

# Cleo

How a Small Black Cat Helped Heal a Family

Helen Brown

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Extract

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How a small black cat  
helped heal a family

HELEN BROWN

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HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

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# Choice

*A cat chooses its owner, not the other way around*

‘We’re not getting a kitten,’ I said, negotiating our stationwagon around a bend the shape of a pretzel. ‘We’re just going to look at them.’

The road to Lena’s house was complicated by its undulations, not to mention the steepness. It snaked over what would qualify as mountains in most parts of the world. There wasn’t much beyond Lena’s house except a few sheep farms and a stony beach.

‘You said we could get a kitten,’ Sam whined from the back seat before turning to his younger brother for support. ‘Didn’t she?’

The back seat was usually the boys’ battleground. Between two brothers aged nearly nine and six the dynamic was predictable. Sam would set Rob up with a surreptitious jab that would be rewarded with a kick, demanding retaliation with a thump, escalating into recriminations and tears—‘He punched me!’ ‘That’s ‘cos he pinched me first.’ But this time they were on the same side, and my usual role of judge and relationship counsellor had been supplanted by a simpler one—the Enemy.

‘Yeah, it’s not fair,’ Rob chimed in. ‘You said.’

‘What I said was we *might* get a kitten one day. One big dog is enough for any family. What would Rata do? She’d hate having a cat in the house.’

‘No she wouldn’t. Golden retrievers like cats,’ Sam replied. ‘I read it in my pet book.’

There was no point recalling the number of times we’d seen Rata disappear into undergrowth in pursuit of an unfortunate member of the feline species. Since Sam had given up trying to become a superhero and thrown his Batman mask to the back of his wardrobe, he’d morphed into an obsessive reader brimming with facts to destroy any argument I could dredge up.

I didn’t want a cat. I probably wasn’t even a cat person. My husband, Steve, certainly wasn’t. If only Lena hadn’t smiled so brightly that day at our neighbourhood playgroup when she’d asked: ‘Would you like a kitten?’ If only she hadn’t said it so loudly—and in front of the kids.

‘Wow! We’re getting a kitten!’ Sam had yelled before I had a chance to answer.

‘Wow! Wow!’ Rob had echoed, jumping up and down in his sneakers with the holes I’d been trying to ignore.

Even before we’d met Lena I’d been in awe of her. A willowy beauty with an eclectic fashion style, she’d migrated from Holland in her late teens to become a highly regarded painter. Her portraits invariably contained political comment about race, sex or religion. An artist in the deepest sense, she also chose to live independently from men with her three children. Personally, I wouldn’t have been surprised if Lena had summoned her offspring from some parallel universe only she and Pablo Picasso had access codes to. I wasn’t about to make a fuss about a kitten in front of her.

Raising a pair of boys was proving to be more demanding than I'd imagined back when I was a schoolgirl watching baby-shampoo ads on television. If there'd been an Olympic medal for teenage mother naivety I'd have won gold. Married and pregnant at nineteen, I'd smiled at the notion of babies waking up at night. Those were *other* people's babies. Reality struck with Sam's birth. I'd tried to grow up fast. Midnight phone calls to Mum three hundred kilometres away hadn't always been helpful ('He must be teething, dear'). Fortunately, older, more experienced mothers had taken pity on me. With kindness and great patience they'd guided me through Motherhood 101. I'd eventually learned to accept that sleep is a luxury and a mother is only ever as happy as her saddest child. So in those closing days of 1982 I was doing okay. They were gorgeous boys and put it this way: I hadn't been to the supermarket wearing a nightgown under my coat for several months.

We were living in Wellington, a city famous for two things—bad weather and earthquakes. We'd just managed to purchase a house with the potential to expose us to both: a bungalow halfway down a zigzag on a cliff directly above a major fault line.

Minor earthquakes were so common we hardly noticed when walls trembled and plates rattled. But people said Wellington was overdue for a massive quake, like the one of 1855, when great tracts of land disappeared into the sea and were flung up in other places.

