

The real-life story of

# HOW A WILD BIRD SAVED MY LIFE

**NATURE &  
NURTURE**

Penguin the magpie was "part of our family", says Bloom (in 2014).



FROM LEFT: SAM BLOOM / INSTAGRAM.COM; CAMERON BLOOM

AFTER AN ACCIDENT LEFT HER PARALYSED, SAM BLOOM, PLAYED BY NAOMI WATTS IN A NEW FILM, FELL INTO DESPAIR – UNTIL A MAGPIE HELPED HER FIND HER WAY

TELLING  
A SPECIAL  
STORY

"I'm deeply impressed by her strength," Watts says of Bloom (together in Australia in 2018).







## HOW SHE'S HEALING

### A FAMILY'S LOVE

Oli, Rueben, Cameron, Sam and Noah Bloom with Penguin in 2015. Sam says through her ups and downs her husband, Cameron, has been "incredible".



### MAGICAL MAGPIES

Bloom has released two books about Penguin (above, with Oli). The family recently rescued another magpie they named Van.



## HELPING OTHERS

Bloom (on a treadmill in August) is assisting researchers with SpinalCure Australia in their search for treatments.

### MAKING A SPLASH

Bloom winning gold at the 2018 Stance ISA World Adaptive Surfing Championship in La Jolla, San Diego, in the USA.



## NAOMI'S BOND WITH SAM

Watts (above, with Andrew Lincoln, who plays Cameron Bloom) became close with Sam Bloom while preparing for the role.

"There was an immediate trust. She bared her soul to me, which was key to being able to tell the story in a truthful way." Things didn't go quite as smoothly with her magpie co-star (one of several trained birds in the movie). "The first day on set he did a nice number two right down my face," Watts says with a laugh. "I was just like, 'OK, here we go.'"

While lying in bed one Sunday morning four years ago, actress Naomi Watts began reading the book *Penguin Bloom* to her two kids Sasha, 13, and Kai, 12. She says they were all immediately captivated by the tale. "The images were so compelling, and the story was filled with courage and hope," says Watts, 52.

The book, a collection of photos of Australian mum Samantha Bloom, her three sons and a magpie they raised named Penguin, tells the story of how the little bird helped the family heal after a horrific tragedy that left Bloom paralysed from the chest down. Watts knew instantly she wanted to make the book into a film – and she did: the movie *Penguin Bloom* is in cinemas now. "I felt the hairs raise on my skin when I put it down," recalls Watts. "I knew I had to play Sam."

Eight years ago Bloom would never have believed her life story would become a bestselling book – and that Naomi Watts would portray her in a movie. "Who in a million years would have ever thought

that?" says Bloom, 49, with a laugh. But as unimaginable as it sounds, so were the very terrifying events that forever changed her life. In 2013 the active mother of three boys – Rueben, now 19, Noah, 17, and Oli, 15 – and her husband, Cameron, 49, a photographer, decided to take a family vacation to Thailand. While they were enjoying the view from their hotel's observation deck, the balcony railing gave way, and Bloom fell six metres to the concrete below. She fractured her skull in several places, her brain was bruised and bleeding and both lungs ruptured. Her spine was also shattered – leaving her paralysed below her chest.

Once she was stable enough to leave Thailand, Bloom flew back to Australia, where she underwent seven months of intensive rehabilitation and was later told that she would never walk again. Her lowest point came when she returned to her house in a wheelchair. "That's when the reality hit," says Bloom. "Where we live, you can see the beach. The beach was everything to me. I was surfing and swimming all the

time. I could no longer run down there like before the accident." She fell into a deep depression. "At that point, I didn't want to live," she says.

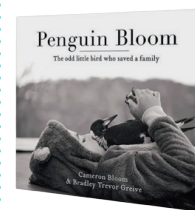
But three months later her son Noah brought home an injured black-and-white magpie chick that he'd found. The family named her Penguin, and for the first time since her accident, Bloom says, she felt her spirits lift. "I stopped thinking about myself

and put more energy into caring for Penguin because she was so vulnerable. That really helped me." The more time she spent with Penguin, the better she felt. "Animals are so healing," she says. "They don't judge you. I began to offload the pain and just tell her what was going through my head. I didn't want to keep bombarding Cameron with all this negativity, so I

would tell Penguin, and that was incredibly helpful." They spent days chattering to each other, and as Penguin got stronger, she went from living in a basket in Bloom's house and being fed every two hours to spending time outside. Never caged, Penguin was free to fly away at any time.

"If my story helps even just one person dealing with trauma, then sharing it was worth it"

- BLOOM



Bloom's memoir, featuring son Oli with Penguin on the cover, was released in 2016.

The film was shot in the Blooms' actual home in Newport, outside Sydney.

Watts says returning to Australia, where she spent her teenage years, was also a special time for her. "My children bonded with Sam's children and my on-screen kids. It was a very cosy, intimate experience," says Watts, who witnessed the effect Bloom and Penguin's friendship had on her family.

"Over the summer we saw a bird, I think it was a crane, walking up the driveway where we were staying. It had a hole in its wing and was really hurt. Sasha saw it, grabbed a towel, picked it up and created a habitat. He went and fished some food from the ocean to give it and helped keep that bird alive," says Watts. "I swear it was

because of our experience with the Blooms."

She hopes the film will serve as an inspiration to others. "We have all gone through different levels of pain, but the pain Sam went through was extraordinary. To see someone navigate that and watch how this family, who was really broken down, come back together again and heal is beautiful and magical."

