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**This story is a fan fiction based on the web novel "Sabrina Online the Story" by Chris Yost, it is a work of speculation and must not be taken as canon.**

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 Five

It was 8AM on the morning of Clarence's third day in the hospital, and Cindy was once again seated at his bedside, having relieved his mother an hour earlier. She was holding his left paw in her right, and turning the pages of a magazine she was reading with her left. As time wore on she became drowsy and didn't notice a fly landing on her nose and suddenly she sneezed. As Cindy was still a bit sluggish, having nearly fallen asleep, she never saw Clarence's ear twitch.

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Clarence stopped and spun around, snapping his eyes left & right "Who was that!"

"What's that?" Owen asked.

"I heard somefur sneeze," the younger skunk stated.

"Really? That's a good sign," his father said, and then he considered Clarence and saw that he was holding his left arm close to his chest. "Something wrong with your arm Son?" he asked.

Clarence looked down at the arm in question. "Not the arm, no, but my chest is starting to ache," he said.

"Yep, I thought so."

"What?"

"The connection between your mind and body is getting stronger. You're starting to feel your body's physical wounds. You're nearly home, Son," Owen finished, smiling.

They walked for some time, talking about events in his life. Owen told Clarence that he should have more confidence in himself and that he should stop trying so hard to get other furs to like him since if he would just open his eyes he would see that he already had a lot of good friends. Gradually a wind started to blow, gentle at first and steadily grew stronger as they walked on then suddenly there was a very bright light shining before them.

"Wha- what is it?" Clarence asked fearfully.

"That," Owen beamed, "is the finish line to this little race. All you have to do is step through and you'll be back with your mother, Cindy, and you're friends." But as he looked back to his son his smile fell away. "Clarence what's wrong?" he asked.

Clarence felt as though ice had suddenly replaced his spine. A look of complete terror on his face as he backed away. Owen ran back to his son and prevented him from retreating further.

"Clarence what is it? CLARENCE!" he shook the younger skunk as he shouted his name.

Startled, Clarence looked to his father, fear still reflected in his eyes. He licked his lips. "I, I just remembered, all those near death experiences you hear about." He looked back at the light. "They say that it's all d-dark then they meet a dead relative who leads them to a bright light where they're supposed to cross over. I d-don't want to die." He finished and tries to back away further, but his father held him where he was.

"Clarence, listen to me, didn't you notice that the only ones who said they saw all that were the ones that lived?" the older skunk said, grinning.

It took a few moments for his father's words to sink in. He blinked, looking back at his father, still fearful but no longer panicked. "You mean crossing into the light isn't crossing into death?"

"I never saw any light when it was my time," Owen said. "I suppose it's easy to misinterpret, but they are being led to the light because it isn't their time yet; just as it isn't your time. You can't stay here, Clarence, as much as I have loved talking to you. At last you must return to your life and the others who love you." He saw that his son was still uncertain. "If you still don't believe me take a deep sniff."

Clarence thought for a moment and shrugged.

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2PM in the hospital room, a young rabbit doe sitting vigil for her boyfriend has fallen into a stupor, hanging just this side of sleep, and so doesn't notice when the unconscious skunk lying on the bed inhales deeply through his nose.

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"CINDY!" Clarence shouted. "Her scent! I, I can smell her scent!"

Owen smiled again. "Just like I said, they're waiting for you just on the other side. Clarence, all you have to do to be with her again is cross into the light."

The fear had left his eyes. The younger skunk now had a look of resolution. He then looked at his father and thought to himself before speaking. "I-I just can't help but still wonder. Are you....well are you really my father, or just my imagination?"

"I don't know what I could say to prove to you that I'm your father," Owen said. "But maybe your mother...yes she'd be able to tell you. Clarence I want you to ask your mother something," and he stepped next to his son and whispered in his ear.

Clarence listened as the older skunk spoke into his ear, and his eyes grew large as dinner plates and a little fear crept back onto his face. "Y-You want me to ask her THAT!"

"Trust me Clarence, she won't be mad. Just tell her that you met me here and that I told you to ask her that. She'll be able to tell you that I am who I say I am." His father chuckled as he stepped back, and then he became serious. "Its time for you to go now, Clarence."

The younger fur, ready to step through, looked at his father and paused. The older skunk's cheerfulness was gone. He even seemed somewhat saddened now that they were parting company. He thought about how he had helped him find his way back to his body and how thanks to him he once again remembers his earlier childhood and how happy he was, and how much he loved his parents and how they **both** loved him, and he now knew his mother had always loved him, that he had only misinterpreted her determination to provide for him as a greater love for her career. *Is he really my father? Is he real or not....does it matter?* "Um, I, I don't know if ...well I suppose it doesn't matter if you're real or not. I n-never got to say it when...well." Clarence suddenly found it very difficult to speak, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I, I love you Dad."

Owen's eyes watered and his paw shook as he was overcome. "Oh, Son," he said hoarsely as he placed his paws on Clarence's shoulders and squeezed. He gave him a good long look, smiled and pulled him into a hug that would out do a Kodiak bear. "Oh Son, you've no idea how much I've wanted to hear you say that. I love you, too, and your mother with all my heart. I've wanted so much to hold you both, and I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me."

Clarence, surprised by the sudden hug, was stunned for a moment, but returned it. "I know, Dad, it wasn't your fault, and I'm sure Mom knows it too," he sniffed.

The older Skunk held his son for a long moment, and then released him from the hug but still held on to his shoulders. He was just barely able to keep hold of his emotions, but wore a smile on his muzzle again. He took one paw and ruffled his son's headfur. "I'm so proud of you, Clarence, I don't think a father could want more for a son," he said, and then stepped behind the younger skunk and nudged him towards the light. "Enough now, son, it's time to go home."

Clarence walked into the light, looking back to his father who was waving to him. "Goodbye, Dad, I'll miss you," he said as his father's image faded and the light got brighter and grew around him.

"Be good, Son, and remember I'll always be with you. Remember that and tell your mother that both of you are in my heart always," his voice echoed, and was gone.

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2:45PM. His eyes fluttered and opened. It took several seconds for his vision to focus and he looked around. "Thank you Dad, I don't think I could have made it back without you," he muttered under his breath. Looking around again, he saw Cindy sitting in a chair beside the bed, her paw holding on to his. He smiled.

Cindy, who had finally fallen into a light sleep and so did not notice the skunk's awakening, only stirred when she felt her paw being lifted and then kissed softly. She slowly lifted her head and opened her eyes. As she looked up and her eyes focused, she saw that the skunk was holding her paw close to his muzzle and smiling warmly at her. "C-Clarence?" she whispered, her mind still muddled with sleep.

"Thank you for being here, my love, your presence more than anything else called me back." he said, just above a whisper.

