



## **A CHANGE OF HEART**

### ***Preview***

Some people believe what they've always heard: "Cats bring bad luck." "They're unfriendly." "They're afraid of everything." But in this story we meet an unusual cat that is determined to prove that you can't believe everything you hear.



## A CHANGE OF HEART

**J**en Thompson was waiting at the bus stop one Tuesday morning with her two friends, Jake and Sam, when they saw an old blue pickup truck weaving back and forth across the lanes. It went completely off the road twice and ran right over a mailbox. Still, it kept coming toward the three nine-year-olds.

“Whoa. What’s up with *that* driver?” Jen asked.

“I don’t know,” Jake answered. “Looks like something I saw in a scary movie one time.”

“Y’all just gonna stand there?” Sam yelled from behind a fence, way off the road. “I don’t wanna die before the bus gets here.”

Jen and Jake scurried away from the edge of the road and climbed over the fence just in time. The rusty blue pickup careened along the gravel shoulder of the road and then screeched to a dramatic stop. Dust blew everywhere, and a loud, raspy voice blasted from inside the cab of the pickup.

“Dang it all! You little . . . STOP! Get offa me!! Oh, for the love of . . .”

The door of the truck suddenly hurled open. A very large middle-aged woman swung around to face the three kids. She was wearing huge curlers in her very badly dyed red hair, a pair of work boots, and a bathrobe. Jake and Jen looked at each other and burst into giggles. Sam, however, looked as though he might faint from fear.

“Hey!” the woman bellowed, silencing Jake and Jen mid-giggle. “Listen to me!”

The three children stared at the strange woman who stared back at them fiercely as though she was about to deliver an extremely important message.

“Want a cat?” she finally asked.

“Oh, no, ma’am,” Sam answered right away in a shaky voice. “My mama would never allow that. No siree. Why, if I ever just showed up with a cat, I . . .”

“What about you?” the woman thundered, pointing at Jake and pushing a flop of red hair out of her eyes.

Jake just shrugged. “Already got a dog.”

“Well, I can’t keep this blasted thing,” the woman yelled. “It hates me and I hate it. Done given me scratches all upside one arm and down the other.”

With that, she lifted a large black cat by the scruff of its neck and held it out in front of her. The cat immediately hissed and swiped at the woman with all ten claws on its front feet fully extended.

“Ow!! Devil cat!” the woman screeched at the cat, who looked both furious and terrified. “Here—he’s all yours,” she said, flinging the cat in Jen’s direction.

With that, the woman heaved herself back around into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. The rusty blue truck roared off in a cloud of dust.

The three kids all looked at each other blankly for a moment and then crouched down to look at the cat. He was huddled behind an old rotten log, shaking slightly and growling.

“Come here, kitty. It’s all right. Here kitty, kitty.” Jen tried to coax the cat out of his hiding place, but he only bushed his tail out and hissed.

“Here comes the bus,” Sam announced in an obviously relieved voice. But Jen didn’t move.

Jake looked at Jen and shook his head. “Hey, Jen. You have to go to school. They’ll call your mom.”

“But I can’t leave this poor cat alone.”

“Jen’s gonna get in trouble,” Sam said in a sing-song voice as he ran happily to the bus. Jen just ignored Sam and waved quickly to Jake.

“It’s okay. I think I’d better stay for just a few more minutes. I’ll just tell my mom I missed the bus, and she’ll give me a ride. No big deal.”

Three hours later, Jen was still on her hands and knees trying to get the black cat to come to her. He had eaten half of the bologna sandwich Jen had packed for lunch. She had set it down in front of him, and he had crept up to take bites. But he only muttered and hissed when she spoke to him or tried to reach out and touch him.

“You’re scared, aren’t you?” Jen asked softly. “It’s a good thing to be scared of

strangers, I guess. But you don't have to be scared of me. I'm your friend—I won't hurt you."

