

# Tempest and Pompon

Brave kids never give up

A middle-grade story

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*Work in Progress*

## Chapter One

### The plea

- “Wallace, go ask Mum for a pet”, I tell my little brother.

Wallace is eight, three years younger than me. He’s annoying sometimes, but he does everything I ask, and he follows me everywhere. Wallace is always joyful and friendly. He sees the bright side of life and people. He’s the opposite of me. I’m careful and defensive. I only trust myself and maybe Wallace, too. I love animals more than many humans. I could DIE of joy if I had a pet, especially a cat. I know everything about cats: how they grow, what they eat, what they like and dislike, how to behave around them and how to respect their character and independence so that they trust you and come to you. Cats are free and proud; quite like me.

If we had a pet, Wallace and I would have a little friend to play with, so cute and so much fun. Mum and Dad are working at home or traveling for work, they don’t play with us much. We’re bored at home, but they always say no to a pet. Maybe this time Mum will say yes if Wallace asks.

- “Tempest, not again!” my brother grumbles.

Yep, my name is Tempest. Like a real Tempest, when the wind blows, the sky turns dark before the rainfall glues your hair, water running down your spine like a slimy snake. Mum and Dad chose my name before they could know if I would be a quiet girl with long, platted blond hair and a soft voice. I would have been ridiculous with a name like Tempest and a look like Alice in Wonderland. It turns out they were right. I don’t look like Alice in Wonderland. I have thick, brown hair that tangles like crazy, big and wild. I run everywhere I go; walking is so slow, so boring. I am skinny and I dress with leggings and tiny tee shirts. I look like a broomstick upside down.

- “Why me?” insists Wallace.

My brother looks suspicious. He thinks I’m trying to get him into trouble, but I’m not. At least not this time.

- “Because she always says yes to you. You’re her favourite.” I respond.
- “I’m not”, Wallace replies, with a frowny face.

He hates it when I call him the favourite, but Wallace IS Mum's favourite, the younger one, the only boy. Mum says yes to Wallace even though she says no to me. He pretends to cry to avoid getting into trouble. It works every time with Mum. Not with me. If someone can convince Mum to have a pet, it's Wallace.

- "Yes, you are. Go and ask for a cat. *Please*. Wouldn't you be happy to have a little cat to play with, Wallace?", I ask.
- "Yes! Yes!"
- "Then go. I will be right behind you. I'll hide", I say, encouraging.

Wallace walks up to the living room. Mum is sitting at the table, working on her computer, even though it's the weekend. Mum is always working on her computer like it's her favourite thing in the world.

- "Muuuum?" Wallace always calls Mum by dragging on the "uuuu".
- "What again?!" Mum snaps, "Do you realise that you call me every two minutes, Wallace?"

I listen from around the corner. Mum sounds annoyed; now is not a good time.

- "Hum... nothing," says Wallace, already running back to his room as fast as he can on his little legs.

Mum's in a bad mood. Mum is scary when she's mad. I should have checked before sending Wallace. Never mind, we'll try some other time. I join my brother in his room. He's sitting on his bed, arms crossed, lips tight. I can see a tear at the corner of his eye.

- "I told you I wasn't her favourite" he says. "It's all ruined now, and this is all your fault!"
- "OK. Now was not the time, but we'll try again," I reply, ignoring his attack. "Brave kids never give up".
- "We'll never have a cat". Wallace is sulking, but he's easy to distract. And I'm hungry.
- "How about baking a cake?" I try.
- "Yes, Yes!" Wallace bounces back like a puppy excited by a new game.

I may not have a pet, but I have Wallace who jumps around and plays with me. He's always up for cake, chocolate, or candies.

I lead us to the kitchen, Wallace hopping behind me. Wallace hops every time he can; he's like a mini kangaroo. Dad was born in Australia; maybe Wallace got a kangaroo gene.

- "What are you guys doing?" Mum heard us. She shouts from the living room, turning her head to check on us, but not leaving her chair.
- "Nothing," I say.
- "Baking," says Wallace at the same time. Wallace is not very good at dissimulating.

