



## NOT FOR SALE

This story is a free read available for download and may be distributed for free. No part of this story can be sold and is used for promotional purposes created by the author, Gem Sivad, who retains all rights to this literary work.

Those who sell this story are in violation of the rights produced by the creator(s).

# Cat Nip

By

Gem Sivad

## Chapter One

The night I delivered Myrtle Patrick's baby was the week of the full moon. I was driving my buggy back to the edge of town where my house sits, when I thought I heard an animal whimpering in pain. My horse, Clarence, had a fit, stepping all over the path, indicating that he'd prefer to run from whatever was out there.

"Settle down, old man," I soothed him. He shook his head as if to disagree, but calmed enough for me to listen more closely.

Since I've never been accused of having an excess of common sense, I pulled up and hopped off the buggy-seat to see what was beside the trail.

Clarence snorted loudly to let me know his sentiments about my intent. But I ignored his advice, just as I'd ignored every other piece of male advice I'd been given, since I'd run away on my tenth birthday after my stepdad beat me black and blue.

Granted, in this instance, Clarence was right. The sound was coming from a big cat that had been chewed up pretty badly by something. I didn't want to think about what was big and nasty enough to hurt a predator of that size, so I concentrated on easing the animal's pain and attempting a healing.

I was unfamiliar with the kind of cat that lay near dead, on its side beside the path, ligaments in its left front leg ripped so that it wasn't going anywhere. Its belly had been sliced open and some of its entrails were pulled to the outside.

Its breath heaved in and out so that I could see its life force floating away, along with the blood that was seeping into the sandy ground. If it hadn't been for the sound that I'd heard, I'd have never seen it lying there, so deep in the shadows was it.

I wondered at that, because when I knelt by the cat, although silent, its feral golden eyes watched me.

“You’ve definitely hurt yourself this time, Mister,” I crooned to him. He raised his head ready to tear into me if I touched him.

Well, I was used to that, too. Plenty of my success stories have caused me a mite of pain. Anyway, fool that I was, I squatted beside the creature and laid my hands on him, after first tucking his intestines back into his belly.

When I say that, I know it sounds pretentious, but that’s what I do—I lay hands on things and they get better. I’m a healer—a witch some call me. I prefer to think that I’m a creature of God imbued with the power to make things improved.

Anyway, never mind me, after the first shudder of surprise or pain—I’m not sure which because I don’t talk to the recipients of my gift, I just help them get well—the cat lay quiet under my hands. I couldn’t help noticing how soft the animal’s fur was as I drew out the malignant force of its wounds and the accompanying infection that had already set in.

I worked there a long time, not willing to give up on the cat. He was magnificent, even torn up as he was. As I ran my hands over the silken coat of gold, decorated by black spots, I estimated that he’d weigh at least 300 pounds. Cougars were common in the Texas territory, but I’d never seen this species before even though I’d heard tell of the animal—jaguar.

I was already tired from delivering Myrtle’s baby and keeping her from bleeding to death, so I wasn’t as careful as I should have been. Once the wounds had closed, and the foreleg had straightened, the cat rolled over and came to its feet, standing huge in the night, looking at me out of amber eyes that glowed in the dark.

The force of his movement knocked me on my fanny in the middle of the dust, and I could do no more than lean on my arms, waiting to be eaten. I wouldn’t have shot him, even if I owned or carried a gun, because I don’t kill things, I heal things.

He was quite beautiful standing there sniffing the air, like he was trying to figure out who or what I was.

“Good luck to that, Mister Cat,” I laughed at him. “I’ve had twelve years since my stepdad tried to beat the devil out of me, to ponder just that question.”

He stalked over to where I lay vulnerable and ready, like a tasty dish prepared just for him. I knew it was male—cat or man there’s no mistaking the need to dominate that God’s *he creatures* radiate.

I didn’t even put up a fuss when he padded to where I lay and butted me with his head. I sprawled back, staring up at the feline, fascinated instead of frightened.

Evidently he wasn’t going to kill me, at least not right away. I was surprised though when he sniffed me again and then began to purr.

I’d never been a cat-lover and didn’t know till then, that cats of all sizes make that humming sound signifying pleasure—they do. The beast was well pleased to be alive and looked me over carefully, trying to decide, I guess, whether to grant me the same privilege. Before I could protest or skitter backwards and away, he bit me.

So much for gratitude, not only did it hurt a lot, but my dress was torn at the neck where he’d ripped the material. I was more upset about that, than the pain. Pain I was accustomed to, in all sizes and shapes. Dresses were hard to come by and I didn’t have so many that I could afford to lose one to an ungrateful cat.

Prudent or not, I swatted at him saying, “Now look what you’ve done. You’ve torn my dress.”

The cat sat on his haunches staring at me for awhile, and since he wasn’t going anywhere, apparently neither was I, so I put my hand over the bite.