Jen was so involved in trying to convince the cat of her friendship that she didn't hear a car pull up.

"Jennifer!" Jen's mother, Sally, got out of the car and slammed the door. "What on earth are you doing? I was scared half out of my mind when the school called to ask why you weren't there today."

"Oh, Mom, I'm sorry. This lady—she threw a cat out and then it was scared and I think it's hungry and . . ."

"Jennifer, calm down. What are you talking about?"

Jen just pointed to the black cat huddled by the half-eaten sandwich. Sally's angry expression melted instantly, and she came over to kneel by her daughter.

"Well, look at you," Sally said gently, looking at the cat.

"Can I keep him, Mom?"

Sally stared at the cat for a minute and sighed. "No, Jen. I wish I could say yes, but you know your father doesn't really like cats. He's always been particularly bothered by black cats. Thinks they bring bad luck."

"But what if the cat follows me home? Can he live outside?"

“Well . . .”

“Oh please, Mom. I know you love cats, too.”

Jen’s mom looked up the hill to their trailer. It was only about fifty yards away, so there was a good chance that the cat would end up hanging around the trailer anyway. She looked back at the cat. He was fearfully inching forward to sneak another bite of sandwich.

“It’s all right with me, but you’ll have to ask your father, too, when he gets back on Saturday,” Sally finally said. Jen’s father, Larry, drove a truck and was often gone for a week or more at a time.

Jen began jumping up and down with excitement. Naturally, this startled the cat and sent him scurrying further into the woods. Jen immediately began following him.

“Oh no you don’t,” Sally said, grabbing Jen’s hand. “You’re going to school. You’ve already missed half the day.”

“But the cat . . .” Jen began.

“Look, Jen,” Sally said patiently as they got in the car, “as cruel as it is, people dump animals on the side of the road every day. Some survive and some don’t. We’ll give this little guy a chance if we can, but it’s up to him. You can’t keep following after him.”

Jen stared into the woods and just nodded

as they drove away. She knew her mother was right, but she wondered if she'd ever see the cat again.

After school, Jen rushed up the hill to the trailer and spent an hour calling the black cat. But there was no sign of him. At the dinner table, Jen was on the verge of tears and barely touched her food. Sally tried to take her daughter's mind off the cat, but it was no use. Finally, Sally walked over to the refrigerator and took out a carton of milk.

"All right," Sally said, shaking her head. "We'll put some milk and food on the back step."

For four nights, Jen and her mother left food on the steps, and every morning it had disappeared.

"Do you think it's the cat or just a raccoon eating the food?" Jen asked every day at breakfast. And every day at breakfast, Sally told her daughter she didn't know. But Sally had found a black cat whisker in the empty milk bowl one morning. However, she didn't want to get Jen's hopes up too high.

On the fifth morning, Saturday, Jen ran outside to check the bowls. As before, they were empty, but this time there was a dead mouse lying in the empty food bowl. Jen jumped about a foot, shrieked, and bolted



back inside to tell her mother. Sally grinned.

“That’s your cat,” she said. “He’s leaving a little thank-you gift for the food you’ve been giving him.”

“And look,” Sally nearly whispered, pointing out the back window. Out in the middle of the backyard was the black cat, stretching in the morning sun and batting at a fly.

Both Jen and her mother tiptoed to the back door and then opened it very slowly. Jen walked just to the edge of the back step and stood very still. She was certain that the cat would scurry away as soon as it saw her. But then something totally unexpected happened—the cat jumped up and trotted right over to Jen, rubbing against her legs and purring. Jen looked over to her mother, a silent question on her face.

“I think your cat has had a change of heart,” Sally said.

“What does that mean?” Jen asked, reaching down to gently pet the happy cat.

“Well,” Sally said, thinking for a moment. “It means that something has happened to change his mind. And because of that, it has changed the way he feels—it’s changed his heart.”

“The food?” Jenny asked. “Did the food change his heart?”