Her mind clearing she realized what she was seeing. "CLARENCE!" she screamed as she jumped out of the chair and made to give him a neck wrenching hug, but remembered his condition and stopped herself, her face mere inches from his. She looked into his eyes; then she slowly closed the distance and they kissed, the doe caressing the side of the skunk's face as he hugged her as closely as his injuries would allow with his arm without IVs sticking out of it.

They ended the kiss only due to a mutual need for air. Cindy laid herself lightly beside Clarence and rested her head on his shoulder and nuzzled him. "Oh Clarence I was so worried, I've missed you so much," she said, still breathing heavily from their kiss.

"No more then I missed you," Clarence whispered, and then he remembered. "Cindy, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. You offered me something very special and I ran. Believe me I didn't mean it as a rejection. I truly want to wait till marriage and I came so close to giving in; I didn't trust myself and thought I should leave."

Cindy propped herself up on her arm and looked at Clarence, a look of shock in her eyes. "Is that why you thought I was angry?" after seeing him nod she smiled and caressed the side of his face. "You dear, sweet, silly male. Clarence, I was never angry with you."

Clarence blinked. "But I thought...you weren't taking my calls."

Cindy looked down. "Um, I, I wasn't taking your calls because I was afraid."

"Afraid, of what?" he asked.

She took a deep breath. "That you wanted...to break up with me."

It was Clarence's turn to look shocked. "Cindy, why would you think that?" he asked.

"You seemed so distant and preoccupied after it happened. I thought I scared you off," she said miserably, "and that you were calling to tell me you wanted to break it off and I just couldn't face it."

"You don't ever have to worry about that, Cindy," he said, running his paw through her headfur and stroking her ear while looking into her eyes. "I am more than happy to be yours for as long as you'll have me."

"Oh Clarence, I...," she broke off, unable to describe what she was feeling. Instead she leaned in and kissed him deeply. After she ended the kiss, Cindy got up, pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat down. "Clarence, can I ask you, if I hadn't scared you off, why did you seem so preoccupied?"

Clarence frowned and looked down. "I, I was thinking about Sabrina and how much I was going to miss her now that she's moved." He sat silent in the bed for what seemed like forever waiting for Cindy to yell at him angrily for thinking of another femme when he's going out with her. When he realized she wasn't yelling at him he slowly looked at the doe expecting to see disgust in her face and was surprised to see her smiling.

"So mom was right, you were as upset about Sabrina leaving as I was. Oh Clare, why didn't you say anything? We could have talked about it."

"I felt guilty," he said sadly.

"Guilty, but why?" she asked.

"Because I, well, because I was thinking of Sabrina when I'm seeing you," the skunk said.

"Oh, Hon, its okay if you think of Sabrina or even miss her. The first fur we fall in love with will always hold a special place in our hearts." Then she got a mischievous look. "I can even understand if you think about that Wanda Vixen you work with. She's quite pretty."

"Y-You met Wanda?" Clarence asked with frightened trepidation.

Cindy nodded, continuing to grin but saying nothing.

"But I, I mean I wou-."

Cindy chuckled and hushed the flustered skunk by placing a finger over his lips. "I know you wouldn't act on them Clare, but you have had those thoughts about her. Any male would but like I said, I understand. So long as it's only me you get cozy with, I don't really mind," she finished and gave the skunk a gentle kiss on the nose.

Clarence's discomfort fell away and he looked contently at Cindy. "How'd I get so lucky as to have a femme like you?"

"I'm the lucky one," Cindy replied.

They looked smiling at each other holding paws till something occurred to Clarence. "Shouldn't we let the staff know I'm awake?"

"OH SHOOT!" Cindy cried out as she tore her paw from Clarence's and smacked herself on the forehead. "I completely forgot! They wanted whoever was with you to buzz the nurse when you woke up," she said, finally reaching for the buzzer.

The door opened a few moments later admitting the nurse on watch, who noticed the skunk's much more animated condition and smiled. "Well it looks as though you've finally decided to join us, Mr. Skunk. How do you feel?"

"I, I feel fine. A bit hungry, thirsty too," Clarence replied.

Cindy looked to the nurse hopefully. "That's a good sign isn't it?"

"Yes, yes it is," nodded the nurse. "I have to inform Dr. Fisk you've regained consciousness and I'll bring you some water," the nurse said and was gone. She returned several minutes later carrying a paper cup filled with water and handed it to Clarence. "Drink it slowly now, the doctor will be coming shortly, he needs to run some tests to evaluate your condition." She turned to Cindy. "I'm sorry but you won't be able to stay during the tests."

"That's okay, I've got some calls I have to make." She turned to Clarence. "A bunch of furs are going to want to see you."

"Uh well," the nurse started sheepishly, "The doctor is likely going to want to limit the number of visitors to one or two for tonight at least, I'm sorry."

"Oh, umm, okay. Well I still need to make those calls." She turned and gave Clarence another long kiss, and then said, "I'll see you again tonight if they let me. If not I'll be back tomorrow. Okay, Love?"

The skunk reached out and caressed the doe's ear. "Even so much as a minute will seem like an eternity without you next to me."

Cindy blinked. No one had ever said anything remotely close to her. "Oh Clare I," but instead of saying anything more aloud she bent down and whispered in his ear, "no male has ever made me feel as you have. I love you Clarence."

As she straightened up Clarence took her paw, stopping her. "And I you," he said just barely above a whisper, knowing she could hear him easily.

Cindy smiled contently and gave his paw a squeeze. "I'll see you as soon as I can, sweetie," she said, and left just as the doctor came in.

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The nurse had been right; the doctor had indeed wanted Clarence's visitors kept to a minimum. He allowed only his mother to see him, saying he wanted the patient's excitement limited so he could rest for the night and that he could have all the visitors he could stand the next day.

Sharon entered the room apprehensively. She had prayed for this opportunity for the past three days, but now that the moment arrived she found herself afraid to face her own son. She sat in the chair at the bedside and tried to think of a way to start, trying to think of the right words.

Now resting in a seated position, Clarence, seeing the troubled and frightened look on her face, guessed at what was bothering his mother.

"Mom?"

"Yes dear," she replied.

"I love you," he stated, smiling.

"I-" Sharon blinked. *Did he just say he loves me?* "You," she asked, "love me?" Seeing him nod she rose from the chair and embraced her son. "Oh Clarence... I love you. too. I've always loved you. I'm so sorry I didn't do a better job of it," she sobbed. "I never meant to shut you out, I swear I didn't."

Having had the IV's removed the skunk was able to return the hug with both arms and breathed in her scent. *Hmmm, just like I remember,* he thought. "I know, Mom. I know, and I know that everything you did was because you loved me. I'm not angry, I'm just glad I was wrong."

"But how Honey? How could you have known?" Sharon asked.

"Well, we can talk about that later," Clarence said, not sure if he really wanted to tell his mother about meeting up with his father out fear she might think him delusional. "It's not really important now, is it?"

His mother smiled. "No I suppose it's not important at all."