It certainly seemed like our bungalow clung to the hill as if it was prepared for something terrible to happen. There was a faded fairytale appeal to its pitched roof, dark-beamed cladding and shutters. Mock Tudor meets Arts and Crafts, it wasn't shabby chic, it was just plain shabby. My efforts to create a cottage garden had resulted in an apology of forget-me-nots along the front path.



Quaint as it was, clearly the house had been built with a family of alpine goats in mind. There was no garage, not even a street front. The only way to reach it was to park the car up at road level, high above our roof line, and bundle groceries and children's gear into our arms. Gravity would take care of the rest, sucking us down several zigs and zags to our gate.

We were young so it was no problem on sunny days when the harbour was blue and flat as a dinner plate. Whenever a southerly gale roared up from Antarctica, however, tearing at our coat buttons and flinging rain in our faces, we wished we'd bought a more sensible house.

But we loved living a twenty-minute walk from town. Equipped with ropes and rock-climbing shoes we could have made it in five. When we headed into the city, an invisible force would send us plummeting down the lower end of the zigzag. Hurtling through scrub and flax bushes, we'd pause for a glimpse. A circle of amethyst hills, stark and steep, rose above us. I was amazed we could be part of such beauty.

The path then pulled us across an old wooden footbridge spanning the main road. From there we could either take steps down to the bus stop or continue our perpendicular journey to the Houses of Parliament and central railway station. The slog home from the city was another matter. It took twice as long and demanded the lungs of a mountaineer.

The zigzag had a sharply divided social structure. There was a Right Side, on which substantial two-storeyed houses nestled in gardens with aspirations to Tuscany. And the Wrong Side, where bungalows sprinkled themselves like afterthoughts along the edge of the cliff. Wrong Side people tended to have weed collections rather than gardens.

The prestige of jobs declined in direct correlation to the zigzag's slope. On the top right-hand side Mr Butler's house sat like a castle. Grey and two storeyed, it oozed superiority not only over the neighbourhood but the city in general.

Below Mr Butler's, a two-storeyed house opened out over the harbour, looking as if it would hardly be bothered by mere social comparisons. With eaves graceful as seagull's wings, it seemed ready to take off in the next decent gale to a far more glamorous world. Rick Desilva ran a record company. People said that, before they were married, his wife, Ginny, had been a fashion model, New Zealand's answer to Jean Shrimpton. Shielded behind a thicket of vegetation that no doubt could be dried and smoked, they had a reputation for parties.

There was a ridiculous rumour that Elton John had been seen staggering out of their house drunk as a dog, though in reality it was just someone who looked like him. Their son, Jason, was at the same school as our boys. They were perched on the lip of a gully about half a mile further up the hill, but we kept our distance. The Desilvas had a sports car. Steve said they were too racy. I had no energy to argue.

Our side of the zigzag specialised in recluses and people who were renting for a while before moving somewhere less exposed, with better access and not so close to the fault line. Mrs Sommerville, a retired high-school teacher, was one of the few long-time residents of the Wrong Side. She inhabited a tidy weatherboard house one down from us. A lifetime with adolescents had done nothing for her looks. She wore a permanent expression of someone who'd just received an insult.

Mrs Sommerville had already appeared on our doorstep with complaints about our dog terrorising her cat, Tomkin, a large tabby cat with a matching sour face. Even though I tried to avoid her, I bumped into her most days, giving her the opportunity to point out skid marks where boys had been zooming down the zigzag illegally on skateboards, or the latest graffiti on her letterbox. Mrs Sommerville's pathological dislike of boys included our sons, who were suspects of every crime. Steve said I was imagining things. While she loathed boys, Mrs Sommerville knew how to turn the charm on for men.



I worked at home, writing a weekly column for Wellington's morning newspaper, *The Dominion*. Steve worked one week home, one week away, as radio officer on one of the ferries that ploughed between the North and South Islands. We'd met at a ship's party when I was fifteen. A grand old man of twenty, he was the most exotic creature I'd ever encountered. Compared to the farmers who steered us around country dance halls near New Plymouth where I grew up, he was from another world.

