

BOON COMPANION

By Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

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SASSAFRAS was but seven and a half weeks old when her mama finally died. Spring was cold and there were lots of other cats in the barn where Sass was born, which meant there was very little for a mama cat whose insides were not quite right anymore and an unripe kitten.

“Don’t die, Mama. I been watchin’ that Sally Cat and I think I can do what she does and hop us a mouse for supper. I will miss you, Mama.”

Her mama had shushed her and pinned her down with a paw to wash her face one last time. “Mousin’ will come soon enough, baby. But what you got to do is get yourself out of this barn. Barn catten’ ain’t a good life for such as us. You know you had six brothers and sisters that perished before you and only you, with that little caul on your face, was born the right way. Did I mention that when I was born I had the same circumstance? And I have come to this barn late in my career, just long enough to deliver my younguns before I die, too.”

“But you, baby girl, you are a special one, just like I was, and it’s up to you to play fate like a mouse and make it feed you.” She licked the long fur of Sassafras’ calico face. Sassafras bore red-and-white patches and a black ear on the blue-eyed side, and black-and-white patches with a red ear on the green-eyed. The effect was lopsided but fetching, her mama had always said anyway. The other cats hissed her and told her she was ugly.

“Who is fate? Would she really feed me? I heard old Tom Fool say he was gonna kill me soon’s you died.”

“Don’t give him the chance. I want you out of this barn right away. You have to go look for your true callin’ and to do that you will need help. Town help. You have a pretty face and winnin’ ways and if you’re willin’ to play the handy mouse-catcher for a

time, you can stay alive in the home of some dotting town-dweller while you look for you boon companion.”

“I got a boon companion, Mama? Other than you?”

“Not yet, but you will have one soon or you will likely die. I never have told you how I come to be so low as to be birthin’ my kits in a barn, and I ain’t got time to tell you all of it now, but it was through the loss of my own boon companion. One more thing I will say before I gasp my last, little gal, and that is look among the young and healthy for your own. They tend to hold up better.”

Sassafras’ mama shushed her with another one of the lullabies she purred to her all the time, but after a while she broke off and didn’t say anything else. Sassafras licked her and tried to nurse, but it didn’t do any good. All the milk was gone, and so was the warmth, the strength, the protection, and the tender care Mama had given the kitten for the whole of her short life.

Presently along came ol’ Tom Fool who, seeing the situation for what it was, took a swipe at the orphaned kitten, missed, and smacked her poor dead mama on the her ear so hard his claws got stuck. That made Sassafras so mad the anger inside her swelled up as big as a house and blazed out of her eyes so it liked to fry Tom Fool.

He knew he was in trouble, too, cause he dragged Sass’ mama a little ways across the floor trying to loose his claws, and when he did, he ran away, just as Sass growled and pounced.

She nudged her mama back into her sleeping pose, and lay down beside her again, but she knew this was the end of her and the barn. Ol’ Tom Fool or some other cat would be after her now that she had no mama to look after her. So when all the other cats were sleepin’ in the hay, Sassafras picked herself up and took herself out of the barn and onto the long bumpy dirt road leading off the property to another long road that led to town. It was a far piece and a cold journey for a little bitty kit, but fortunately, Sassafras was a longhair, and she would curl up tight in the crook of a tree limb and take her a little nap when she was tired.

One time (because during that period she didn’t count by days and nights but by waking and sleeping spells) after she woke up, she heard a lot of noise and felt the sun on the parts of her not shaded by the tree limbs.

Looking down from her perch, she saw she was outside a building and there were a lot of human kittens playing in the yard. These were young and strong, just like her mama had said for her to get, but they could also be mean and cruel, as she knew from Tom Fool's story of how he came to lose his tail to deceitful boys with tin cans and firecrackers.

She watched those children all day long, studying them to see if one of them might be her boon companion.

One little gal sat off by herself reading and Sass was drawn to her. She jumped down from the tree limb and sat in the corner of the schoolroom window, under the branch of a bush growing up against the building. She watched that little girl read. And cough. She coughed over and over, her mouth funneling into her hand, her eyes tearing up. With her common sense as well as her second sight, Sassafras figured that while this child might be young, she was not strong. More than likely she'd be gone before spring came again.