I was surprised at how little a mark was there, since I’d felt the teeth puncture the flesh of my shoulder and neck. The wound wasn’t even bleeding and closed rapidly even as I touched it. At least that part of things went right, since usually I can’t heal myself.

Anyway, we glared at each other for awhile and then Clarence interrupted our staring match, shaking his head and snorting loud enough to let me know we had company coming.

The cat stood up and butted me once more with his head, just to prove he could, I guess. Then, he turned and disappeared through the brush and into the night.

John Patrick rode his horse up to the buggy and dismounted to help me.

“What the hell are you doing sitting in the middle of the road?” the big bluff Irishman asked. And then as if any answer I gave him wouldn’t be worth listening to, he hauled me up and set me on the seat of my buggy.

“Myrtle sent me to see you home,” he glowered at me. Clearly he would rather not have obeyed his little wife, but there was a powerful love between them and when she told Paddy to do something, he minded her.

I shivered, still feeling the power of the cat and pretty sure it was close by watching us. It might spare me, but I doubted that Paddy would be as fortunate.

“Go on back to Myrtle, Paddy, and be sure to keep her warm. Feed her some of that soup I brought with me, nothing heavier for a while. I’ll see myself home.”

He was relieved to be free of his duty to me, and hurriedly turned his horse back to the cabin where a new son awaited. He paused only long enough to see me gather my reins and start Clarence on the journey toward my shack.

\*\*\*\*

I must have been more exhausted than I’d known, because when I rolled out the next day, morning was gone and afternoon had already begun. I lay in my bed for a minute trying to adjust to—something different. Even though I wasn’t sure what or why, I knew things had changed overnight.

My contemplations could be handled just as easily while feeding my neglected horse and chickens, so I dragged my butt out of bed and dressed.

On the way through the kitchen I grabbed up my usual apple from widow McVey's tree, but I guess being afternoon, my stomach wasn't ready to settle for so little. It growled hungrily, and I took that as a sign that I needed to visit the general store in town. Except for eggs, I didn't have much on hand to eat.

I gave Clarence his scoop of grain. He hadn't settled down since the cat incident the previous night.

"Whoa up there boy," I looked for injuries that I might have overlooked in my tiredness but found none. He trembled and flinched under my hands but calmed a little as I groomed him.

The chickens were even worse. You'd think I'd brought a polecat into the coop with me. The fluttering and carrying-on that they did was silly. My number one layer, Claudine, that usually gave me a nice plump brown egg, pecked my hand when I reached into her nest. Then she used her sharp talon to rake my arm when I filched the egg and retreated.

More astonishing, the red scratch oozing the blood that immediately appeared, almost as quickly, began to heal, zipping closed until even the white scrape was nothing but a memory.

I might have stayed longer in the hen house, staring at my healed wound, if a pounding on my front door hadn't interrupted me.

Bad news usually accompanies such a commotion, so I hurried into my shack through the backdoor, grabbing a towel to wipe my hands before answering the caller at the front. Instead of the usual homesteader or sick townsman, the sheriff stood there.

He started talking before I threw the door wide. "Good to see you, Missy. Had some trouble last night and knew you'd been out to Paddy's place. Good job delivering

Myrtle's baby, by the way." He stopped to draw breath and I eased the door wider, inviting him into my one room of living space.

For all of his jovial façade, he looked around uneasily checking, I was certain, for a cauldron and spell book. He'd been near several times when others had whispered *witch*, loud enough for me to hear. He'd not taken action to defend me then, so I understood that he was desperate or he wouldn't be here now.

He wasn't a reticent man usually, so I wondered at what had caused it now. He shuffled from one foot to the other and then, as if remembering why he'd come, said, "Big cat attacked Ben Casey's corralled horses last night. Brought down one and dragged it away."

The paucity of my personal possessions seemed to reassure him in some unfathomable way and he finally got to the point. "Wouldn't know anything about that would you?"

"Sheriff Bannister," I laughed at him. "Did you think I stole Ben's horse and ate it?" I was joking but he frowned as though considering that possibility.

"Ben got off a shot. Says he winged the cat. I thought you might have crossed trails with it while you were out helping Myrtle."

This was the moment I should have told him about the jaguar I'd healed. But, I didn't. Instead, I shrugged his question away and answered honestly, "No gunshot wounded cats have sought my aid today or yesterday. I'll be sure and let you know if one does."

The sheriff took another slow moment to look around inspecting my habitat closely. "Kind of isolated out here aren't you?"

I could hear the change in his voice. It occurred to me that Sheriff Olag Bannister was getting ready to make an improper advance—one I had no interest in

receiving. His usual bland expression had darkened and his eyes seemed feral as he looked at me with hunger.

“I’m busy today, sheriff. I’ve no time to chat with you about animals that are likely dead and gone by now.” I stepped toward the door, intent on getting him out of my space. The hair on the back of my neck lifted and I smelled danger in the air.

He reached for me, but I avoided his grasp and stepped outside, walking quickly to where he’d left his horse. I stood there expectantly waiting for him to follow. When he stepped into the afternoon sun, I wondered what had spooked me so much. It was just the sheriff doing his duty, talking to all citizens about a wild animal attack.

