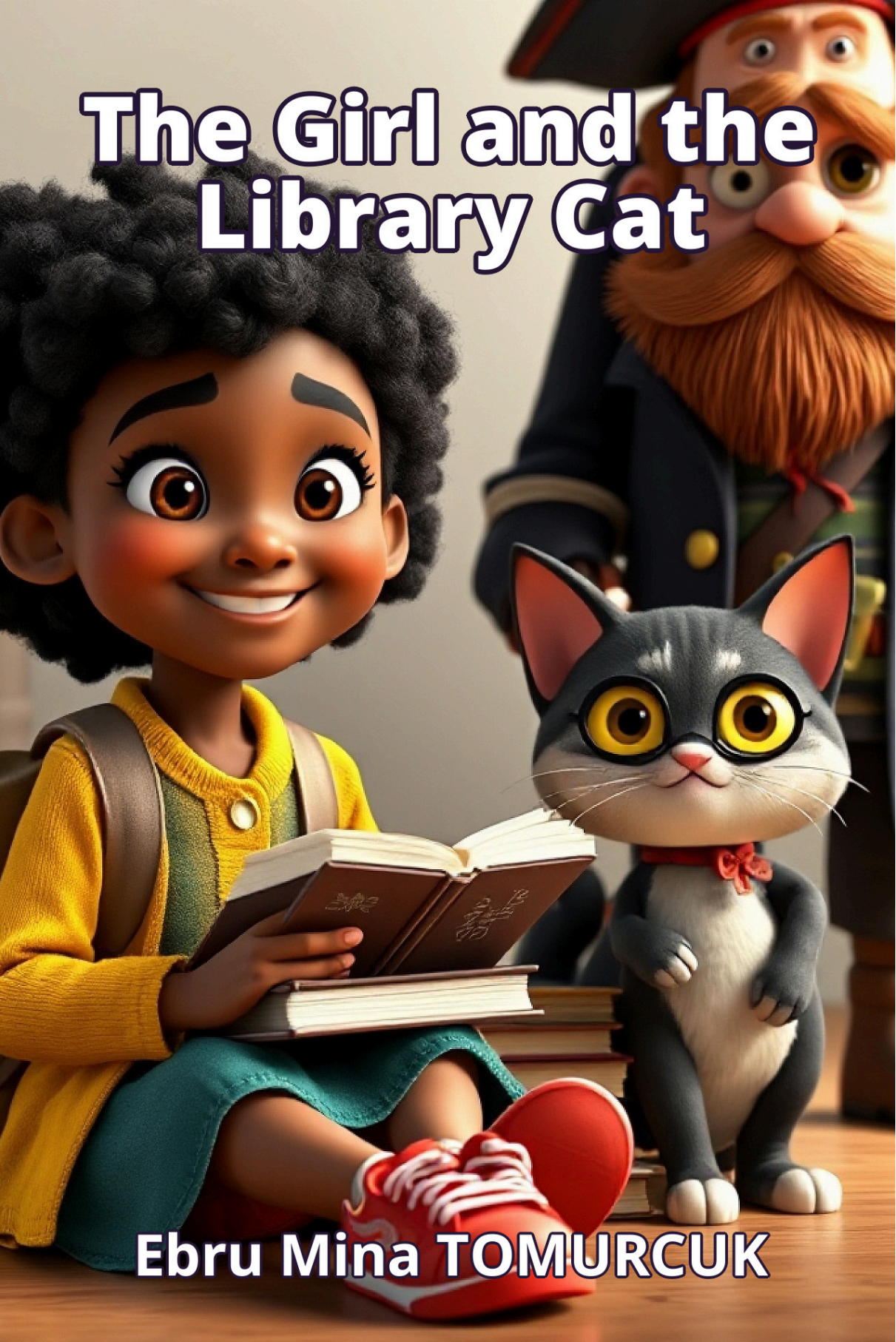


The Girl and the Library Cat



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Maya loved the town library more than any place in the world. Every Saturday she filled her canvas satchel with books and read until closing time. One rainy afternoon, she heard a soft rustle behind the poetry shelf. A charcoal-grey cat with a white chest and bright amber eyes peeked out. His tiny round spectacles glinted as he looked at her.



The cat padded closer. "Hello," he said, as if talking cats were perfectly normal. Maya gasped, then smiled. "You can talk!" The cat bowed. "I'm Pages. I guard this library and all its stories." His red ribbon collar held a brass tag shaped like a book. "You must love books very much," he added, flicking his white-tipped tail.



