

Farewell For A Friend

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The ringing of his bedside phone brought Lee Evans fully awake in an instant. As he rolled over to reach for it, his eyes took in the early hour and his mind reviewed his situation. *Hmmm, we don't have any tests or flights going on, which means it's a major field problem or it's personal. Blast, I'm not sure which is more preferable.* Picking up the pawset, he answered, "Evans."

"Lee?" Came the anguished tone of a distraught femme, "It's Endora Mustelidae. I need to speak to Debbye, please."

Sabrina's mother? I'm liking this less and less, especially with that tone! Aloud the cat answered, "Sure, hold on and I'll get her up." Turning to the sleeping squirrel femme beside him, he gently shook her as he put his paw over the microphone. "Sweetheart, you need to wake up, there's a call for you."

His wife shifted slowly and blearily looked at the early hour displayed on the clock. "Honey, do you know what time it is?"

"I sure do, but it's Sabrina's mother on the line and it sounds like a 'code red'."

The feline could see the effect this news had as his love's eyes widened in full wakefulness and the fur around her muzzled fluffed anxiously. "Right," she replied as she reached for her phone's pawset. "I'm here, Endora, with Lee on the other phone. What's wrong?"

"Chris Foxx just called me. I - I don't know how to tell you this, but Sabrina's dead."

"What?!" cried Debbye, her eyes tearing up. "But I talked to her just the other day!"

"Well, yesterday afternoon she was in an accident with a semi," started the distraught and sorrowing mother; who then proceeded, with difficulty, to tell the shaken femme, and her listening hubby, everything she knew about what had happened.

"...and so Zig-Zag is the last call I've left to make," finished the sobbing, weary skunk femme.

Debbye was crying, too, and Lee's eyes were more than a little moist themselves. "Oh, Endora," cried the squirrel, "how horrible! How's Tabitha taking it?"

"A little better than I am," came the reply. "But we're both a bit rocky right now."

"And how're Chris and Alan taking it? – Never mind, I'll call with our condolences."

The maine coon moved to comfort his grieving wife. Holding her close with one arm and letting her sob against his chest fur, he considered a number of things. *Foremost is preventing another accident* was his first thought. "Endora, may I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"Under the circumstances, don't you or Tabitha try and drive yourselves over there. Go ahead and pack while the rest of us get things sorted out. There should be enough furs driving from here that you'll have no trouble finding a ride; it's the least any of us can do for you two."

"Thank you, Lee; we appreciate the thoughts for us; we'll probably do just that." The femme skunk sighed. "I'd like to talk more, but I really need to call Zig-Zag before I can't take it any more and collapse in a crying heap."

The feline nodded to himself. "I can understand that; I also know you're strong enough to hold as long as you need to. You go do what you have to do; I'll take care of Debbye. My deepest condolences and 'God Bless'."

"Thank you, both of you. Good night."

Click With that, Endora hung up and Lee was able to concentrate fully on comforting his wife as she cried her eyes out for her lost friend. When the tears ebbed, he gently eased her back, softly kissed each eye, and stroked her face. "It's not the end of the world, love. You've got the rest of the Clique and your cousin. Speaking of which, they'll probably be calling shortly to make certain you have the news. Why don't you go into the office and use the multi-line conference phone so y'all can make plans together." He smiled, "But I assume you're calling Chris, first?"

The squirrel femme nodded. "I have to let him know that we care." Drying her eyes and turning back to the phone, she picked it up and dialed the Foxx residence. Getting no answer and then the Foxx's answering machine, she broke into tears and hung up without leaving more of a message. Turning back to Lee as he stepped up beside her, she buried her face against his chest fur, bawling, "She did the message on their answering machine, I just couldn't take it."

When she regained her composure, she found that Lee had a robe on and was holding one for her. "Love, your cousin and the others will be calling soon, if they didn't while you were on the phone. Take this and hurry down the hall to get ready."

