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Historical note: this story takes place during the events described in chapter 46 of Sabrina Online the Story by Chris Yost and starts three days after Sabrina has left Columbus.

Clarence & Cindy

Jumping to conclusions

By Styx

Chapter Three

Sharon had been at Clarence's bedside for five minutes, and although she was worried about Clarence, she found her thoughts turning to her late husband. Owen had been twenty four and she only just past her eighteenth birthday when they first met. Sharon was a freshman at Columbus University studying business when they ran into each other, or rather she ran into him.

Sharon was headed back to her campus dorm room; she had just left the hobby shop with a bag of marbles and several 2" wooden dowels, which she planned to use for a project. It was for the science class which she was only taking because of state required curriculum. Not watching where she was going, she slammed into the back of a fur that had stopped to check the address of the store he was standing in front of, knocking him to the ground. The collision also caused Sharon to drop the bag of marbles she was carrying, which burst open when it hit the ground, allowing the contents to spill out. "Oh my gosh I'm so sorry, I didn't see you I-I, oh let me help you up," she said, holding out her paw. "You're not hurt are you?" she asked, only then noticing the fur she'd mowed over was a male skunk. Kind of skinny, but rather cute, she thought.

"Heh, no I'm ok," he said, taking the offered paw but not really putting any weight on it. He didn't let it go once he was on his feet, either. "Don't be sorry. I don't really mind being trampled by a femme as lovely as you," he said, and then immediately slapped his other paw to his forehead. "Oh God, I didn't just say that did I? I'm sorry, my mouth sometimes goes off without checking with my brain first, that was probably the worst line you've ever heard," he finished.

Sharon giggled. "No, it's okay. I mean, I've heard worse," she said, smiling, enjoying the feeling of her paw being held in his. Their eyes locked and she moved to step closer, but when her foot came down she winced in pain. "Ouch, what the!" she

exclaimed. They both looked down only to find themselves standing in the middle of the marbles that had spilled from the bag. "Oh that's just great!" she said with exasperation, and started rounding up the rogue spheres.

Owen, who had been raised to be a gentlefur, and let's face it wasn't anxious to leave this beautiful young femme, got down on his paws and knees and helped her gather up the marbles. "You know, I haven't had to do this since I was a kit," he said, smiling.

Sharon looked at Owen and returned the smile. "You know you don't have to, but thank you for the help," she said.

"Oh no problem at all. Umm, I'm sorry I didn't get your name," he said as he dumped a paw full of marbles into the bag.

"Sharon Henderson," she replied and added her own paw full to the bag. As they gathered up the marbles they talked. It was a good ten minutes before they had collected all they could find and the bag was still half empty.

"Owen, Owen Skunk. Hmm, well I guess we lost some down the sewer there," Owen said pointing to the grate.

"Well, I should have enough for my project. Thanks again for your help, Owen, it was very sweet of you considering I ran you down," she said.

"Oh don't worry about it, no harm done. Uh Sharon, I was wondering if, ah ,well if you'd like to have dinner with me tonight? Maybe a movie too. That is if you're not too busy with your project or, um, somefur else." He was just barely able to get it out, he was so nervous.

Sharon looked at Owen again. She did like the way it felt when he held her paw, like something electrical, and his eyes were sincere. She grinned mischievously. "You sure you want to go out with a femme who's lost half her marbles?"

Owen's expression matched Sharon's. "I'm game if you're willing to risk going out with a male who's never had all of his to begin with," he replied with a chuckle.

"You're on," she laughed, "pick me up in front of the campus library at six."

"I think I can handle that, I'll see you then," he said, and then took her paw in his once again and gave it a gentle kiss. He turned and left, but not taking his eyes off her until he nearly ran down another fur twenty feet down the way.

That first date went so well they decided to see each other again. This went on until they had been on several dates over the next few weeks. It was then that Sharon decided to take the relationship to the next level. She suggested they go to his place as it was Friday night. Owen as always was a gentlefur and told Sharon to just let him know

when she wanted him to take her home. She replied by coyly stating that they could discuss that over breakfast.

"Oh okay," Owen said automatically. Then his head snapped back to Sharon in shocked surprise when what she said had sunk in.

Sharon saw his stunned expression. "Unless you'd rather I didn't stay," she said apprehensively.

Owen took her into his arms and hugged her close. "Oh no it isn't that at all it's just..."

"Yes?"

"Well, are you sure?"

"Excuse me?"

"What I mean is nothing could please me more than to be with you but only if it was what you truly wanted. I don't want you to do this because you think I'll lose interest if you don't. If that's the case, then this is the last thing I want. It would only be right if it is what we both wanted. So I ask you again, are you sure?"

Sharon regarded him briefly then smiled warmly. "Yes," she said, "I'm sure, now more than ever." She leaned into Owen's embrace and kissed him till both were breathless.

