

Jane Toombs



*Dance of the
Cedar Cat*

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Too restless to sit, she got up and paced. If only she could understand why she had this urge to fling off her clothes and run out into the moon-drenched night. It hadn't happened when her grandmother was alive. Grandma Metsa had always found tasks for her to do when the full moon was high, or told stories of ancient times in Finland, when Vainomoinen and Ihlimarinen walked the land. And then there were stories about Louhi, the witch who ruled the dark and dismal north.

“You are like the third daughter of Louhi,” her grandma often said. “The first two were so beautiful all men lusted after them. But the third, it's told, was a foster daughter Louhi found as a wee child in the snow one night. No one knew the girl's origins. Her eyes were a deep, strange blue like yours and her hair reddish instead of pale like the Finns or the black hair of the Lapps. It's said men feared her.”

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Eternal Press

Dedication:

*To the many cats that have enriched my life, from my first,
Merriweather, to my present, Kinko.*

Sussie Sironen shut the blinds against an early July full moon and eased into a rocker, propping her bare feet on a stool. With Grandma gone, these nights were getting harder and harder to get through alone. Even though the cottage was far from the village, now and then a few tomcats trekked here and caterwauled outside. She couldn't understand why they persisted now that the female Siamese her grandmother left her had been spayed. Cleo's ears laid back as she listened, no longer thrilled by the calls of her feline suitors. But still the toms came courting at times—always during the full moon.

In contrast to Cleo, who had suitors she didn't want or need, Sussie had none. Zero. A strawberry blond and decent-looking, she had no trouble meeting guys, but after the first date she never heard from them again. A few had kissed her, but not one had made a serious attempt to get into her bed. She wouldn't have allowed it on the first date, but that was beside the point. Grandma had insisted it was not her fault, that she was a sweet girl and not guilty of being anything but herself. If true, she figured "herself" must be damned unlikable, not to mention having no sex appeal at all.

Her sigh caused Cleo to glance at her, and she stared into the beautiful blue eyes of the Siamese. Eyes the same color as hers, though Cleo's ancestors came from the hot sands of Egypt and hers from Finland's frozen northland. The cat looked at her intently, as she often did, as though trying to communicate. Sussie shook her head—a fanciful notion.

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“You are like the third daughter of Louhi,” her grandma often said. “The first two were so beautiful all men lusted after them. But the third, it’s told, was a foster daughter Louhi found as a wee child in the snow one night. No one knew the girl’s origins. Her eyes were a deep, strange blue like yours and her hair reddish instead of pale like the Finns or the black hair of the Lapps. It’s said men feared her.”

So were men afraid of Sussie Sironen? Hard to believe, but something was wrong. She wasn’t like Louhi’s third daughter, a child dropped on her parents’ doorstep. They’d been killed in an accident when she was four, so she didn’t remember them at all, but her grandmother assured her they’d loved her and that she was the image of her father. Heaven knows she was no witch, either, or a noita, one of those old Finn sorcerers who could do magic. She was a medical transcriptionist—a completely mundane job.

As she paced, she wondered if she should enter the room that had been her grandmother’s and go through the childhood ritual Grandma Metsa had insisted on when the moon came full. She’d stopped it after her grandmother died. What had been mysterious and exciting when she was a little girl now made her feel foolish. First pick up the little cedar cat that stood on top of the wooden box. Remove the key from under the box. Unlock and open it. Hold the cat in the palms of both hands as though offering it to something or someone.

Place the cat inside the box. While relocking it and hiding the key underneath, chant the Finnish words Grandma had taught her: *Täysikuu taivaalla, pidä kissa sisällä.*

Because she’d insisted, Grandma Metsa had told her what the words meant in English: Full moon in the sky, lock up the cat.

Once she was grown, she had continued the nonsense ritual to please her grandmother. During her infrequent absences, she knew the old woman did it for her, holding the cat in a tattered rag doll that little Sussie used to sleep with.

The cat was always on top of the box the next time the moon was full. Little Sussie thought it was magic, but growing older taught her there was no such thing. She knew her grandmother took the cat out, though she never caught her doing so.

Sussie shook her head. Why resume a useless ritual that had no effect?

Then a new sound startled her. A caterwaul, yes, but no tomcat ever made that sound. She tilted her head to listen.

Damn! She’d peeled off her T-shirt without even being aware of what she was doing.

Why on earth had she done that? As she reached to pick the shirt off the floor, the cry changed, cajoling, drawing her, inviting her to strip and run out under the moon. To join—what?

Must be a cougar, she told herself. The Michigan DNR wouldn't confirm that cougars roamed any part of the state, but she knew people who had seen one in this area of the Upper Peninsula. She'd be crazy to go outside with a cougar around.

Even as she thought this, she found her hand on the back door lock. She drew back, alarmed, but still the call came. Come, the cry urged, mental pictures forming in her head. Come out and dance with me under the moon.

No man had ever invited her to moon dance. But what she heard was certainly not a man.

Yet how could a cougar call to her in her mind? What was out there in the summer night? Maybe she was going crazy.

Instead of being frightened, the sound enticed her. Naked under the moon? How exciting. She unhooked her bra and let it drop. She discarded her shorts and bikinis, unlocked the door, open it and stared out into the moonlit dark.

She caught sight of—what? Tawny, like a cougar, but the wrong shape. Was it actually standing on its hind legs? Whatever it might be, the creature slipped into shadow before she could do more than catch a glimpse. Shaken, Sussie slammed the door shut and clicked the lock. What if she'd actually gone out there? The thought chilled her, made her realize she hadn't a stitch on. Whatever had she been thinking?

The safest thing she could think of was to go to bed and distract herself by playing CDs and reading. Grabbing up her discarded clothes, she hurried to her bedroom, followed by Cleo and dropped a Dixieland Jazz CD on the player. The cat watched as she flung on her nightgown, waited until she turned on her bedside light, shut off the overhead and climbed into bed. Before Sussie could choose a book from the stack on the table next to the bed, Cleo leaped up, settled on the pillow next her and began to purr an accompaniment to Pete Fountain's clarinet.

Sussie sighed. While Cleo was a lovable comfort, a cat shouldn't be the only bedmate a woman her age had ever had. Picking a book at random, she forced her attention to the first page. Reading distracted her, and eventually made her drowsy. She put the book down, turned off the light and let sleep claim her...

Moonlight silvered the world, forming a moonglade on the waters of Lake Superior. Beautiful. Still, that shining path didn't tempt her. She'd been invited to dance under the moon—where was her partner? Naked, she padded down to the sand beach and began to twirl and spin, feeling as light as dandelion fluff, as if her feet found the right steps she might dance on air.

She needed a partner, though. Not just any partner, only the right one would do. He was near; she could sense him, though he remained hidden. She called out, not in words. Surely when he heard her lonely wail, he'd appear. Hadn't he called to her first?