He stepped off the porch and winced as he limped toward me. “What’s wrong with your leg,” I queried. I didn’t offer to heal him. For some reason, bile rose in my throat at the thought of laying hands on Olag Bannister.

“Twisted it chasing a belligerent cowpoke who needed to sleep a drunk off. Damn leg just keeps acting up. Maybe...” I was shaking my head before he could ask and backing toward my slab of porch.

“Oh, almost forgot,” he reached into his saddle bag and pulled out a brown wrapped package. “This was left for you at the general store. I said I’d deliver it since I was coming your way.”

I caught the package out of the air and said *thank you* when he tossed it, still determined to wait outside until the man departed. No way did I want to be cornered by a randy lothario in a closed space I might not be able to escape.

He mounted his horse, tipped his head, silently saying *good-bye*, and rode off toward town. I stood outside watching until he disappeared from sight. Only then did I look with curiosity at the package in my hands.

I sank down on the step and tore the brown wrapper aside. Gifts were uncommon occurrences in my life and usually amounted to a jar of honey or a jug of spirits in payment for services rendered.

But this was different. I knew what it was before I finished tearing the paper free. It was blue. The prettiest dress I'd ever owned. Actually, it was the first store-bought dress I'd ever laid hands on.

Paddy must have seen the state of my clothes and decided to replace the dress when he'd come upon me sitting in the middle of the road. Still, as I fingered the soft muslin material I doubted my own assumption.

Paddy and Myrtle didn't have coin to spend on foolishness, and with me happy to take vegetables from their garden in payment, why would they buy me a ready-made dress?

A picture of the big cat I'd healed flashed through my mind and I unconsciously stroked the bite on my neck. There was a small raised area where his teeth had sunk deep, but nothing more. When I touched the spot, it itched, igniting strange fires throughout my entire body.

I live in the country for several reasons. One, I'm never wanted in town—*needed* sometimes, but *wanted*, never. Two, I'm not much for socializing; anymore than one person at a time is too many.

I say this, admitting openly that I have no friends. So it seemed very odd to me how traffic had picked up at my place. Usually when I heard a buggy in front of my house, I expected sickness or hurt.

I knew before opening the door that this was another payment. I didn't investigate the idea's source, but answered the knocking. Old man Ivers, the town's only restaurant owner, stood ready with a basket of food to shove in my hands.

“What is it?” I asked, because he held the basket in front of him like it contained snakes.

“Order for this, and money to pay, was shoved under my shop door this morning. I’m just getting around to delivering.” He stepped closer, suddenly not so in a hurry to leave. “You look different.”

I don’t recall ever having a conversation with Mr. Ivers in my life. I knew him by sight, as he did me. He was the owner of the *Cat’s Eye Diner*, I was the local witch.

“Not really, I’m sure.” I backed away as he made a hesitant step toward me. The dress that had been delivered earlier by the amorous sheriff, settled protectively over my hips, and I felt a curious rumble begin in my throat.

Mr. Ivers must have heard the noise, because he blanched and backed up. I was glad that he was leaving, if not a little startled, by his hurry.

I held the basket and watched as he slapped the leathers across his poor horse’s rump, urging the animal into a lope instead of a sedate trot, like—well—like he was running away from something.

## Chapter Two

I'm not much for taking other people's word for anything, so after I polished off the basket of food Ivers had delivered, I decided to do some investigating. I looked dumbly at the pile of chicken bones on my plate, and the empty tub of potatoes. I'd eaten wings, thighs, and breast, three rolls and even the butter that he'd packed.

The odd thing was I felt like I could eat more. Still, pleasantly full, almost purring with contentment that was unearned, I loosed the curious side of my nature. Where had the big cat been traveling from, and what had taken a horse from Ben Casey's corral, because, torn up as he had been, the jaguar, had not been covered in blood, nor had he shown signs of gorging recently.

I decided that I had the time and the inclination, so I revisited the site from the previous evening. Clarence was just as leery of stopping on the road in the daylight, as he had been the night before. I insisted, climbing down from the buggy with alacrity now that I was here.

The place that the cat had laid was scuffed, and drops of blood dotted the landscape. I crouched next to the *show* on the ground, and lifted a tuft of hair from sage brush where it had caught.

I smelled it. I don't know why. It just seemed like another piece of information, the scent, so to speak. I didn't really think that the aroma of cat would cling that long, or that I'd smell it if it did.

I was wrong. The scent nearly knocked me on my rump. And not in a bad way either. My body's response was immediate. My breath caught and my lungs froze at the same time that cold chills were followed by hot waves of sensation never experienced before.

I dropped the hair sample and scrambled backward, putting distance between me and all that power. I was an untrained healer with no information about strange

occurrences other than what I had learned in my own short life. I stared at the tuft of hair, not capable of leaving it behind, and unwilling to touch it again.