- “OK, be good”, Mum replies. She clearly did not listen. When Mum works, a bomb can explode next to her, she wouldn’t even pay attention. Dad’s the same. I don’t know what’s so interesting in adults’ computers to keep them so busy. Maybe I’ll find out when I grow up. I think it’s crazy; a pet is so much more exciting than a computer!

I close the kitchen door behind Wallace and I, so Mum can’t hear us anymore anyway.

- “OK, let’s make a yummy cake with chocolate and candies. What do you think?” I ask my little brother, sure of the answer. “But then you have to do what I say”, I warn.
- “Yes, Yes!”

Wallace hops around the kitchen like a wallaby on a sugar rush, though we haven’t eaten anything yet. He pulls out the baking tins and bowls as I ask. Wallace is always happy to help. He loves cooking. I don’t. I’m like Mum for that. I could live on chocolate, but Mum makes us eat carrot sticks instead at every lunch and doesn’t allow chocolate before mealtime.

It’s nearly lunch time, but she can’t see me. I stand on my tippy toes to grab a chocolate pack from the shelf. I can feel my mouth watering at the idea of eating the delicious milk chocolate squares. But just as I’m breaking a big piece off the bar, I hear footsteps behind the door. Mum’s coming, trouble ahead!

- “Wallace, catch!”

I throw the chocolate in Wallace’s hands just before Mum opens the door. Wallace is standing in the middle of the kitchen, holding the piece of chocolate with both hands, mouth open, eyes wide, stiff as a statue. Better that he gets into trouble rather than me; he’s her soft spot anyway.

- “Wallace!”, shouts Mum, “What’s that?”

My brother stands still, looks at me, looks at Mum. His mouth is still open, but no sound is coming out. Tears are mounting into his eyes. I start feeling a bit guilty, but he puts me in trouble sometimes, too.

- “But we want a caaaaat!” he finally cries.

Mum gasps, then laughs. She puts away the chocolate piece and sits us around the kitchen table.

- “Listen, you two”, she starts.

I’m getting ready for another lecture. Mum loves lecturing us. She holds our hands and looks at us straight in the eyes, and we’d better listen.

- “We have been through this before. I know you want a pet, but Daddy and I disagree. A pet needs care and presence. You are at school all day. Daddy and I travel a lot for work. Who will take care of this poor pet? London is a big city, with many cars and other

dangers. If you get emotionally attached to a pet and something happens to him, you will be very sad. Daddy and I don't want that."

- "OK..." I say, looking at my feet.

I knew what Mum was going to say. She always says the same thing. But she's wrong. I would be great at taking care of a pet. I know so much about animals. I can tell the race and age of a cat, a dog, even a hamster, just by looking at them. I even know what they mean to say by the noise they make. But Mum will never agree, and there is no point arguing with her. It's unfair. She doesn't understand how happy I would be if I could play with a little pet.

- "Now can I have some chocolate?" asks Wallace, who can change topic every two seconds and never misses a chance to turn a bad outcome into a new opportunity. I wish I could see the world as rosy as he does.
- "No," says Mum, "no sugar before mealtime, you know that. Worse, you tried to eat some without my permission" lectures Mum, again! "What are the two most important rules in the family?" she continues.
- "Never lie, and always speak with respect", Wallace and I answer together.

We know. Mum repeats the rules at every chance she gets. Telling the truth is how we build trust in a family, she says, and there is nothing more important than trusting each other. Mum gets furious when we mess up with the rules. And no one wants to be around when Mum is furious.

I run away to my room, hiding my tears. I want to be alone with my soft toys. For a long time, I could pretend they were real pets. Now, it's harder; I'm not a little girl anymore. I need real friends and real adventures. I don't know that my life is about to change forever.

## Chapter Two

### Climbing Trees

- “Kiiiiids, lunch’s ready!” shouts Mum.

It turns out, Mum drags the vowels just like Wallace, though she hates it when he does it to her. People don’t like having a mirror pointed at them, I suppose. We run to the kitchen. Mum doesn’t like it when we’re late. Mum does everything fast and doesn’t like to wait.

Mum makes lunch fast as well: crumbed chicken, quick spaghetti with bottled tomato sauce and carrot sticks. She puts on the side of our plates two squares of milk chocolate as dessert, the same I tried to grab earlier. Wallace and I eat silently while Mum goes back to her desk. I slide the carrot sticks in my leggings’ pocket. Tip and Tap will be happy later.