None of the others looked just right. The teacher looked nice, but her gown was flecked with many colors of cat fur. Sass reckoned others had a claim on the teacher before her.

While the children were in class Sassafras hunted the playground looking for a drop of spilled milk, a little bite of something to tide her body over. Not much was left behind by the hungry youngsters, but she did find a dropped bite of chicken sandwich and gobbled it up.

School let out and as the children passed by her bush Sassafras stared hard at each one. This one cared more for dogs, that one was allergic to cats, another one liked cats but except for that didn't have a brain in her poor little head.

Sassafras followed after them at a safe distance. It got darker and colder, and pretty soon she was going to have to find another place to nap. But what she really needed the most was some more food. That previous morsel had filled up her little belly at the time, but it was long gone now.

As she padded along the one ratty, windy road, something kept trying to lure her off it, out into the fields again, but she didn't give it any heed. She'd go hunting later on for a mouse small enough she could hop it without too much fear of bodily harm. Right now she needed to make tracks.

When it began to snow, she sat down on her haunches, curled her tail around her, and looked up at the whiteness coming down from the skies. It was pretty. It was cold. She said, “mew,” in a complaining kind of way, just to let that fate gal know that she did not like the way this was going so far.

The town was a long way off. Or so she thought, until after a while when she came to a crossroads. There were no signs and if there had been, she couldn’t have read them.

Since it didn’t much matter which way she went, she closed her eyes, ran round widdershins following her own tail as fast as she could go and as many times as she could before she got almost too dizzy to stand, then she staggered off in the nearest direction.

She opened her eyes and stared up at the bottom of the grill of a great big old truck about to run right over her. Before she could run, the truck squealed like a rabbit and stopped and a gal in great big galoshes and a heavy coat jumped out.

A hand smelling like soap cupped Sassafras’ entire body while another hand slid under her tail and back paws and scooped her up so she was looking straight into freckles and a pair of thick spectacles. “Little kitty, you almost made catsup,” the gal said. “What you doin’ out here in the middle of the road in the middle of the winter anyway? You got no home, have you? Well, you do now.” And with no more ceremony than that, the gal lowered Sassafras into one of the big pockets in the front of the wool coat and they got back in the truck.

As soon as Sass got herself turned around, she crawled up to the top of the pocket and looked around. The landscape whizzed by at a speed faster than she could run, and she mewed in dismay.

The gal lowered one finger and stroked Sass between the ears. “Hush up, little kitty, Sophy’s gonna take care of you now. Nothin’ gonna get you with Sophy here. We’ll take you home and show you to Mama. She’ll be glad to see somethin’ as little and pretty as you. She doesn’t get to see much these days.”

That was because Sophy’s mama was not long for the world. She was dying and that was a fact. Had there been any question in anyone’s mind at all that Sassafras was coming to stay at the farmhouse with Sophy, Sass put paid to it by making herself indispensable. She took turns comforting Sophy’s mama, purring her to sleep, then

comforting Sophy while she rested from her labor of running the farm and taking care of her mama.

Sassafras plumb exhausted her own small self just helping out. When the day came that Sophy's mama finally passed and it was time to bury her, Sass guarded the house while Sophy went with the other relatives to the graveyard.

It was a good thing, too. The house needed guarding. Before Sophy had returned from her mama's grave, there was a loudmouthed skinny woman with stiff-looking yellow head fur and a thin sour mouth tapping on the door and peering through the windows, then poking around outside. Pretty soon she was joined by a heavysset gal with eyebrows that looked like they'd been drawn on her face with one claw.

Sass just looked at them, then the heavysset one pulled a key out of her purse and unlocked the door and walked in, bold as brass. "I know Melinda kept it around here somewhere," she said. "I always admired it even when we was small, and she told me a long time ago I could have it when she died. That was way back before she saddled herself with that horse of a girl."

"Well, she took the punch bowl and serving set our Granny meant to leave to me and I mean to have that back, too. And Sonny is bringing the truck later for Aunt Thea's sideboard and brass bed." But the woman didn't seem to be looking for the things she was talking about. Sass saw her pawing through the books on the shelves, especially the cookbooks up above the stove. While her back was turned, Sass skittered away down the hall. Behind her she heard the sound of doors and cabinets opening and slamming shut again.