For a few hours they talked happily. Sharon talked about meeting the furs Clarence worked with as well as Cindy and her family, and she apologized for being so angry at him for taking the job at the studio and told him that she thought Zig, Marvin, and Wanda were good furs. After a while they brought Clarence's dinner and his mother kissed him goodnight and said she'd be back in the morning.

The only other visitor Clarence had came around 6pm. A knock came before the door opened and a police fur came in. "Mister Skunk? I'm Officer Brady. I'm glad you came through okay. Your mother was very upset when I spoke to her. I have some papers for you to sign," and handed the skunk a clipboard and a pen.

"What are these?" Clarence asked.

"Just the official complaint stating you intend to press charges against Miss Susan Felin."

"What is she charged with?"

"Well Mr. Skunk, Miss Felin used her claws when she assaulted you and she had to be restrained to prevent her from attacking you further, so she's being charged with attempted murder."

Clarence thought for a moment. "And if I decide not to sign?"



Officer Brady's brows furrowed. "Well, sir, in that case we'd have no choice but to let Miss Felin go; she'd get off scot-free."

"She wouldn't have a record?"

"Only an arrest record but that wouldn't mean much," the officer answered.

*It was a misunderstanding, a mistake, and it was as much my fault as Susan's. She doesn't deserve to have her life ruined for this.* Clarence handed the clipboard and pen back to the officer. "How soon can you release her?"

Brady blinked. "Uh, sir, I think you should think about this a little longer. She nearly killed you. If you don't press charges she's going to walk. What if she does this to another fur? Do you want that on your conscience?" the officer asked.

"Officer, I know you're only trying to do your job, but it was all just a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding," Brady repeated, looking at the skunk as if he thought the doctor might have missed something while appraising his patient's mental fitness.

"Yes, and one that is as much my fault as hers. I didn't explain something properly and as a result Susan thought I did something horrible to my girlfriend, an extremely close friend of hers. They're practically sisters. I don't want Susan's life ruined over this, I'm **not** pressing charges."

Officer Brady sighed; he could see the skunk was set in his decision. "Well Miss Felin was released on bail yesterday, so all that needs to be done is to notify her that the charges have been dropped"

Clarence nodded. "Can you let her know that I'd like to see her when she can manage it?"

The officer shook his head, exasperated. "I'll...I'll see that she gets the message," he said, and turned to leave.

Clarence could hear the police fur muttering, but since his hearing wasn't as good as Cindy's he couldn't get it all but did manage to catch something about how were they supposed to do their jobs if their paws were being tied all the time. He sympathized with Officer Brady but was sure his decision was the correct course of action. Looking at the clock he noticed it was nearly 6:30. It was still rather early but even given that and the fact that he had just spent the better part of three days unconscious he realized that he felt quite tired. He got himself as comfortable as possible, given that his ribs made very clear their displeasure at every attempt to move, and drifted off to sleep.

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Something wasn't right. A strange sensation was intruding into the blackness. An itch. His ear. Something was itching his ear. After twitching the ear and brushing it with his paw, the itching persisted, causing him to slowly wake. He opened his eyes and could only see a tawny blur that was Cindy. She was scritchng his ear lightly with her finger and he smiled. "Morning Cindy," he muttered, still half asleep.

Cindy giggled. "Rise and shine, sleepy head; you've got company."

Clarence reached over to the bedside table, grabbed the spare glasses his mother had dropped off when she visited the night before, and gasped after he got them on. He had expected Cindy and his mother, but besides them smiling at him were Cindy's parents, Zig, Marvin, and Wanda. "Wha- what are...I mean why are you all here?"

"Oh come on, Clare," Wanda said cheerfully. "What do you think we're here for? When we heard you woke up yesterday, we all wanted to come over right away. Zig was fit to be tied when she was told we couldn't see you till this morning."

"Well, I was worried about him, just like the rest of you," the tiger striped skunk said defensively. "Anyway I calmed down after they explained why I couldn't," she finished, then turned to Clarence. "Besides it gave us a chance to get this and have everyfur sign it." With that she pawed over a large envelope to the other skunk, who opened it and pulled out an equally large get well card. "All the furs at the studio signed it, and you remember James the fur I'm seeing? He signed it, too." she finished.

Clarence looked at the card, going over all the get well wishes he saw. "Hope you get back on your feet real soon, I want a chance to win some of my money back-James." Clarence smiled, remembering the poker game at the studio Saturday night, and then looked up at Zig. "Tell him I'm game whenever he is," he chuckled.

Zig laughed. "I'll tell him...so," she said more seriously, "how are you feeling, Clare? I'll be honest, I was so worried when I heard you'd been hurt. We all were."

"It's true," Marvin said. "The boss here was near tears and Wanda was in hysterics." This earned him a sneer from Zig and a raspberry came from the vixen's direction.

Clarence's smile grew and he held out his paw to the other skunk.

Zig stepped forward and took the offered paw, bent down and gave him a friendly kiss on the cheek.

As Zig started to move back, Clarence gave her paw a small tug, stopping her. "You've been more than a boss, Zig. More like a big sister, thank you."

Zig smiled warmly. "You know, it's funny, the other day when this happened and we were waiting to see you, I was thinking just how short a time it took for me to think of you as family."

"It's true, I had the same thoughts," Rodney said. "I was an emotional wreck when I told Cindy about what happened; not just because I had to tell her something I knew would crush her but because in my mind I already thought of you as part of my family."

Cindy leaned close to Clarence and whispered into his ear "You see, Clare? You just needed to stop trying so hard; just be yourself and furs will like you."

"Yup. No, there's no denying it, like it or not you're part of the group," Marvin said.

"That's for sure. It just wouldn't be the same without you," Wanda added and stepped towards the skunk and bent down, but unlike her boss did not give a friendly peck on the cheek but a kiss full on the lips., And, although it was quick and not overtly sensual given the past attentions she's paid him, the kiss caused the fur on Clarence's face to stand on end and the pink tint of his skin underneath was unmistakable. Cindy's blood rose, though she was able to keep her expression neutral. If she could've shot lasers from her eyes, Wanda would have been a smoking pile of ash.

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The two femmes walked down the hospital corridor in silence and stopped at the partially open door of a private room. The squirrel pushed the door open and they both took a step inside. Everyfur had their attention on the fur in bed so it was he who first noticed them and smiled.

"Hello Debbye, Susan, come in," Clarence said.

Everyfur turned. Cindy and her parents were surprised to see the lioness since they had expected her to still be in a jail cell. The Elder Skunk however reacted a bit more vocally.

"SUSAN?" she shouted turning around and spotting the lioness. "You're the one who did this to my son?" she asked as she moved between the bed and Susan. Zig Zag and Marvin took up positions behind Sharon on either side ready to hold the angry femme back should she decide to lash out at Clarence's attacker, or help defend Clarence if the lioness made a move against him. "Have you come to finish what you started? Why aren't you in jail? They said you were charged with attempted murder."

"She's not in jail because I dropped the charges, and she's here because I asked her to come," the younger skunk said.