Sharon's thoughts returned to the present. *Oh Owen, I wish you could be with me now. I don't know what I'll do if I lose Clarence. He's the only one who's given my life any meaning since I lost you.* Her mind continued replaying flashes of her early life, first with Owen. It had been a short courtship before she had told him that she was pregnant, it was right then that he had asked her to marry him. She would have thought that he had asked only because of the baby, were it not for the fact that he had produced an engagement ring from his coat pocket a second later. Then the falling out with her family. She knew her parents would be upset that she hadn't waited for marriage, but she had not expected them and her whole family to disown her even when she had told them that she was going to marry the father. They would hear none of it. She had tried several times, but her parents returned every letter she sent unopened. She stopped trying when they sent back the letter she sent them after Clarence's birth. The one that she had written "**Pictures of your Grandson inside,**" again unopened. The only thing that kept her from being lost in depression was Owen's strength and support. Sharon had left college to devote herself to her husband and son. She did not regret that decision till later. She was completely happy being wife and mother to the only family she had left in the world. Sharon and Clarence were the only family Owen had as well, he was an only child and

his parents didn't have any relatives. They had kept in contact with him, but his parents had been killed in a plane crash two years before he met Sharon, so aside from some friends they were alone in the world. Alone but happy together.

Finally, Sharon's thoughts settled on Clarence. She smiled as she remembered the day he was born. It was a difficult delivery. She was in labor ten hours and had cursed Owen's existence many times but he was always calm and comforting. When he had entered the world and she held Clarence in her arms with Owen at her side, she felt complete for the first time in her life. Later as he grew, Sharon and Owen started to notice that their son was very intelligent for one so young. For example, at three he had been able to work out on his own that if he played with his building blocks on the floor instead of on the carpet, they didn't fall over so easily. He also found he could build them higher if he gave them a broader base. Owen had commented once when he saw the complexity of one of Clarence's structures, "That kid is going to be one hell of an engineer; I can't wait to see what he can do with an erector set." He was proud at the prospect that his son may follow in his footsteps. His first two birthdays were just Clarence and his parents, but at two his parents put him in preschool. He was shy even then but still managed to make a few friends. Sharon loved preparing and throwing his birthday parties for him and his friends. Sharon was happy, she didn't feel that her life was lacking anything, but then came that horrible day when her world fell apart.

Sharon had to consciously stop her train of thought. She did not often allow herself to think about the day Owen died, and she didn't want to dwell on it now that she was so close to losing her son. She tried to focus on other memories of Clarence. Happy memories, birthdays, days in the park, but to Sharon's confusion she couldn't recall one time after his father's death. Sharon tried to remember any time she spent with Clarence, she could only come up with brief moments where she had scolded him for making a mess or wasting time, or telling him she didn't have time to attend some activity at school because she had too much work. Completely at a loss, she couldn't understand. Clarence had always been the most important part of her life, especially after Owen's death. She had worked so hard to provide him with everything he deserved, a home, food, clothing and an education. She was nearly a slave to her job in order to do this. Sharon's thoughts stopped short. *Oh no, what have I done*, she thought. "No, this can't be. I couldn't have, he's far too important to me," she said fearfully as she trekked through her memories again, trying to find something, anything, but only dredging up more times of her making excuses to a disappointed Clarence. "I can't right now." "I'm too busy to play." "I have to work." "Later Clarence, can't you see how busy I am." Sharon could only come to one conclusion. "Oh God no, what have I done?" New tears now streamed down her face. These were not shed for Clarence's condition, but for what she now realizes she has done to him. *I've failed him, oh God what must he think? Does he know how much I love him? Oh Clarence please, please come back! Please don't leave thinking I didn't love you.* Sharon, overcome by her sobs, buried her head into her paws. After crying helplessly for several minutes, she felt guilty being in the same room with him and got up without bothering to wipe the tears from her eyes as she quietly left the room.

Aimlessly, Sharon wandered the halls of the third floor, only paying enough attention to avoid being an obstacle to the staff. *How? How could I have let this happen? I failed him so completely; I deprived him of what he needed most. God Owen, it's like he lost both of us when he was five. I provided a home and education but not the one thing that truly mattered, and look at me now, I'm doing it again! I'm running away from him when he needs me most. I am a horrible mother.*

"Mrs. Skunk?"

Sharon looked up. She had unknowingly walked by the third floor waiting lounge. Zig Zag, Marvin and Wanda were looking at her, all with worried looks. *They really are worried about him, she thought. Was I really so wrong about them?*

"Mrs. Skunk?" Zig asked again when she didn't respond, "is everything okay, will you be alright?" She finished, handing the skunk a tissue from her paw bag.

"Thank you, yes," Sharon replied, accepting the tissue and wiping away the tears. "I will be. Would you like to see Clarence now?" She motioned towards Clarence's room and the others followed. As they entered the room, Sharon stood to one side of the room while the three from the studio stood around the bed. Wanda on the right held Clarence's paw in hers. Zig was on the left and swept a stray lock of head fur from his eyes then rested her paw on his shoulder. *Look at them, Sharon thought, already they've shown him more care than I have in years. Oh Clarence I'm so sorry. She lowered herself into the chair that was in the corner and broke down crying again.*

Zig looked over to Clarence's mother and left the bedside. She kneeled beside her and spoke softly. "I'm sorry if we're intruding, would you like more time alone?"