Something touched her face caressingly. Why couldn't she see him? She reached for him—and touched soft fur. He purred into her ear...

Sussie woke with a start to find Cleo licking her face.

So much for her dream. She shooed the cat back onto the other pillow, turned over on her side, and eventually dozed off again...

Wearing a fuzzy jumpsuit, Sussie paced back and forth in her cage, peering through the bars, hoping to see someone who'd let her out. Why was she locked up anyway?

"For your own good." Grandma's voice, but she was nowhere in sight.

Indignant, Sussie said, "I've done nothing wrong."

"But you want to. It's not safe out there."

"Out where? Where am I?"

"Inside, in your cage, so nothing will happen to you. Didn't I warn you the full moon was dangerous?"

Sussie remembered something. "You're dead, Grandma."

"Don't you suppose I know that? But a body can't rest easy with a rebellious child running loose."

"I'm not a child."

"So then— why didn't you lock up the cedar cat like I taught you?"

After a moment's thought, Sussie said, "If I promise to lock up the cat when I'm supposed to, will you let me out of this cage?"

"See that you do. Some things are not meant to be."

The cage door clicked and opened. Hesitantly, Sussie stepped out into a bare gray

room. "Grandma?" she called. No answer.

Looking around, she saw no door. As she stared at the four solid walls, the dark maw of a tunnel appeared in one. Was the tunnel endless? If not, where did it lead? The darkness frightened her, but if she didn't chance the tunnel, she might as well still be locked in the cage. She inched toward it...

And woke to her alarm and daylight. Both dreams bothered her all the way to Ojibway Hospital, where she worked.

Just before noon, the hospital administrator brought around an "addition to our extended staff." Which Sussie understood to mean someone who'd be working in the new specialty clinic attached to the hospital. All the Ojibway doctors were family practitioners. The clinic provided other physicians in the various specialties on a rotating basis, Monday through Friday. All had their main practice in larger cities up to one hundred miles away.

Sussie listened as the administrator introduced Dr. Petrovich to the office staff. Since she worked in a cubbyhole behind the main office, she knew she'd be last.

"Dr. Petrovich is a psychologist who is currently working with Dr. Miles, the psychiatrist from Marquette. Since Dr. Miles is unable to offer his services in person at present, we are fortunate he was able to offer us Dr. Petrovich."

The word tawny came to her mind as she assessed the psychologist's golden hair, amber eyes, tanned skin. He might be a shade less than six feet, toned and lithe in his light brown shirt and darker brown slacks. Decent-enough looking. Though you couldn't call him movie-star handsome, he carried himself with a certain air she found intriguing.

"I'm afraid the title is premature," the psychologist said. His voice was pitched low, with a slight gritty feel, like beach sand underfoot.

"I won't be able to put the Dr. before my name," he continued, "until some time next year, after I finish the qualifications for my doctorate. Right now I'm working with Dr. Miles as part of the requirements."

"Yes, yes," the administrator said. "I know all that. And we all realize a psychologist, with or without the title of Dr., is not an MD. But for convenience sake, we intend to refer to you as Dr. Petrovich. "

The tawny man shrugged, and his gaze drifted through Sussie's open door. She

swallowed when those amber eyes fixed on her, a strange sensation coursing through her. Almost a feeling of recognition. But she'd never seen this man before in her life.

"Ah, yes," the administrator said, waving at the door. "Sussie Sironen is our insurance billing specialist, and also handles the medical transcription."

She managed to push out a few polite words about being happy to meet him.

"The pleasure is all mine," he said, sounding like he meant it. Still, being a psychologist, he'd take the trouble to make a good impression, wouldn't he?

"I hope to become better acquainted with you—all of you—at next month's hospital gala," he said. He'd been looking directly at her until the "all of you", when he turned his head so he was facing the rest of the staff.

Then he held out his hand to her. She was momentarily dazzled by his touch, and then he was gone. Girl, she warned herself, how pathetic can you get when a handshake thrills you?

While she drove home after work, she told herself he hadn't singled her out, she was imagining things. But when she got to the cottage, the first thing she did was to pencil in a note about the gala onto the kitchen calendar. It'd be good for her to go. She was too much alone; maybe that had been the cause of that odd aberration last night. The gala, she noted absently, was just before the next full moon.

Sussie arrived late for the party, having taken too long to decide what to wear, then having a deer leap into the road in front of her car when she'd almost reached town. By quickly swerving to the right and almost into the ditch, she managed to avoid hitting it. She'd gambled on the doe continuing across the road instead of turning back, and, thank heaven she'd won. Heart still hammering at the narrow escape for both her and the deer, she pulled into the restaurant parking lot.

The place had been reserved for the party—hospital personnel, spouses and their guests—so she'd know almost everybody. Still she took a few extra minutes to calm herself before going inside. These past few years, crowds tended to make her tense. Another symptom of spending too much time alone.

Taking a deep breath, she plastered a smile on her face and opened the door. Voices

and laughter greeted her as she stepped into the bar area of the restaurant. The dance floor had been cleared of tables and chairs so everyone could meet and greet. Party-goers milled about, forming ever-changing groups.

"Sussie!" She turned to see Ginny, one of the girls from the office. "You did come, after all. Great, grab a drink and join us."

Sussie waved and made her way to the bar. Before she had a chance to order, a man spoke from behind her. "I've been waiting for you."

She knew who he was before she turned and stared into Dr. Petrovich's amber eyes, heart hammering all over again, feeling like the deer she'd missed. Though she'd seen him occasionally at the hospital, they hadn't spoken since their introduction.

He carried a glass of clear liquid in one hand. "What do you want to drink?" he asked.

"Tonic water," she told him. Alcohol, even beer, just plain didn't agree with her.

He smiled, and she wondered if he had any idea just how devastating his smile was.

"Two hearts that beat as one," he murmured, and gave the bartender her order.

She glanced again at the drink he carried. "Yours is tonic water, too?"

He shrugged. "Best hangover prevention I know of. Shall we find a table before the mad rush begins?" Without waiting for her to agree, he put his hand on her back, and urged her gently toward the dining room.

His hand was warm through the light cotton of her dress, but she had to control a shiver.

"Doctor," she began. "I think the tables—"

"Are set up more or less by rank? You're right, but I've taken care of that. And it's Volan, not doctor, Sussie."

Volan. She'd wondered what his first name was. He was listed as V.R. Petrovich on the sign at the clinic office.

"I don't think I've ever met anyone with that name before," she said as he seated her at one of the smaller tables—for four. Sure enough, both their name cards were there, with two others for Fred and Nona Peters. She didn't know either of them...

He sat next to her. "Great. That makes me your very first Volan. Only fair, since you're my first Sussie. Is that a nickname?"

"No, not quite. Though it's not the actual Finnish word for cat, the Finns often name

a favorite cat Sussie. Does your name have any significance?"

