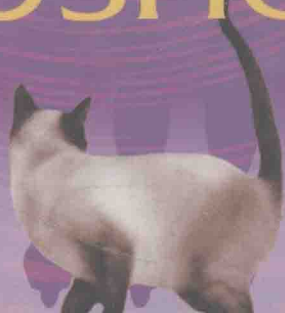


Lilian
Jackson
Braun

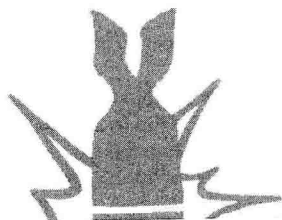
The Cat
Who

Dropped a
Bombshell



LILIAN JACKSON BRAUN

THE
CAT WHO
DROPPED
A BOMBSHELL



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

NEW YORK



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

Publishers Since 1838

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014,
USA • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto,
Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin
Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St
Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin
Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd,
11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110 017, India • Penguin
Group (NZ), Cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New
Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa)
(Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Copyright © 2006 by Lilian Jackson Braun

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned,
or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do
not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation
of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

ISBN 0-399-15307-1

Printed in the United States of America

Book design by Patrice Sheridan

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are
the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and
any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses,
companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Earl, my other half—for his husbandly love, encouragement, and help in a hundred ways.

To my research assistant, Shirley Bradley—for her expertise and enthusiasm.

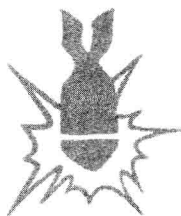
To Becky Faircloth, my office assistant—who's always there when I need her.

To my editor, Natalee Rosenstein—for her faith in *The Cat Who* from the very beginning.

To my literary agent, Blanche C. Gregory, Inc.—for a lifetime of agreeable partnership.

To the real-life Kokos and Yum Yums—for their fifty years of inspiration.

ONE



April was lovely that year! No blizzards. No hailstorms. No torrential rains with mud slides and power outages. Gentle nighttime showers irrigated the potato fields of Moose

County and freshened the peony gardens of Pickax City, the county seat.

It boded well for the sesquicentennial celebration of Pickax City, 400 miles north of everywhere. Plans were being made for parades, special events, and family reunions. Jim Qwilleran, columnist for the local newspaper who had spent the winter in a condo, was planning to move his household (two Siamese cats) back to his summer quarters in order to be closer to the action.

One evening he was lounging with his feet up, reading and eating apples, and the phone rang with that sound of urgency that sometimes happens.

The anguished voice on the line was that of Hixie Rice, the promotion director of the newspaper and chairperson of the Sesquicentennial Committee.

“Qwill! This is Hixie! Is it too late to come over for a minute?”

“Too late for what?”

“I’ve got a big problem!”

“Come along. Refreshments?”

“Not this time, thanks.”

Hixie Rice lived in a nearby condo, and Qwilleran had barely time to gather up bachelor clutter: newspapers, apple cores, and items of clothing.

The woman who rang the bell was looking harried.

He waved her to a sofa, and she flopped down, tossing her shoulder-length hair and kicking off her shoes.

“Do you mind? I’m exhausted.”

“Are you sure you won’t have a glass of Squunk water, Hixie?”

“You twisted my arm.”

At that moment two Siamese cats walked into the conversational circle.

“Hello, you beautiful creatures!” Hixie cried. They struck poses to show off their sleek fawn-colored fur, their seal-brown points, and blue eyes. She said, “Koko has such a masterful, intelligent expression, and Yum Yum so sweet and appealing . . . Forgive me, Yum Yum, if I sound sexist.” For answer, the lively female jumped into Hixie’s lap as light as a feather, while the male sat tall like an Egyptian sculpture.

There was something therapeutic about Qwilleran's manner. He was a tall, well-built middle-aged man with hair graying at the temples and an oversized pepper-and-salt moustache, but the sympathetic look in his brooding eyes and his willingness to listen to problems attracted individuals looking for help.

