

# Cleo



## *the uppity cat*

An impish black kitten called Cleo holds the key to happiness for a family, in this exclusive extract from a story by **Helen Brown**.

**FIVE WEEKS HAD PASSED** since our elder son, inside his white coffin, had been lowered into the hills. We'd visited the grave a couple of times. I found no comfort on the windswept summit, with its soldier lines of plaques.

The first few times it took a while to work out where Sam's grave was. In typical incongruity, he'd been buried between two people who'd lived well into their 80s. Kneeling above him, my tears irrigating the grass, I searched for something of his essence. There was nothing of him in the gnarled bushes bent permanently against the wind. Clouds wrapped themselves in improbable shapes. Sheep bleated. Sam didn't belong in that empty place.

I felt like an actor wearing someone else's clothes. On the outside, we resembled the same people we'd been a month or so earlier. Drove the same car, went to the same supermarket. My internal organs felt like they'd been rearranged and scrubbed with steel wool. Shock probably. I no longer trusted the goodness of being alive. Hatred and fury flared easily.

Reluctant as I was to admit it, I

was getting help from our new kitten, Cleo. She seemed to know when I was bottoming out, whatever time of day or night it was. A paw would slide down the crack of a door, she'd leap on our bed or sit nearby, not demanding anything. Purring patiently, she'd simply wait until I surfaced.

Even her destructive behaviour seemed to have purpose. It dragged us into dealing with the here and now. During the few moments I was yelling at her about chomped curtain chords or toppled photo frames, I wasn't eating my insides out over Sam.

Infuriating, impish and bursting with affection, Cleo pulsed with exuberance. From the point of her tail to the tips of her whiskers, she was 100 per cent alive.

But my husband, Steve, didn't see it that way. Even though I'd explained how it was Sam who had picked her out, Steve felt everything had changed. The kitten belonged to the life we'd had before Sam, not this surreal existence we were trying to eke out now.

After a week away at sea, Steve unpacked his bag under Cleo's watchful gaze. She appeared to be making an

inventory of his clothes and which might be portable. His eyes slid sideways at her. Just as I launched into a spiel about how much Sam's younger brother, Rob, adored the kitten, Cleo dived into Steve's bag and emerged with the toe of a black sock between her teeth.

Scurrying away, she tossed the hosiery above her head and jumped in the air. She caught the sock between her front paws with panache, before galloping away full pelt, the sock trailing between her legs. One of her back legs stepped on the sock, bringing her to such a sudden halt she somersaulted through the air and landed on her back. Unperturbed, Cleo wriggled to her feet, picked up the sock again and sprinted away.

Unimpressed, Steve trudged out of the room in search of his sock. It generally took two days for us to adjust to a routine after he'd been away. His irritation with my inability to fold underwear neatly matched my annoyance with his insistence on checking pots after I'd washed them to see if I'd left residual circles around the edges. With the additional tension of >>>

an unwelcome kitten, domestic harmony was more problematic.

The sun glinted like a giant tiger's eye as it sank behind the hills. Slipping on a cashmere cardigan, I chopped chicken breasts. Cleo lifted her nose and, like a connoisseur analysing the aromas of a rare Bordeaux, half closed her eyes. Following my ankles as I moved about the kitchen, she emitted a series of squeaks. Not the mews of a cat begging for food, but the demands of a priestess impatient to have offerings laid at her feet.

Gathering her up, I snuggled her against my chest and sat down with her on a kitchen chair. She strained wistfully towards the chicken, but soon became intrigued by my precious cashmere cardigan. She chomped the wool around the middle button. I disentangled her and lowered her firmly to the ground.

Cleo sprang back on my lap. Like a famished lion, she dug her teeth into my cardigan. I tried to dislodge her and felt a sudden pain in my thumb as she sank a fang through my flesh. Not only had she ruined my cardigan, she'd drilled a hole into me.

Crying out, I stemmed the blood with a paper towel. When Steve saw my injury, he was unimpressed. When we sat down to the meal, a furrow between Steve's eyebrows deepened as Cleo demonstrated how unwilling she was to understand the words: "Don't jump on the table". She attacked all three of our plates, not to mention the tablemats, salt and pepper, and cutlery.

Heat pulsed up the back of my neck. My thumb throbbed. I grabbed her and shut her firmly in the laundry.

"She hates it in there," Rob whined.

"She can't ruin our lives!" I shouted to drown out the yowls from the laundry. Something about her jagged cries tipped me over the precipice. It wasn't just the kitten, the thumb and the husband. There was going to be an inquest in the morning. I would finally have to accept Sam was dead.

My body started shaking. Breaths came in shallow gasps. "I can't stand it any more. Cleo will just have to go back!"

Rob stared into his risotto and swallowed back tears. "You're. You're. So. Mean."

Scraping back my chair, I reeled to my feet and ran to the bedroom. Sobbing loudly into the pillow, I knew Rob was right, I was mean. And out of control. A bad mother, hopeless wife, a failed

human being in general. I longed for sleep to droop its blanket over me.

Instead, a boy's hand touched my shoulder. "She loves you, Mummy," he whispered. "Listen ..."

A bulk of fur nestled into my neck. The rhythmical growl of Cleo's purr roared in my ear. It was the deep primeval sound of waves rolling in on the beaches of my childhood, the noise a baby hears when it's in the womb. Wise and eternal, it could be the earth's lullaby or the voice of God.

Cleo nudged her head under my chin, stared at me with maternal concern and, to my amazement, planted her damp

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nose on my cheek. It was an unmistakable kitten kiss.

Nestling into my neck, she stretched a delicate front leg across my face. I took the paw between my fingers, caressed it and watched the claws gently open and close. The pads of her foot were softer than my fingertips and sensitive enough to feel the earth's subtle tremors. As we lay "holding hands", it was as if our souls had reached across the divide of the species and shared a connection beyond words.

I awoke several hours later, with Cleo wedged between the sheets, her head resting on the pillow beside me. She felt entitled to be there.

Her motionless form, the peaks of her ears against the white cotton, the restful comfort of her breathing, made me wonder if we hadn't slept that way, human and feline, side by side since earth's first dawn. ■

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