All eyes turned to Clarence. His mother looked as though she couldn't have been more surprised if her son had announced that he and the lioness were engaged. "Honey, she nearly killed you, why on earth would y-." Her eyes landed on Cindy, who was still staring at Clarence, still not believing what he had just said. "You! This is because of you, isn't it?" she snapped. Cindy looked at Sharon, stunned. "What did you tell him, that you'd break up with him if he didn't drop the charges?"

Both Rodney and Ellen made to defend their daughter at the same time but never got the chance.

**"STOP IT, JUST STOP IT! LEAVE HER ALONE!"**

The room was plunged into silence and everyfur there saw something they never thought they'd see; Clarence with anger in his eyes. He looked unblinkingly at his mother, whose ears were now flat against her head. His expression softened as he looked at Cindy. He took her paw and pulled her onto the bed beside him and hugged her close. His wounds protested, but he paid no heed to the pain. He was more concerned with the doe in his arms. He whispered to her, telling her everything was okay.

"But Clarence, she---," Sharon started.

"NO! Mother, listen to me, you don't know what you're talking about," he turned to look at Cindy, who had her face buried in his shoulder and he could hear her snuffle softly. He sighed and turned back to his mother, no longer angry. "I'll admit the fact that Susan and Cindy are friends had some small influence on my decision to drop the charges, but it was **my** decision. Cindy didn't even know I did it till just now. We never even talked about it."

It took a few seconds for what her son had just said to sink in. Sharon seemed to shrink. "Oh, God, Cindy," she said, stepping up to the bed and placing a paw on the doe's shoulder. "Cindy, I'm so sorry. I -I just -, I'm just so, I don't know. I almost lost my son, the only one that meant anything to me since my husband died, and although I haven't shown it I have always loved him very much. Then to hear that the one who nearly took him from me is getting off scot-free, I'm afraid I let anger override my judgment. Can you forgive me?"

Cindy pushed herself up and heard a sharp intake of air coming from Clarence, and realized her sudden movement had caused him pain. Then it seemed as if she just suddenly realized that she was lying on the bed. "OH MY GOSH, CLARENCE I'M SO SORRY," she said, and she hopped off the bed as if she had been electrocuted. "Oh Clarence, why did you have me lie next to you? It must have been very painful."

The skunk shrugged. "You were upset and needed to be comforted, the pain wasn't bad at all."

Cindy held the skunk's paw and turned to his mother. "Yes, of course; I forgive you Mrs. Skunk. You've been through a very emotional few days and it's an easy thing to believe I might have influenced him. In fact I was thinking that I **was** the reason he dropped the charges. Truthfully, if Clarence hadn't dropped them, I can't honestly say that I wouldn't ask him to reconsider. But please believe me; I would never try to force him into something he didn't want." The doe then looked back to the skunk in the bed. "Clare, are you sure about this? Why did you drop the charges?"

Clarence smiled. "Just like I told the officer last night it was all a misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?!" his mother repeated in exasperation.

Clarence chuckled. "You sound just like Officer Brady did last night. He wasn't any too happy when I told him I wanted him to let Susan go. It's just as I said, it was a misunderstanding. One I helped create. I wanted Susan to talk to Cindy for me because I thought she was angry with me when she wasn't taking my calls. Susan wanted to know what Cindy was supposed to be angry about and well... I kind of tried to tell her without telling and I did a poor job of it. Susan took what I had said to mean that I -, that I had hurt her and as close as Susan and the others are to each other, and given Susan's protective nature, she lashed out before I had a chance to explain what really happened. If I had just told Susan what happened then none of us would be here like this. It's as much my fault as it is hers. It was a mistake we both made and I don't think Susan's life should be ruined because of it." Clarence saw that his mother had calmed down considerably, but still looked angry. "Mom, I understand how you must feel about her right now, but she only acted out of rage over what she thought I had done. I guess you've heard what it was she thought I did?" He saw his mother nod and continued. "Now, if you thought somefur had done that to a femme you were as close to and was asking you to help him apologize to her, can you honestly say you wouldn't lash out at him?"

"Well I -," Sharon began, but then remembered her reaction to Susan's arrival and the wind was suddenly gone from her sails. She shook her head slowly "I don't really know. I suppose I might."

Clarence nodded. "I don't know her as well as Cindy, but I know that she's a good furson who cares for her friends, and she's a fur I would be happy to call friend," he said turning his head to look at the lioness.

Susan was in a state of shock. She was certainly surprised when she was told the charges had been dropped and that she was free to go, and then when they told her that Clarence had asked to see her she hadn't known what to expect, and certainly she never thought to have him defend her against his mother. And then to hear him say that he would be happy to call her friend? It was all too much to comprehend. "How can you say that, Clarence? After all this, after what I did, after what I accused you of; how can you even stand to look at me?" she finally asked.

"Because I mean everything I just said," the skunk commented as he held out his paw and motioned with his fingers to come closer, As she stepped forwards past his mother, Clarence gently gripped her arm and squeezed. "I'm glad Cindy has a friend like you who will look out for her, and I would very much like it if you would be my friend, too."

Susan felt a warm feeling come over her and she placed her paw over the one he had on her arm and cradled it in both her paws. "Clarence Skunk, you're certainly a lot more than you look. A lot more, I'm ashamed to say, than I'd ever given you credit for, and one I would be more than honored to call friend," she said, smiling.

Sharon felt her anger towards Susan fade and she came up behind her and lightly touched her shoulder. The lioness turned and faced her and the smile she had shown Clarence melted to a look of uncertainty.

"Mother please don-," Clarence tried to intervene.

Sharon held up her paw, stopping her son. She then looked back to the lioness and stared into her eyes for several long minutes, unnerving her.

"Mrs. Skunk, I know you must be very angry with me and you have every right to be. I nearly killed you're son. Please believe me, I wish there was some way I could undo what I did," and then she turned to the skunk in bed, "I am sorry for attacking you Clarence. I know, I should have said it when I first came in but I just didn't know how."

"I know you are Susan, and so am I," he replied.

"You are, but what are y-?"

"I didn't want to tell you what happened because I didn't want to embarrass Cindy, but you are her friend. No, more then her friend, you, Sabrina, Debby, and Cindy are sisters. I should have trusted you to not give Cindy a hard time about it and I didn't. For that Susan, I am sorry."

Susan blinked, then smiled. "You're quite the Gentlefur, Cindy is very lucky."

Clarence chuckled. "You know I've heard furs say that a few times, and each time I think it's strange that they'd say that because I have always considered **myself** to be the lucky one."

Sharon sighed heavily, getting the lioness's attention again. "Well, I guess if he has decided to look past this incident and sees a good furson in you, then... I'll trust his judgment." She held out her paw and a smile slowly played across her muzzle. "If he can forgive you, so can I."