"How's everything going downtown?" he asked.

In exasperation she said, "I've just had a frustrating four-hour meeting with the PR committee assigned to find a name for the celebration, and we got nowhere! Qwill, try saying 'Pickax Sesquicentennial' three times, fast. Try saying it once! It's a horrible mouthful, and hardly anyone knows that it means a century and a half. We polled the man on the street. One joker thought it was 'sexy-centennial.' We've been working on the problem for weeks, without any luck.

"The scruffy little town of Brrr celebrated their bicentennial with a 'Brrr 200' logo that was perfect for posters and T-shirts, and someone suggested 'Pickax 150' but we'd cancel the whole show rather than copy them! All they have in that town is a harbor, a soccer team, and the Hotel Booze! In Pickax, thanks to the K Fund, we have cultural, medical, and education facilities that—"

She stopped for breath, and at that moment Koko delivered an ear-splitting "Yow-w-w!" His bedtime snack was twenty minutes late!

"That's it!" Hixie cried. "That's the answer! The name of our celebration! *Pickax Now!* . . . Thank you, Koko! I'll see that you get full credit!"

“No! No!” Qwilleran protested. “Just say that the answer came to you in a dream.”

The next day the name of the forthcoming celebration was flashed across the front page of the *Moose County Something*, with Hixie Rice crediting a member of her committee who wished to remain anonymous. Only to her friends did she admit that the name came to her in a dream.

Qwilleran first heard the “convenient myth” from his next-door neighbor. He and Wetherby Goode, the WPKX meteorologist, occupied adjoining condos in Indian Village, an upscale residential complex on the north edge of Pickax.

“Hey, Qwill! How’d you like the news! They’ve found a name for the celebration, and it’s a terrific one. It’s going to fire up local enthusiasm. Folks have been dragging their feet over the sesquicentennial thing. And do you know what? ‘Pickax Now’ came to Hixie in a dream, although she’s hushing it up!”

“Is that so?” Qwilleran remarked.

“Yeah, she’s one terrific gal! Well, I’ve got to go to the station and see if the piano’s in tune. So long!”

Wetherby (real name: Joe Bunker) entertained his weather listeners by singing “*Stormy Weather*,” or “*Sunshine of Your Smile*,” or “*Blue Skies*.”



There had been a reason why Pickax could not, or would not, emulate the clever slogan of Brrr’s anniversary. It was a matter of pride, trivial though it might

seem to outsiders. Pickax was bigger, but Brrr was older. The antagonism was felt even at soccer games, after which fans always rioted—that is, until the sheriff started attending with his dog.


It all started circa 1850 when the first settlers arrived in sailing ships and made camp on the shore of a natural harbor.

They called it Burr, a good Scottish name. When a sign painter made a mistake on an official sign, spelling it Brrr—since it was the coldest spot in the area—the residents, with good pioneer humor, decided to keep it.

Fifty years later, when the territory became a county, the town of Brrr expected to be the seat of government, but the founding fathers were obliged to look ahead and choose a central location for the county seat.

Now comes the romantic part. The government surveyors assigned to choose a site happened upon a rusty pickax wedged in a tree stump at a point where two trails crossed. And that is how the county seat became known as Pickax City. The historic artifact that inspired the name was now exhibited in the city council chamber.

But that was way back when. There were great accomplishments to celebrate in *Pickax Now!*

 Qwilleran also heard the “handy myth” from Polly Duncan, the chief woman in his life. She lived in a condo three doors away, but they ended each day with an eleven P.M. tête-à-tête by phone.

She had recently exchanged a career as director of the public library for a new challenge as manager of a bookstore. Both jobs made one privy to the latest rumors, and Polly always passed them on to Qwilleran. He himself was not prone to gossip, but he had no compunctions about listening, especially if the scuttlebutt came from an impeccable source, such as Polly.