I'd heard it said about my mother, before I ran away, that she was a round-heeled woman who would fuck the devil if he asked. Some, like my step-father, had looked at me and my odd ways, and declared that the devil had asked.

My mother's behavior had affected my outlook in areas of male/female interaction. I'd never had much use for the mating rituals of the normal, since, I didn't qualify. But, it seemed as though, an abnormal part of me that had been slumbering, was awakened by the aroma from that tuft of hair.

My skin itched, as prickles of awareness skittered from the soles of my feet to the tips of my ears. My breath changed to short pants, my back arched, my fingernails scraped the ground that I clutched, and I had the incredible urge to scream, or yowl, or hiss—very loudly.

I shook off the strange reaction and pulled my attention back to why I'd revisited this spot. I could see the scrape marks covered in blood and bits of fur—obvious testimony to the existence of the big cat I'd saved. It looked like the cat had dragged itself a long distance to get to the trail I'd traveled the night before.

I don't believe in fortuitous coincidence so I immediately pondered a deeper possibility. *The cat knew I could heal it and had lain in wait for my passing.* It sounded pretty incredible put like that.

I intended to follow the trail while it was still fresh, but Clarence snorted and did his nervous dance he used to alert me that company was incoming. Before I stood, I hastily pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and gathered the hair fiber.

I was leaning over Clarence, checking his hoof when the sheriff rode up to my buggy. "Got trouble?"

This would have been the perfect time to tell the law about the cat I'd treated the night before. I didn't.

"No, sheriff, I was on my way to check on Myrtle and her new baby when Clarence seemed to be favoring his front leg." The sheriff's hand dropped uneasily to his own leg, and I wondered what that was about.

"So, you did you magic hoodoo on the leg and it's all better now?" His tone was derisive and I was glad I'd done no magic hoodoo on his leg.

"I guess we'll see," I said, running my hands up Clarence's flank before I moved to his tail, patted his rump and then climbed back into the buggy.

Without further conversation, I shook out the reins, politely nodded my head *good-day* and trotted my horse toward Paddy's place.

\*\*\*\*

I knew Myrtle would be fine, but I would have come anyway just to see the son I'd delivered to her. I like babies. It was the only persuasion that enticed me into looking at men occasionally.

The baby was a lusty Irish lad, with lungs to match his da, and that's something to be said. Paddy was all smiles ushering me in to see his pride. I wore the dress that had been delivered earlier in the day.

Neither Myrtle nor Paddy commented and I knew the package had come from another, when Paddy handed me a basket of honey on my way back to my buggy. "For your help last night," he paused and then went on, "I would have given it last night but the babe and Myrtle had all my thoughts."

I nodded understanding and then just to make certain, I asked, "Did you make a trip into town today?" Paddy looked pained and shook his head.

“No, I’d a liked to buy a trinket for Myrtle, something you know, to make her happy,” he stopped and cleared his throat, looking embarrassed. “No, I didn’t make it in.”

“I think the boy is enough for now, don’t you?” Seeing a man in such a state because he couldn’t buy his wife a birthing gift gave me hope that there were some worthy males to be had. It also assured me that someone besides my grateful patient had sent me the blue dress.

It was early evening when I started back. Not as late, certainly as the night before, but late enough that Clarence was picking up his feet smartly, anxious to get home to his stall in the shed beside the chicken coop.

I’m not sure when my conscious mind admitted that I was being stalked. Maybe, stalked isn’t the right word...the animal was running parallel to the trail, not bothering to keep hidden or pretend fear.

It was the jaguar from the night before. I didn’t need to look at him directly, and kept my eyes riveted between the ears of my horse. *See no evil.*

Then he disappeared and I felt enormous relief at having avoided another meeting with the wild cat. I was soon to be disappointed. He prowled onto the path ahead, muscles rippling, head turned to stare at Clarence and me as we barreled down on him. The cat sat in the middle of the trail, snarled loud enough to halt Clarence in his traces.

Having gotten our attention, the jaguar sat in the middle of the path and yawned, showing us his teeth gleaming very whitely in the darkening night. His eyes were amber colored, and glowing. I shivered. “What do you want?”

I know that speaking to a wild animal as if it understands, is irrational behavior. Nevertheless, that’s what I did. He made a chuffing sound, and dropped down on all fours, rolling to his side, inviting me, I thought, to do a follow up exam.

The leg was still tender with a line of red marking what should have been a fading scar. “Oops, better let me work on that.” He purred, rumbling a deep resonating chest sound, loud in the night. “Roll over on your back. I need to check your belly. I don’t know how you found me last night, but I’m glad I could be of service.”

He was a very easy animal to talk to, and shifted under my hands as I needed, so that I could probe the stomach wound which had healed without issue.

The leg, though, that was a different story. I looked closer and saw the problem. I had missed an important part of the big cat’s injury the night before. He’d been shot. When I popped the bullet out of the hip, I was surprised it had caused that much discomfort.