Susan took the offered paw in both of hers. "Mrs. Skunk, thank you. I'm not certain that I deserve yours or Clarence's forgiveness, but I hope one day I can prove myself worthy," she said somberly.

Sharon then looked around. "Now ladies," she said facing the femmes near the bed. "I don't want to empty the room, but if I could have a few moments with my son?"

They all nodded and filed to the other end of the room to join the others. There everyfur broke into groups and talked quietly. Cindy & Susan, Clarence noticed, were in different groups and he looked on with a troubled expression.

"What's wrong dear?" Sharon asked quietly.

Clarence nodded towards the others. "Them, they haven't said a thing to each other since Susan came in. Even now they're not talking," he said, just as quiet.

Sharon followed her son's gaze and saw that every now and then Susan would look worriedly over to Cindy, then quickly look away if the rabbit happened to turn her head in her direction. "I wouldn't worry too much sweetheart. I spoke with Cindy yesterday after she talked to Susan about what happened and I believe she's forgiven her, but I think she's letting Susan make the first move." She turned back to her son. "You know dear, I think you've been changed by this whole ordeal. You seem more confident." She grinned. "You're certainly louder."

Clarence's eyes grew wide. "Mom, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you like that, I -," he began, but was cut off.

"No, Clarence, you had every right to yell. I was out of line accusing Cindy like that. Actually I'm very proud of you for sticking up for her. You reminded me so much of your father." She remembered with a sad smile the time when she and her then fiancé Owen had met with her parents. Sharon had been reduced to helpless tears as her parents shouted horrible things at her. The entire time, Owen had his arm around her holding her closely as he shouted back that they had absolutely no concept of what love is if they can so easily turn their backs on her because of a mistake. Later that night she told him that she did not consider anything they had done together a mistake and wouldn't undo a single thing.

"I think I met him...while I was unconscious," Clarence said quietly. "He helped me find my way back."

Sharon looked at her son silently for a long moment. "Sweetheart, it must have been your imagination, you're subconscious mind created an image you'd trust."

Clarence shook his head. "I don't really know what to think. He told me a lot of things, like how you only worked so hard because you loved me and wanted to give me everything. He also showed me memories of my fifth birthday and how happy we were together."

The femme skunk paused, lost in thought. *Is it possible? How else could he know the real reason I worked so hard? We haven't talked about it yet.* "Honey I think maybe you're mind was telling you what you knew but hadn't really realized yet."

Clarence nodded. "I had the same thought when I was talking to him. I asked him how I could know if he was real or not."

"And?" Sharon asked anxiously.

"He ...gave me a question he said I should ask you and you'd be able to tell me if he was real or not."

"I'd be able to, but -." Sharon's anxiety increased. *How should I reply? If I tell him it wasn't his father and only his imagination, will he be upset?* "Uh wh- what was the question dear?"

The skunk looked from his mother down to the blankets on the bed, shook his head slightly and sighed. "This is going to sound crazy but he wanted me to ask you... if... if you ever found your marbles."

Her eyes grew wide, her mouth fell open, and she gasped. *Oh my God, Owen?* She brought her paw up, covering her mouth, as a single tear fell down her cheek.

"Mom, are you alright, what's wrong?"

"Oh Clarence I, I don't know how but, I think... I mean we never told anyfur so how could you, unless, no, you were too young."

"Mom what are you talking about?"

"That question, Clarence; it was our private joke. It goes back to how your father and I met. It's kind of a long story but when ever I was feeling a little down or moody he'd ask me 'What's wrong, still can't find the rest of you're marbles?' Sweetheart it sounds impossible but I think... it must have been him, it was your father. Was he alright? Was he okay? How has he been?"



Clarence was dumbstruck. He had thought his vision of his father might have been real but to have his mother confirm it was something of a shock. "He, he seemed okay. He looked just as I remembered when I was five. He has a bit of a quirky sense of humor."

Sharon nodded and smiled. "Yes it was one of the things that attracted me; he could almost always make me laugh. Oh I'm so glad you had a chance to meet him and that he was able to see the fur you've become," she said as she ran her paw through his headfur to brush the bangs out of his eyes.

A knock came at the door and Clarence heard a familiar voice. "Is this a hospital room or Grand Central Station?"

"Styx!" the skunk greeted.

"Clarence, guess I have the right room after all. You sure have a lot of friends for being as shy as you are," the panther said as he walked in. "So fur, what the hell happened? I've been trying to call you for the past few days to see how things went with you're girlfriend's friend at the ice cream shop. When I called the studio to talk to you this morning they told me you were here but didn't give me any details"

"Wait," Cindy broke in, "you knew about that?"

"Um yeah, well it was my idea. You must be Cindy. It's good to finally meet you," he said extending his paw.

Cindy looked at the offered paw. *His idea, he sent Clarence to talk to Susan? No, no don't make the mistake of falsely accusing somefur like Mrs. Skunk did, he couldn't have possibly known all this would've happened.* The doe smiled and took the panther's paw and shook it. "Its good to meet you, Styx is it? Clare mentioned you before; you work in computers don't you?"

"Yup. Technical support actually. I help out furs who call in having problems with the systems they bought," he replied. "So, Clare, what the heck happened to you anyway?" he asked the bedridden skunk.

Cindy, Susan, and Clarence exchanged looks anxiously, and then Susan started to tell her fellow feline about the events in the ice cream shop with Clarence jumping in now and then to fill in a detail here & there, leaving the panther stunned and silent.

"Damn, boy," he said finally. "I've said it before and I'll say it again...you get into the strangest dilemmas," he chuckled. Noticing Sharon, "Shame on you," Styx scolded jokingly. "You never told me you had an older sister."

Clarence blinked for a moment. He thought the panther meant Zig Zag, but no, he knew who Zig Zag was, so then wh -. The skunk then saw his friend looking at his mother. "What, sister? No this is Sharon Skunk...my mother!"

"What!" Styx was flabbergasted. "But," he stammered as he looked more closely at the femme skunk whose cheek fur was now standing on end. "No way... you're pulling my tail, she can't possibly be old enough to have a son your age."

Sharon, having recovered from her embarrassment, spoke up. "I assure you, ah, Styx was it?"

"Hmm? Oh yes well my name is really Greg, Greg Panthros but most of my friends call me Styx...um long story."

"I see; well as I was saying, I am Clarence's mother. He was born when I was nineteen."

"But," Styx said, looking from Clarence to Sharon, "Forgive me but you honestly look to be about my age; in your late twenties or early thirties."

"Thank you. That's very kind of you to say but I just turned forty-one a few months ago," she replied, then seeing the panther's astonished face. "I can show you my driver's license if you like," she offered, smiling.

Styx looked as though he was going to take the skunk up on her offer, but then said, "Umm no, that's necessary. I'll take you're word for it. It's amazing. If circumstances were different I'd be very tempted to ask you to dinner or a show."

"Well why don't you?"

Both the skunk and panther turned and saw the tiger striped skunk step over.