Maya nodded eagerly. "I do! I read every day." Pages's notched ear twitched. "Then you know that some books here are unfinished. Their characters grow restless." He led her past tall shelves to a corner where papers fluttered. "Lately, those characters have started to escape." Maya's hazel eyes widened. "Escape? Where do they go?"



Pages pointed toward the reading room. A tall man with a wild ginger beard and a paper cutlass was stomping about, his peg leg thumping. "A pirate!" Maya whispered. The pirate bellowed, "I want a real adventure!" A little girl with silver-blond hair and a crooked crown hid behind a chair, her lavender gown rustling like paper. "I just want to know how my story ends," she said softly.



Pages adjusted his spectacles. "They slip out when nobody is reading." Maya felt brave. "We must send them back." The pirate waved his paper cutlass. "Never! This library is more fun than my unfinished tale." The paper princess sighed. "But we don't belong here." Maya had an idea. "What if we finish your stories? Then you can go home happy."



Pages nodded. "Maya is right. Every story needs a reader to finish it." The pirate scratched his ginger beard. "You'd do that for us?" Maya opened her satchel. "I have plenty of books!" The paper princess smiled, her ink-line patterns shimmering. "I'd like that very much." The pirate grumbled but agreed. "Lead the way, small reader."



Maya and Pages gathered the escapees in a cozy reading nook. Maya pulled out a book about a brave pirate who feared nothing but bedtime. "This one's for you," she told the pirate. He squinted at the pages. "I can't read!" Maya grinned. "Then I'll read it to you." She began, and the pirate leaned in, his bushy eyebrows rising with every word.



As Maya read, the pirate's paper cutlass grew solid. His peg leg tapped happily. "I remember now! My story is about finding treasure and sharing it." The paper princess tugged Maya's mustard sleeve. "And mine?" Maya picked a book about a princess who painted the sky. "Listen." The princess's ink-line patterns glowed as Maya described each color.



Pages supervised from a velvet cushion. "You're doing wonderfully," he purred. But more characters appeared! A knight with a cardboard sword, a fairy with tissue-paper wings, and a dragon made of folded newspaper. "Oh no!" Maya cried. "We need to help them all." Pages flicked his tail. "Then we must be quick and clever."



Maya thought hard. "What if we all read together?" She handed books to every character. The pirate read about treasure, the princess about painting, the knight about bravery, and the fairy about flying. The dragon read about friendship. Slowly, each character's edges grew crisp and real. "It's working!" Maya cheered. "They're becoming part of their stories again!"



But the dragon's book was missing its last page. "I can't finish," it rumbled sadly. Maya looked at Pages. "What do we do?" Pages's amber eyes sparkled. "We imagine the ending." Maya closed her eyes. "The dragon flies over the library, sprinkling stardust on every book." The dragon's paper wings flapped. "Yes! That's it!" it cried.



One by one, the characters returned to their books, waving goodbye. The pirate tipped his bandana. "Thank you, matey. My story is better now." The paper princess curtsied. "I'll remember you, Maya." She stepped into her book, and the pages glowed. Pages touched Maya's hand with his white paw. "You see? Reading opens the door to imagination."



Maya beamed. "I couldn't have done it without you, Pages." The cat purred loudly. "And I couldn't have done it without a reader." He hopped onto her satchel. "Now, shall we read one more story?" Maya laughed. "Always!" They curled up in the big armchair, and Pages began to read aloud in his warm, rumbling voice.



From that day on, Maya visited the library every day after school. Pages was always waiting by the poetry shelf. They read mysteries, adventures, and fairy tales together. Sometimes, if they listened closely, they could hear tiny cheers from the books on the shelves. "Your friends are happy," Maya whispered. Pages nodded. "Because you finished their stories."



Maya learned that every book is a door. When she read, she could go anywhere and be anyone. Her imagination grew bigger than the library itself. She and Pages became the best of friends, sharing secrets and stories. "What will we read today?" she asked each morning. Pages would just smile and lead her to a new shelf.



One evening, as the library grew quiet, Pages curled up in Maya's lap. "You know," he said, "you're my favorite story." Maya hugged him tight. "And you're mine." They sat together, surrounded by books, as the sun set outside the window. Maya knew that as long as she had Pages and a good book, her imagination would never run out of adventures.