“I’m sure it helped,” Sally answered with

a laugh.

Later that afternoon, Larry returned home from his trip. Jen exploded through the back door to meet her father out in the yard, and she nearly knocked him over with hugs and kisses.

“Okay,” he said in a dry tone. “What do you want?”

“What makes you think I want anything?” Jen asked casually. “I’m just glad to see you.”

“Hmmm. Okay. Well, I’m flattered, then,” Larry said with a smile as he hugged Jen.

At that exact moment, as though he were following a script, the black cat came strutting across the yard, plopped himself at Larry’s feet, and began a tremendous purring. Larry looked down and then looked at his daughter. Jen was doing her best to appear as though there was absolutely nothing unusual about a strange cat running over to greet her father.

“And I don’t suppose *this* has anything to do with how glad you are to see me?”

“Well . . . I . . .”

“Jen, you know that I am not exactly a big fan of cats,” Larry said. At that very moment, the black cat looked up at him with huge, loving eyes. Larry sighed.

“Dad, *pleeease*,” Jen pleaded. “He’s liv-

ing outside. He catches mice and stuff—he doesn't have anywhere else to go!" Jen's eyes began to fill up with tears.

Larry threw his hands up in the air. "Oh, all right! But he *has* to stay outside. *All* the time. I don't ever want to see even one cat toe inside the front door."

Jen ran over and hugged her father again, saying, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," nonstop. The cat, having completed his performance, wandered back across the yard and sat down to clean his whiskers, totally ignoring Larry.

"You sure are a lucky cat," Larry yelled across the yard. "Especially for being a black cat."

"That's it!" Jen said happily. "*Lucky*. I'm going to name him Lucky."

Within only a couple of weeks, Lucky was managing to put a lot more than just one cat toe inside the door of the trailer. Jen would often sneak Lucky inside when her father was gone and her mother was working late. After all, why should both she and Lucky be lonely? Jen would sit watching TV or reading a book with Lucky curled up in her lap. Then, just before her mother returned home, Jen would gently set Lucky back outside with a few cat treats.

One evening when Jen was alone, she could hear huge thunder claps in the distance. She ran to the door and called for Lucky, not wanting him to be out in the approaching storm. Lucky pranced right into the trailer, happy to be breaking the rules once again. Then Jen sat brushing Lucky and chatting to him as the rain began falling.

Suddenly, Lucky sat up with his ears twitching and his tail growing bushy. His eyes were wide, and he muttered a low warning growl.

“What?” Jen asked, quickly pulling the brush away. “What’s wrong?”

At that very moment, there was a loud banging on the front door. The banging went on and on. Every so often, a man’s voice would yell, “Hello? Anyone home?” Jen didn’t move. She barely breathed, but her heart was beating wildly. *Who would be at the door in the middle of a storm?* she wondered. *And why doesn’t he go away if no one’s answering the door?* Finally, Jen sneaked to the window and peered out through a slit in the blinds. Banging on the door was a tall man with long, stringy hair. He was wearing a funny-looking uniform of some kind.

“Hello? I know someone’s in there!” he shouted between thunderclaps. “I just need to use your phone. My car broke down right

out front, and my wife is sick. I need to get her to the hospital. Please help me!”

Jen watched the man for another minute, wondering what to do. She wasn't supposed to open the door to strangers, but maybe she could make the phone call for him. She could just ask him to wait outside while she called. As Jen was figuring out her plan, Lucky paced back and forth by the door, snarling and hissing. Finally, Jen walked over to the door. She made sure the security chain was locked in place, and then she cracked the door open.

“Oh, thank you!” the stranger said, smiling a weird smile that looked more angry than happy. He was missing two front teeth and his hair hung over his eyes. “I just need to come in and . . .”

“I—I can't let you in,” Jen stammered. She and the stranger stared at each other through the crack.

“That's okay,” he said. “Can you call the hospital for me?”