"Ah Styx, this is my boss Zig Zag," Clarence offered, "and the one behind her is Wanda Vixen."

Styx shook paws politely with the actresses, he of course had not needed Clarence to introduce them as he knew quite well who they were but didn't let on, fearing Sharon might think less of him.

"That's Marvin over there," Clarence nodded in the badger's direction, who nodded to the panther. "You've met Cindy. This is Rodney and Ellen her parents," he said, indicating the other two rabbits, and continued to introduce the other furs in the room.

"So, what about it?" Zig asked the bewildered feline.

"Hmm, sorry?"

"Why don't you ask her out?" Zig replied.

"OH! Umm, well uh I'm sure she has a great many things on her mind with all that's happened to Clarence," he replied, trying to ignore the fact that the fur on his cheeks was sticking straight out.

"But he's going to be just fine now so that's just an excuse isn't it?" said the striped skunk with eyes gleaming.

The panther stared at Zig then flashed a helpless look towards the vixen and badger's direction. They merely shook their heads, telling him there was no way she was going to let this drop. Deciding that it would only make a bigger spectacle to continue resisting than it would to just give in and ask, Styx gave Zig a rueful slight smile. Taking a deep breath he turned to Sharon. "I really would have liked a better venue to ask in, but I would very much like to see you sometime for dinner and maybe a movie?"

Sharon, who, if at all possible, was even more embarrassed than the panther that Zig Zag would pressure him into asking her out, thought, *Oh Gods, I haven't been on a date since I first met Owen, and that's another thing. It feels like I'm betraying his memory, but I also know that Owen wouldn't have wanted me to spend my life alone. Clarence, part of me is really jealous. I wish I could speak to you're father right now.* Sharon considered the panther. *Look at him, he's got to be ten years younger than me...then again he seemed to honestly think I was about his age. Hmm, maybe I've still got it; besides maybe Jake was right, maybe 'tis time I had somefur to share my life with again. I've been alone too long and he is kind of cute.* "Well I suppose after everything has calmed down and Clarence is back on his feet, dinner and a movie sounds rather nice." she said with a smile.

"Really!?! That's great, um well I guess I'll call you in a couple of weeks and we can set something up," the feline said happily.

"Oh but why-," Zig started but was interrupted by the panther.

"After all," he said, "with all that's happened I doubt you'd be able to enjoy yourself very much right now."

"You're probably right, I think it would be best if we wait a bit," Sharon replied as they both looked at the tiger striped skunk with bemused expressions, wondering if she'd get the hint.

She apparently did, Zig blinked a couple of times, shrugged, and turned to her gopher. "So kiddo, with all that's happened," she flashed Sharon & Styx a mischievous grin, "How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad. The painkillers keep everything down to a dull ache; I should be able to get back to work before too long."

The grin dropped from the striped femme's muzzle as her brows furled. "Oh no you don't, buster! The last thing I want is one of my furs relapsing because they pushed themselves too hard. Now I've spoken to that doctor of yours, so I know when he says it's okay for you to go back to work and I'm adding two weeks to that, paid of course."

Clarence's eyes grew larger than dinner plates. "That, that's not really necessary I pro-"

"I'll decide," Zig cut in, still scowling, "what is and isn't necessary where my employees are concerned, thank you." She paused for a moment, and then her expression softened and the grin returned. "And if I see you in or near the studio for any other reason then to say hello until I say I'll put you right back in that hospital bed, you hear me?"

Clarence blinked a few times then smiled back. "Whatever you say, boss...thanks Zig."

"Any time, kiddo, just take it easy and don't worry about work, we got it covered," she replied.

The other furs had decided to join in at that point, Sharon and Styx had discovered a mutual liking for classical music when Cindy had asked what kind of music Clarence wanted her to bring in and were discussing their favorite compositions. Zig and Marvin were talking to Clarence telling him how bad everyfur at the studio felt. "It was like working in a funeral home till we heard you were alright," Zig commented. "It's a good thing we didn't have any intimate scenes scheduled, I don't think anyfur would have had their heart in it," she finished. Cindy was sitting on the edge of the bed holding Clarence's paw while she talked to her parents. Wanda, Debbye, and Susan had grouped together. The vixen was telling the other two some of the more choice occurrences at the studio involving Sabrina and a few with Clarence as well. Every so often the lioness would look anxiously over at Cindy, only to quickly look away again if she saw the doe turn her head towards them.

The door opened to admit a rather attractive collie femme in a nurse's uniform. "Okay, folks, I'm afraid visiting time's over for now. I need to change the patient's bandages as well as give him his bath, the doctor says he can have visitors again after lunch. You all can have another ten minutes then I'll have to ask you to leave," she said pleasantly, and left leaving the door halfway open.

Sharon bent over and kissed her son on the forehead "I'll drop by after lunch, I love you Clarence."

"I know, Mom, I love you too."

A tear formed in Sharon's eye. She rested her muzzle beside his wanting to give him eighteen years worth of hugs in that one moment, overcome with joy at hearing him say that he loved her. "Oh, Clarence, I'm so glad I didn't lose you," she said softly.

"And I'm glad I found out how wrong I was...about a few things," he said just as softly, then seeing the confused look on her face. "We can talk later," he added.

Sharon nodded and smiled. "Alright," she said, simply content that he knew she loved him and that he loved her despite her poor behavior as a mother. She straightened and stepped aside to let Cindy come up.

The doe leaned down as the skunk had but instead of a peck on the forehead or the cheek gave him a very passionate kiss and caressed the side of his face. "I'll come back after lunch, Clare, I...I love you."

Clarence took her paw in his. "I love you too, Cindy. I want you to know that no matter what happens I'll always love you."

The two stared into each others eyes not hearing or seeing anything else, until the doe's father came up and tapped her on the shoulder. "Okay Honey wrap it up for now, there're others who want to say their farewells." He then offered his paw to Clarence, who took it and gave it a firm shake. "I can't tell you how relieved Ellen and I are that you're going to be okay, son, get well soon."

Ellen, Cindy, and Clarence all looked at the buck bemused when he had addressed the young skunk as "son" but he seemed oblivious to his Freudian slip. "What?" he asked them.

Ellen just smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "Nothing, Dear," she said, and then she too turned to the skunk and bent down and put her paws on his shoulders. She placed the side of her head to his in the best approximation of a hug that she could manage and not aggravate his injuries. "Get better soon. I don't think Cindy will enjoy falling asleep in front of the TV as much until you're there beside her again." She started to move away but paused and came back and spoke just loud enough for him to hear. "Oh, I just wanted you to know that I feel exactly the same about you as Rodney does." She then stepped away.

Zig came up with a big grin. "Well aren't you a lucky fur, getting a bath from a very attractive nurse, hmm?"

"Oh come on Zig," Clarence said dismissively, "I mean, she's a nurse. She must do this fifty times a day, it's not like anything is going to happen," he smirked.