"NO, no please stay, I..." Sharon paused. "I don't think I have any right to send away furs that obviously care about Clarence like you do," she sniffed.

"You're his Mother."

"I've not been a good one."

"Nonsense, it's clear you love your son a great deal," Zig said.

Sharon wiped her eyes again with the tissue Zig gave her earlier. "Yes I do, I only wish he knew it."

"I'm sure he knows," Zig said reassuringly.

Sharon took a deep breath and let it out with a moan, feeling utterly ashamed. "You don't understand. I only just realized tonight how I failed Clarence." She looked at Zig's confused expression and continued, "After Owen died I had to go to work to support both Clarence and I. I had to work hard to be able to provide Clarence with all I

felt he deserved, and I felt he deserved the best." She looked at the floor. "Yes I love Clarence more than I can say. He's all that's given my life meaning since his father died, but in working so hard I forgot to give him the one thing that he needed most. I forgot to show that love to him, and now if he," the words got caught in her throat. It was several minutes before she could speak again. "Clarence was very young when his father died. I don't even know if he remembers those times. We were so happy, but after I was little more than an authority figure, and now, now he may die thinking I didn't love him." She broke down again. "I'm the worst parent alive," she sobbed.

Zig's heart ached for Sharon. She stood and pulled the sobbing skunk out of the chair and into a supportive hug and spoke softly. "Mrs. Skunk, I wish my parents cared half as much for me as you do for Clarence. You may not be perfect, but who is? You made a mistake and it can't be undone, but what you can do is when he recovers, tell him how much you love him and make a promise to him and to yourself that you will change." She ended the hug and looked Sharon in the eyes. "You may think that you have not been a good parent, but you're by no means the worst. Take it from me there are those who couldn't care less about their children." Zig took on a pained expression and turned her gaze away then spoke again even softer than before, "and some parents will do unspeakable things to them." She looked back to Sharon and smiled. "Once you explain matters to him, I'm sure Clarence will forgive you. He just strikes me as that kind of fur. The important thing is to forgive yourself, and don't dwell on the possibility that Clarence may die. Just believe he will be okay," Zig finished.

"Yes, you're right, he'll be ok, I know he will," Sharon said with as much conviction as she could muster. *But how? How can I not worry? Dr. Fisk only gave him a fifty percent chance to survive. She's right about one thing, if he does come out of this alright I'm going to have to explain things to Clarence. I only hope she's right about him being able to forgive me. I also owe them an apology; I can't believe how wrong I was about them.* "Ms. Zig Zag, thank you, and thank you for coming to see Clarence, as well." She included Marvin and Wanda, who turned their attention to her. "I feel I owe you three an apology. When Clarence had told me he was going to work for an adult film studio I was furious! How could my son even consider doing such a thing? Even when he told me he was just a gofer working behind the camera and not on it, it made little difference to me. I had heard how some furs do things in your work and was set in my opinion of furs who worked in such places. I thought that you were all cold & uncaring. I was certain you would somehow convince or even force him to work in your movies and told him so. I forbade him from working for you. To my surprise he argued the point, he said I was being unfair, that I hadn't even met you and couldn't know what you were like. It was the first time Clarence had ever defied me. After meeting the three of you, I'm glad he did. Tonight seems to be a night of revelations for me as to what kind of furson I've been. I first realize that I had unknowingly neglected the only one who gave my life any meaning for the last seventeen years, and now I come to see that I have unfairly judged and condemned furs I never met. I am truly sorry; I heard stories which I mistook to be true of every fur in your line of work, but that I now know to represent only some of the furs who work in the adult industry. The concern you have all shown for Clarence and

myself tonight proves how very wrong I've been, I hope you can forgive me," Sharon finished and looked down, genuinely ashamed of herself.

Marvin, Wanda, & Zig looked at each other. Zig spoke first. "Mrs. Skunk," she said with an edge to her voice that had Sharon worried, "first just call me Zig Zag, or Zig if you like, and second," then she smiled, "apology accepted." She finished in a softer voice, much to Sharon's relief.

"Yeah, same here," Wanda said, "when all the media ever talks about are the sleazy operators and exploitation it's hard for the average fur not to think that's the way it is in the whole industry." She finished with a smile.

"Same goes for me too Mrs. Skunk. Hell, many furs with preconceptions often refuse to let go of them even when faced with evidence to the contrary. Fewer still would have admitted their mistake or even bother to apologize. The way I look at it you were concerned for your son and wanted to protect him. Yes you were mistaken about us but as Wanda said it would have been hard not to be when all you ever hear about the business is what the media reports. You at least kept your mind open and accepted the truth," Marvin said.