"While he's at it, maybe he'll load up that television and home entertainment center Melinda got last year. She barely used it and I offered to buy it from her when she got sick, but she said I could just have it later. That girl won't need it when she goes back to the orphanage. No sense in it goin' to waste."

"No, indeed. And Melinda borrowed a recipe book from my Aunt Ally before the dear old soul died. I want it back for sentimental reasons."

Sass hid behind Sophy's mama's pillow and closed her eyes tight, trying to make herself invisible as the two horrible women rummaged through the house. In her mind's eye Sass saw them picking up bits and pieces wherever they went, figurines, knickknacks, a set of knives, whatever they could stuff into their pockets and purses.

They were still poking around when Sophy came home, her eyes all red and her shoulders sagging. Both of them made for the door like they were just going when Sophy came in.

“Hello, Sylvie,” one of them said and Sassafra could tell the old gal knew Sophy’s real name but was callin’ her the wrong one out of contrariness, like she wasn’t important enough to take notice of what she was called. “We just came to check the refrigerator to see what you might be needing. I know people will probably be bringing by cakes and casseroles and you can’t possibly eat all of that by yourself. We’ll be glad to take any of it off your hands so you don’t have to get fat or risk offendin’ people by lettin’ their baked goods spoil,” said the woman. Her shoes, in spite of the winter weather, were skinny little sandals on long narrow feet white as plucked chickens with blue veins standing out on them.

“Speakin’ of which,” said the other one, whose puffy feet spilled out over the tops of new black patent plastic pumps, “Your mama borrowed an old recipe book offa me and I want it back. You seen it? It’s got a red and white checked oilcloth cover.”

Sophy shook her head and, trembling with anger, waited silently while they left, their purses and pockets clanking with things they’d stolen.

Sophy slammed the door behind them and plopped herself down at the kitchen table with her head resting on her clenched fists. Sass jumped up beside her on the table, glad the old biddies hadn’t managed to cart it off yet. She inserted herself in the crook of Sophy’s elbow and mewed inquiringly.

“Poor little kitty, you probably haven’t had a bite to eat or a drop to drink this livelong day and for that matter, I haven’t either for all their going on about casseroles. If I was to take any casseroles to those two, I’d lace ’em with rat p’ison first.”

Once Sophy fixed Sass some supper, the girl looked inclined to sit and cry again. Sass felt it was her bound duty to do something cute and bewitching that would keep her gal from foggin’ up her glasses again. So, selflessly taking no heed of her own hunger, the kitten leaped over to the kitchen counter and stretched up to the cup rack where she tapped a tiny paw on Sophy’s favorite mug. The one with the cat on it. Then Sassafra walked over to sit beside the teakettle on the stovetop and wait for Sophy to get the idea. It only took three repeats, but Sass was patient and considerate of her friend’s fragile emotional state.

When the girl didn't pay her any mind after the third try, Sass jumped back onto the table and gently, patiently, and considerately sank a single claw into the hand Sophy was using to crumple the Kleenex to her nose.

Sophy screeched, batted half a foot from where Sass had been, and dabbed at her hand with the end of the Kleenex. Sass, now that she had Sophy's attention, went through her routine again, tapping the mug and sitting by the teapot again.

"Bossy little thing, aren't you?" Sophy asked with a sniff. "I had no idea kittens drank tea." But she filled the kettle and put it back on the stove, stuck a teabag that had only been used once before into her cup, and calmed down some.

Sassafras relaxed and sprawled across the kitchen table while Sophy drank. This was no time for her friend to be backsliding just when she had been making so much progress. Already Sass had taught Sophy to produce food, open doors, stroke and groom on request. Not command. Sassafras didn't like being pushed around and she didn't reckon anybody else did either. Besides, Sophy could do all this with just little hints and nudges, unless the poor girl was terribly preoccupied. Then, Sassafras had to allow that it took a little stronger language and a slightly louder voice to produce results. Generally speaking, though, the girl was intelligent and cooperative, mostly biddable, and predisposed to be kind. But those two old hissycats who had come to steal and pry had none of those good qualities. Why, they would drive an orphaned girl and an orphaned kitten from their home and laugh about it afterward.

It was pure and simple up to Sass to help Sophy save their home from those sneak thieves, or they'd be out on their ears before the sun set again.