On this phone chat she said, "Everyone's delighted with the name of the celebration! It was said to be the result of a committee brainstorming, but there is a rumor that it came to Hixie Rice in a dream, and I tend to believe it. How about you, Qwill?"

Astutely he replied, "The important thing is *what* not *how*. The name puts an auspicious slant on the celebration."

"You're so right, dear. . . . What do you think I should wear to Mildred's dinner on Sunday? If the weather continues nice, she might serve on the deck."

"If she does or if she doesn't, I'd like to see you in your new blue pantsuit."

Blue enhanced the freshness of her complexion, the sparkle in her eyes, and the silvery glints in her well-coiffed hair, which may or may not be attributed to her belief in broccoli, leafy green salads, and a banana a day.

"Eat your broccoli," she would remind Qwilleran when they dined out.


"Are you taking anything to the party, Qwill?"

“A bottle of something . . . Pick you up at one?”

“I’ll be ready. Come in and say hello to Brutus and Catta. Good night, dear. *À bientôt!*”

“*À bientôt!*”

Qwilleran was grateful that Polly had survived the stress of a major job transition and was her amiable self again.

 The four neighbors who met to have Sunday dinner were comfortable friends. The hosts were Arch and Mildred Riker. He was editor in chief of the *Moose County Something*; she was food editor of the paper. The two men had been chums since kindergarten in Chicago. Their rapport was casual to say the least.

The weather was pleasant, and they had cocktails on the deck: sherry for the women; Squunk water with cranberry juice for Qwill; a martini for Arch.

Polly raised her glass in a toast. “Here’s to the beautiful people!”

“Don’t forget Arch!” said his old friend.

Huffing testily, Arch said, “We got a blistering letter from one of your devoted readers complaining about your repeated use of the C word in your column. He’s threatening to cancel his subscription.”

“Let him cancel! I know him, and he’s a cat hater. There are twelve million cats in Moose County, and I happen to live with two who are smarter than he is.”

Mildred said, "Maybe you should set him straight, Qwill. Write him a strong letter. You're good at that!"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Mildred, but it's unsportsmanlike to engage in a battle of wits with anyone who is obviously unarmed."

"Bravo!" said Polly. "I hear we're going to have an heirloom auction as part of *Pickax Now*."

Mildred squealed with excitement, "And an arts and crafts show, and three parades. It's going to be so thrilling!"

Polly concurred. "And Hixie's name for the celebration is brilliant! The committee had been floundering around for months, and the name suddenly came to her in a dream!"

"That can happen," Qwilleran said quietly, suppressing a chuckle. "The way it's shaping up, I can expect a deluge of ideas for the 'Qwill Pen' column, and I won't have to go through trash barrels."

Arch jumped in. "How about writing three a week instead of the usual lazy two?"

"Only if I get a fifty percent raise."

The joke was, of course, that Qwilleran was the richest individual in the northeast central United States. His freak inheritance of the vast Klingenschoen fortune, based in Moose County, had brought him to the north country, and his disinterest in money had caused him to turn it over to a philanthropic foundation. The K Fund, as it was chummily called around town, had been respon-

sible for most—if not all—of the improvements being celebrated during *Pickax Now*.

Polly said, “The problem will be to focus on the stimulating present without neglecting the nobility of the past.”

That said they all nodded thoughtfully and went indoors for one of Mildred’s delicious dinners. She was, after all, the food editor of the *Moose County Something*.

Mildred served watercress consommé, pot roast with an exotic sauce, and small potatoes steamed in their skins.

Polly said, “There’s nothing to equal the flavor of Moose County potatoes!”

“We all know why,” said Arch. “A potato farmer was using them to make hard liquor during Prohibition, and the revenue agents caught him and poured it all on the ground. . . . Pass the potatoes, Millie.”

She said, “Do you know why we have so many potato growers in Moose County? They came from Ireland during the Great Potato Famine in the nineteenth century. There was a blight on the crop, and a million Irish died of starvation, disease, or drowning when they tried to escape in leaky boats owned by unscrupulous profiteers. . . . Sorry! Once a schoolteacher, always a schoolteacher.”