"Thank you, all of you," Sharon said, "and please call me Sharon." Just then there was a knock at the door. Sharon walked over and opened it. Three rabbits stood on the other side, two femmes and a male. One of the femmes looked about Clarence's age. *Could this be Clarence's girlfriend and her parents, but how did they find out about Clarence?*

The male rabbit spoke first. "Mrs. Skunk, my name is Rodney Lapin, this is my wife Ellen and my daughter Cindy," he said, indicating the two femmes. "Please forgive the intrusion, but we heard about Clarence and came to see him, if it's okay with you that is?"

Sharon considered the three in the hall. The youngest doe had been crying a great deal by the looks of her, and her parents looked just as worried as three from the studio. Sharon looked at the young femme. "You're the doe Clarence has been dating aren't you?" Cindy only nodded, not trusting her ability to speak clearly. "Yes of course come in," she said, stepping aside to allow them to enter.

Cindy walked into the room and took a couple of tentative steps towards the bed. When Zig Zag and Marvin moved aside, Cindy got her first glimpse of him. She stopped, and a cold chill went up her spine. She had tried to prepare herself to see Clarence hurt, but the bandages, the tubes, and stillness of his body was too much for the tenuous hold she had on her emotions. Tears once again welled up in her eyes, and she brought her paw to her muzzle. "Oh Clarence," she said in a ragged voice, "what have they done to you?" She covered the rest of the way to the bed on unsteady legs. "I'm here Clare, please wake up. Please, please Clarence come back to us, to me, please don't leave us." Cindy started crying again and buried her muzzle into Clarence's un-bandaged shoulder.

"Pleeeeee," she whispered tearfully. Zig, Marvin and Wanda left the bedside to allow Cindy some time alone with Clarence and moved over to join Sharon and Cindy's parents. *Time for some answers*, was on all their minds.

"How did you hear about Clarence? I haven't had time to tell anyone except the furs he works for," Zig heard Sharon ask Rodney and Ellen.

"Rodney does some repair work for me," Zig volunteered, "he was in when you called and since I knew that his daughter and Clarence were dating, I thought it would be best if she heard it from him first."

"Oh I see. It's rather fortunate actually, I had wondered how I was going to let his girlfriend know what happened," Sharon said.

"Mrs. Skunk," Rodney started, "how did this happen? Who would do this to Clarence?"

"Had to be a mugger, I can't believe anyfur who knows him would do this to Clarence," Marvin commented.

"From what the police told me he does know his attacker," Sharon stated angrily. "They met up at an ice cream shop. He even paid for her ice cream."

By this time Cindy had managed to climb out of the emotional hole she had fallen into and was able to at least marginally follow the conversation. She brushed some head fur out of Clarence's eyes and kissed him lightly on the cheek. She then moved to join the group. She wanted to know who had done this to Clarence as well.

"Wait, he paid for **her** ice cream?" Ellen asked, stunned. "It was a femme who did this? Do they know who she is, and is she in custody?"

Sharon nodded. "Yes the officer I spoke to said the other furs in the shop weren't able to prevent the initial attack but they were able to keep her from attacking him further, and turned her over to the police."

"Did this femme say why she attacked Clarence?" Wanda asked.

"She claims Clarence...hurt a friend of hers," Sharon said in a low voice. *Well it's not really a lie*, she thought, not wanting to give any detail about the accusation against her son.

"I can't believe Clarence would hurt anyfur," Zig said angrily, "who is this femme?"

"A lioness named Susan Felin"

"NO!"

All eyes except Clarence's were on Cindy. Her parents of course had no need for explanations. They always made a point to know who Cindy's friends were. The other furs however looked at her with shocked confusion.

"It- It can't be! It can't have been Susan," Cindy said, starting to sway slightly. Her mother & father went to her side to support her. They walked her to a chair and sat her down. "This can't be," she said miserably. "This just can't be happening."

Sharon walked over to Cindy and knelt so they were face to face. "Cindy dear, do you know this Susan Felin?"

Cindy nodded. "She's one of my best friends. But she couldn't have done this," she said, looking at Clarence lying in the bed. "She's known Clarence just as long as I have, she knows he'd never hurt anyfur. I just can't believe it was Susan who did this."

Sharon sighed. "I'm sorry Cindy but the femme they arrested was identified as Susan Felin."

Cindy shook her head, at a complete loss. "But, why? Why would she hurt Clarence?" she asked. After a few minutes, Cindy dug into her paw bag and pulled out her cell phone. She punched up a number on the speed dial and held it to her ear. A few moments later the phone connected. "Hello Debbye? Cindy. Debby listen, Clarence was attacked today." She let out a sigh and shook her head. "No he's not, he's in a coma. The doctor isn't sure if he'll make it. Thank you, right now he needs all the help he can get, but that's not all. The police say that it was Susan who did it. Yes, our Susan! I know; I can't believe it either, she'd never do something like this," Cindy said, then, "Well, yes, Susan told me about that too, but she only slapped that fur because he had made a disgusting offer involving her and Sabrina. And, come on, we're talking about Clarence here. Look, this all happened at an ice cream shop. If it's the same one we go to then Susan would have been taken to your father's station. I really hate to ask but I need to talk to Susan, do you think you could talk him into letting us see her? Okay I'll wait." Cindy looked up and saw the other furs looking at her. "Um, Debbye's father is a captain in the police department. She's asking him if he can arrange it for me to talk to her." Then she looked at Sharon. "Debbye says she's very sorry to hear about Clarence. She's going to pray for him."