“Sure.” Jen felt relieved that he was not going to continue to ask to come in. She turned to walk over to the phone, leaving the door cracked but chained. Jen had barely picked up the phone to make the call when there was a loud crash. Whirling around, Jen saw that the stranger had thrown himself against the door, breaking the security latch. Before Jen could

move, the man had stormed over to her. He grabbed her roughly around the waist and slapped his hand over her mouth.

“You make a sound, you die,” the man hissed in her ear. “Scissors. Where are some scissors?” Jen was shaking so badly, she could barely raise her arm. But she managed to point to a drawer. The stranger dragged her to the drawer with him. He pulled out the scissors and then cut the phone lines.

“Now, I need some clothes and some food,” he snapped. “I’ll find those myself. If you move, I’ll kill you.” With that, he threw Jen to the floor, kicking her hard in the back as a warning. He stomped to the refrigerator and began pulling out food, throwing things everywhere. Jen waited until the stranger started eating and his back was turned. Then she began to creep toward the back door along the floor.

But just as she reached the door, the man saw her. He rushed over and pulled her to her feet by her hair. Then he slapped her so hard that she fell back over. When she hit the ground, he kicked her again. Crying and gasping for air, Jen reached out blindly to shield herself from the stranger. But he grabbed her hands, trying to pull her to her feet so that he could slap her down again.

It was at this moment that Lucky attacked.

He had been quietly sitting on the top of the refrigerator, and now he lunged down directly on top of the stranger's head. Lucky dug all twenty of his claws into the attacker's skull and bit at his head. The stranger yelled out in pain and anger, trying to pull the cat from his head. But Lucky held on. He raked his claws down the front of the stranger's face and then sank his fangs deep into the man's neck, hissing as he bit and fought.

The stranger had let go of Jen in order to deal with the attack cat. In that split second, Jen tore out the back door of the trailer and ran through the thunderstorm to a neighbor's house just fifty yards away. She was bleeding, and something felt broken on her side near her back. When the shocked neighbor opened the door for Jen, Jen fell to the floor, gasping a few words.

"Help . . . stranger attacked . . . Lucky," Jen barely uttered before she fell to the floor unconscious.

Two days later, news of the heroic cat that had risked his life for his owner was in all the local papers and even on TV. Jen and Lucky sat curled up together on the couch, both of them in bandages for broken ribs. Lucky also had a broken paw. The attacker had been scared off by Lucky's ferocity, but he had hurled the cat against the wall on his way out the door.

“Yep, that cat can stay inside all he wants,” Jen’s father said with a grin. “Nothing better than the sight of a happy cat in your own home.”

Larry had arrived home the day after the incident and was shocked to hear about the escaped prisoner who had broken into their trailer and injured his daughter. The police had caught the fugitive only half a mile away. He was covered in scratches and was unable to see out of one eye.

“Thought you didn’t like cats,” Sally said to her husband as she winked at Jen.

All that next week, people dropped by the trailer to bring well wishes and gifts to Jen and her hero cat, Lucky. Often, Jen didn’t even know the people who came by. One afternoon, a strange woman in a baseball cap knocked on the door. Jen came to the door holding Lucky.

“Well, he sure is a good cat, isn’t he?” the woman said. She reached in her purse and pulled out a check for \$200.

“Just something to help with his vet bills. Maybe buy him a special treat, too.” The woman then tried to pet Lucky, but Lucky let out a quiet growl. The woman just smiled and turned to leave.

Two hundred dollars! Jen could hardly believe anyone could be so generous. She watched the woman walk away. *Why do I feel*



*like I know her?* Jen wondered to herself. When the woman reached the road, she pulled off the baseball cap. Poorly dyed red hair fell to her shoulders. Then the woman climbed inside a rusty blue pickup truck and drove away. Jen stared open-mouthed. She pulled Lucky close and whispered something in his ear.

“Change of heart,” Jen explained to Lucky.