"Volan was my mother's maiden name. Like my father, she's Russian. And you must be Finnish."

When she nodded, he said, "In the past, the Russians and the Finns were enemies. Luckily we're both Americans, so we can be friends." There was no question in his voice, but she thought she saw one in his eyes, now golden in the flickering candle light.

She hesitated, the look in his eyes making her wonder exactly what she was committing herself to. So she equivocated. "I'm certainly not your enemy."

He offered her a wry smile. "Wary as a cat, too, aren't you? But here we are at the same table this evening, by coincidence."

"You moved the tags."

"Yes, but the coincidence is this was the only table with a vacancy and, since Dr. Miles told me he'd be in town this weekend, I took the liberty of inviting him to tonight's gala. Obviously he should sit at the head table, so I gave up my place of honor there." He grinned.

Sussie stared at him.

"Truth," he told her. "His father left him the family cottage west of town. He goes there when he can get away."

So he hadn't singled her out. He must have seen her name when he put his name tag on the table, then noticed her when she came in. But didn't that mean he must be at least mildly interested in her?

He clinked his glass against hers. "Shall we drink to the coincidental beginning of a friendship?"

She smiled and took a sip of her tonic water. Certainly they could be friends. Where had her strange notion come from? Volan might even be different from all the other men she'd met.

"I dare you to tell me what you're thinking right this minute," Volan said.

Dared her? Well, hey, he was shrink of sorts. She took a deep breath and said, "I don't know why I scare men off."

He blinked. "You? The prettiest girl in the room, and probably in the whole area?"

"Well, I do."

The crowd was now drifting into the dining room. He leaned closer to her and

lowered his voice. "Suppose I make it my business to find the reason. If I do, I'll certainly tell you. But I suspect it may be because you haven't met the right man yet."

She frowned. "Are you insinuating you might be?"

He straightened and shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe. Neither of us will know until we get better acquainted, will we?"

Sussie couldn't argue with that.

"So, what'll we do tomorrow on our first date?"

Surprise struck her dumb for a moment. She rallied and said, "Won't you be meeting with Dr. Miles?"

"He'll make a token appearance here tonight for goodwill reasons, but he didn't come up for that, or to see me. Shrinkers need to be alone from time to time, you know. How about a picnic? I'll pick you up about noon and we'll find a good spot. Maybe you can suggest one. "

"The beach?"

"Fine with me. Where do you live?"

As she told him, she realized he'd moved in fast, which gave her a tingle of anticipation, even though she warned herself it wouldn't last. The men she met never did.

"Those directions sound as though your place might have beach frontage?"

"Yes."

"So the picnic spot isn't a problem."

She nodded, unable to do anything but agree. "I can take care of the food."

"No, it's my picnic and it'll be my food. You can treat me another time."

He figured on "another time", did he? She wasn't so sure.

A couple approached their table and peered at the name cards. "That's us," the woman said.

"Till tomorrow then," Volan murmured and clinked his glass against hers.

When their glasses touched again, this time she found the gesture pleasingly intimate, and her heart leaped. She sipped the tart tonic, and warned herself hope was like a sand castle, liable to be washed away by the slightest wave.

Picnic food packed in an ice chest, and wearing his belligerent tomcat T-shirt, Volan headed for Sussie's house in his Jeep. He'd been careful not to let on he already knew where it was. Softly, stealthily, like Gonzo on the prowl. He was sure his big tom back in Ann Arbor was okay at his sister's place out in the country, but he missed Gonzo. If he'd read Sussie right, she'd have a cat, too. Their kind always did. He'd searched long and hard for a woman like her and he'd been incredibly lucky not only to find her in this remote place, but to find she was a real beauty. Now he needed to move cautiously. One false step and he'd lose her.

He smiled, thinking of her grandmother telling her she scared men away. The old woman had been spot-on, which meant she'd known exactly what she was dealing with. But a quick look at the Clinic computerized employee records had given him the info that Sussie had no next of kin listed, so the grandmother must no longer be alive. Sussie lived alone. Which, as he knew, made her vulnerable.

When he pulled up, she was outside, hanging a newly-filled hummingbird feeder on the branch of a nearby ash tree. Her halter-top and shorts showed a figure every bit as enticing as he'd expected.

"So you feed the birds," he said as he got out.

"Just the hummingbirds," she told him. "Too many critters in the woods near the cottage— chipmunks, squirrels, raccoons and even bears. They all like birdseed as much as the chickadees and jays."

He made a point of looking around. "I like the feel of these woods."

"Me, too. Only sometimes they do seem to be closing in on the cottage. Come on in while I grab my sun screen and gather up the beach blanket."

Her back door led into the kitchen. A blue point Siamese stalked up to him and he leaned down to let her smell his fingers. She butted her head against his hand, inviting him to stroke her.

"Cleo certainly took to you fast," Sussie commented. "She's usually standoffish until she makes up her mind how she feels about company. But that T-shirt tells me you're a cat person. Do you have one?"

He told her about Gonzo, sitting down when she invited him to. Cleo jumped onto his lap, purring as he petted her. If only it was as easy to attract her owner. He'd like to

take a tour of the cottage, but it was too early in their relationship to ask, and she didn't offer.

"Did you bring something for us to drink?" she asked, lifting a striped blanket from a chair back. . "Because I have—"

"All taken care of. Though I admit I don't have a designated beach blanket, so I'm glad you do. I suppose with all the critters in the woods, Cleo won't be picnicking with us." As he spoke, he gently lifted the cat from his lap.

"I daren't take a chance. She still has her claws, but fishers climb trees, and so do bears. She wouldn't be safe."

Outside, he retrieved the ice chest from the Jeep and followed her down a pine needle strewn path to the beach. With little wind to ruffle the sun-dappled water, waves lapped the sand delicately and slid quietly back into Lake Superior.

Sussie spread the blanket on the sand, and he laid the chest there before flopping down next to it and taking off his sandals. Sussie was already barefoot, so he reached for her hand and pulled her with him into the shallow water along the shore. "Test run. People keep telling me Superior never gets any warmer than forty-five degrees."

"Don't believe all you hear."

"I never do, but even risk takers occasionally like to check the odds."

She glanced at him. "A psychologist risk taker?"

"Why not? We make as many mistakes as most humans."

"Somehow, I doubt you do. But anyway, by August the water's warmer along the shore."

"So I can tell." Dropping her hand, he splashed out onto the sand, pulled off his shirt and shorts to reveal swim trunks beneath. "Last one in pays a penalty," he warned as he ran full speed into the lake, finally plunging into a shallow dive .

By the time he surfaced and looked around, she was close behind him. They swam side by side for a while before heading back to shore. "You have a penalty hanging over your head," he reminded her as they waded in.

"Don't be so sure. You didn't even bother to check. I shucked my shorts, and my halter top is part of my suit. We hit the water in a dead heat."