"Tell her thank you for me," Sharon said.

Cindy's attention was drawn back to the phone. "Yes Debbye, tomorrow morning, 8:30. Thanks again, I really appreciate this. Yes I hope so too, and Clarence's mother says thank you for the prayers. Good night Debbye," she said, and then closed the phone and put it in her purse and sighed sadly. "Well, we'll have the answers tomorrow morning."

Just then the door opened and a nurse walked in. "I'm sorry but visiting hours are over. You may come back tomorrow. Because of the uncertainty of the patient's survival, Dr. Fisk has left clearance for Mrs. Skunk to stay through the night."

The other furs turned to Sharon to say their goodnights. Zig gave her a hug and whispered in her ear. "Clarence is going to be alright, I just know it." Marvin, Wanda, Mr. & Mrs. Lapin all followed with their assurances that things would be fine. Cindy however had gone back to Clarence's bedside and was holding his paw in hers.

"Cindy? It's time to go honey, you can come back tomorrow," Rodney called from the door.

Cindy looked up to her father, her eyes clearly telling him she didn't want to go, but after a moment she bent down and gave Clarence a kiss and whispered in his ear. "I'll be back soon my love, be strong." She left Clarence's side and walked up to Sharon. "Mrs. Skunk, I can't tell you how sorry I am about all this. I will be back in the morning after I speak with Susan. I promise I'll find out why she did this. I just can't understand why she would have; it has to be a mistake."

Sharon truly felt bad for this femme. Not only is the one she loves fighting for life but her best friend is responsible.

"Thank you Cindy I appreciate that and I do hope that there has been some mistake regarding your friend," she said softly as she watched the doe leave the room.

How long he had been walking in the blackness Clarence couldn't say. There was nothing to give any hint to the passing of time. It seemed like he had been walking for days, in his mind at least, but he didn't feel hungry at all. In fact now that he thought about it he didn't feel anything at all. He didn't feel the clothing he was wearing or his glasses. He ran his paw through the fur on his arm and face. Nothing. He could not even feel the ground under his feet. *This is weird*, he thought. "What is going on here, and come to think of it, what is this place and how long have I been here?" he said to himself.

"This is the realm," said a familiar voice, "that lies between life and death."

Clarence spun around, raising his tail flat against his back as he readied his only defense. But as Clarence prepared himself he saw that he was facing another male Skunk. Clarence lowered his tail since it would be pointless to spray another skunk, plus what the older skunk had said finally sank in. "Where did you say this is?" he asked, hoping he had misheard this newcomer.

The older skunk smiled sadly. "The realm between life and death," he repeated. "I guess you could call it limbo"

"Between life and," Clarence started, but couldn't finish. "Am- am I dead?" he asked nervously.

"No Clarence, you're not dead, but you did die. Fortunately the surgical team was able to bring you back, though it was very close. You gave me quite the scare there," the older skunk answered.

"So I am alive, but then why can't I feel my body?" Clarence asked, placing his open paw against his chest, his eyes going wide as dinner plates. "I- I can't even feel my heart beating!"

"Well that's simple. You can't feel it because what you are perceiving as your body really isn't your body," the newcomer stated as though nothing else needed to be said, but when he saw the confused look on the younger skunk's face. "You see Clarence, your body, your physical body, is lying on a hospital bed in a coma. What you now see as your body is merely your mind's self image of you."

"So I'm alive, I'm going to be okay then?" Clarence asked hopefully.

At this the older skunk frowned and put his paw over his mouth in contemplation. "Yes Clarence you are alive but....as to whether you're going to be okay or not, it is up to you. Like I said before, that," he said, pointing to the center of the younger fur's chest, "is only imaginary. Your mental image of yourself, but it has no substance. That's why you can't feel it. Your mind has withdrawn from your physical body so far that the connection between the two has been stretched dangerously thin. The longer you are away from your body the weaker your connection gets, until it snaps, and if that happens Clarence, your body dies."

"D- DIES?" Clarence cried suddenly panicked, "how do I get back to my body?"

"I've already set you in the right direction. All you have to do is to just keep going," the older fur said.

"That was you. Just who the heck are you anyway?" Clarence asked, suddenly aware that he had no clue who this other fur was. "How do I know that what you're telling me is the truth? How do I know that you're not pointing me in the wrong direction? Why should I trust you?" Clarence was now glaring at the stranger. Clarence didn't know what to think anymore. His behavior was surprising to him. He had never confronted anyfur except for the time he argued with his mother about his job at the studio. He guessed that it must be the stress of this whole situation that was the cause. He didn't trust the older skunk, though something told Clarence that the strange fur wasn't lying about his life being in danger.