The kitten was studying on the matter when there was a loud commotion at the door, like someone was about to pound it in. Sophy blew her nose and went to see who it was. A massive, sullen puppy of a boy stood in the doorway. His boots were black and muddy and smelled like the blood of slaughtered animals.

"What do you want here, Willie Pewterball?" Sophy asked. Sass could tell by the girl's tone she didn't like him."

Come for that brass bed and sideboard my mama wants—and the TV and stereo, too. You can help me load 'em in the truck."

"I'll do no such thing. Those are mine. My mama left 'em to me."

“That’s not what *my* mama says. She sent me to get ’em and I’m gonna get ’em. If you don’t want to help, get out of my way,” he said, and knocked Sophy aside when she tried to bar this entry. Sass attacked his ankles and he kicked her away.

Sophy, who was half knocked to the linoleum herself, reached down to pet Sass and make sure she was all right. Sass felt a little jolt, like someone had rubbed her fur the wrong way on a cold dry day and made sparks jump from it. Suddenly she was Sophy and Sophy was her and what they felt and who they were was the same. They were linked. This was the kind of thing Sass’ mama had been talking about. What was in Sophy made what was in Sassafras bigger than ever it could have been had the kitten been her own. And if the kitten had already been in a huge snit, it was nothing compared to the bottled-up store of anger and grief that poured into her from Sophy. It was as intense and painful as the fit that came over Sass at Tom Fool when he hurt her poor dead mama’s ear. Outrage and anger flooded from the girl into the cat, who had far fewer scruples about directing it back where it belonged. She growled at the boy.

“You keep that damn cat off me or I’ll kill it,” Willie said, but then he made the mistake of looking down at Sassafras.

He didn’t have to look near as far as he thought he would. As it had with old Tom Fool, Sass’ rage had made her as big as it was, and bigger, because she had Sophy’s anger, too. Sass’ back was up, her ears were flat, her fur was all bristly, and her tail was like a many-barbed whip of righteousness lashing behind her. She hissed and spat through fangs like the blades of pocket knives and lashed out at him with claws that looked five inches long to Willie.

He turned tail and lit out like his britches were on fire. “You’re gonna get it!” he yelled back to Sophy.

“You’re not allowed to keep wild animals in the house!”

He jumped in his truck and roared away and Sophy, puzzled, looked down at Sass, who sat grooming her neat small self, licking the last few tufts of fur on her white right paw back into place.

“He’s on drugs,” Sophy said, fists on hips. “Has to be. Nothing else explains it. Somehow or other, even though he kicked you, you scared the pee-waddin’ out of him and I say good riddance to bad rubbish.” Then the air went out of her and she scooped Sass up and rubbed the kitten’s side against her cheek. “But, oh, Sassafras, what are we

going to do if he comes back with help? Other folks aren't gonna be scared of a little pussycat like that fool. Shoot, he's likely to come back with the sheriff and try to arrest me for keepin' a dangerous animal."

Sass yeowed once and then reflected that both of them carrying on didn't do much good, so she started to purr a little song her mama used to purr to her. She purred the melody into Sophy's ear and beat time with her little tail, which was now a good four inches long, on the back of Sophy's neck.

"Hush, little baby, don't you cry
You'll have your own place by and by.
Mice in the walls and moles in the lawn
Feed my kit when Mama's gone on."

Sophy sat down and went back to her tea and stared into the cup. Sass kept on purring, and pretty soon Sophy began to run her finger around the top of the cup as she hummed. She wet the end of her finger and her cup made a whirring, chiming noise. Sass didn't like it at first, but it grew on her. It was part of the magic they were going to make between them to take care of their troubles.

They had to make them some protection. "Wards." The word came into her mind, and she knew right away that's what they needed. It wasn't like it was just a human kind of idea. Cats did it all the time when they marked their territory. They needed something to mark this house and all the things in it and all the property around it.

Sass jumped down and began racing around, rubbing her face at things and wondering why there were no tomcats around when you needed them. They had that handy tail-shaking thing they did that would be just the ticket in this situation. Sass stopped rubbing and looked up at Sophy. Sophy looked back at her. Didn't people have anything to ward off intruders? Surely they didn't expect their cats to do everything by themselves.