It was really just a flesh wound, no more than a pebble under the skin. The slug fell to the ground, and I concentrated my healing efforts on the hip, drawing the pain and infection out, letting the positive healing power flow in.

I was tired but satisfied that I’d gotten everything this time and I slumped back on my hands. A sharp burn startled me. I thought at first I’d leaned on a snake. But on inspection, my hand had touched the bullet I’d removed from the cat’s hip. It was silver.

I took my handkerchief from my pocket, and much like earlier in the day, I gathered the bullet to look at later. It nestled next to the tuft of fur. The original coat purred loudly in front of me.

I had an incredible urge to sink my fingers into that magnificent coat. Or, worse, lay my cheek against the powerful shoulder. The purr seemed to intensify, until that was the only thing in the world I heard. I shuddered, grasping for control.

“You’re stealing my will, or trying, aren’t you Mister Cat?” So the cat wanted to play?

My life is fairly lonely. It's not something I dwell on, but the closest friend I have is Clarence, so an offer of friendship from this big cat didn't seem too far-fetched or unwanted. Tentatively, I reached a hand to touch.

I froze in mid air. What did I want to feel—the brow, the neck, the belly? I looked darkly at him, and dropped my hand.

“Almost had me, didn't you?” I stood up and brushed my new dress off disgustedly. And then as an afterthought I murmured, “Oh, and thanks for the clothes.”

It was his turn to stand mesmerized. I don't usually have that affect on males of any species, so his attention got mine.

I headed back to my buggy. Clarence twitched his ears at me, as if to say, *get a move on Missy*, but he didn't seem overly alarmed at the big cat that accompanied me to my conveyance.

I climbed in and took up my reins, prepared to leave. Before I urged Clarence toward home, I leaned down and murmured advice to the cat.

“The sheriff was at my house today asking about a marauding cat that's killing livestock. If it's you, quit. He said it had been shot.” The cat stood, shoulder level with the seat of the buggy, one ear cocked, listening. I wanted to smack his nose. Instead I grasped his jaw with both hands and stared straight into hypnotic amber eyes.

“I missed the bullet last night, so today I could tell the sheriff the truth—I didn't treat a cat for bullet wounds. I won't lie if he asks again.” I dropped my hand, took up the reins and drove Clarence toward my shack, trotting homeward at a fast clip.

## Chapter Three

He invaded my dreams that night. One minute I was in my bed, sleeping; the next moment, I was in the low foot hills surrounding Flat Rock. My night vision had improved, sounds were intensified, and I rolled newly found muscles in my shoulders. The scent in the air teased my senses. I stretched and I flexed my fingers that had become sharp elongated claws. Testing the strength and capabilities of my new body, I crawled across the ground.

I heard the familiar chuffing sound and then he was beside me, belly crawling toward the edge of the ledge, as I was. The heat from his body scalded me and his purring, attempted to lure me from my goal.

I snarled at him, even took a swipe at his too close shoulder. It was important that I see below.

Two men squatted beside a fire, a branding iron heated in its coals. Fifteen or so cows milled restlessly close by. The cat in me recognized how easy this prey had been offered up. My claws slid deeper into the gravel underneath, preparing to spring.

I don't know whether it was one of the men I intended to devour, or one of the cattle. My mind was a red haze of blood lust. The jaguar screamed a warning to those below and knocked me on my side. I rolled and fell.

I was on the floor of my shack, wrapped in my blanket...still me, Misery Hess. I rubbed my hands across my arms just to make sure that there was no fur there. It had been so real I felt like I needed to get up fast before I fell back into the dream.

\*\*\*\*

The nice thing about being a healer, everyone expects me to be odd and keep strange hours. Clarence, of course, would have preferred, I think, a more traditional mistress, but it wasn't to be. And so it was that we found ourselves back on the same road that we had already traveled twice in one very long day.

When we reached the sandy area where I'd found the big cat, I turned Clarence and diverged from the well worn path to follow an elusive track through the brush. Without exploring the why of it, I knew where I was going, and I traveled quickly.

When we reached the foothills that led to the bluff in my dreams, I drove Clarence ruthlessly. "Clarence, I will feed you double in the morning. Don't let up now old man, we have a cat to save."

I pulled leather atop the rise and left Clarence by a Juniper bush, climbing swiftly up the rocky way to the bluff. He was there, as I'd known he would be. His tail was swishing angrily as he peered down at the tableau below.

It was almost as it had been in my dream, but for one man who had been added. Sheriff Bannister warmed his hands at the fire and spoke to the rustlers as we watched. I could feel the tension coming from the jaguar and he gathered himself, preparing to spring.

I laid my hand on his shoulder. Slowly, eyes glowing with the blood lust from my dream, he turned his head toward me. One insistent word beat at my mind demanding...what? "...*Change.*"

He butted be with his head, driving me away from the edge of the cliff and down the slope. I half stumbled, trying to keep my footing at his aggressive shoves. "*Change,*" he roared in my mind.