"Clarence, don't I look familiar?"

Clarence thought a moment. "Yes, you were in the ambulance with me. You were asking if I could hear you."

The other skunk gave a loud sigh. "I guess it has been a long time, but still I had hoped. Think back Clarence, back to when you were very young. Don't I seem familiar from that time?"

Clarence looked down and frowned as he thought back. He didn't like thinking about his childhood and all the torment he suffered at the paws of the "cool" cubs, just because he was better in class than they were, and times of disappointment when his mother never had time for him, and not having a father...Clarence snapped his head up and stared at the other skunk intently. *Could it really be him, it's been so long but I think it is!* "You're, you're my," he couldn't quite say it, it seemed so impossible.

The other skunk stared back "Yes Clarence, it's me, Owen...your father," he said, as though reading the younger fur's mind.

Clarence was dumbstruck. He just continued to stare at the image of his Father. After a few minutes he managed to find his voice. "B- But you d- died when I was five," he sputtered.

"Yes I know, I was there," Owen said with a smirk.

"No, I mean how can you be here when you're dead and I'm still alive?"

"Well I don't know, I guess that when most furs die they go on to a reality beyond this one." He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe there is a heaven and hell, who knows? But I just stayed here."

"But why?" Clarence asked.

"I think that's kind of obvious isn't it? I stayed because of you and your mother. I had only a short time with you both before my accident. The two of you were all I had in the world, and I loved you both too much to just leave you behind, so I just stayed here, I guess to sort of watch over you two," Owen explained.

His Father's words seemed to trouble Clarence, because he just turned and started walking. Owen looked at his son with some confusion. This wasn't the reaction he had expected. He didn't think that Clarence would throw himself at him yelling, "DADDY!" Well, to tell the truth he hoped that might happen, though he seriously doubted that it would, given his son's age, but still he had thought he'd give him a hug or shake his paw, say that it was good to finally see him again, but this? Owen jogged several steps to catch up to Clarence. He just looked over to his father but said nothing and continued walking.

"S- So if you've been around s- since I was five why didn't you c- come talk to me or Mother before?" Clarence suddenly asked

"Actually son I did, or at least I tried with your mother...for a while anyway, shortly after my death, but I only seemed to be able to reach while she was asleep and even then it was only in her dreams. I would try to talk to her but all I ever seemed to accomplish was to give her nightmares about the day she got the call telling her I was dead or when she was standing at my graveside. She'd wake up crying miserably for hours. I just couldn't do that to her anymore and I didn't dare try with you for fear of doing the same thing."

"Then why can I see and hear you now? I mean how do I know your not something my subconscious mind has conjured up?" Clarence asked, coming to a stop.

"Well I don't know how I can prove my existence to you except to ask if you think a figment of your imagination would have asked while you were in the ambulance if you could hear it or not." *Or if it was likely to have an extremely strong desire to hug the stuffing out of you. Why is he acting like this? It's as though he's unhappy to see me,* Owen thought to himself. "As to why you can see and talk to me now? Well I'm not sure but it might have something to do with how close you are to, uh, well....you know," the older skunk finished weakly, not wanting to say it. "Come on son, we need to continue, we shouldn't stay here for too long"

Thursday, 8:25 A.M. Cindy parked her car in front of the police station, where she met up with Debbye. The femme squirrel had been waiting for Cindy and gave her a hug when she walked up. "How are you holding up?" she asked.

Cindy sighed. "I'm just barely keeping hold of my wits," she said sadly. "Is it really Susan in there? Have you talked to her yet?"

Debby nodded slowly. "It's her; I haven't spoken to her yet. I didn't feel right finding out about this before you, but Daddy showed me the mug shot. Daddy also said the witnesses had to pull Susan off Clarence, so there's no doubt that she did it, but he didn't say what reason she gave for attacking him."

The last bit of hope drained from Cindy. She had been holding on to the hope that there was a huge mistake. "Let's get this over with," she said and walked towards the station's front doors.

The interview room was only big enough for three or four furs. Susan was sitting in a chair with her paws and feet bound to the table by chains. The table itself was bolted to the floor. The door opened and three furs stood at the doorway. Debbye, Debbye's father and Cindy. Debbye spotted Susan's chains and turned to her father, angrily pointing at them. "WHY IS SHE TIED DOWN LIKE AN ANIMAL!" she hissed.

"Debbye listen, Susan has committed a serious act of violence. Now I was just as surprised as you were when I heard but there is no denying that she very nearly killed that poor skunk; still may have according to the doctor's report," Capt. Squirrel said sternly. "You said you wanted to speak to her privately. Well, if you think I'm going to allow you and Cindy to go in there with her and no guard without making sure she couldn't attack you, you've got another thing coming."

"But Daddy!"

"If you want the chains removed, then I'll place an officer in here," he said resolutely.

Debbye huffed and cast an angry sideways glance at her father, but didn't say another word.

Cindy stepped forward into the room determinedly and took a seat, but avoided looking at Susan.