Sophy screwed up her face and said, "You know, kittycat, you've got a point there. What we need is something to keep people away from our property without knowing why they're doing it. Nothing you or I can say in do is going to make them go away if they know it's us doing it. But there's ways of makin' them steer clear so they think its

their own idea. I don't know anything about that stuff, but old Miss Ally did, and she was a friend of my mama's. That old biddy niece of hers was awfully keen on havin' her recipe book, and I know my mama got it from Miss Ally before she died, but I'm durned if I recall what she did with it."

Sass, who had been wound tighter than a fiddle string, collapsed with relief and began grooming herself. The girl was coming along real well.

Sophy hunted high and low for the book, and at last she found it under her mama's mattress, between the ticking and the box springs.

Hugging it to herself, Sophy sat back down at the kitchen table while the kettle boiled again. Sass hopped hack up to see what was in there.

"Hmmm," she said. "I was right, Sass. This is no book to make biscuits from. This is Miss Ally's witchin' book." Sophy said, and stroked her, nose to tail tip. "You know, Miss Ally had her a cat, too. She was so worried about her. Asked my mama not to let her cat nor her recipe book go to that niece of hers. Mama was fixin' to bring the cat over here when Miss Ally died and we couldn't find hide nor hair of that cat. Then Mama got sick before we could look anymore.

"Too bad Miss Ally died before Mama, or she might have been able to save her. She was wonderful with cures, Miss Ally was. Miss Ally was a witch, of course, but Mama didn't hold with witchin' so she always said Ally was a 'nature doctor.' But she was more what folks here call a white witch because she didn't do any harm. And whatever Mama liked to think, Miss Ally had cures for more than just bodily diseases and injuries.

"She knew how to mend a broken heart or incline love in someone's direction—the girls in school talked about goin' to see her for such things. I reckon all that is in the recipe book."

Sass yawned and put her chin down on her paws. She took a nap while Sophy hunted around the house for things needed for a protection spell.

Sophy was pleased and that pleased Sass. Kittens needed a lot more sleep than she'd been getting lately, and she dozed off again while Sophy chanted happily to herself, "Iron filings—got them and some rusty nails; mountain ash berries from right out in the yard, three times three yards of red thread—why don't they just say nine?" she asked Sass and scratched her behind the ears. Sass yawned and curled her small pink

tongue out from between her teeth, then blinked sleepily and rearranged herself into her compact napping posture. Sophy continued. “Will you listen to this, Miss Sassafra? It says here we need to draw this picture of an eye here on a brown eggshell and break the egg on our doorstep. I reckon that way if someone comes that shouldn’t, they’ll slip on the egg and fall and break their necks. What do you think?”

Sass thought that sounded a little silly and wondered how it was supposed to do anything: It seemed to her something was missing from all this but she could hardly be expected to figure it out, young as she was, and without her sleep.

After a time during which something tangy and herbal boiled on the stove, Sophy scooped her up again, along with a sugar shaker full of stuff and the egg with the eye drawn on it, and carried her outdoors. It was growing dark later now and Sass realized with surprise that she had been here more of her life than she had been in the barn with Mama. She woke up and wriggled out of Sophy’s grasp to climb up on her shoulder and watch what she did. Sophy walked around the house three times sprinkling a sugar shaker full of the herby smelling stuff and broke the egg on the doorstep. She said some words, too, but they didn’t make much sense to Sass.

They both felt vaguely uneasy as Sophy carried her back inside the house, picked up the recipe book, and tied it in a plastic bag from the grocery store.

“I thought of the best place to hide this when we’re not here, Sass. I’m gonna put it in the bottom of your pan and sprinkle litter over it, so don’t scratch none too hard, okay? It’s got oilcloth on the cover so the top and bottom will be all right.”

Sass watched while Sophy did this and then went to her box and dampened the litter to add a little touch of realism to the scheme. Then she jumped up on the bed and stretched out diagonally across the middle of the bed. A few minutes later Sophy picked her up, and laid her back down against the curl of her own body.

A stinging sensation in her nose woke Sass sometime later. She opened her eyes and they began to water. The loom was dark and fuzzy looking. Smoke.

Sass mewed and when Sophy didn’t wake up that very minute, she hooked her hard on the hand for the good of them both, then jumped down before Sophy’s reaction sent a wrathful hand to bat a cat off the bed.