And suddenly, I felt the fear that I had not felt before. Instead of the slow descent that had been, I ran, panicked as he chased me, his silence now more frightening than the low growl that had been emanating from his throat.

I needed to get to Clarence and my buggy. My feet flew over the rough ground, and I was subconsciously surprised that I didn't stumble. Then I did fall, but that didn't stop me. I scrambled on all fours, too frightened to stop, or look at my pursuer.

My muscles, unused to such abuse, screamed as I lurched forward, my awkward gait changing, as a vast awareness of power swept through my mind and body.

Then, I was, as I had been in my dream—jaguar—racing on four legs, muscles rippling with new strength, my senses open and alert to the dangers of the night, and focused on the big cat that followed behind.

I skidded to a halt so quickly, that I sent a shower of fine rocks spraying outward, throwing noise and debris into the air.

A breeze that I had not noticed before carried the scent of burning cattle hair, and the sound of bawling cows. It also brought me the words of the rustlers as though making a gift of them to me I ignored the big cat that now stood over me, purring as he approved my new appearance.

His sounds of pleasure/joy—both I suspected—intruded blocking part of the outlaws' conversation with Olaf Bannister. I butted the cat, enjoying the feel of him on a primal level never experienced before. *Hush...* I mind screamed to get his attention.

Sheriff Banister's words drifted on the wind. *Moving them won't be easy....must be careful...*The big cat shoved, impatiently demanding my attention. I slapped him across the muzzle and admired my paw as it flashed out and made contact.

*Tomorrow night* were the last words heard from the sheriff before a mighty head-butt sent me tumbling backward with a force that left me sprawled in the dust, belly exposed, and a big cat straddling me.

Thoughts of rustlers drifted away on the wind. I knew him, every new sinew and muscle in my body was familiar with the cat that stood above. His purring increased, overwhelming my resistance, burying the part of me that was Misery Hess.

He lowered his head and rubbed his muzzle against my furred shoulder, then stepped over my awkward sprawl and flopped down beside me. I flipped to all fours sniffing the air, straining to understand.

*My name is Misery Hess and I'm a healer.* The words floated through my brain and away. My cat lowered to her belly, and crouched beside the big male, meeting his unblinking gaze.

*My name is Misery Hess and I'm a healer.* The male cat snorted, and growled, showing white fangs. Then he stood and stalked angrily around me, tail twitching in short, tense jerks. I—she—we--recognized his need to dominate. His verbose rumbling and pacing didn't frighten us at all.

I felt a smile blossom in the heart of my cat as the male jaguar circled, muscles rippling in the moonlight. Abruptly, as though he'd come to a decision, he rushed me, playfully nipping my shoulder, before he pinned me to the ground.

My cat was no match for his three hundred pounds of brawn. Carefully, he lowered his weight across my back. When I tried to roll away and resist, his teeth closed over the spot where shoulder and neck connect.

The bite shocked me, flooding my body with erotic heat. *Mate...* I heard him as clearly as if he had spoken. He poured waves of love over me and I shuddered, unfamiliar as I was with the experience.

Ironically, that was what brought sense back. *My name is Misery Hess and I am a healer.* I repeated my one line as if it was a talisman against magic, and maybe it was.

Disgusted, he gripped me by the nape of the neck and dragged me up, shaking me violently as though he needed to get my attention. The force of the motion, cleared the remaining confusion from my brain and my cat glared stubbornly at him.

*My name is Misery Hess and I'm a ...* Before I could finish my incantation, he released his hold on me, roaring a loud scream in the night. I wondered if the rustlers below heard it as I did. *Mate.*

I walked down the hill side, first on four trembling legs, that changed at some point to two. I knew he stalked behind, but I did not turn lest I give into the wild urge to stay and never be Misery Hess again.

I stumbled naked toward Clarence and my buggy. Once there, and seated, I pulled a blanket I kept in the back around me and urged my horse, "Take me home, Old Man. I don't know what just happened, but I need to be away from here."

The beast paced beside the buggy as I drove furiously away. He guarded me, even though it was he, I fled. I did not feel his absence until Clarence was once again in his stall and I was in my bed.

## Chapter Four

Well, I could huddle in my bed and pretend that nothing extraordinary had just happened to me, or—not. After my initial bout with denial, I pulled a robe over the nightgown I'd donned and went to my kitchen, looking for food.

I was hungry in a way I'd never felt before...a deep, clawing need for...what? I thought about the big cat and shuddered. He was no longer outside my house. I could feel his presence when he lurked near, just as I could feel his absence now.

I was sitting at my table, drinking tea. I was hungry, but except for the honey that I'd received in payment from Paddy, my cupboard was bare. A knock on the back door interrupted my sparse breakfast.

An old Indian stood there, basket in hand, waiting patiently for me to answer the door. "For you," he thrust the woven carrier into my hands and stepped back, turning even as I called out.

"Wait," he paused. I spoke to the back of his head. "I'm sure you're hungry too. Won't you join me?"