His face was peachy white and he had baby-soft hands. I'd been mesmerised by his blue eyes, that glowed under their long lashes. Unlike the farmers, he hadn't been frightened of conversation. I'd assumed that, being English, he was probably related to one of The Beatles, if not the Rolling Stones.

I'd loved the way his tawny hair draped across his collar, just like Paul McCartney's. He'd smelt of diesel oil and salt, the perfume of the wider world that was impatient for me to join it.

We'd written to each other for three years. I'd sprinted through school and a journalism course (straight Cs) then flown to England. Steve was literally the man of my dreams—I'd met him in person for only two weeks during the three years we'd been letter writing—and reality had no hope of matching up. His parents were probably unimpressed with his big-boned girlfriend from the colonies.

We'd married in the Guildford registry office a month after my eighteenth birthday. Only five people had been brave enough to turn up for the ceremony. The officiant was so bored he forgot to mention the ring. My new husband slipped it on my finger afterwards outside in the porch. It was raining. Distraught back in New Zealand, my parents investigated the possibilities of annulment, but they were powerless.

About two weeks after the wedding I'd stared at the toilet seat in our rented flat and thought it needed polishing. That was when I knew getting married had been a mistake. Yet we'd upset so many people by insisting on it I couldn't back out. Short of running away and causing more pain, the only solution I could think of was to create a family. Steve reluctantly obliged. Honest from the start, he'd made it clear babies weren't really his thing.

We returned to New Zealand where I'd laboured through a December night, too frightened to ask the nurse to turn the light on in case it was breaking hospital rules. Somewhere through a drug-induced haze I'd heard the doctor singing 'Morning Has Broken'. Minutes later she'd lifted baby Sam from my body.

Before he'd even taken his first breath he turned his head and stared into my face with his huge blue eyes. I thought I'd explode with love. My body ached to hold this brand-new human with his downy hair glowing under the delivery room lights. Sam was wrapped in a blanket—blue in case I forgot what sex he was—and lowered into my arms. Kissing his forehead, I was overcome by a sensation I'd never be safely inside my own skin again. I uncurled his tiny fist. His life line was strong and incredibly long.

Even though it was supposed to be our first meeting, Sam and I recognised each other immediately. It felt like a reunion of ancient souls who'd never spent long apart.

Becoming parents hadn't brought Steve and me closer together. In fact, it had the opposite effect. Two and a half years after Sam's birth Rob slid into the world.

Lack of sleep and jangled nerves had made our differences more apparent. Steve sprouted a beard, a look that was becoming fashionable, and retreated behind it. Returning from a week at sea, he was tired and irritable.

He became annoyed with what he perceived as my extravagance over the boys' clothes and upkeep. I bought a second-hand sewing machine that emitted electric shocks and taught myself to cut their hair. I grew louder, larger and more untidy.

The times we weren't sure how much longer we could stay together were interspersed with phases of holding on and hoping things might improve for the sake of the boys. Even though we were drifting apart like icebergs on opposing ocean currents, there was absolutely no doubt we both loved them.

♦

'Now boys,' I said, pulling up outside Lena's house and heaving the handbrake high as it would go. 'Don't get your hopes up. We're just going to look.'

They scrambled out of the car and were halfway down the path to Lena's house before I'd closed the driver's door. Watching their blond hair catch the sunlight, I sighed and wondered if there'd ever be a time I wouldn't be struggling to catch up with them.

Lena had opened the door by the time I got there, and the boys were already inside. I apologised for their bad manners. Lena smiled and welcomed me into the enviable tranquility of her home, which overlooked the playing field where I often took the boys to run off excess energy.

'We've just come to look at the . . .' I said as she escorted me into her living room. 'Oh, kittens! Aren't they adorable?'

In a corner under some bookshelves a sleek, bronze cat lay on her side. She gazed at me through amber eyes that belonged not to a cat but a member of the aristocracy. Nestled into her abdomen were four appendages. Two were coated with a thin layer of bronze hair. Two were darker. Perhaps once their fur had grown they'd turn out to be black. I'd seen recently born kittens before, but never ones as tiny as these. One of the darker kittens was painfully small.

The boys were on their knees in awe of this nativity scene. They seemed to know to keep a respectful distance.