Sophy opened her eyes, sniffed and cried, “Lord have mercy, what now?” She shoved her feet into her fleece-lined moccasins and staggered after Sass, who was near the door already.

The old outhouse was in flames. Before Sophy could unroll the garden hose and turn on the outside faucet, the smell was way worse than smoke. Sassafra retreated as far as she could while still keeping an eye on Sophy. She didn’t want to return to the house where all the smoke was trapped inside either, so she ran up the road a ways thinking she might hop a mouse while Sophy put out the fire. That’s when she saw Luly Pewterball’s boy’s truck. Good thing she *hadn’t* returned to the house. That boy was not kind to small animals.

Still, she thought she had better warn Sophy. She sprinted back down the road to where Sophy was standing away from the soaked and smoldering ruins of the outhouse.

Sophy grunted and headed back for the house, but Sass meowed and meowed and snatched at her legs and ran away from the house and snatched again. The girl didn’t have the sense God gave a goose though and went right in, even though the front door was still standing wide open.

Luly Pewterball and her boy came out of the bedroom as Sophy walked in.

“*You* set that fire!” Sophy said.

“What if she did?” the boy asked belligerently. He paused to cough. The smoke was still thick in the house. But Luly’s mean little eyes narrowed up and she said, “No such thing. (cough cough) We saw the smoke and come to see if you were safe.”

“You did (cough) not!” Sophy exclaimed hotly.

“That’s right,” the boy said, and moved menacingly toward her. “We (cough) did. ‘Cause we figured if you were (cough) safe, we’d (cough) change that. Now, my mama really wants her (cough, cough cough) inheritance, and we can’t (cough) find it (cough) anyway. Where’d you (cough) put it?”

“You better not (cough) hurt me,” Sophy said. “I told people about you (cough) comin’ here. I could have (cough) you charged with assault.”

The boy had spotted Sass, and said, still coughing between all his words, “There’s no law in this state against killin’ feral cats, though. That one fooled me once, but I see she ain’t so big now. Maybe I should open her up and see how she did that.”

“Don’t you touch her!” Sophy screamed and tried to catch Sass to put her out the door but only succeeded in blocking the exit. Sass scabbled on the linoleum for half a second before rocketing in under the bed, then cursed herself for a fool. Now she was cornered.

Soon she was backed against the wall with a big ugly face looking down at her on two sides. She heard Sophy’s steps and saw her feet edging toward the bedroom window. Bless her, she was going to open it and try to let Sass escape.

A long arm lashed out while Sass was watching Sophy and pulled the kitten’s tail. It was a short tail, though, and the grasp was only a couple of fingers, so Sass got it back and huddled closer to the wall. Then the bed started to move.

“Let her alone! We haven’t done anything to you. Leave us be!” Sophy hollered, the effort costing her a whole long string of hard hacking coughs.

“Give me my book and we’ll go,” Luly told her.

Sass could hear Sophy’s thoughts. She was about to break and give it to them. But Sass knew that wouldn’t do any good. Luly would try to use the book then to get all of the rest that rightly belonged to Sophy, and maybe do them both harm and a good many other folks as well. She was mean. And even if Sophy did give them the book, that boy was even meaner than his mama and he was bound and determined to kill him a pussycat.

Oh, they needed help, and they needed it bad. Sass heard a cat crying and realized it was herself, bawling for her mama over and over again. Then she heard her mama’s singing again in the back of her mind, the song Mama always sang when she returned to the nest whenever she head Sassafra howling from fear and worry.

“Hush, little kitten, don’t you yelp
Mama’s come a-runnin’ here to help.
Moles in the yard and mice in the barn
Mama’s gonna keep her babe from harm.”

A pudgy-ringed hand sideswiped Sass and then closed around the kitten’s leg.

But just then they all became aware that a siren had been blaring outside because suddenly it cut off and there was a banging on the front door, then it slammed open.

“Where’s the fire?” A masculine voice yelled.

“Here!” Sophy called. “In here!”

Three young men in heavy boots stormed into the room. They started coughing, too, as soon as they came in.

Luly let go of Sass’ foot and both she and her boy stood up. “We’ll just be (cough) going now, Sophy, but you give us a call when you find that thing we were discussin’,” Luly said, as if the visit had been a friendly one.