Tip and Tap are my squirrels friends from the park. Parks are my happy place. It’s super cool that we live so close to a park in the middle of London. We just have to walk down onto the street from our flat, turn left, walk half a street, and there we are. It’s so close that Mum lets us go by ourselves, which is great. Otherwise, I think I would COLLAPSE from boredom at home.

I love being outside and play with my animal friends; they’re always kind and gentle, not like so many people. I’m not very good at making human friends. I don’t fit in. I hate following stupid rules, I don’t understand the codes of fashion and I don’t know how to behave in a group. People are mean when you’re not like them. I’m not like the other girls, but that’s ok. I find other ways. I have a world of imagination to escape to.

- “Tempest, let’s go to the park, pleeeaaase!” Wallace wakes me up from my daydream.
- “Sure, why not?” I reply, I’m happy to get out of the house. On to our park we go.

I climb trees faster than anyone else. I hate when people call me Shorty. I know I am tiny for my age, but when I’m on top of a tree, I’m taller than everybody. I share tree branches with the birds. Mum says I’m like a robin. Robins are the only type of birds Mum knows. They are easy to spot with the orange patch on their chests. Mum doesn’t know much about animals; her computer is the only thing she knows well. I’m more of a parakeet, actually: curious and clever, with space to play. I know the birds in our park and their different characters, I wish I could fly like them and be free.

Trees are my friends; I give them names. Elmo is the most gigantic elm in the park. His branches start low and spread widely across the centre of the park, sheltering us from the rain and the sun. We run under his branches to play and hide. Its trunk is so big that I don't even cover half the circumference when I spread my arms around it. I calculated his age based on his size. Elmo must be about 120 years old. He is as tall as a three-story building. I have never tried to climb him to the top yet, but I will before I turn 12. I got this.

Today's a sunny day. Wallace went off to kick the football with his friends, Rory and Max. I play with Tip, my favourite squirrel, sitting on the grass. Tip likes the carrots sticks I pull out of my leggings for him. I sing "a smile and a song" like Snow White to birds and squirrels in the Disney movie. I LOVE Disney songs and I know all of them by heart. Tip likes it when I sing to him. I am as pale as Snow White, but my hair way wilder and I definitely don't dream of Prince Charming, Eek! The other kids at my school are trying to have boyfriends and girlfriends. Not for me; it's disgusting. Boys are annoying.

As I finish my song, I hear a faint "meeooowww" coming from above. I look up, but the sun shines right into my eyes, I can't see anything. Wallace has heard the noise, too. He abandons his football and runs towards me. We walk around the park slowly, trying to locate the sound. It's coming from Elmo!

"MEOW! MEEOOOWWWW", it's a kitten in distress. I must climb and rescue him. Wallace trails behind me.

I start my way up. I know I can do this, even on a huge tree like Elmo. I put one foot on a branch, one hand on a branch. It's easy, I am progressing fast.

I can hear the noise, but I can't find the cat; there are so many branches, and the foliage is so thick. I keep moving up, looking everywhere I can.

The branches are getting thinner as I climb higher. I must be careful. One foot at the time, one branch at the time...

I'm so high now, I can see the whole park and our street: the red and white brick houses, even the rooftops, the terraces. I swallow. I take a deep breath. I'm not scared, of course I'm not.

I look down. People seem small. I know everyone in our neighbourhood: Rory and Max, my best friend Sushi and her mum who buys us ice cream, the purple hair granny who always reads the same book... but who's that?

There is a stranger in our street. His face is hidden by a soft grey hat with no real shape, like a melting cake. There's curly grey hair coming out of his hat, like frizzy decorations around the cake. He must be an old man; he walks slowly, leaning forward, holding his hands together

behind his back. He wears brown baggy pants, and soft shoes, like slippers. He's sliding on the pavement as if he's ice-skating.

As he's about to turn a corner and disappear from our lives, the old man stops. He looks up, right at the top of the tree. He's looking at me! Even from that height, I can see his steely blue eyes: a piercing gaze that gives me shivers.

CRAAAACKKKK !!! AAHHHHHHH !!!