"And what will you be doing?"

With a wry smile, the cat replied, "Getting your suitcase from the basement so that you'll be ready to pack when you're finished. Would you like me to do at least the basics for you?"

Slipping into the robe, she turned and kissed her husband passionately. "This makes me realize how precious everything is. I don't tell you near enough that I love you."

Returning the kiss and holding her tight, he murmured, "Nor I, you, love." Breaking the kiss, he cuddled her head to him and rested his chin on top of it as his tail curled to encircle her. "You mean so much to me, my dearest one. I'd be lost without you and your enlivening ways."

"As I'd be lost without you, my rock of support."

"Thank you, love. Speaking of that, can I get practical for a moment?"

"Mmm, 'long as you hold me while you are."

Snuggling her close, he spoke quietly, "I imagine the Clique and Amy will be heading out as soon as possible. Might I suggest y'all take your car? It'll carry all of you and your luggage with ease and we've kept it in top-notch condition, so it'll be reliable."

"Why do I think you've another motive?"

"Because you know me so well, love. Of all the cars available to the four of you, it's got the largest crush zones and, after what's happened, I want to 'stack the deck' in your favor as much as I can should an accident occur."

The femme squirrel smiled, "That sounds like you, honey. Always looking to keep me as safe as possible. Of course I'll put forward my car; it's also an easier trip if there're four of us to switch-out as drivers rather than two cars with two furs each."

The cat smiled at this and was about to say more when the phone rang. "That's undoubtedly one of them now; you'd best scoot into the office and take it there."

With a quick kiss, Debbye did just that and Lee, after admiring her retreating figure, headed down to the basement to retrieve her suitcase.

Sitting at the desk, Debbye answered the phone, "Evans residence."

"Debbye? I assume Endora called you, too?" responded a shaken Susan.

"She did and it was rather a shock; I'm still getting adjusted to the news. Meanwhile, we're making preparations for me to head to Pennsylvania. Let me get Cindy on here and we can work out how we'll do this."

"Works for me."

Rapidly calling her friend, Debbye soon had the rest of the Clique talking. "I figure we're all gonna want to get there as soon as possible, right?"

An affirmative chorus responded.

"In that case, since I've got the largest car and can take all of us in one vehicle, why don't we take it? We can trade off on the driving so no fur gets too worn and we'll all be safer."

"Sounds like a plan to me," responded Susan. "That'll make it easier for the guys. How about for you, Cindy?"

The lop-eared rabbit thought for a moment. "Yeah, sounds good to me; couldn't ask for better company. Clarence can handle the kids for now; then, when he gets free to travel, bring Rodney with him for Alan. Since she's really too young, I'll ask my folks to take Nikki." She softly chuckled, "Grandparents are always willing to do that duty."

The squirrel nodded, "Lee's got important meetings this week, so he'll be coming later, too. Maybe they can work something out."

"I hope so," answered Cindy. "I'd hate to think of Clarence making that drive by himself."

"I'll ask Lee, I promise."

"Okay, we've got that taken care of," continued Susan, "so what's the plan for getting together?"

"Well, since we'll be going in my car," answered Debbye, "why don't I swing by and pick each of you up? It's simpler than trying to meet somewhere."

Both of the other parties agreed.

"While we're at it," continued the squirrel, "I know Amy's gonna be as anxious as we are. Why not ask her to come with us?"

"Yeah-h, I like that," replied the lioness. "You two hold here a few minutes and I'll give her a call."

A few minutes later, she was back. "I talked to her and she's waiting for your call."

Debbye turned to the keypad and punched the familiar number, "Amy? Debs, you're more than welcome to ride with us."

"Thanks," replied her cousin in a shaky voice. "I don't think I care to make this trip alone."

"We'll be there together," chorused the Clique.

"But I've got one little problem," continued the older squirrel. "Timothy's got a cold and I need to drop him off with Thomas' parents."