He gave her a mock frown. "So you say."

She grinned at him as she wrung the water from her hair. "And you can't prove

otherwise."

He took in the lower half of her bikini, but it was a fairly modest one as suits went, though it did give him a great view of her enticing butt.

They sat together on the blanket, letting sun dry them off. "So when do I get to see the picnic fare?" Sussie asked, expecting him to produce submarine sandwiches or other delicatessen food.

He opened the ice chest, removed the foil-wrapped contents. Yes, deli food. They split up the different sandwiches so both could have a taste of everything. With her first bite she realized she was only half-right. The corned beef on rye with kosher dills, and roast beef on wheat were first class, with the best coleslaw she'd ever tasted. The limeade was also very good.

"You didn't find all this in the village."

"Nope. Made a special trip into Wisconsin on Saturday. Though I did make the limeade this morning."

"Wait a minute. You didn't invite me on this picnic until Saturday night. "

"It wouldn't have done not to have the right food if you agreed, now would it?"

"But I might not have."

"Then I'd have had really good lunches for a few days. "

Sussie wanted to be irked that he'd been so sure she'd agree, but she was having too much fun. She really liked this guy.

"Okay, I approve of the limeade. Just tart enough."

"That's important to a guy."

She blinked "Limeade?"

"That, too."

"You know, in Regency England, women were described as giving a smart-mouthed guy a 'speaking' look. I happen to have one for you." She slanted him the haughtiest glance she could manage.

"I understand the look, but Regency times?"

"I do read, you know." She had no intention of admitting she'd learned this from Regency romances.

They ate, tossed the remainders of the food to a few attentive seagulls, then walked along the shore until they came to a stream running into the lake. This time he made no

attempt to take her hand, making her wonder if her curse had already started to affect him.

As they turned back, he took hold of her shoulders, halting her. Before she had any idea what he meant to do, his lips, warm and tender, met hers. He tasted of corned beef and Dijon mustard along with his faintly wild flavor, one she knew instantly she'd never tire of.

He didn't break off the kiss, but pulled her tight against him and ran his tongue teasingly along her lips in an invitation to open them. She couldn't resist, her entire being thrumming with awareness. She'd never felt so hot.

When he finally released her, he seemed reluctant. "Too soon." His voice held the telltale rasp of need. "I don't want to scare you off."

"That'd be different, anyway. A first, of sorts." She did her best to make the words light.

"I happen to be in this for the long haul, make no mistake about that."

What did he mean by "this"? You could hardly call a picnic and a first kiss, a relationship.

"Don't look so confused. I mean you're going to have one hell of a hard time scaring me off." He grabbed her hand and pulled her along with him as they retraced their steps toward the blanket.

On the way, he scooped up his shorts and shirt from the sand. Almost immediately she heard a chime. He dropped her hand, pulled a cell phone from the shorts' pocket and put it to his ear. "Petrovich," he said, listened a moment and then replied, "Okay, it'll take me maybe ten, fifteen minutes," and shut off the phone.

"I'm on call," he told her. "Have to respond to this one." He grabbed his sandals and hurried toward his Jeep.

"You forgot your ice chest," she called after him.

"I'll pick it up next time," he called back. Then she heard the engine catch and he was gone.

But not for good, she assured herself, He'd said the magic words—next time.

Three nights later, the full moon rode the September sky. Sussie listened nervously for the eerie caterwauling. When she heard it, strangely she felt she knew what called her. The unwanted urge to answer threatened to flame out of control. Frightened, she hurried to her grandmother's room and picked up the cedar cat. She offered it up in both hands before retrieving the key from under the box, then unlocked, opened it, and tucked the little cat inside. Hands trembling, she closed the lid, and while locking the box murmured, "*Täysikuu taivaalla, pidä kissa sisällä.*"

Full moon in the sky. Lock up the cat.

As she slid the key under the box, the urge to run out under the moon lessened. By the time she went to bed, it was entirely gone. Did it really have anything to do with the cedar cat? More possible was that her childhood belief in the ceremony had worked because she believed it would. Whatever it was, she waited two more nights before she unlocked the box and put the cat back on top.

The next day at work, Volan dropped by her cubbyhole of an office. "How about coming with me to the jazz concert at the theater tomorrow night? I bought two tickets just in case."

"You like jazz?"

"Who knows? Thought I'd investigate the possibility. Do you?"

She nodded. "I'd hate to see your extra ticket go to waste, so thanks."

"I'll pick you up."

"I could drive in and—"

He held up a hand. "My grandfather taught me a gentleman always picks up his date. I don't want to fall short of his standards."

"Do you ever?"

He grinned. "All the time. That's why I try to keep up with the ones I can manage."

After he left, Ginny stuck her head in. "I heard that. He actually asked you for a date." She narrowed her eyes. "Have you been holding out on us? As far as I know you're the first one he's noticed. Be sure and tell me how it turns out, hey?"

Sussie couldn't help but wonder if Ginny figured this would be the usual pattern—a first and last date. She certainly wasn't going to tell her they'd already picnicked together. "It's just to the jazz concert."

Ginny raised her eyebrows. "A date might be a 'what if?' one, but it's never 'just'

one."

"We'll see," Sussie said, not promising to tell her, or anyone, a thing.

She had Volan's ice chest ready when he came by to pick her up for the concert. He set it in the back, and opened the Jeep's door for her. "Even though I'm perfectly capable of getting in and out, I could get used to you being a gentleman," she told him.

There was no movie theater in the village, and the theater in the old county building was packed. Grandma had told her in earlier days they used to feature traveling troupes here. And, of course, the local high school used the stage for the junior-senior play every spring. The rest of the year, the group who'd renovated the theater booked whatever they could.

The jazz group was not a famous one, but Sussie thought they were good. Especially the Dixieland numbers, because those were her favorites. Sometime during the show, Volan reached for her hand. His was large and warm, a hand for a gal to trust. She shook her head—where had that thought come from?

"Care to stop by for a drink or something?" he asked after the performance was over.

"I have apple crisp at home," she said, holding her breath as she waited to see if he refused.

"Perfect," he told her.

In the dark of Jeep, Volan smiled with satisfaction. She trusted him enough to invite him in at night—a step forward. He would only be here another month and a half, so he needed to get inside that cottage and discover what her safeguards were. He'd sensed what she was from the beginning, but became confused when she refused to respond. Then, when he shook her hand for the first time, he knew he was right about her, so she must have some way of shutting down. Probably taught by her grandmother. Somehow, he had to discover a way of circumventing it, or she'd never be his.

The apple crisp was good. But they were still in the kitchen, and he hadn't yet found a way to look at the other rooms. He figured the bathroom excuse was the best bet, so he asked where it was.

"In the hall." She gestured. "The open door in the middle."