Wallace! I was so busy observing the steely blue-eyed stranger, that I forgot about my little brother following me up the tree. He needs help. He must have stepped on a weaker branch that cracked under his weight. Wallace is small, but he's muscly and heavy, a bit like a dumbbell. He falls through the branches, then suddenly stops:

AOUCH!!!

MMMMEEEEOWWWW!!!

Wallace has found the cat.

More precisely, Wallace has fallen ON the cat. He has scratches on his face and twigs in his curls, but he's not injured. Most of all, Wallace is super proud to have found the cat all by himself.

It's a black kitten; only the tip of his right paw is white, and the top of his chest, like a mini bib for a baby cat. "Come here, my sweetie", I whisper to the kitten. I sit on a branch and take him into my arms. He's too dizzy to protest. Wallace has fallen on the side of him; he's not hurt, just a bit drowsy with the fright and the shock. I hold him in my arms like a tiny baby. I pet him on the head and under the chin; I know kittens like that. He starts purring. I can tell he's feeling better. He must be seven or eight weeks old, with beautiful green eyes. The blue eyes all kittens have at birth have turned green for him. My heart is melting of love already for my new best friend.

- "It looks like a Pompon," says Wallace, looking at the white paw in the black fur.
- "Pompon! That must be your name", I say, "Good job Wallace! Now let's go down and take care of Pompon."

Wallace climbs down first, his little legs dangling in the air before reaching the next branch down, but he manages. I follow him carefully, holding the branches with one arm and Pompon safe with the other. I'm responsible for another life now. I must be careful.

We leap on the ground from Elmo's last branch. My brother has a big smile on his face. My heart is pounding with joy and excitement. We are so proud to have saved an animal. Pompon has no collar, no tattoo, no sign of any owner. He could be our cat. Mum and Dad won't like that, but I love Pompon so much already. Brave kids never give up. We must find a way.

## Chapter Three

### The secret pet

“Wallace, go check if Mum’s home, please!”

I’m walking back from the park with Wallace. Pompon is in my arms, hidden under my jumper. No one should know we have a pet yet, especially Mum and Dad. They would force us to give it to a vet or an animal refuge. He would die. I would DIE from losing him. No way. Pompon will be our secret pet until it’s safe to tell our parents. I have a plan. I hope. I throw the house keys to my brother; he catches them like a real cricket player and runs to the house. Two minutes later, Wallace opens the front door and tip toes around the hallway.

“Muuuum? Daaaad? Anyone hooooome?” he calls.

Only the ticking clock in the living room answers his calls. All clear, we can come in. There’s a note from Mum on the entrance table:

*“I went pick up Manie at the airport. Back in about two hours.*

*Be good. Love, Mum”*

Manie’s our grandmother, mum’s mum. She’s 70 years old but she tells everyone she’s 62. "I'm stuck at 62", she says. We don't know how long she'll be stuck for. Sometimes people look at her funny, but I don't know if it's because she looks older than she says, or because she dresses like a teenager of the London School of Fashion. Manie has just returned from a photo safari in Tanzania. She loves photos and travels: her living room is full of old travel photo albums. This summer, she said she'd take us with her.

It's lucky Mum’s out, but she could be home any time, we don’t have a minute to waste.

“OK Wallace, let’s follow the plan.” I say to my little brother, trying to sound calm and organised. “Can you help?”

“Yes, yes! I can, I can!” Wallace hops on one leg, like whenever he’s happy and excited.

“Great. First, let’s find something to eat and drink for Pompon” I say, leading to the kitchen. The baby cat gets wriggly in my arms. He wants to discover his new place. I cannot let him, not yet: Mum would find cat hair on the cushions, marks on the floor and carpets. We would be caught out in no time.

“Let’s close the kitchen door really well. Pompon cannot escape, otherwise we would get into real trouble, do you understand?” I warn my brother. I don’t want to lose Pompon over a silly mistake.

“OK” he responds, pushing the kitchen door closed with both hands. “And now, let’s give milk to Pompon!” he says, with a big smile.