"No problem," answered Debbye. "There's room for him and that slight detour won't be any trouble at all. We'll get together first and then come and get you. That okay with the rest of you?"

"Fine." - "Sure."

"Okay, then. As one of Lee's favorite characters says, 'Let's be about it.' Lee's already packing for me, but I know he'll want me to choose some things."

The other three femmes laughed for a moment; then quieted. "Doesn't seem right to laugh so soon after losing her," offered Susan.

"She'd have been the first one to laugh," answered Amy. "I can't imagine she'd want us to stop all emotions, even for this."

"Yeah," answered a somber Cindy, "she'd want us to still enjoy life."

"Then I'll see you in a little while," finished the younger squirrel.

To a chorus of "See you soon!", she ended the calls and sat for a moment, wiping her eyes, as she let the loss overwhelm her. Shaking her head, she dried her eyes and headed back for the master bedroom where Lee had her suitcase already loaded with her personal care items and the basics he knew she'd be wanting. Beyond that, a few possible choices of outfits were laid out on the bed for her consideration. Padding softly over, she kissed his cheek. "Thank you, honey, I appreciate your help; especially when you've got important meetings to be ready for."

Lee smiled and returned the kiss, "You're still more important, m'dear. You still hold my heart in your paws."

"As you do mine. Speaking of sentiments like that, Cindy asked if you could ride with Clarence and share the driving when he heads out."

The feline nodded, "I'd be pleased to. 'Sides, if I remember correctly, this has to have hit him as hard as it's hit the Clique. Didn't you once tell me that he had a 'thing' for Sabrina before he and Cindy came to know each other?"

The femme started, "I never even thought of that. It just makes your traveling with him all the more helpful."

"My thought, too. Now, pick out the outfit you want to wear today and what you'll need for the next few days, plus a couple of extra ones just in case, and we'll finish getting you packed."

As she headed for her closet, Debbye saw his suitcase sitting off to one side and smiled. *So like him, already planning ahead for his trip.*

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Lee finished stowing the suitcase in the Crown Victoria's trunk and closed the lid. "That should be everything," he announced as he returned from the garage. "You're all ready to go."

Clad in warm clothes for the trip, Debbye gave him a passionate kiss. "I'll miss your solid support, love. Hurry along as soon as you can."

The cat nodded, "Of course I will. You let me know when you get there and, more importantly, when you've got the details for the service. Don't worry about the class tonight, I will explain to *sensei* why you're not there; I'm certain he'll understand."

"Thanks, honey," she replied. "What are you going to do after I leave?"

He chuckled, "Well, since I'd only get a little more sleep, I thought to finish getting ready, have a large mug of coffee, and head in early. With this set of meetings, I can use the jump on the day to get something done."

"That's my Lee," she responded with a throaty chuckle as she entered the garage. "Always finding something good."

Her husband waited until she was inside the car, then opened the garage door before she could start the car and stood watching while she drove off. "Angels watch over thee, my dearest love," came the soft whisper as she vanished around the corner.

Giving himself a brisk shake in the cold morning air, the feline closed the garage door and headed back into the house. *I do believe I hear some coffee with bagels and cream cheese calling my name; pity we're out of lox.*

Lee entered his office with the box lunch from the meeting and sank into his desk chair. *I think things have gone well so far; at least as well as a Quarterly Program Review can go. The first full-scale "Bulldog" is coming along and the tech demonstrators are confirming our predictions. I'm glad I'm helming this meeting instead of some of the ones Marilee has told me about. He paused and reviewed the past, Hard to believe I've been working this project, off and on, for 11 years, but that initial field observation was that long ago. As he ate, he listened to the messages that had accumulated on his voice mail. Nothing major so far. Ah! There it is; they got there safely and have the date of the services; Debbye will call me later with the final information on the times. Which reminds me, I need to set up that ride.*

Freeing his paws, he keyed in the number for Clarence's work phone and waited for him to answer. "Clarence? Lee. Any chance I can catch a ride to Pennsylvania with you? Since Debbye already has one of our cars there, I don't see any reason to drive another there; 'sides, I'd enjoy the company and we can spell each other behind the wheel. Probably safer for both of us that way."