The other three talked at once, protesting that it was all very informative.

“And how is Cool Koko?” Mildred asked.

“He has a new hobby. After a lifetime of making carbon

copies, I finally broke down and bought a photocopier—a desktop model. Koko is fascinated. He stares at it for hours waiting for it to light up or play music. If nothing happens, he extends a cautious paw and presses a button.”

“Koko is so smart!” Mildred gushed.

“Or crazy,” Qwilleran said.

Mildred said, “I hear there’ll be several family reunions during the summer, and I thought I might run a series of features on the food preferences of each group—with recipes.” She looked at Qwilleran speculatively. “Would the K Fund be interested in publishing a cookbook?”

“Absolutely! And I’ll volunteer as official taster.”

Polly reported that one of the staffers at the bookstore, a volunteer at the humane society, had proposed an auction of homeless cats rescued by the shelter.

Mildred clapped her hands in approval and said, “Wouldn’t Qwill make a wonderful auctioneer?”

“Wipe that idea from your mind right here and now!” he growled.

But the two women exchanged nods and smiles, and Arch said with obvious glee, “Something tells me we haven’t heard the last of this matter!”

“How’s everything at The Pirate’s Chest?” he asked Polly.

“Just fine! We have quite a number of book collectors in Pickax, and they think the name of the store alludes to shelves full of treasures.”

“How nice!” Mildred said. “And how is the bibliocat doing?”

Polly said, "Many customers have never seen a marmalade before, and they swoon over his apricot-and-cream markings and emerald green eyes. That little cat charms everyone, but one day he hissed at a woman customer and bared his fangs. She was wearing too much cologne! She left in a huff without buying anything, and we had to turn on the ventilating system."

"How is Judd Amhurst doing as special-events manager, Polly?" Mildred asked.

"He may be a retired engineer from the Moose County Power Company, but what most people don't know is, he's been a lifelong bookworm, with an extensive library of his own. And his storytelling hour for young children is a big success. I think they like the grandfatherly look of his white hair."

Mildred said, "I know he's retired, but he seems too young to have such white hair."

Polly knew the answer. "It turned white overnight, following a horrendous experience on the job. He was captain of a crew of linemen working in the woods, looking for downed power lines during a major blackout. He narrowly escaped being killed by a falling tree. I think he took early retirement."

Arch said, "Those power outages always occur after a heavy rain. The ground is soaked, and shallow-rooted trees topple over like bowling pins. I wouldn't want a linesman's job."

Polly said, "He could write a book about his experiences—except that he's no writer."

"Qwill could ghostwrite it," Mildred said.

The other three looked at Qwilleran and he huffed into his moustache.

Mildred continued with her bubbling optimism, "I'm glad to say that Wetherby Goode has promised unusually good weather for our picnics and parades!"

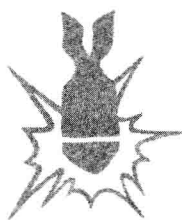
The two veteran newsmen exchanged cynical glances.

After more conversation the amiable party broke up early.

Arch asked Qwilleran, "What's in your Tuesday column? Anything fit to print?"

Qwilleran said, "I don't give insider information. You'll have to wait and buy a paper."

TWO



Following the farewell dinner at the Rikers' condo, Qwilleran and his reluctant housemates moved back to the converted apple barn on the southeast edge of Pickax—close to the action, yet sheltered from the hubbub by patches of woods.

He was moving from the neighborliness of condo living to the solitude and privacy of a barn and acreage. The latter was one of the oddities of Pickax, a city full of oddities. This one could be explained.

Qwilleran's property dated back to pioneer days, when strip farms were the norm—half a mile long and no wider than today's city block. It had been the Trevelyan apple orchard, and the back road still bore their name, but a series of disasters caused the family to sell.

Once upon a time this had been a drive-through barn,