“No, not milk: it will hurt his tummy.” I explain, “We’ll give him water instead. Kittens need their mother milk when they’re little babies. Then, they should drink water.” I can finally apply everything I learnt about kittens, I’m so happy. I let Pompon jump off my arms on the kitchen floor and pour water in a bowl. Pompon laps it quickly, with the funniest creaking noise. He’s so cute. His tiny body needs solid food too. I grab two slices of cooked chicken in the fridge and cut them into tiny pieces. Wallace and I sit on the floor, watching him drink and eat with appetite. It feels like a dream: we have a pet. It seems too good to be true.

I put everything back in the fridge precisely as it was. Dad would notice immediately if something has been moved. Dad notices the strangest things.

“No, Wallace, don’t give him that!”, I shout to my brother who’s about to give a chocolate chip cookie to Pompon.

“Why not? It’s yummy” he asks, with a frowny face. Pompon has turned to me, too. They are both looking at me with a dark look and a wrinkled nose. I try not to laugh.

“Chocolate is toxic for cats; Pompon could be very sick. Don’t let him have any. Pompon needs his own baby food, but you can eat the cookie if you want”, I say with a smile.

Pompon loses interest in the cookie and starts walking around the kitchen, sniffing the table and chairs, exploring the room. We watch him in silence. When he’s under the kitchen table, he stops, squats, and...

“Looooook! He’s doing a wee-wee on the floooooor!” cries Wallace in a big laugh, then winces: “Yuuuuuucckkk! It stinks!” The smelly pee brings me back to reality. Mum will be home any minute and I need a litter box, kitten food, and a hiding place for Pompon. Having a secret pet is complicated. I can’t panic. Brave kids never give up, it’ll be alright.

“Hold him when I clean, please”, I say to my brother, putting Pompon in his arms, “keep him snug, like a little baby.”

“Yes, yes” says Wallace, sticking his tongue out. Wallace sticks out his tongue every time he concentrates to do something new. Mum says that Wallace does everything with his tongue. Mum’s funny when she doesn’t mean to.

“Let’s hide Pompon in my room” I say.

My brother nods in silence. Pompon has fallen asleep in his arms. Kittens sleep a lot, and Pompon had a big day. We wrap our new friend in comfy blankets on my bed. With his eyes closed and his fluffy fur, he looks like another one of my soft toys. Only his little chest going up and down shows he's alive.

"I'll go out quickly to get cat litter and kitten food. I'll be as fast as I can." I say to my brother, while I'm putting all the money of my piggy bank in my legging's pocket. "Don't go anywhere: stay in my room with Pompon. Keep the door and watch him, please. And don't let him poo on my soft toys either!". "Ahahaha, OK" giggles Wallace. "I'm serious Wallace. Can I count on you?" I give my brother a severe look. He can't mess up.

"Yes, yes! Promised!" he says. I shut my bedroom door tight and start running as fast as I can. There's a pet shop only two streets away from our home. I pass it every day on my way to school, dreaming of having a reason to come in. Now I do.

"Good afternoon!" I shout, louder than I wanted, to the lady behind the counter.

"Good afternoon young lady... where's your Mum?" she asks, giving me a suspicious look. She's tall, skinny, and wears big eyeglasses. With her beige cardigan and her grey hair tied in a bun, she looks more like a librarian than a pet shop keeper. With my tangled hair and dirty tee-shirt, I look more like a homeless kid than a pet owner. Appearances are deceptive.

"She's waiting in the car", I lie, "We couldn't find a park, so she asked me to come in. We're kind of in a hurry." I continue with a grin, fingers crossed behind my back, hoping she'll believe my story. "I need some kitten dry food, and a small litter bag, please. For £18.50." I say as politely as possible, putting all my money on the counter. It's all I have. I hope it's enough. I have no idea of how much these things cost. I read all about animals, except that!

"£18.50? That's very precise, but it's enough." says the shop keeper-librarian, as if she could hear my thoughts, "Here we go young lady."

"Thank you very much! Goodbyyye!" I say, already at the door. I run back home like a guepard in a rush. Everything's still quiet. Wallace has fallen asleep on my bed, next to Pompon.

"Wallace, wake up" I whisper to my brother to not wake up our cat, "I need your plastic toy box for Pompon's litter!"

"But it will smell like horrible pee!" he grumbles, half asleep.