He nodded and sipped his drink as he listened to the skunk's reply. "That'll work for me. I've got meetings I'm helming, so I can't get away 'til then myself." He listened a bit more; then replied, "Sure, unless the services get scheduled for the morning, that time's fine. Debbye's going to let me know the time and I'll call you if there's a problem. Swing by the house, then, about eight that morning and I'll be ready." He sighed as he looked at the clock, "Well, I need to get ready to go back to running a meeting. See you when you come by." Hanging up the pawset, he wrote a quick note to himself and started to look over the material to be covered that afternoon.

The cat looked up at a knock on the doorframe. "Hi, Lyman, step on in for a minute. I've got a favor to ask."

The fox-wolf padded in and took a seat. "I was just wanting to ask how the QPR was going."

The feline gave a grin that would've done his distant relative from Cheshire proud. "Exceedingly well, thanks to the lot of you. I'll send out the specifics later, but please let it be known that we're in a very good standing with the Customer."

"Will do. Seems hard to believe that TDY¹ we went on evolved into this."

Lee smiled at the memories that evoked. "Yeah, and we both got more than we expected, didn't we? Now, I need to take a few days off when this review is over tomorrow and I'd like you to fill in for me."

"I think Serina and I would both agree about that TDY; I'd never have met her without it. As to filling in, that's fair since you've honchoed this review so well. What's the occasion? I hope it's a pleasant one."

"Anything but, sad to say. You remember Debbye's friend, Sabrina?"

¹ Author's note: for those not familiar with military acronyms, TDY is "Temporary Duty", meaning that you're sent somewhere for a comparatively "short" period of time rather than as a permanent reassignment

“How could I forget? Your taking part in the wedding got us that break from TDY. She married a fox, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, and they’ve been quite happy. Unfortunately, she was involved in a car accident yesterday afternoon and died at the hospital. Debbye’s already gone out there with the rest of her close friends and I’ll be heading out for the funeral.”

“Damn, I’m sorry to hear that. Please convey Serina’s and my condolences. Any idea when you’ll be back?”

The cat shrugged. “Not at the moment; we’ll probably take a few days after the services to help out there. I rather expect Chris won’t be in any shape to do anything; I know I wouldn’t be in his place.”

“Nor would I be if Serina was lost like that. You take the time necessary to help that fox, I’ll “hold the fort” here.”

“Thanks.” The feline looked at the clock. “Well, ‘Once more into the breach’, it’s time to reconvene the review.” “Catch you this evening, then,” replied Lyman as he headed out the door. Lee cleaned up his area and shortly thereafter headed toward Building L’s main conference room.

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The guest room of the Foxx residence was quiet as the three remaining members of the Clique curled beneath their blankets for a night’s rest. Two, though, were finding sleep difficult. Cindy lay awake thinking and noticed Debbye fidgeting as she tried to sleep.

“Psst, Debs,” whispered Cindy. “What’s wrong? You’ve been restless for an hour now.”

The squirrel femme sighed, “Well, mostly that all of this,” she gestured at where they were, “just sunk in and it’s got me a bit bothered.”

“Me, too,” nodded the lop. “How’s about we talk it out? Say, in the kitchen where we won’t disturb Susan?”

“Suits me.”

Slipping out of the room, they walked quietly through the living room to avoid waking Chris. They were nearly through it when he let out an anguished cry of “Sabrina!” and wept on his pillow. “Poor guy,” muttered Cindy, “at least Clarence and Lee will be here soon. Sabrina won’t be coming back.”

Debbye nodded, “That’s one of the things I’ve been thinking about. This whole situation got me thinking of one of those old country songs Lee likes, *“If Tomorrow Never Comes”*. We talked a bit before I left and we’re both aware of how the other feels, but still want to be certain we tell each other more how much we love one another.”