As he left the room, the kitchen phone rang. He hurried into the hall, easing open the first closed door. Obviously her bedroom. He shut the bathroom door as he went by and opened the next one. Clean, no clutter, but with a disused look. No doubt her grandmother's. He ducked inside, and was immediately drawn to a dresser where a cedar cat stood on a small box. He nodded. Had to be the charm.

Letting himself out, he shut the door quietly, then entered the bathroom, flushed the toilet and washed his hands. When he reached the kitchen, Sussie was still talking on the phone. Looking up, she told the caller she had to run and hung up.

"One of my friends from high school," she told him. "We've kept in touch."

"Doesn't look like it was good news."

She sighed. "Good and bad. Angie finally divorced the creep she married, but her mother is ill and she's coming back to Ojibway to take care of her."

He made a move to carry his plate and fork to the sink, but she shook her head. "No, just leave those. You said you liked that groups' rendition of St. James Infirmary Blues. I've got a CD of Al Hirt's band jazzing it up. What to hear?"

Hirt was okay, but he'd listen to anything to get her out of the kitchen and into a room where they could be a bit cozier. "Lead on."

He stood behind her while she eased the CD onto the spinner. Al Hirt's trumpet notes had barely graced the air when she turned—right into his waiting arms. He kissed her before she had a chance to protest—if that's what she intended. From the way she'd responded to him on the beach, he didn't think so. As before, the feel of her soft mouth under his threatened to make him abandon all other plans.

He knew he couldn't, knew he had to wait until she understood, but it was going to be damn hard. Like he was. Just from a kiss. Kissing turned into caressing, escalated into overt desire on her part as well as his after he edged her over to the couch and down onto it. He had to stop, but how could he? He'd never wanted any woman as much as her.

Her shirt and bra were off, he was about to taste her beautiful breasts when something hit his upper back and claws dug into his skin. Damn! He'd forgotten about Cleo.

A Siamese cat clawing its way up your shoulders was a real attention grabber. Volan came to his senses.

Dance of the Cedar Cat

He jumped off the couch and stood, resisting the impulse to grab the Siamese and fling her off. Cats were cats after all—he should know. He waited until Cleo settled into place like a fur boa before saying, "I think maybe your cat doesn't approve."

Sussie, obviously flustered, hastily donned her shirt, sans bra. "I can't think why—she's never—did she hurt you?"

"Probably not on purpose. Guess she wanted some attention." Cleo purred in his ear as if in approval. He lifted her off and handed her to Sussie. "Time to hit the road. Thanks for the apple crisp and Al Hirt. Have to admit his trumpet never affected me like that before, though."

Sussie, carrying Cleo, stood staring at the door after he'd closed it behind him, feeling let down and frustrated. Well. Just what was she supposed to make of all that? If Cleo hadn't made her move, would he have—? Would she have—? And what next?

When Volan did no more than smile at her if they happened to cross paths at the hospital, Sussie didn't know what to think. She certainly hadn't scared him off, and she didn't believe Cleo had, either. But when day after day went by with no call from him and he made no attempt to seek her out at work, she began to despair. Had she done something wrong? Been too eager? She didn't think so, but if not, then why the silence?

When almost a month went by, she told herself she'd have to put him out of her mind. But she couldn't.

The October evening darkened into dusk, with a huge, deep-yellow harvest moon rising over the pines. No toms came to serenade Cleo, and Sussie had just decided she wouldn't need to use the cedar cat trick tonight, when the caterwauling began, low and persuasive, calling her to come out and dance naked under the moon. The urge to answer was so strong that she'd taken her shirt off before she came to her senses. She dashed to her grandmother's bedroom and flicked on the lights, flew to the dresser and stopped, staring. Where was the cedar cat? Had she forgotten to take it out of the box?

She thought she had, but maybe not.

Quivering all over with the urgent need to strip and run outside, Sussie unlocked the box with trembling fingers and lifted the lid. Empty! Maybe the cat had fallen off. She crouched and peered under the dresser. Not there. Or anywhere else in the room. She never let Cleo in here, so the cat couldn't have carried it off as a plaything.

Where could the cedar cat have gotten to? Nobody else had—wait, yes, somebody had been here last month. Volan. Oh, yes, and the repair man who'd fixed her washer. But why would either of them take the cedar cat?

Without realizing what she'd been doing, Sussie saw she'd stripped off everything but her bikinis. She was already barefoot, like she usually was in the evening until the weather got too cold. But it wouldn't be cold out under the moon tonight. Indian summer had settled in.

Over and over, she heard the call.. Come. Dance with me under the moon. I'm the partner you've been waiting for. Come...

She was not going to remove her bikinis. She was going to dress and...

Sussie found herself, her last garment discarded, unlocking the back door. Opening it, she stepped outside. Yes, there he was, the suitor, already dancing, stretching out his—were they arms? No. A frisson of fear shot through her and she turned back, but the sound of his voice stopped her. She shut the door and faced him again, advancing step by step toward something that was not human, though it stood on two feet. Was not any kind of animal she'd ever seen. Though she was still terrified, a surge of anticipation drove her forward.

Pain shot through her, a vicious stretching and twisting that brought tears to her eyes. But then he was there, licking the tears from her—fur? The pain lessened and she suddenly felt free of all restraint. Paw to paw, they began to dance under the full October moon.

So this was what her grandmother had tried to keep her from. Why, when it was so glorious? Sussie was still there, somewhere inside her, and Sussie knew why. Because she was not like everyone else, she was a creature who could change herself into—what?

We are werecats, my lovely mate. His words filtered into her mind. Werecats, yes. She was and he was. But if she was still Sussie underneath, who was he? Looking into his eyes, she thought she should know, but did not, and that troubled her. But the beast

she'd become had no qualms. We dance, together we dance. His words twirled and twisted in her mind as she gave herself up to the pleasure of the twining, sinuous moon dance.

Each time they brushed against each other, her arousal grew until she began singing to him with her cat voice about how much she needed what only he could give her. He responded, his song telling her how beautiful she was and how long he'd waited to find his perfect mate. He wanted her, only her.

She gyrated before him, suffused with desire, offering herself, readying herself to become his mate. Only he could quench the hot urgency within her, could offer her what she'd never before experienced.

Instinct told her she must drop to all fours before he would heed her plaintive call. When she did, he followed suit. He reared up over her, and his teeth sank into the fur of her ruff as he mounted her. The slight pain became part of the thrill of his entering thrust. She knew this was right, this was how it began, the mating dance. There was nothing that came close to matching the intense thrill of satisfaction that gripped her. She lost all sense of the woods around them, even of the moon's rays shining down. Nothing mattered but her werecat mate and the wonder of their union that went on and on until she thought she would die of pleasure.

When finally it ended, she curled up next to him in blissful satisfaction, and slept.