"We'll wash it well. Go!" I order. "I'll get some bowls in the kitchen for Pompon's food and water, and we meet back in my room in two minutes. Go!"

The front door slams as I grab the bowls in the kitchen cupboard. I freeze.

"Hellooooo! We're baaaack!" It's Mum. She's coming to the kitchen. "Oh, hi, Tempest! ... What are you doing with these bowls?"

## Chapter Four

### Manie

I stand in the middle of the kitchen, petrified. I need to think fast, yet finding excuses is not my talent.

“... I need to sort out colour beads in my room! For school tomorrow. It’s mufty day. I need to make necklaces. For charity. For my friends. It’s ok if I use the bowls for the night?” I say, too fast and too loud. I can sense a cold sweat running down my back. I feel I’m blushing.

Mum looks at me, surprised: “You? Sorting out your room?” She’s right. My room’s always a mess, with clothes on the floor, books and toys mixed up. I hate tidying up. I don’t see the point. It’s like making my bed in the morning: what for, if it’s to undo it every night anyway? Mum can’t be bothered to tidy up either, though she doesn’t like seeing the mess. Once in a while, she yells really loud and I put everything back in place, until the next time.

“If you want” Mum says. “Thanks, I’ll be quick!” I reply, running back to my room before she asks me anymore question. My hands are shaking. I hate lying to Mum. It’s against the rules and I’m a little ashamed, too, but I have no choice.

I’m so deep into my thoughts that don’t see Manie’s suitcase lying in the middle of the hallway. I run right into it, stumble, and fall flat on my face. The bowls go rolling under the buffet. Lying on the floor, all I see are two slim legs wrapped in white lace. Manie’s standing right above me, dressed in her favourite lace trousers, high heels shoes and puffy golden jacket. Who could guess she’s just come out of a plane? My grandmother’s fashion sense is her own.

“Whaaaaa Tempest! Where are you going so fast? Come here give me a hug.” Manie says “Whaaaaa” every time she’s happy, surprised, or afraid. This time she’s happy. She helps me get up and squishes me with all her strength. I feel her golden bangles pressing against my ribs and her patchouli perfume makes me sneeze.

“Athchi! Hi Manie! I’m so happy to see you! Just give me in a minute please. I need to go to my room real quick.” I say, picking up the bowls. Without giving Manie a chance to respond, I run up to my room. Wallace has brought his toy box. He’s waiting for me sitting on the floor, between the skirt of my school uniform and one shoe.

“Wallace, go to the living room to distract Mum and Manie, please, while I set up the room for Pompon. Thank you for the box!” I ask my little brother.

“But what should I say? Can you come with me?” Wallace’s nervous. We don’t want to lie to Mum but we don’t want to lose our cat either.

“Don’t say much, let them talk. Grown-ups love talking about themselves. Asks them questions, anything. Ask Manie about her trip, ask Mum about her work. That will keep them busy. You can do it. Go!”

Wallace smiles, puffs out his chest and hops downstairs. He’s on a mission, and so am I. I roll up my clothes and chuck them into the wardrobe and slide my shoes under my bed. I pour the white, sand-ish cat litter into Wallace’s toy box; it will be Pompon’s toilet. I hope my baby cat knows how to use litter, that he had a Mummy who showed him, or an owner who trained him. I’ll soon find out. I put the box against the wall under my desk, hidden if someone comes in, but easy to access for Pompon. I place the bowl of water next to my bed, on the side of the wall people can’t see it when they come in. I just need to pour the food in the second bowl and I’m done. The kitten food looks like big CocoPops cereal.

“These don’t look like colour beads!” says a voice behind me. Manie is standing in the door frame, two hands on the hip, observing me.

“Shhhhhh, Manie! Close the door, please!” I beg.

“What’s going on in here?” she says, closing the door. I thank her in my mind for playing along. Manie’s wild, but she can be my ally. I am used to doing everything on my own, but now, I think I’m going to need allies. *Meeowww*: my baby cat finally wakes up in all the noise.

“Look at what we have here!” Manie exclaims “Tempest, how did you convince your Mum to have a pet?”