"Okay Daddy we'll do this your way," Debbye agreed, and then stepped inside and closed the door.

All three femmes sat for several minutes in silence, then.

"I'm sorry about the chains Suse, Daddy can be a little over the top sometimes," Debbye said nervously.

Susan gave a weak sort of smile. "Its okay Deb, I can't really blame him, he's just being cautious."

Cindy, who had been staring at her paws folded on the table, suddenly spoke. "Why Susan? Why did you hurt Clarence? Tell me, tell me why you almost killed him," she said, still looking at the table.

Susan was silent for a moment, and then spoke. "I didn't mean to hurt him so badly," she said, shaking her head. "But how can you ask why after what he did to you?"

Cindy blinked, confused. "After what he did to me? Susan what are you talking about?" she asked shaking her head.

"Oh come on Cindy don't try to protect him, he doesn't deserve it," Susan said angrily.

Cindy & Debbye looked at each other, neither one having any clue what Susan was talking about.

"Susan please, I have no idea what you're talking about, what is it that Clarence is supposed to have done?" Cindy said pleadingly.

Susan looked between Cindy and Debbye. "Alright but..." She shot a nervous look towards Debbye. "Uh, you might want to ask Debbye to step outside," she said.

Cindy and Debbye again traded looks of confusion. "That's not necessary Susan, Debbye is as close a friend as you are. Whatever it is, you can say it to both of us. Now tell me why you did this," the doe said impatiently.

"Because he told me what he did to you," Susan said, but when she saw Cindy's exasperated expression. "Because...he told me that he raped you," she finished quietly.

"WHAT!!!!" Cindy & Debbye cried out together, and once again looked at each other, but this time they traded looks of shock.

"HE DIDN'T!" Cindy shouted.

"Come on Susan, we're talking about Clarence here, he'd never," the squirrel stated.

"I know Deb, I wouldn't have believed it either if he hadn't told me himself," the lioness stated.

"Wait, you say he told you he raped me?" Cindy asked, bewildered.

"Well he didn't exactly say the words, he was too ashamed, and kept fumbling around the words, but I was able to put it together," Susan said.

Closing her eyes Cindy gave her head a small shake as if to clear it and sighed heavily. "Susan maybe you should start at the beginning. Why did you meet with Clarence in the first place?" asked the rabbit.

"Well, he called me saying he needed a favor, and I suggested we meet at the ice cream shop. After we met and got our table he told me he needed me to talk to you because you were angry with him and not taking his calls. He wanted me to get you to talk to him again. I asked him why you were angry with him but he didn't want to say, so I told him that if I knew what it was all about I'd have a better chance of convincing you to talk with him. Well, he told me that you and he went to your place last Sunday after leaving Amy's place," Susan said awkwardly. She had almost said Sabrina's. "He told me how you two got uh...friendly. That's when he started stumbling over what he was trying to say, but he did manage to say that things went too far, and I knew you'd never let things get out of hand." Cindy took on an embarrassed and shamed expression at this. "That's when I was able to put it together that he had raped you and I guess I flew into a rage."

Cindy was quiet while she contemplated what Susan had just said. *No! This can't be*, she thought. Cindy leaned forward and rested her head into her paws. "Oh God no." It was Susan's turn to exchange confused looks with Debbye. "This, this is all my fault," Cindy said in a small voice. "Everything that's happened is because of me," she said quietly.

"NO!" Susan spat angrily. "Don't you dare blame yourself for what that **SLIME** did to you."

Cindy shot Susan an angry look, "DONT YOU CALL HIM THAT!" Cindy shouted, and Susan pinned her ears back against her head.

"Cindy, quiet, you'll have the whole station bursting in here," Debbye urged, placing a paw over Cindy's to calm her.

Cindy looked at Susan, whose ears were just now starting to rise again, and sighed heavily. "Please don't call him that Susan," she said as calmly as she could, but her voice was still shaking a little.

"But Cindy he...", Susan started.

"Did nothing Susan. He has never been anything but a complete gentlefur with me," Cindy persisted.

"Then why were you angry with him? Why wouldn't you take his calls? Why did he need me to talk to you?" she asked hotly.

Cindy's ears drooped even more than normal. She really didn't want to tell anyfur just how badly she had screwed up, but she also felt she had no choice. She had to face what she had done. "Susan," she said with a look of utter shame. "Clarence never raped me. He could never ever do such a thing. It was not him that went too far Susan, it was me," she said, sobbing again. "We were kissing. I felt so warm, so loved and safe in his embrace. I-I wanted us to be together and I invited him up to my room, but he- he knew it wasn't right. He knew I think, that I really want to wait for marriage and he was going to leave. I had to talk him into staying but even though we had a nice dinner and watched some TV and talked, he seemed, I don't know, distant and preoccupied at times, like he was thinking hard about something and I thought I scared him off. I- I wasn't taking his calls because I was afraid that he wanted to break it off with me and I just couldn't face it. Now because of me Clarence may...he- he may die because I was too scared to face him," Cindy said in a shaking voice.