Zig bent down and placed her nose barely an inch from his. "Oh I wouldn't be so sure of that, kiddo. You see I've pulled some strings and made sure you got ah...special treatment."

The younger skunk's expression became nervous. "N-no you didn't," he stated, but grew alarmed as he watched her already large grin grow into something that would make the Cheshire cat proud. His eyes bugged out and his mouth opened to protest.

"Gotchya!" Zig exclaimed before Clarence had a chance to make a sound. He just stared at her, his mouth still open. Her face settled into a smug expression as she brought her paw up and tucked a finger under his chin and pushed his mouth closed and pulled her paw away again. Then she chuckled and gave him a peck on the end of his nose, "Get better soon, kiddo." With a practiced flourish she stood up and spun around while lifting her tail in one smooth motion, landing the tip of it on the end of his nose and giving it a little swish, eliciting a sneeze and causing everyfur but him to chuckle.

Rubbing his nose, he looked up to Marvin as he stepped up. "Is she ever going to stop doing things like that to me?" he asked.

The badger shook his head. "I would get used to it if I were you, kid. Now that Sabrina's gone you can expect more of that, but if it's any consolation she only behaves that way with furs she really cares about."

"Well, yeah I guess I can put up with it then."

"Good boy. I knew you'd get with the program. Take it easy and don't push yourself,"

"Thanks, I'll remember that." He smiled as he stepped away and watched as Debby and Susan walked up.

"Take care Clare. I hope you're better soon. I'll pray for a fast recovery," the squirrel said.

"Thank you, Debbye, I appreciate that."

Susan stayed silent a moment longer, and then. "Clarence, I want to thank you for being so understanding. I wouldn't have blamed you for going ahead and pressing charges," she said.

Clarence shook his head. "I really never considered it an option, knowing I was just as much at fault. I'm worried about you and Cindy though, you two haven't said a word to each other since you got here. Are you guys going to be okay?" he asked.

"Oh...yeah, I'm...sure we'll be just fine," Susan replied, trying to smile confidently.

The skunk frowned, catching the uncertainty in her voice. "I hope so. I'd hate to see your relationship fall apart over this, because it would mean I had a paw in destroying a wonderful friendship."

The lioness shook her head. "No, you shouldn't blame yourself."

"But I do. I meant what I said before, I'm just as much to blame for this. The choices I made contributed to the outcome and I must accept the responsibility for them."

The skunk had spoken in such a way as to leave no doubt in Susan's mind that he wasn't anything other than completely serious. She looked over at the rabbits who were now grouped together then back to Clarence. "I promise, Clare, I'll talk to her." She bent down and gave him a friendly peck on the cheek and left.

A paw rested itself lightly on his shoulder getting his attention. "You going to be okay?" Styx asked.

Clarence nodded and smiled. "I think so," he said to the panther.

The feline smiled back. "I'll come back and see you tomorrow, I want to talk to you about something private," he said.

Clarence had a good idea what that something was since his friend was looking over at his mother when he said he wanted to talk, but the skunk only nodded again. "Okay," he replied as the panther joined the others.

"Get better soon Clarence. Work's just not the same when your not there," Wanda said cheerfully. She kissed him on the cheek and joined the others as they started filing out the door. Wanda was the last one at the door, but instead of leaving with the others she made sure they had started down the hall then she closed the door till it was just barely open and returned to Clarence's bedside.

The nervous feeling he had when Zig Zag was teasing him returned ten fold. "Is...Is there something else Wa- Wanda?" He found himself wishing for a sudden loss of consciousness.

"Yes Clarence there is something else. You can relax, I just want to talk privately," she said with a smirk. "You know by now that I'm attracted to shy furs, and, well, you're just about the shyest fur I've met. I have to admit I've been rather blunt in my efforts to seduce you and yet you annoyingly continued to resist. Normally I'd have lost interest by now, but you're different, Clare. I can't put my finger on it; it's not like no fur has refused my advances. I usually move on to another but you keep sticking in my mind."

Cindy had ended up at the back of the group as it moved down the hall. As they rounded a corner on their way to the elevators, she noticed that a certain vixen was not among them. *But I saw her leaving with the rest of us* she thought, then with a scowl she suddenly spun around and marched back towards the room. *WHY THAT LITTLE!* She reached the door before she could finish the unflattering thought and was about to push it open her sensitive ears picked up what was being said inside.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that I...I think I'm falling in love with you," Wanda said laying her paw in the center of the skunk's chest. "I'm not really sure if it's love; all I know is that I have never felt like this for any other fur I've met," she finished.

Cindy's blood boiled, she clenched her fists and as her dewclaws bit into her paw she had a sudden desire to have claws like Susan's. *I'd skin her alive, if I did*, she thought to herself.

"Wanda," Clarence replied, "I can't begin to tell you how flattered I am. You would have any male falling over themselves to be yours." he placed his paw over the one she had placed on his chest and lightly caressed it with his thumb. "But what you seek from me is no longer mine to give, Cindy holds my heart...completely, and I'm happy to let her do so for as long as she wants," he said.

Outside, Cindy's anger towards the vixen lessened, she really couldn't blame her for falling in love with him, after all when he wasn't trying so hard to get others to like him he was very charming and a perfect gentlefur. *But what was that he said? As long as I want? That almost sounds like he wants to -. No, we've only been going together for a few months; that can't be it. Could it?*

Wanda stood silent for a few moments and then. "Wow Clarence, you sound as though you want to marry her."

The skunk smirked. "Well I've only been with her a few months so asking her now is out of the question. I wouldn't want to scare her off or rush her into something like that, but...yes, yes, I've already decided that I do want to be with her for the rest of my life. I only hope that when the time comes to ask her she'll say yes."

Cindy took in a deep breath and held it. *HE DOES! He does want to marry me, oh my God; oh my God I can't believe it he's already decided to ask.* She brought her paws up to her muzzle to hide the smile; she turned and started back down the hall. She was so excited that it took all her restraint to not hop her way to the elevator but her tail was breaking speed records going back and forth. When she got to the elevator she thought it would be rather awkward if Wanda came along while she was waiting for the car and decided to take the stairs down to the first floor.



Again Wanda was speechless. "Well, if she has a brain in that head of hers, of course she'll say yes. I know it's too soon, but I am happy for you. The two of you look real good together. I wish you both all the happiness in the world," the vixen said, then kissed him on the cheek and started for the door.

"Does that mean," Clarence asked, stopping the vixen, "That you're going to stop...doing the things you do?" he asked hopefully.

Wanda turned back toward the skunk. "Oh I never said that," she said with an evil grin. "You're far too entertaining to just leave alone, but I promise to be careful not to cross the line," she finished. As the vixen left, she was giving her hips more wiggle than a gelatin dessert factory.

Clarence watched the vixen go, struck dumb by her display. He shook his head to clear the image from his mind and took a deep breath. "Between her and Zig, I'm sure to have a heart attack," he said to himself.

