

Tempest's Secret

Brave kids never give up

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Chapters 1 – 3

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Chapter 1

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 follows me everywhere, jumping around and playing games. Wallace only sees the bright side of life and the good in people. He's the opposite of me; I trust animals more than humans; animals are truthful. 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. I know 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, like me.

It would be so cool to have a pet. Wallace and I would have a little friend to play with - so cute and so much fun. Mum and Dad are working or travelling for work, so 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 her.

"Tempest, not again!" my brother grumbles.

Yep, my name is Tempest: like a raging storm, when the wind blows, the sky turns dark before lightning strikes, and the thunder rages like an angry monster. Mum and Dad chose my name before they could know if I would be a quiet girl with long, plaited 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 because walking is so slow; it's boring. I'm skinny, and I wear leggings and tiny tee shirts. I look like a broomstick upside down.

"Why me?" insists Wallace.

My brother looks doubtful. 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'm not," replies Wallace 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 things for Wallace even though she says no to me. That's because he pretends to cry to avoid getting into trouble. It works every time with Mum. 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, sure of what he's going to say.

"Yes! Yes!"

"Then go. I will be right behind you. I'll hide," I add to encourage him.

Wallace walks to the living room. Mum's sitting at the table, working on her computer, even though it's Sunday. Mum's 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 now?!" 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 my brother, already racing back to his room as fast as he can on his little legs.

Mum's in a bad mood, and she's scary when she's mad. When Mum yells, even the neighbours go quiet. I should have checked before sending Wallace. Never mind, we'll try some other time. I run upstairs and 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 it's 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!" My brother 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. He hops every time he can, like a mini kangaroo. Dad was born in Australia, so maybe Wallace inherited a kangaroo gene.

"What are you guys doing?" Mum's heard us. She calls from the living room, turning her head to check on us, but she doesn't leave her chair.

"Nothing," I say.

“Baking,” says Wallace at the same time. He’s not very good at lying.

“OK, be good,” Mum replies. She clearly did not listen. When Mum’s working, a crystal ball could shatter next to her, she wouldn’t even pay attention. Dad’s the same. I don’t know what’s so interesting on 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 me so Mum can’t hear us anymore anyway.

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

“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, and he loves cooking. I don’t: I like sweets and finger food. I could live only on candies and chocolate cereal bars, but Mum makes us eat carrot sticks at every lunch and doesn’t allow chocolate before mealtime.

It’s nearly lunchtime, but she can’t see me. So, 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 break a big piece off the bar, I hear footsteps behind the door. Mum’s coming: trouble ahead!

“Wallace, catch!”

I throw the chocolate into 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 in his eyes. I start feeling a bit guilty, but he gets me into trouble sometimes, too.

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

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

“Listen, you two,” she starts. I get ready for another lecture. Mum loves lecturing us. She holds our hands, 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, and Daddy and I travel a lot for work. Who will take care of this poor pet, huh? Not your grandmother: she can barely look after you two when we’re away! Plus, London is a big city, with many cars and other dangers for animals. If you get

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

"OK..." I say, looking down. I already 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 loads about animals, and I understand them. I can tell the species and age of a cat, a dog, or 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's no point arguing with her. It's unfair. She doesn't understand how happy I would be if I had a pet to love.

"Nooooow, can I have some chocolate?" asks Wallace, who never misses an opportunity to turn a problem into a chance to eat. I wish I could see the world as playful as he does.

"No sugar before mealtime, you know that," lectures Mum again. "Worse, you tried to eat some without my permission. What are the two most important rules in the family?"

"Never lie, and always speak with respect," Wallace and I answer at the same time. 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: my sweet Lana from The Lion King, who sleeps in my arms every night, Pingy the giant penguin that I use as a pillow; Tucker, my fury spaniel who looks like Copper in the Fox and the Hound, and Old Bunny, my pink fluffy rabbit from when I was a baby. For a long time, I could pretend they were real. It's harder now: I'm not a little girl anymore. I need a real pet and real adventures. I don't know that my life is about to change forever.

Chapter 2

Climbing Trees

“Kiiiiids, lunch is ready!” Mum drags out the vowels just like Wallace, though she hates it when he does it to her. People don’t like seeing their own flaws back in others, I think. We run to the kitchen. Mum doesn’t want us to be late. Mum does everything fast, and she doesn’t like to wait.

Like everything else, she prepared our lunch quickly: crumbed chicken in the oven, quick-cooking spaghetti with bottled tomato sauce, and carrot sticks. Next to our plates, she put two squares of milk chocolate as dessert, the same I tried to grab earlier. Wallace and I eat in silence while Mum goes back to her desk.

“Tempest, can we go to the park, pleeeaaase!” asks Wallace out of the blue.

"Of course, that’s a good idea! Let’s finish our lunch, and we’ll go."