Susan moved to comfort Cindy but the cuffs and ankle chains held her in place. "Cindy listen to me, you shouldn't blame yourself. I'm at fault, I jumped to the wrong conclusion and lashed out without letting Clarence explain." Susan suddenly became quiet, tears now forming in her eyes as she thought about what she had done. She had never meant to hurt Clarence as badly as she had, but had not regretted it, justifying it by

telling herself that he deserved it for raping Cindy. But now, now that Cindy had told her that Clarence had not, that she had been completely wrong, and now because of her Clarence was in the hospital possibly dying. "Oh Cindy," she said through her tears, "I am so sorry. I- I can't put in to words how much I wish I could undo what I've done. I have no right to expect you to understand or to forgive what I did. When I thought that he had raped you I- it was like. Cindy, you, Debby, and Sabrina have been more then just friends. I think of you as my sisters and the thought of anyone doing that to one of you, I just- I just lost control. I know its no excuse but I wanted you to know why," she sobbed.

Cindy, still trying to hold back the tears, regarded Susan for a few minutes, sniffed, and then said, "Thank you Susan, for telling me. I- I'm going to need some time to think on things."

Susan nodded sadly. She really didn't expect Cindy to jump up and say, "All is forgiven," not for this. "Cindy, I hope Clarence comes through okay, and no matter what punishment I end up getting, it won't be enough to make up for what I did, and I can only hope that one day you'll both forgive me."

Cindy was trying to come up with a response when there was a knock at the door and Captain Squirrel poked his head in. "Okay girls, that's all the time I can let you have," he said as he stepped into the small room and made to release the ankle chains from the table. "Your lawyer would like to speak to you before you're arraignment and bail hearing."

"Um, Captain Squirrel sir?" Susan asked, stopping him.

"Yes?"

"I- When I was brought in I said that I had attacked Clarence Skunk because he raped a friend of mine," the lioness stated.

"Uh yes, I was going to speak to you back in your cell. I'd like to get the name of your friend, we need to speak to her to determine if we need to file charges against Mr. Skunk," Capt. Squirrel said.

"That would be me sir," Cindy said.

"OH! Cindy, are you okay?"

"Yes sir I'm fine and you won't need to file charges against Clarence. He didn't rape me."

Relief showed on the squirrel's face but then a thought occurred to him. "Cindy are you sure your not protecting him because you still care for him or you don't want others to know what happened? If you are, he could do it again if not to you then another femme."

"I'm sure, sir," Cindy said.

"Then how did Susan here get the idea that you were raped? Forgive me for pressing the matter but I need to be certain of this," he said in a concerned voice.

Cindy looked mortified. Explaining what happened to Susan and Debby had been bad enough, how was she going to tell Debby's father? "Um, well there was an incident," she said nervously. "It's uh, rather embarrassing, but nothing illegal ever happened; I swear," she finished.

Capt. Squirrel rubbed his paw on his muzzle while he considered what Cindy just told him. "Alright Cindy, if you say nothing really happened I believe you. At least this will be some good news for Mrs. Skunk, I was told she was absolutely livid when the arresting officer told her about Susan's accusation. Not that you can blame her of course."

"I'll tell her sir, I'm going over to sit with Clarence while she gets some sleep. She's been with him all night," Cindy said.

"Alright Cindy; thank you. Okay, Susan, I'm sorry but I need to take you to the room where your lawyer is already waiting for you," he continued as he undid the chains and escorted Susan out.

"So," Debbye said, "um, what's going to happen between you and Susan?"

Cindy gave a soft groan as she looked to the floor. "Oh Debbye, I wish all this would just go away. I want so much for this to be a bad dream and all I'd have to do is wake up and find that I fell asleep watching TV on the couch with Clarence again."

"That didn't answer the question," Debbye stated, wondering to herself, *What would I do if that was Lee rather than Clarence?*

"Oh I don't know Debbye. I mean, yes, I've already forgiven Susan. I probably would have done the same thing if I thought anyone had done that to any of you. But what happens if Clarence dies?" Cindy stopped at that and again tears rolled down her face, but she managed to keep her voice calm, giving her head a slight shake. "You know, if you had told me at the start of the year that I would fall for Clarence; I'd have died laughing. Oh, but now I don't even want to imagine my life without him."

Debbye came up to Cindy and hugged her tightly. "Clarence is going to be just fine, you wait and see. The two of you will be falling asleep in front of the TV again in no time." Debbye broke the hug and looked the doe in the eyes. "You've got to just keep telling yourself that," she said as they both started walking out of the station. When they got out to the parking lot, the squirrel asked, "You want me to keep you company at the hospital?"

"Yes, if it's not keeping you from anything, but give me about an hour or so, I need to explain things to Mrs. Skunk first," Cindy replied when they reached their cars.

"Okay, I'll see you then," Debbye said as she gave Cindy a quick hug. They both got into their cars and drove away, Debbye taking her time in a very thoughtful mood.

END OF CHAPTER THREE