“It’s nothin’, boys,” Willie laughed loudly to cover up what Sophy was trying to tell the firemen. “You know how hysterical these old maids get about burnin’ outhouses and cats in trees.”

The Pewterballs skedaddled out of there quicker than the outhouse had gone up in flames.

Sophy needed to tell the volunteer firemen, two of whom were father and son, the son being a high school classmate of Sophy’s, what had happened. Sophy began talking excitedly, trying to tell them what the horrible Pewterballs had done, but she was coughing so hard in between her words that the men, who were coughing too hard to be able to listen carefully, didn’t pay much attention to her. The excitement was all over, the fire was out, and the house was still full of nasty-smelling smoke. They were in quite a hurry to get out of there. Her classmate’s daddy offered to take Sophy over to their house for the night, but Sophy said she didn’t want to leave her kitten alone and the daddy said that they had a big old dog who would take exception to a cat. So they left, the daddy giving Sophy his telephone number.

Sass crawled out from under the bed.

Sophy sat up the rest of the night in her mama’s rocker, and Sass curled in her lap and slept a fear-exhausted sleep. The house still stank from the fire, but Sass was too played out to care.

Later in the day, when Sophy had cleared the house as best she could with electric fans and nice smelling, candles, the girl told Sass, “I should just get rid of that book, kittycat. It doesn’t work anyway. I did that protection spell just like it said in there, and

it didn't do a darn bit of good. And if those firemen were what it brought, all I can say is that it took its time gettin' them here."

Sass jumped down and went to her box to scratch. Sophy laughed, "I know you don't think much of it either, but Miss Ally set too much store by it for you to be poopin' on it." She plucked the book from the box and shook the cat litter off it while Sass did her duty.

When Sass returned, Sophy was sitting at the table with the book open, staring at it. "You know, there's something peculiar about this book if it is the spellin' book Miss Ally used for her white witchin'. There's plenty of recipes, like it says, with funny ingredients in them and they all sound magical enough, but it doesn't seem right somehow. I thought witchin' had more to it than that. Aren't there spells or somethin' you have to say?"

Sass stepped onto the open book and lay down. Right away she knew the book was magic because she could feel all the magical words soaking into her right through her belly, filling her full of spells and sorcery. She felt something else, too. She felt something of her own dear mama about this book, and it confirmed what she had been reckoning ever since Sophy told her about Miss Ally's cat disappearing. Miss Ally had been mama's boon companion and this was *her* book. And now it was theirs, hers and Sophy's. She stood up and put a paw on Sophy's hunched-over shoulder and licked her cheek, backed up, sat down on the book, and mewed in a humorous tone. What was missing from the recipes was right under Sophy's nose and right behind Sass's own! It was herself. And as for the spells—her mama loved her and would not have left her all alone in the world without teaching her the magic words she needed to follow her career of controlling world events to suit herself. All those little purred nursery rhymes and lullabies *were* the magic words. The book was only to give people like Miss Ally and Sophy a list to look at so that they could do the tedious gathering of items a cat couldn't easily describe or tell them where to locate without speaking words of human language.

Excited by her new insight, Sass leaped back and forth from the kitchen counter to the table and batted at the remnants of the ingredients Sophy had used in the useless warding spell of the previous day. Now they could make it work.

Sophy looked at her sadly. “You poor little thing. Did all that smoke addle your brains? You act like you belong in the county asylum, though I don’t believe they like kittykats.”

But while Sophy was young and much burdened with cares beyond her years, she was not stupid. She followed Sass’ directions and began putting together the same ingredients as the night before. Only this time, there was a difference. Instead of keeping her mama’s song to herself, Sassafras sat on Sophy’s shoulder as she mixed, grated, pounded, boiled, and stewed the fixins for the ward spell. And while Sophy did all the manual labor requiring the use of thumbs and fingers, Sass purred her the protection spell Mama had taught her, the one that had come into her head when Sophy mixed up the potion before.

*“Hush little baby don’t you cry
You’ll have your own place by and by.
Mice in the walls and moles in the lawn
Feed my kit when Mama’s gone on.”*

But that, Sass remembered as she sang to Sophy, was just the first verse. The second was:

*“Hush, little children, don’t be afraid.
Wait till you see what mama’s made.
Sprinkle all around like tomcat pee
Keep our house safe as safe can be.”*

But then she remembered a more crucial verse, one that called for an ingredient only she could provide. It came into her head just as Sophy was about to blend all the fixin’s together.