He pivoted swiftly on his heel, doing an about face, surprisingly quick for an old Indian.

I carried the basket into my kitchen and set the food on the table. It was heavy, laden with more than the offering the day before which was good, since I was hungrier than the day before.

My messenger stood, outlined by the rising sun, as it spread daylight behind him. Amber eyes met mine, and I felt a rumble begin in my throat.

\*\*\*\*

He stepped inside, and the glamour or whatever charm he'd spelled to disguise his form, fell away. My breath caught in my chest, leaving me weak, almost suffocating. He was magnificent.

"Well," I fluttered over the food that he'd brought. "There should be enough here to feed both of us."

He said nothing, picking up one of the two chairs I own to sit it astride. His gaze was fixed on me, and I couldn't help my nervous reaction to his stare.

"I assume you are going to tell me what this is about?" It was a question, a fair one, or so I thought.

"Not what are you?" His voice was a low growl, as I knew it would be.

"I know all I need to know about what you are. It seems you've made me one of them too. But, I'm more curious about who our enemy is?"

I lost interest in his face then, becoming more interested in the contents of the basket. There was a wrapped package I set aside. The rest was food and I tied into laying the table faster than I ever had.

The cake alone, chocolate with chocolate icing, was more of a treat than I'd ever experienced. But the roasted beef, loaf of fresh bread, ears of hot buttered corn, and fresh cooked collard greens had me hurrying to eat this lavish meal before it disappeared.

I found a second plate in the cupboard, rounded up a knife and a fork, though they didn't match mine, and only then remembered my manners. "Please join me as I enjoy this lovely meal you've provided."

When he slid his chair up to the table and filled his plate, I waited until his mouth was full of beef before I added, "As soon as we've finished, you can tell me who the sheriff is rustling cattle for, and why they want to kill you."

He looked up, fork half raised for a second bite, and ordered, "Eat. Shifting takes

a lot of energy. You talk too much."

Then he picked up the carving knife and cut a chunk of meat half the size of one of the roasts. He put it on my plate and motioned at it, repeating. "Eat."

I opened my mouth to argue, only to hear the rumble that started deep in his chest, reaching across the table as a command. His eyes changed, became the amber eyes of the big cat, and I closed my mouth with a snap and picked up my fork.

The food was delicious. I amazed myself with the quantity of beef and vegetables that I ate. I kept my questions to myself until the chocolate cake was cut and served.

If he up and left after hearing my words, I wanted to make sure that I'd tasted that dessert. I'd heard tell of chocolate, but I'd never sampled it.

He seemed mighty interested in my reaction when I put that first bite into my mouth. What can I say? The flavor fairly exploded on my tongue, sending a riot of exquisite pleasure through my entire body.

I ate that entire piece and he cut me another, putting it on my plate before picking up his own eating utensils. I know I had a goofy grin on my face when I licked the tines of the fork, savoring every drop of the chocolate.

"I brought you another dress," he nodded toward the brown package I'd set aside. Two things occurred to me then. I was sitting at the table in my nightgown and robe, and I'd had more gifts in the last two days than in the sum of the rest of my life.

All things considered, I was inclined to look with favor at Mister? "Ahem," I cleared my voice, "What is it I'm to call you? I can't name you Mr. Cat."

"Call me Thomas," he chuckled. It was a rusty noise echoing the laugh he'd made earlier, as though he intentionally practiced the sound.

I clutched the new dress to my bosom, again, and nodded my thanks.

"Now, tell me," I instructed him. I did not ask a direct question because there were too many things unknown.

I did not want to limit any information Thomas might offer by framing a specific question. His eyes continued their amber glow, intensifying as he looked at me. His purring grew louder, and it seemed to me that the temperature in my small cabin warmed.

I tried to break away from the glance that held mine. Instead, the combination of his heated amber eyes and that mesmerizing purr had me leaning toward his seduction.

I could see his intent in his eyes. The jaguar intended to mate with me. I was drawn into his mind and startled when I saw both beast and man as each pursued and captured its prey—me—in both my forms.

“No.” The word resounded loudly in the room, although I had only managed a whisper. “I don’t even know your whole name.”

He blinked and straightened on his chair, pulling his face back before his lips brushed mine. “Hunter,” he said, “Thomas Hunter.”

I blinked at his next words. “I’ve traveled a long way to find you. I’ll not leave alone.”

He declared his intentions gruffly, leaving me to mull over his words. “For now,” he agreed, “I will accept your *no*. But soon, Misery Hess, you’ll walk the night with me.”

His rumbled words promised a future destiny that I would have to consider. Not one to let man or cat, have the last word, I had to respond, “We’ll see.”

Just like that I was plucked out of my chair and found myself cradled on his lap. “For now, I will let you show your independence.” He growled the words mocking my declaration. Then he dipped his head lower and nuzzled the mark on my neck murmuring his words against my flesh.