Cold, she was too cold to stay asleep. Eyes still closed, Sussie reached for a blanket. She woke in a confused hurry, sitting up when she found herself clutching a handful of leaves. Where in hell was she? And where was—? She came to a dead end. Where was who? And, good grief, she wasn't only outside, she was naked! Had she sleepwalked?

Shivering in the cool October air, Sussie hurried inside. Cleo followed her to the bathroom and sat waiting while she took a hot shower. As the water sluiced down her body she realized the back of her neck hurt and she'd somehow acquired scratches there. Also, the private area between her legs was sore.

She needed to know why, but at the same time she was afraid to remember. Cleo sat on her undisturbed bed, watching her intently. Sussie talked to her as she dressed.

"I couldn't have dreamed, because I woke up outside. I recall looking for the cedar cat—" She broke off as the incredible truth poured into her mind. No cedar cat. She'd stripped and gone out to answer his summons. He wasn't human. A werecat. They danced together under the moon, and then they—"No!" she cried. But now she remembered the mating vividly. How could she have had sex with a beast? This is what her grandmother had tried to save her from. But last night she'd—changed. And worse.

No wonder men were afraid of her. She probably gave off some kind of aura. Only Volan hadn't been scared off. Sussie's sigh was heartfelt. Everything had been going so well between them, but now—how could she face him when she'd found out this awful truth about herself?

She slid on her watch, realizing she needed to hurry or she'd be late for work. Her world may have altered drastically, but she still needed her job. No time to eat. Damn. For some reason she was ravenous this morning. She poured some dry cat food into Cleo's dish and dashed for her car.

Luckily, someone in the office had treated them all to doughnuts. She chose one, drew a cup of coffee from the big percolator in the waiting room and holed up in her tiny office, hoping she wouldn't have to interact with anyone today. Especially Volan. Though she did need to find out if he could possibly have taken the cedar cat. As far as she knew he hadn't gone into her grandmother's bedroom. She didn't think the repair man had either. But the little cat was missing.

She couldn't possibly ask him today, though. The way she felt, she'd do well to talk to anybody at all.

At lunch, she grabbed a cheese sandwich and a carton of chocolate milk from the machine, and hid in her cubbyhole. Ginny popped in. "I suppose he told you he was leaving, but it was a surprise to the rest of us."

Sussie stared at her. Ginny's eyes narrowed. "So you didn't know, either. This morning, early, the night shift in the ER said. One of them was out having a smoke and saw his Jeep pull away. Well, that's just like a man. Hard to trust one of them. But then you knew he was only here temporarily anyway."

Gathering her wits, Sussie realized she was talking about Volan. "Yes, I knew that," she managed to say, surprised her voice didn't quiver.

"Word is, Dr. Miles called him back earlier than expected for his final evaluation.

Something about him getting to call himself doctor for real, I guess." She eyed Sussie. You look kind of beat."

"Didn't sleep well." Sussie muttered.

Ginny raised her eyebrows, but didn't comment further before she left.

Numbness enveloped Sussie, and she welcomed the absence of feeling, hoping it would remain until the end of the day. Then she'd have two days off. But once she slid behind the wheel of her car, she started to cry, and the tears continued all the way home.

Days passed, then weeks. No letter, no phone call. So he hadn't really cared about her. Or maybe it was what she was beginning to think of as "the curse of the werecat" that had cooled him so fast he hadn't even said good-bye.

As the November full moon neared, Sussie searched through the entire house, looking for the cedar cat, not really expecting to find it. The thought she might change into a beast again terrified her. When night came, she huddled on the couch with Cleo, dreading to hear the caterwaul. She couldn't believe her luck when neither a tom nor any other kind of cat yowled outside the cottage. Maybe it had been a one-time aberration.

But a week into December, another worry surfaced. She, who'd been as regular as clockwork since her menarche, had missed a period. Impossible! How could a beast have impregnated her? But then, he couldn't be a beast all the time. He'd said he was a werecat, which meant he was also human some of the time. So maybe it was possible. But that still left some terrible questions. If she was pregnant, what was inside her?

Unable to bear the uncertainty any longer, Sussie finally drove to the next town and bought a pregnancy kit. When she used it, her worst fear was confirmed. An abortion? Involuntarily her hand dropped to cup her lower abdomen. But if not that, then what?

The cedar cat. Did either Volan or the repairman have a reason to take it? Not the repair guy—he was old enough to be her father, and married besides. But Volan? What would be his reason? She could think of none, unless he knew he was removing the protection her grandmother had given her. She didn't see how he could have known that, but he had been in town every time the werecat tried to lure her out during a full moon.

If she believed that, she'd have to admit she'd been dumped by a shape shifter. So, if she remembered that dance and its culmination, he would, too. Anger carried her through the rest of the month. She'd never had such a miserable Christmas.

The New Year began with no decision made. The next full moon loomed, but she no longer worried. He'd left town, hadn't he? So the werecat was gone. No one would call to her. It began to snow the night before the January full moon. Sussie was fixing supper when a knock came at the back door. She turned on the outside light to see who it could possibly be, looked through the window and drew in her breath. She'd never expected to see him again, but it certainly was past time.

She opened the door, furious words rising to her lips. Volan strode in and thrust something into her hand. She stared down at the cedar cat. She took a deep breath to let loose her fury, then blinked as he dropped to his knees in front of her.

"I know you must be mad as hell, but will you marry me anyway?"

Speechless, she struggled to process his words. What he talking about? Marry him?

"Will you?"

"I—I don't know."

He stood and took off his cap, jacket, and kicked off his boots. He took her hand, leading her into the living room, where he gazed into her eyes. "I know what I did was inexcusable, but I had to leave by morning. I'd already taken the cedar cat, though, and my last night here turned out to fall during a full moon.

"My first day in town, I'd just driven into the hospital parking lot and got out of the Jeep. It was noon, and you came out one of the doors. The feeling kicked in then, the sense something slept within you. I did a bit of detective work and found out who you were and where you lived. That night would be a full moon, and I couldn't wait to find out if what I'd sensed was true. So after dark, I drove out to your cottage and serenaded you. When you opened the door and I saw you naked, it sent me up, made me pretty sure I was right. But you didn't come out."

"Why would you do such a thing?"

"I knew I could never expect a woman to love me without telling her what I was. But only a very special kind of woman would accept that part of me. I think I fell in love with you the moment I saw you, but I couldn't risk being wrong about you. That's why I kept trying to find out if you could change. It took me awhile to realize you had some charm

that kept you from it." He gestured at the cedar cat clutched in her hand. "When I found that, I had to take it away. Otherwise I'd never know, and by that time I wanted you so much I was nearly crazy.

"I had to make you shift, so you'd be able to accept what I was. Otherwise we could never be together. I'm not sure you'll ever forgive me for that. Tomorrow night is a full moon. You have the cat back, so you can choose whether to love me or not. If you do, come out and dance with me in the snow, under the first full moon of the New Year. If you want me, I promise never to leave you again."