Sass hopped down, went over to the doorjamb and stretched herself up as high as she would go, almost a whole entire foot, and scratched her little claws for all they were worth, till some of the casings came away with the wood splinters.

Then she mewed for Sophy to come pick them up.

Sophy had come to know that mew and had learned that it meant she needed to pay right smart attention to what was being told her.

She gathered up claws and splinters and all in the dustpan and with a look at Sass, dumped them into the brew. Sass sang her the last verse, purring triumphantly.

*“Hush, my kit, don’t flap your jaw.
Put you in just a little claw.
Gives your ward-juice mighty paws
To smack them breakin’ mama’s laws.”*

They worked all day long brewing up a huge batch of the magic mixture until Sophy’s arms ached and Sass’ purrer was worn to a frazzle.

But then it was time to sprinkle it. This time they had enough to circle the house, the drive where Sophy’s truck was parked, the henhouse, and the barn even though it didn’t have any a horse or cow anymore, and the biggest trees. Sophy sprinkled the mixture onto the snow and Sass purred her spells as they circled the property, widdershins, counterclockwise, singing the spell through three times three times seven.

For a long time, they were left in peace and the Pewterballs didn’t come near enough for Sophy to know of it or be troubled by it.

Sass grew in length, strength, and beauty, and she and Sophy were soon able to talk to each other right clearly with no words passing anybody’s lips. She and Sophy practiced lots of the spells, as much as they could by themselves. Sophy carried potion with her whenever she left the house and farmyard and Sass was careful never to hunt outside the charmed circle. One day, Sophy took the recipe book to the town library and used the copy machine to make another book, which she put with her school things.

Then spring came, and as Sass shed much of her heavy, long coat, so the farmyard shed the snow, which melted, running away in little rivulets from the charmed circle.

Back came Luly Pewterball and her awful offspring, one sunny day while Sophy was at school.

Sassafras recalled the burping gasping noise of Willie Pewterball’s truck and ran for cover when she heard it. She hid under the sofa, up inside the frame where she had

pulled loose the stuffing to make herself a cozy nest. They weren't likely to find her there, she thought.

"Well, I'll be if this ain't our lucky day, Willie!" Luly cried. "There's my very book lyin' open there on the table where that careless girl must have left it! She doesn't deserve such a treasure."

"Then take it and let's go, Mama. This place gives me the creeps."

"It's not like you to be so timid, Willie."

"No, ma'am, but let's leave all the same."

When Sophy came home and found the book gone, Sass told her what had happened and she called the sheriff. Of course, the Pewterballs lied about it.

But that was all right, because Sophy had her copy and right away between them they whomped up a spell to get the book back.

*"Hush, little children, don't you yearn
Bad folks got them a lot to learn.
Their luck will sour and their guts will burn
Till what's not theirs is safe returned."*

The spell was not purred like the others but transmitted in a low, threatening growl. Sassafras enjoyed singing it a lot.

Once it was made, all they had to do was wait. Normally, you had to put a potion or something within range of the people that needed spellin', but in this case the recipe said, the thing that had been stolen provided the contact.

Sass made up her own verse now, which showed she was getting bigger and better at this.

*"Luly and Willie, time to weep
You won't rest and you won't sleep
You won't drink and you won't eat
While our spell book's in your keep."*

On the third day after the theft, Sophy found the recipe book in her mailbox with a note from Luly attached.

“Keep it. The damn thing doesn’t work anyway.”

Sophy giggled as she showed it to Sass, but Sass just washed her tail and smiled to herself. Of course the spell book wouldn’t work without a cat to sing the words. And as mean as Willie was to animals, he was about as likely to turn into a horny toad as he was to get any cat to do charms for him and his horrible mama.

The Pewterballs picked up and left town after that and nobody heard from them again except the skinny gal who had come with Luly on the first day. She was nicer now and taking her medicine real regular these days. She came by to return what she had stolen from Sophy’s house and to tell her that she had received a letter from Willie, wanting cigarette money, since the prison guards wouldn’t give him any without him buying them.

Sassafras winked at Sophy and Sophy winked at Sass, neither one of them let on about what they knew.