'They've only just opened their eyes,' Lena said, scooping one of the bronze kittens from the comfort of its twenty-four-hour diner. The creature barely fitted inside her hand. 'They'll be ready to go to new homes in a couple of months.'

The kitten squirmed and emitted a noise that sounded more like a yip than a meow. Its mother glanced up anxiously. Lena returned the infant to the fur-lined warmth of its family to be assiduously licked. The mother used her tongue like a giant mop, swiping parallel lines across her baby's body, then over its head for good measure.

'Can we get one, please, PLEASE?' Sam begged, looking up at me with that expression parents struggle to resist.

'Please?' his brother echoed. 'We won't throw mud on Mrs Sommerville's roof anymore.'

'You've been throwing mud on Mrs Sommerville's roof?!'

'Idiot!' Sam said, rolling his eyes and jabbing Rob with his elbow.

But the kittens . . . and there was something about the mother. She was so self-assured and elegant. I'd never seen a cat like her. She was smaller than an average cat but her ears were unusually large. They rose like a pair of matching pyramids from her triangular face. Darker stripes on her forehead whispered of a jungle heritage. Short hair, too. My mother always said short-haired cats were clean.

'She's a wonderful mother, pure Abyssinian,' Lena explained. 'I tried to keep an eye on her, but she escaped into the bamboos for a couple of nights a while back. We don't know who the father is. A wild tom, I guess.'

Abyssinian. I hadn't heard of that breed. Not that my knowledge of pedigree cats was encyclopaedic. I'd once known a Siamese called Lap Chow, the pampered familiar of my ancient piano teacher, Mrs McDonald. Our three-way

relationship was doomed from the start. The only thing that hurt more than Mrs McDonald's ruler whacking my fingers as they fumbled over the keys was Lap Chow's hypodermic-needle claws sinking into my ankles. Between the two of them they did a good job creating a lifelong prejudice against music lessons and pedigree cats.

'Some people say Abyssinians are descended from the cats the ancient Egyptians worshipped,' Lena continued.

It certainly wasn't difficult to imagine this feline priestess residing over a temple. The combination of alley cat and royalty had allure. If the kittens manifested the best attributes of both parents (classy yet hardy), they could turn out to be something special. If, on the other hand, less desirable elements of royalty and rough trade (fussy and feral) came to the fore in the offspring, we could be in for a roller-coaster ride.

'There's only one kitten left,' Lena added. 'The smaller black one.'

Of course people had gone for the larger, healthier-looking kittens first. The bronze ones probably had more appeal, as they had a better chance of turning out looking purebred like their mother. I'd already decided I preferred the black ones, though not necessarily the runt with its bulging eyes and patchy tufts of fur.

'But the little one seems to have a lot of spirit,' Lena said. 'She needs it to survive. We thought we were going to lose her during the first couple of days, but she managed to hold on.'

'It's a girl?' I said, already stupid with infatuation and incapable of using cat breeder's language.

'Yes. Would you like to hold her?'

Fearing I'd crush the fragile thing, I declined. Lena lowered the tiny bundle of life into Sam's hands instead. He lifted the kitten and stroked his cheek with her fur. He'd always had a thing about fur. I'd never seen him so careful and tender.

'You know it's my birthday soon . . .' he said. I could guess what was coming next. 'Don't give me a party or a big present. There's only one thing I want for my birthday. This kitten.'

'When's your birthday?' Lena asked.

'Sixteenth of December,' said Sam. 'But I can change it to any time.'

'I don't like kittens to leave their mother until they're quite independent,' she said. 'I'm afraid this one won't be ready until mid February.'

'That's okay,' said Sam, gazing into the slits of its eyes. 'I can wait.'

The boys knew the best thing to do now was to shut up and look angelic. Maybe nurturing a kitten would wean them off war games and tune them into feminine sensibilities. As for Rata, we'd do our best to protect the kitten from such a monstrous dog.

Further debate was pointless. How could I turn down a creature so determined to seize life? Besides, she was Sam's birthday present.

'We'll take her,' I said, somehow unable to stop smiling.