Her friend nodded, “That’s one thing I’ve been thinking of. I’m going to talk with Clarence after the services; we need to do something similar.” Taking a seat at the kitchen table, she waited for the squirrel to do the same and then continued, “It feels like there’s a void where a friend used to be and seeing her laid out like that just brought it home to me that I won’t see her again.”

Debbye nodded, “At least not in this life. I’ll be looking forward to catching up in the next. Besides, as long as she’s in our memories, she’ll never be completely gone.”

The lop femme brightened, “There is that. But it’s such a wait and it hurts.”

“Doesn’t it, though? Still, I’m going to enjoy life so that I’ve got a lot to tell her when I get there.”

Her friend nodded, “That sounds good to me, too. Thanks, Debs, that helps.”

The young squirrel suddenly giggled, "That does kinda concern the other reason I had trouble getting to sleep. Well, I keep listening for that soft purr Lee makes when he's asleep. I've always found it quite soothing."

Cindy laughed softly, "Yeah, it feels funny sleeping without Clarence next to me. But surely Lee's been gone on trips before."

"He has, but I've always been in the familiar sounds of our place when he was gone. This just feels 'off'. I'll be glad when he gets here; I need his solid presence and I can't wait to feel his arms around me again."

"Yeah, I do miss being covered by that luscious tail of Clarence's; it makes me feel all warm, cherished, and protected"

"Good thing they'll be here before too long," said Debbye with a dreamy look. "We'll get a motel room to give Chris some breathing room."

"Of course; that's the only reason," Cindy replied with a wink.

"Well, maybe not the only one. I think we're both going to be very demonstrative, like I said."

The rabbit softly laughed, "That makes two of us. You sure you two don't have some rabbit in your family somewhere? Now, since we've both talked this out, feel like trying to sleep again?"

"Yeah, let's go. Oh, no rabbit blood, it's just that Lee more than lives up to the reputation tomcats have and," here she blushed a bit through her fur, "I can't help but respond just as ardently to him."

Cindy gave a quiet snort of amusement as both stood.

Carefully moving through the living room, past the now quiet fox, they returned to the guest room. Lying back down, the squirrel femme responded, "Thanks for helping me talk through things, I can sleep now. G'night."

"G'night, Debs."

As he saw Clarence turn into the driveway, Lee waved and inquired if the skunk or his son needed to use the facilities before departing. Getting a negative answer, Lee set the house security system; then shut & locked the front door. Picking up his bags, the feline padded out to where the skunk had stopped. "Thanks," he offered as they loaded his luggage in the trunk, "I'd really have hated to take an extra car there.' He smiled, "I really want to ride back with Debbye."

"No problem," replied his friend. "I'm looking forward to having Cindy ride back with us and I can use the company going over there. Figure to change places about half-way?"

"Fine by me. You want to drive first since you're already in the seat?"

"Why not. Besides, I need someone to talk some things over with."

"Oh? Such as?"

"Well, before Cindy and I came to know and love each other, I had something of a crush on Sabrina and, well, this resurrected feelings I thought were dead and gone. I'm trying to figure out how to deal with them.'

The cat nodded, "I can see where that could be troubling. Well, I'll be glad to offer a ready ear and, I hope, some helpful advice; after all, what are friends for?"

"Thanks, Lee. That'll be a help. I want to get this worked out so I don't spoil things for anyone else."

“De nada; amigo. As I said, you’re a friend and friends help friends.”

As they pulled into their planned rest break in Ashland, OH, Clarence sighed in relief, “I’m glad that part’s over. I’ve never seen the roads so bad.”

His feline passenger nodded, “I’ll believe you, though I’ve not been here near as long. Still, you did a good job of driving; we never once went out of control or got into trouble.” He looked the skunk over, “It looks like it took a good deal out of you, though. How about I take over driving from here?”