“I didn’t. It’s a secret. His name is Pompon. Wallace and I found him today, stuck on a high tree in the park. Mum and Dad don’t know about him yet. Don’t say anything, please Manie. I need time.”

“Well, well, well, well! That’s a story! And how do you think you’ll get out of this young lady? Do you hope to convince your Mum to keep a cat in the house, after hiding it from her? She doesn’t want to hear about any pet! Not even a goldfish, not even a snail! And your Dad’s the same.” Manie’s shaking her head. I’m worried now. My plan doesn’t seem so strong after all.

“But if I can prove to Mum and Dad that I can take good care of a pet without causing trouble, even for a few days, they will let me keep him, won’t they?” I reply, half convinced, half asking.

“Mmmm, maybe. Not sure, my darling” she says, looking at me with pity. It scares me even more. But I can’t give up so soon. “Anyway. For now, Pompon needs to stay a secret between us” I tell my grandmother, standing back up in front of her... “like the day you lost me” I add.

“Oh. I see. We have a deal.” Manie replies, looking me straight in the eye. Manie always looks people straight in the eye.

When I was six years old, Manie lost me in the crowd of a carnival parade at the shore. She had stopped to chat with friends and did not see me following the parade, following the dancers with green and yellow giants’ heads of papier mâché, doodling in the rhythm of the drums. Once the parade was over, I was lost.

I knew that lost kids need to find a grown-up they can trust and ask for help. So, I went into a bakery shop and asked the lady to call the police to drive me back home. She looked at me with wide eyes, gave me a pain au chocolat and grabbed her phone. Half an hour later, I was dropped in a police van at the “The blue pebbles”, my grandma’s villa. “Blue pebbles” near the beach was all I knew about my address, but they found it. Now I know it’s in Folkestone.

Many was there, sitting next to the phone, shivering and drinking vodka. Manie only drinks vodka when she’s really scared. I could see her through the window of the living room. She jumped up at the bell. She opened the door wide and hugged me for a very, very long time. Her eyes were a bit wet when she said “thank you, sir” to the policeman. Then she held me by the shoulders and asked me to never tell that story to Mum and Dad: “it will be our secret” she said. Now we have two.

“Good.” I nod, with a firm look at my grandmother. “Let’s go back to the living room. You go first. I’ll be there in a minute.” I use this short time alone to give a big cuddle to Pompon. I whisper in his ear to be quiet and not worry, that I’ll be back soon. I show him his bowls of water and food, and the litter box. I make some paper balls for him to play with. He’s looking at me with his cute, baby green eyes. I don’t know how much he understands, but he seems to. I give him a last scratch on the head, a last kiss. I close the door tight and go join to the others downstairs. I miss my baby cat already.

Everyone is sitting downstairs. Mum has prepared a bowl of chips and glasses of coke for Wallace and me. It’s party time, we are never allowed to drink coke unless it’s a special occasion.

“Mum, are these new shoes?” my Mum asks to her Mum.

“Yep! Snakeskin!” Manie replies, lifting her leg up in the air for everyone to see. “It was the snake or me. I had stepped out of the jeep to take pictures of a family of lions when a cobra slid to me. His head was lifted, hissing, ready to bite. John saw it just on time: he grabbed the snake by the neck and cut off the head with his ranger’s knife. We ate it for dinner. And I made myself new shoes.”

“Snake for dinner! Yuck!” says Wallace.

“It’s not bad, a bit of a mix between chicken and fish” Manie explains.

“I don’t have snake for dinner, but I have pepperoni pizza” announces Mum.

“Yes! Yes! Pepperoni pizza!” Wallace jumps up, hopping around the living room on one leg again. Wallace loves pizza like Garfield loves lasagnes. The thought of Garfield reminds me of my own cat, alone in my room. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my heart clenching in my chest.

“Mum, can I help you with dinner?” I ask to distract myself.

“Yes, thank you Tempest. Please take the pizzas out of the fridge but wait for me to turn the oven on. I forgot my glasses upstairs, I’ll be back. I think I have left them in your room earlier.”

Before I could say a word, Mum’s already in the staircase. I watch her go, in disbelief. This can’t be. Manie looks at me. Wallace stops jumping. We are all waiting in silence for the storm to break.

*To be continued*