He turned, strode back to the kitchen and donned his winter gear. She watched, holding the cedar cat to her heart, unable to think, much less act. He stooped to pet Cleo, who twined around his legs. Then he was gone.

He wanted her to come out and dance with him again under the moon, in the snow. He'd given her back the cedar cat so she could make the choice. Didn't ever have to make the change again. He'd deceived her from the beginning. But he'd also said he'd fallen in love with her before he was sure she could change.

She'd been utterly furious with him, but her anger ebbed away as she'd listened. How lonely he must have been all his life. Still, did she want to marry a shape shifter? The cedar cat would keep her from ever having to change again. Isn't that what she wished for? Only then did it occur to her she hadn't told him she was pregnant.

They didn't have to marry because of that. She was sure Volan would support his child in every way possible. Whatever it was? She shivered.

Before she went to bed, Sussie eased into her grandmother's bedroom and lifted the cedar cat she'd placed back in its box. She held it in both hands and said, "Grandma. I know you didn't want me to ever discover my peculiar heritage. But now that I have, do you believe I should pretend I'm not what I am?"

She waited, but there was no answer. Not that she'd really expected one. Cleo meowed and she whirled around, seeing she'd forgotten to close the door. The Siamese minced over to the dresser and leaped up to the top, dislodging a small box that flew open as it hit the floor. A tiny object skittered across the floor. After retrieving it from under the bed, she looked at what she held. A tiny ivory cat with topaz chips for eyes, a little gold loop protruding from its back. She'd forgotten all about this cat her

grandmother had worn on a thin gold chain around her neck. Even in bed.

Why? To keep from changing? Sussie shook her head. She'd never know if the ivory cat had any significance, but to her it seemed an omen—as if grandma had answered her question in her own oblique fashion.

As Sussie returned the ivory cat to its velvet-lined box, she saw the gold chain coiled in the bottom. Grandma must have taken off the cat and chain before she went to the hospital. Strange she hadn't noticed her grandmother wasn't wearing it there. Probably because I was so terrified of losing the only relative I had.

Could that be why she'd kept her grandmother's room just like it was when she was alive? And not let Cleo in here? Unhealthy behavior. Perhaps the time had come to change that.

She approached the rosewood secretary that had belonged to her great-grandmother on the Keranen side of the family. Locked, of course; it always had been. As a child she'd looked for the key once or twice, but never found it.

Crash! She whirled. Cleo was back on the dresser, peering down at the pieces of a porcelain bluebird on the floor. "Bad kitty. What's gotten into you? You've never broken anything before."

Seeing there was no way the bird could ever be put back together, she picked up the shards and dropped them into the waste basket. The last piece felt heavier than the rest. Looking closely, she saw she held the base of the bird, which seemed to have a sliding panel. She worked it open and stared at a small key. The key? No wonder she'd never found it. She glanced at Cleo, who looked regally smug. The Siamese had been in this room a lot when Grandma was alive. Was it possible ...?

Sussie shrugged. Cats were inscrutable.

Once she'd unlocked the lid of the secretary, she pulled out the two holders below, opened the lid, and let it down to rest on them. The cubbyholes were stuffed with papers. She opened one of the two small drawers and found a color photo of a bride and groom—a head shot, neither smiling. Her breath caught as she stared at the solemn face of the man. He had to be her father because her resemblance to him was clear. The pretty woman, who must be her mother, wore such a sad expression that Sussie blinked back tears.

She turned the photo over and on the back, in her grandmother's neat script was

"My son, Conrad and his bride, Twila."

At first the other drawer seemed empty, but then she noted an uneven piece of metal in one corner. She almost dropped it when she looked into the snarling face of a cat. What had it meant to her grandmother? And when and why had this piece been broken off what must have been some kind of medallion?

Sighing, she set the photo and the metal piece aside and closed the secretary, leaving the key in the lock. The papers could wait. They might reveal a past she should know, but right now a decision about her future loomed.

Sussie looked at the photo a dozen times before she went to bed, hoping to see something new, a secret revealed. She hadn't. There was only a bride and groom with expressions more suitable to a funeral.

She couldn't fall asleep for thinking about the decision she had to make before dark tomorrow. Marry a man because she was pregnant? She cringed at the idea. But what if she really loved him? Did she? She might think so, but how could she be sure?

Had her father been a shape shifter? Was that why her mother looked so unhappy? The truth was something she'd never know.

When at last sleep overwhelmed her, she dreamed...

She sat on the bed in her grandmother's room, watching Cleo poking around as though searching for something. The Siamese stopped, sat down and looked expectantly at the closed door. Though it didn't open, a mist seeped through. The mist coalesced into Grandma Metsa, who leaned down to stroke Cleo before straightening to fix her gaze on Sussie.

"Didn't I teach you that nothing in life is sure?" she demanded.

"Yes, but..."

"But me no buts. Love is not rational. Else I never would have married poor Halmer and put him through agony." Her face softened. "He told me before he died that I was worth it. But I know better. Nothing is worth that."

"Grandmother, you're dead, too."

"So, I should stop reminding you what's right? Especially now that you've disobeyed me and suffered the consequences."

"But I didn't disobey. The cedar cat—"

"Sooner or later you would have. Because men like him aren't easily discouraged."

I'm not here to tell you yes or no. I came to tell you when the time comes, your heart, not your head, should make the decision." With that, she vanished.

Sussie woke, surprised to find herself in her own bed, Cleo curled in sleep on the pillow next to her. She feared she wouldn't fall asleep again, but when she woke for the second time, light showed around the edges of the blinds. Morning. The snow had stopped and the sun shone.

She went to work as though it was any other day. Though she waited in dread to hear his name mentioned, no one did, so he must be in town unofficially. To collect her, if she decided in favor of being collected? Because she couldn't help thinking of it in that way. Fortunately, she had a lot of work piled up on her desk. In a burst of energy brought on by not wanting to think about Volan, she had it all finished by the time her work day ended.

Driving home, she shoved in a CD and sang along with the Ghoul Dogs as they rammed through "Dead Bayou." She envisioned Louisiana swamp country, hot and humid, so different from the cold and snowy UP. Gators roaring in the night instead of howling wolves.

If Volan had to be a were, at least he wasn't a werewolf. No way would she ever dream of being interested in a werewolf. But then, as he'd said, she was a cat person. How could she ever have imagined what he was? What she was, too, for that matter. Though she could prevent the change. Could he? How awful for him if he couldn't.

Damn it, no, she wasn't going to start feeling sorry for him.

Once home, she ate a quick meal, then swept and mopped the kitchen floor. Though winter dark had set in, and the stars were out, the moon was not yet up. Best go and lock up the cedar cat. Before moonrise...