“But soon...” he nipped his way up my throat, across my stubborn chin, to claim my lips. “Soon,” he breathed his warning—his promise against my mouth, nibbling until I opened for him.

I'm not sure what would have happened if the clip-clop of hooves striking the scattered gravel in my yard hadn't interrupted us. I struggled off of his lap, and peered out the window.

"It's Olaf Bannister," I warned him.

He rose smoothly, handing me the blue dress he'd brought. "Put yourself together, I'll handle the sheriff until you're ready."

I stepped into the shadowed corner and fumbled my way into my clothes. I heard the back door open and close, so I wasn't surprised when I turned back to an empty room.

When I opened the door to greet my visitor, a black cat streaked around the corner of the cabin and sat by his feet, looking with interest at the sheriff.

"Sheriff Bannister," I greeted him. "It's very early in the morning for a visit. Is there a problem?"

The sheriff stood uncertainly, and then asked, "May I come in?"

At my nod, he pushed past me into my one room, looking around suspiciously. "Paddy says he found you sitting in the middle of the trail the other night—said it looked like maybe you'd been doctoring something."

I sat on the chair that recently had been vacated by Thomas, and waited for the sheriff to make his point. The black cat promptly took up residence on my lap and sat rumbling interest as he watched the sheriff.

I recognized the purr and realized that Thomas Hunter still guarded me. I was happy to have him there, since Sheriff Bannister seemed very upset.

He looked at the cat on my lap and sneered, "Finally got yourself a familiar I see."

Holding Thomas in my arms I stood and took a step toward the looming sheriff.  
"If you have a question, sheriff, please ask it."

Olaf Bannister seemed nonplussed as I walked toward him. I felt the cat's muscles ripple and his claws unsheathe. A glance at my new friend showed that he stared at the lawman from unblinking, amber, eyes.

It appeared Thomas Hunter was coiled and ready. And then Thomas was out of my arms and arching through the air, body twisting and changing shapes, even as I watched. I gasped in the wonder of it, almost missing the event that had precipitated his change.

Olaf Bannister, shimmered in the light filtering through the door, his image wavering for a moment, before he too, launched himself and instead of cat and man, two full grown jaguars met in the air and toppled to the floor.

Whatever the outcome, the beasts needed space and so I stepped around and out, followed by the writhing mass of male cats that screamed and rolled, biting and tearing at each other.

I could see now, what had happened to Thomas on that night when I found him half-dead on the trail. The sheriff's clothes were strewn on the floor of my cabin, gun belt and gun as well.

I hesitated. I am a healer. I may be many other things, and discovering new every day. But I am a healer. I knew I wouldn't be able to kill the shape-shifting sheriff if he was the winner of their combat.

I held the gun in my hand and watched as the two struggled. The cats were of the same size, but Bannister was black as a panther. For a moment, the black cat pinned Thomas to the ground, as he tried to rip his throat out.

I changed my mind. I lifted the gun and aimed it. Before I could will my finger to pull the trigger, Thomas twisted under the other cat and their positions were reversed.

They rolled, claws raking each other in a desperate life and death struggle. Their roll took them to the edge of the ridge my cabin set atop, and together they rolled over still locked in a mutual death grip.

I ran to the edge of the hill and watched as the two tumbled all the way down until they hit a rock that jolted them apart. The big black cat that had once been Olaf Bannister gathered his strength and raced away.

It was clear to me that for the moment, the fight had ended. I took that moment to assess my own position and decided retreat to the safety of my cabin would not be amiss.

I turned and raced back, still holding the gun to my side, but as quick as I was, the jaguar Thomas was faster. His man form stood directly in my path, and blocking the cabin door when I arrived.

I was stunned. First I had not seen him race past me—because he hadn't. He was just—there. Second, he had shifted from cat to man, and was already fully dressed.

"How did you do that?" I heard myself demand querulously.

"Misery Hess, will you invite me in?" I reached beyond his shoulder and pushed the door open. Since he was closer to inside than me, I wondered why he asked and then looking at the smug expression on his face, paused

Then I ducked under his arm and across the doorsill. "Maybe someday, Thomas Hunter, but not today."

Then, I repeated my mantra of protection as I had many times before. "My name is Misery Hess, and I'm a healer."

His eyes went jaguar and I thought I saw a flash of teeth, but I stood my ground and glared at him across the invisible line of magic.

He could not enter unless invited? I sensed his frustration and felt a smile begin to form, blossoming from my depths.

"I guess I'm a witch too. And maybe even sometimes a shape-shifting jaguar. But walk the nights with you right now, I won't. I have too much work to do." And with that, I closed the door.

As I listened to his receding footsteps, his words, accompanied by laughter, sang in my head. "I'll be back, Misery Hess, someday soon..."

# The Saga of Misery Hess

If you enjoyed this story, read the next  
installment

## Hunter's Pride

[www.gemsivad.blogspot.com](http://www.gemsivad.blogspot.com)

[www.gemsivad.com](http://www.gemsivad.com)