The park next to our house is my happy place. It’s so lucky that we live close to a park in London: we can just walk out on the street, turn right, walk for a minute, and there we are. It’s so close that Mum lets us go on our own, which is great. Otherwise, I think I would COLLAPSE from boredom at home.

I slide the carrot sticks into my leggings’ pocket. Tip and Tap will be happy later. Tip and Tap are my squirrel friends from the park that I tamed. Playing with animals is my favourite thing in the world: they’re friendly and affectionate - not like a lot of people. I’m not very good at making human friends. I don’t fit in. Why should I know about fashion, follow some silly rules, or behave in a certain way? People are mean when you’re not like them, but that’s ok: I find other ways to make friends and be happy.

"Mum, we’ve finished lunch. Can we go to the park now, please?" I ask as soon as I have swallowed my last bit of crumbed chicken.

"Of course, guys. Have fun. Tempest, not too high in the trees, please," replies Mum, still sitting at her computer.

I climb trees faster than anyone. I know I’m tiny for my age, but I hate it when people call me Shorty. Yet, 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, but that's because it's the only type of bird she knows. They're easy to spot with their orange patch on their chests. Mum doesn't know much about animals. In fact, I'm more like a magpie: clever, curious, and independent. I know all the birds in the park and their different characters. I wish I could fly like them and be free.

The trees in our park are my friends, too; I give them names. The biggest one is an Elm: his branches start low and spread widely across the middle of the grass, protecting us from the rain or the sun when we play and hide. I called him Elmo, obviously, like in Sesame Street. Elmo's trunk is so big that I can't even cover half of it when I spread my arms around it. At that size, Elmo must be a hundred-year-old tree, at least. He's as tall as a four-storey building. I haven't tried to climb him near the top yet, but I wanted to try before my next birthday. I'll be 12 soon. I got this.

Today's a sunny day, nice and warm. Summer will be over soon; we must enjoy it before Autumn starts. The air smells nice; it's a fun day to be outside. Wallace plays football with his friends, and I play with Tip, my favourite squirrel, sitting on the grass. Tip likes the carrot sticks I pull out of my leggings for him. I sing "A Smile and a Song" like Snow White to the birds and squirrels in the Disney movie. Tip likes it when I sing to him. I LOVE Disney songs; I know all of them by heart. I'm as pale as Snow White, but my hair is 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. But not for me, thank you!

As I finish my song, I hear a faint "meeooowww" coming from above. I look up, but the sun shines right into my eyes, and I can't see anything. Then another "MEOW!" louder. Wallace has heard the noise now, too. He abandons his football and runs to 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 wants to follow me.

Putting one foot on a branch and one hand on a branch, I start my way up. I know I can do this, even on a massive tree like Elmo. It's easy, I'm progressing fast.

I can hear the noise, but I can't find any 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 a time, one branch at a time...

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

Down below, people look small. I know everyone in our park: Wallace's friends who play football, my neighbour and her mum who buys us ice cream, the old granny with purple hair who always reads the same book...but who's that?

There is a stranger in our park. From high up, I can see him pushing the gate onto the 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 behind his back. He wears brown baggy pants and soft shoes, like slippers. He walks like he's sliding on the pavement, as if he's ice-skating.

Just when he's about to turn the street corner and disappear, the 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 !!! AAAHHHHHHH !!!

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 still small, but he's muscly and heavy, like a dumbbell. He falls through the twigs and is suddenly stopped by a big branch:

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, reaching towards him. 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, and he's not hurt, just a bit drowsy with the fright and the shock. I hold the kitten 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 and I can tell he's feeling better already. He must be six or seven weeks old, with beautiful greeny-blue-y eyes. The blue eyes all kittens have at birth are turning green for him. My heart is melting with love for my new best friend already.

"It looks like he has a Pompom on his leg," says Wallace, pointing at the kitten's white paw in the black fur.

"That's an idea! Let's call him 'Pompon', then!" I say. "Good job Wallace! Now, let's get 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 jump on the ground from the last tree 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, and no sign of any owner. He could be our cat. Mum and Dad won't be happy, but I love Pompon so much already. Brave kids never give up. We must find a way.

Chapter 3

The secret pet

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

We’re walking back from the park. Pompon is in my arms, hidden under my hand. No one should know we have a pet yet, especially Mum and Dad. Otherwise, they might force us to give it up to a vet or an animal refuge, and I would DIE of sadness from losing him. That’s not an option. Pompon will be our secret pet until it’s safe to tell our parents. I have a plan, sort of.

“Here, catch!” I throw the house keys to my brother, who grabs them like a real cricket player and runs to the house. A few seconds later, Wallace opens the front door and tiptoes around the hallway.