She started for her grandmother's room, Cleo weaving in and out between her legs as though trying to trip her. At the now-open door of the bedroom, she paused. Last chance, hammered through her mind. Last chance to lead a fairly normal life?

Is any life normal without love? Where had those words come from? From within

Dance of the Cedar Cat

her, if she was honest with herself. Because she never would love another. How could she?

The call came, clean and crisp in her mind, like the outside air. Come to me, dance with me under the moon, my beloved.

His beloved. He loved her. In the dim light of the hall, she could barely see the outline of the cedar cat on its box on the dresser. In her mind she could clearly see Volan, tawny and magnificent in his werecat form.

When she turned to retrace her steps, Cleo ran ahead of her, leading the way to the outside door. Cleo, she thought, had somehow known all along what was happening. On her way to the door, she stripped, dropping her clothes where they lay, not allowing herself any second thoughts, responding only to his seductive call. As she reached the kitchen, she saw Cleo on the table—a real no-no. The cat batted something from the surface and jumped down after it.

Bending to retrieve it, Sussie saw it was the piece of metal with the cat's snarling face. She'd left it with the photo on the table. About to put it back there, she hesitated. So far, Cleo had seemed to have a reason for everything she did. Closing her hand around the metal strip, Sussie kicked off her slippers and opened the back door. She shivered in the cold air, but almost immediately the wrenching began.

A dim awareness that a werecat had paws, not hands, made her lean down to leave the piece of metal on the stoop. As she completed the change—not as painful this time—she heard his voice in her mind. Come to me, my lovely mate.

No longer cold, fur-covered now, and relishing the freedom of being a werecat, she bounded over the snow to his moon-silvered form. How beautiful he was!

Paw to paw, they began their courting dance, a dance she knew would end in the blissful explosion of mating. But as they danced, Sussie surfaced inside her, insisting, "In the house, in the house."

Impossible to mate inside! Neither of them could so much as turn the knob to open the door. Sussie, though, wouldn't let her fall back into the sensuous haze the dance created. At last she broke away and made for the house. Come, she mind-called. He loped after her.

At the door, Sussie ordered her werecat-self to lay her paw on something small glinting in the moonlight. When she did, she felt herself changing back and lifted her

paw—but it was too late. Sussie, shivering in the cold, picked up the metal fragment and, reaching up, pressed it between the male werecat's eyes. He jerked away, but let her try a second time. In moments Volan, as naked as she, stood staring at her.

"What in hell did you do?"

"I'll explain inside." She opened the door and he followed her in. "In bed," she added, "where we can be warm."

He grinned. "No argument."

In her bed, as they huddled together under the covers, he murmured "Too cold for you out there?"

"No, but you made the choice the first time, this is my turn."

He kissed her, long and thoroughly, sending the delirious excitement of the mating dance sizzling through her veins. She could feel his arousal as he pulled her against him, skin to skin.

Soon now, soon. But he delayed, first caressing each breast until she felt her nipples engorge, before putting his mouth to her breast until she panted for breath, moaning. Then he moved to the other. She'd thought werecat mating wonderful, but this was blissful torture.

"I need," she paused for breath. "Need you. So much, Volan. Please..."

He finally raised himself over her, and, as she felt his hardness probe into her she shattered, screaming his name. He paused for a moment or two, and then thrust deeply inside her, intensifying her pleasure as they joined together in a matching rhythm. At last he shouted her name and they fell from dizzying heights in complete accord.

Finally he rolled to one side, still holding her. "I take it this means yes." His warm breath tickled her ear.

As if she thought he was speaking to her, Cleo leaped onto the bed, picking a spot to curl up on the pillow above his head, purring. Sussie giggled. "You're using her pillow."

"At least she had the courtesy to wait." He blew in Sussie's ear, making her tingle all over. "When?"

"When what?"

"Do we exchange eternal vows."

"Eternal?"

"Better be."

Sussie bit her lip, realizing he had to tell him. "Um, sooner than later would be best."

"That's my gal."

"There's a reason."

"Can't wait to have me in your bed every night?"

"That, too. But by July or so, we'll be parents."

"Damn. No condom. And you're not on birth control." He paused. "Wait a minute. It'll be more like October, counting from tonight."

"Not counting from last October."

Volan raised himself up on his elbow and stared down at her. The moonlight shining through the slats in the blind showed him the outline of her face. "You're not kidding, are you?"

"No. And I'm worried about what the baby might be like. After all, we mated as werecats."

He found himself speechless. That possibility had never occurred to him. Recovering, he blurted, "It was my first time—as a werecat, I mean. And even in that form, I could tell it was your first time ever." He pulled himself together. "But there's no need to worry about our baby. You'll deliver as a human, so that's what the baby will be."

"You're sure?"

"Makes sense to me. It's pretty much guaranteed we'll have a shape shifter on our hands, though, with both of us carrying the trait. Lucky you have that cedar cat."

"I believe my grandmother was one. And maybe my father. I think the piece of metal I used is a remnant from some kind of medallion that kept him from changing. But I didn't know all this until you came into my life."

"And made you change, love. I know." He eased back down and cuddled her next to him.

"I'm not sorry!"

"Good. Because I'm not either. We belong together. What's the waiting period in Michigan?"

"To get married? I haven't a clue."

"So we'll fly to Nevada. Not Las Vegas tacky. Maybe Carson City, the capital." He kissed her, tasting the essence that made her unique. His hand curved around her breast and she sighed in pleasure.

As they began caressing each other, starting a slow ride to the peak, Cleo jumped off the bed. Their lovemaking continued to the summit and beyond, and they eased sleepily into the after-glow.

It's a girl. Give her the ivory cat.

Volan reared up "'Who said that?"

Sussie sat up as well. "You mean you heard that in your head, too? It must mean my grandmother has accepted you as one of the family, so you may as well get used to it."

"A werecat can handle anything. I take it Grandma is usually right, so we'd better start thinking of girls' names."

Metsa.

"That's my grandmother's name!" Susie cried.

After a moment they began laughing. "Bossy, isn't she," Volan said.

What's right is right.

"Thank you, Grandmother," Volan said formally. "I know this is right, Sussie and I being together."

What's done is done. See that it stays right.

"I intend to." Volan spoke as much to Sussie as to the voice in their heads.

"Me. too," Sussie said.

Cleo jumped back on the bed as if to add her agreement.

I shall help.

With that, a sense of wonder and contentment settled over them like a blessing and, all cuddled together, they fell asleep.



About the Author

Jane Toombs has eighty plus published books to her credit as well as twenty-some stories and novellas. She writes in most genres, but paranormal is her favorite. Jane and the Viking from her past are snowbirds. Along with their grandcat, Kinko, they spend summers on the south shore of Lake Superior in Michigan's beautiful Upper Peninsula and winters in Central Florida's lake country. Her website is www.JaneToombs.com and she enjoys hearing from readers.