"Well then it's lucky for you you're in a hospital," the nurse said, smiling as she wheeled a cart with clean bandages and bathing supplies into the room.

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Cindy reached the first floor landing and looked through the small window in the door. She only had to wait a few minutes before she saw the vixen exit the elevator across the hall and headed outside. She waited a few minutes more and left the stairwell and made for the exit herself.

"Hey, Cindy, wait."

The rabbit stopped short of the doors and turned towards the voice. She saw Debbye over in the waiting area looking rather nervous and walked over. "Hi, Debbye, um where's Susan?"

The squirrel nodded towards one of the private conference rooms. "In there; she said she wants to talk to you...alone."

"Oh," was all she said, and took a deep breath then let it out again as she walked towards the door. *What'll I do, what do I say? I wish we could just pretend it didn't happen.* She knew however that that wouldn't solve anything. *We're just going to have to deal with it.* Right away upon entering her fur stood on end as if she had dragged her feet across the carpet as she sniffed the air. *Fear?* She asked herself. *For as long as I've known Susan, she's never been afraid.* Looking closer she could see the lioness was trembling. "Susan?" she spoke quietly, "Are you okay?"

Susan shook her head. "No, no, I'm not," she managed to say, though her voice was very shaky. "I nearly did a horrible thing. I never knew what you saw in him, never realized how special Clarence is once you bother to look beneath the surface, until today. I had fully expected to spend years in prison even after I was told he was going to be okay, but then they called me saying Clarence dropped the charges. I had no idea why. I would have given in to almost any demand. Even if he wanted me to leave Columbus, I would have...but he asked for my friendship." She shook her head in wonder. "How many furs like him could there be in the world, who'd forgive the one that nearly killed them and even go so far as to take some of the blame? They could probably be easily counted on one paw." As she spoke tears started to form in her eyes and her voice became hoarse. "You damn near lost him Cin...because of me." Susan was sobbing now, and collapsed into a chair and buried her head into her arms.

Although a few moments before Cindy had no idea what she should do, she saw her friend in pain and knew there was only one thing she could do. Pulling up a chair she sat down beside the lioness and put a comforting arm around Susan's shoulders. "Suse please don't do this; this is partly my fault too. If I hadn't tried to hide from Clare, he wouldn't have looked to you for help, and, like he said, he is partly to blame too. It took Debbye a bit of talking to convince me that neither one of us is entirely to blame."

Susan looked up to the doe and saw real concern for a friend and gazed at her in amazement. "How?" she asked, "How can you sit there and comfort me, be concerned for me, after what I did? I couldn't blame you if you hated me forever because of this, I've been so afraid that I have ruined one of the best friendships I'm likely to ever have."

Cindy smiled. "You can stop worrying about that Suse; I forgave you as soon as I found out why you attacked Clarence. Susan, you shouldn't have done it, but knowing what you thought Clarence had done to me I can understand why you did...and I don't think you could have done anything that could have proved more that we are more than just friends. We're sisters Susan, and I will always love you as one no matter what happens." She looked at her friend and still saw disbelief in the feline's eyes. Holding up her paw with the palm turned towards herself and her fingers closed into a fist except her pinky, she smiled and said, "Clique?"

Susan's depression dissolved into warmth and the feeling of family she always got when they got together, she smiled back at Cindy as she copied the gesture, hooking her pinky around the rabbit's. "Clique," she repeated.

Both femmes stood and hugged, Susan's embrace was so strong that after a few moments the doe started to pound desperately on the lioness's back.

"Huh!"

"AIR!" Cindy squeaked.

"OH! Cindy I'm sorry," Susan said as she released her friend.

"I'm okay," she said. "Whew! Now I know what it's like being one of Tabitha's plushies."

"I didn't break you did I?" Susan asked.

The rabbit chuckled. "I'm not as delicate as most think I am."

"Well there's certainly nothing delicate about-

Holding up her paw, cutting her friend off, Cindy said, "Stop right there you. I've had enough fun poked at my feet for a while thanks to Debbye. Don't you start in." Both femmes chuckled, then. "We better get out there. I'm sure Deb is worried about what's happening between us."

"I'm sure she'll be relieved. I know I am," Susan said as she grabbed the doe's paw and gave it a squeeze.

Debbye looked up and stood as the door to the conference room opened and both of her friends stepped out. *So, what now?* She asked herself worriedly. The concern must have shown quite plainly on her face because Cindy held up her paw still gripped in Susan's and smiled.

"It's okay, Deb," the rabbit said, "everything's okay."

Relief fell over the squirrel. Cindy had told her outside her father's station, but to see that her two friends were still each other's friend showed that her prayers had been answered. Smiling as she walked over to them, she put her arms around both of them. "I swear both of you are going to turn me gray before I'm thirty," she said, and all three of them laughed.

Still chuckling, Susan spoke up. "Hey let's go get some lunch. I haven't eaten much the last few days and I'm starving. Let's hit Mc Furry's, my treat."

"Hey, that sounds good to me," Debby replied.

Cindy grinned as they made for the exit. "Well that sounds great to my pocketbook"

As they walked towards their cars, Debbye looked over at the feline and saw that she was deep in thought. "Something on your mind Suse?" she asked.

"Hmm? Well I was just toying with an idea... I think we should bring Clarence into the Clique"

Cindy stopped suddenly, causing the other two to have to turn to face her. She looked at Susan, confused.

"What?" the lioness asked defensively.

"Well," said the rabbit, "it's not that I'm against the idea but...aren't you the one who said Chris couldn't be Clique because he's a guy?"

"Yeah, Suse," Debbye piped in, "how's Sabrina going to feel about you wanting to bring Clarence in after eight balling her fiancé?"

The fur on Susan's cheeks made her blush apparent as it bristled. "Well," she said sheepishly, "the fact he's a guy really didn't have any bearing on my objection; more like it was a good excuse." She paused as the two rodent femmes exchanged looks of puzzlement. "Look, except for Sabrina, we really don't know Chris at all. I mean he certainly seems nice and all but aside from that we know nothing about him."

"But Suse, isn't it the same thing here?" Cindy broke in.

Susan smiled and shook her head. "No, Cin, it isn't. You get to know a lot about a fur by the way they treat another they have completely in the palm of their paw. I think Clarence more than proved himself to be Clique material today."

"You have no arguments from me, but there's still Sabrina to consider," Debby said.

"I guess," Susan replied, "we could make Chris honorary Clique until we all know him better, but we'll let Sab have final say as to whether we bring either of them in. Does that sound fair?"

"I think so," Cindy said as they resumed their trek through the parking lot. "By the way...who's going to tell Sabrina?" They all stopped again, both Cindy & Susan trading nervous looks.

"Since I have the least involvement, I would have least amount of trouble. I'll tell her," Debbye said. "Besides, I may be wanting the same consideration for Lee some time."

"THANK YOU!" Cindy and Susan said in unison.

"Now," Susan said, "let's eat."

**THE END**