“Muuuum? Daaaad? Anyone hooooome?” Only the ticking clock in the living room answers his calls. There’s a note from Mum on the buffet in the hallway:

“Gone to 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 oddly: it could be because she looks a bit older than she pretends or because she always wears crazy clothes. Today, she’s coming back from a photo safari in Tanzania. Besides funny fashion, Manie loves travels and photos. Her living room is full of photo souvenirs from around the world: the pyramids of Egypt, the Taj Mahal in India, Christ the Redeemer in Brazil... Next year, she will take us with her on one of her trips – so exciting!

For now, it's lucky Mum’s out, but she could be back any time, so 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 agrees twice and hops around on one leg – he’s definitely happy and excited.

“Great. First, let’s find something to eat and drink for Pompon,” I say, going to the kitchen. Pompon becomes wriggly in my arms. He wants to discover his new place, but I can’t let him

wander in the living room. Mum would find cat hair on the cushions or marks on the floor and carpets. We'd be caught out in no time.

"Close the kitchen door really well so Pompon can't escape. Otherwise, we'd get into real trouble, understand?" I warn my brother, "I don't want to lose him over a silly mistake."

"OK," he says, pushing the kitchen door closed with both hands. "And now, let's give some milk to Pompon!"

"No, not milk. It will hurt his tummy. We'll give him water instead. Kittens need their mother's milk when they're little babies. After, they should drink only water." I explain, happy to be able to finally apply everything I learnt about kittens.

I let Pompon jump off my arms onto the kitchen floor. I pour fresh 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 a slice of cooked chicken in the fridge and cut it into small pieces on a plate next to the bowl. I make sure that food and water don't mix. Cats don't like that.

Wallace and I sit on the floor, watching our new kitten drink and eat with appetite. It feels like a dream: we have a pet. It seems too good to be true.

Once he's finished, I clean up and put everything back in the fridge precisely as it was. Dad would notice immediately if something had been moved. Dad notices the strangest things.

"No, Wallace, don't give him that!" I shout, as I see my brother about to give a chocolate chip cookie to Pompon.

"Why not? It's yummy," he asks, puzzled. Pompon has turned to me, too: both look at me now with a dark look and a wrinkled nose. It's hard not to laugh!

"Chocolate is toxic for cats: Pompon could be very sick. Don't let him have any. Pompon needs his own food, but you can eat the cookie if you want," I smile.

Pompon loses interest in the cookie and starts wandering around the kitchen, sniffing the table and chairs, exploring every corner. We watch him in silence, Wallace nibbling on his cookie. Pompon walks under the kitchen table, stops, squats, and...

"Looooook! He's doing a wee-wee on the floooooor!" laughs my brother. "Yuuuuuuucckkk! It stinks!" he winces. 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, it'll be alright. Deep breath.

"Hold him while 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 on doing something new.

“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 has had a big day. We go upstairs and lie our friend on a comfy blanket on my bed. With his eyes closed and fluffy fur, Pompon looks just like another one of my soft toys. Only his little chest going up and down shows that he’s alive.

“I’ll run out quickly to get cat litter and kitten food. I’ll be back as fast as I can.” I say to my brother while putting all the money from my piggy bank in my legging’s pocket. “Don’t go anywhere: stay in my room with Pompon. Keep the door closed 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 look straight at my brother. He can’t mess up.

“Yes, yes! Promised, promised!”

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 house. I pass it every day on my way to school, dreaming of having a reason to go in there. Now I do.

“Good afternoon!” I shout, a bit short of breath and louder than I wanted to the lady behind the counter.

“Good afternoon, young lady... where’s your Mum?” she asks, looking at me suspiciously. 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 shopkeeper. 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 parking place, so she asked me to come in. We’re kind of in a hurry.” I grin, my 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 how much these things cost. I read all about animals, except for that!

“£18.50? That’s very precise, but it’s enough,” says the shopkeeper-librarian, as if she could hear my thoughts.

“Here we go young lady,” she says, handing me the bag.

“Thank you very much! Goodbye!” I say, already at the door.

I sprint back home like a cheetah in a rush. Everything’s still quiet. Wallace has fallen asleep on my bed next to Pompon. I tiptoe into my room, looking at them both. I don’t want to wake up Pompon; he needs a rest.

“Wallace, wake up!” I whisper to my brother, gently shaking his shoulder. “I need your plastic toy box for Pompon’s litter.”

“Noooo, it will smell like horrible peeeee!” he grumbles, half asleep.

“We’ll wash it out after. Go!” I order. “I’ll get some other bowls from the kitchen for Pompon’s food and water, and we meet back in my room in two minutes.”

I hear the front door slam as I grab the plastic bowls from the kitchen cupboard. I freeze.

“Helloooo! We’re baaaack!” calls Mum, walking to the kitchen.

“Oh, hello, Tempest! ... What are you doing with these bowls?”