Pawsome!

Caught them in the act!

Tip-pawing across the road, Qitt approached, his caution overridden by the gnawing ache in his stomach. The smell of something meaty wafted past his nostrils and he almost swooned at the aroma. Kitty and Jack noticed him.

“Oh look,” she said, “there’s a new cat. I haven’t seen him before.”

New?

I was here looong before you guys.

They eased back and Qitt took the first mouthful, his taste buds leaping somersaults in delight. It was so wet and juicy, nothing like the old fried chicken or shawarma his palate endured. The food slipped down his throat and into his stomach like a fish swimming downstream.

“Wow, he’s really hungry,” Jack said. “He’s finished the food already.”

Too right.

I haven’t eaten since yesterday.

Jack put another spoon of food in the bowl.

“He’s a real Greedy Gonzales,” Kitty commented.

Who are you calling Greedy Gonzales?

I’m literally wasting away.

Look, my bones are almost poking out.

He licked the saucy remains from the corners of the container. Jack stroked his head after he’d finished.

“I’m surprised he lets us touch him.”

Greedy Gonzales sat by the open gate, watching them enter their apartment and close the door. Once he realised that the hooman’s brief petting session had concluded, he walked away, licking his lips.

I came.

I saw.

I gobbled.

Strolling towards the sunset with a full stomach, he searched for Curtains and the others, eager to share the news and prove him wrong. Then it hit him. If he made it public in the feral feline network, all cats would visit this new restaurant to eat. Gonzales decided to keep it a secret, at least for now. These hoomans had the potential for adoption, and he might make his move in the near future.

If you loved this adventure, which is based on a true story,
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About the Author



Kitty May Gruchelska loves creating fantastical worlds for her readers, full of diverse and quirky characters. In a past life, she was probably a cat because she likes tuna, dislikes water, and frequently knocks things over, but luckily, she has nine lives. Kitty May taught in a magical desert kingdom full of sunshine, camels, and rice dishes. She loves travelling, which also inspires her to write, and now lives in Uzbekistan.