The skunk shut off the car and leaned back in the driver’s seat to stretch. “It was more luck than skill, Lee. They’ve kept the Interstate in reasonable condition for this weather.” He grimaced, “I am tired, though. I’ll take you up on that offer; though I’m afraid you’ll get the ‘fun drive’ after we get off the Interstate.”

“Well, that’s okay with me. I’m rested and,” he grinned, “I’m going to be interested in seeing if that driving school was worth the money to put Debbye and me through it.”

“I remember Cindy saying something about it at the time. How’d you get Debbye to go along?”

“Well, I sold it as a preventive measure to help us have a better chance if things went wrong; the discount on our insurance didn’t hurt there. But her first day really sold her; by the end of the week, she was showing some of the fastest times in the class.”

“Maybe I should see if Cindy would be interested; it sounds like you two had fun.”

“We did. ‘Sides, what more can you want from a vacation than something that’s totally different, challenging, and fun? That it had a practical benefit was just ‘gravy’.”

“I’ll sure think about it.” The skunk looked around, “Now I think we’d better find someplace to refresh and get going. I don’t want to be late for the service.”

“Nor do I, amigo. Nor do I.”

Some several minutes later, having refreshed themselves and stretched, the trio climbed back in the car, the two males swapping seats, and headed back out onto the road. The effort of his part of the drive had its effect on the skunk and he had difficulty keeping up a conversation with Lee. The steady hum of the road as they passed through a cleared area lulled him and he soon fell asleep. Lee glanced over at the sleeping skunk and smiled softly at the tired expression. *I’ve some idea, my friend, what you’re going through and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.*

Concentrating on his driving, the cat was soon occupied with increased traffic as they headed toward Akron. Consequently, he was shocked to full alertness when the skunk let out an anguished cry and started upright. Looking over, he asked, “You okay?”

Panting a bit as his system returned to normal, Clarence replied shakily, “Yeah. Or I will be in a minute.”

“Having a bad dream?”

The skunk’s groan was sufficient answer for the feline. Taking a soothing tone, he continued, “Just relax. Try to center yourself and breathe normally.”

After a bit to regain his composure, Clarence started to speak as tears welled in his eyes. “God, that was awful. It was...Sabrina! God, what she must have gone through...” Tears fell as he continued, “It was horrible. Oh, Sabrina...” He buried his face in his paws as tears flowed freely.

"I understand," responded the cat. "I've been through that a few times myself."

"Oh?"

"Well, she was a good friend, not some one I had a crush on; though we both knew the potential was there."

The skunk relaxed back in his seat as he regained his composure and wiped his eyes and muzzle. "When was this? Does Debbye know or should I keep quiet?"

Lee softly laughed, "She knows. What happened inspired me to certain behaviors and I had to tell her what happened in order to explain why I don't do some things."

"Ah, please tell me more."

"The femme's name was Becky, she was a lynx whose family came to Texas from Louisiana before she was born. We'd known each other as friends in high school and before, since we both attended the same church, and were starting to find that there was more between us than friendship. We both decided to attend the same college and enjoyed going out on weekends; still just as friends. The spring of our freshman year, she went home for a weekend and stayed rather later than she'd planned; since she had an 8 AM class, she went ahead and drove back to school very late that Sunday night. Now, the fastest route between our hometown and college involved a number of secondary roads, Texas calls them 'Farm to Market' roads, and she fell asleep barreling down one. Her car veered off the road, hit the edge of a culvert, and flipped over, crushing the roof. By the time anyone else came along and called for help, she was dead. I think I was as devastated as her family was.'

"That's so sad, Lee. Thank you for sharing that; it's a comfort to know I'm not the only one who knows these feelings. On the other paw, though, it's saddening to know that someone else has suffered this kind of pain."

"I'm sure neither of us is the first nor the last to experience such pain. But it does diminish with time."

"So I see. I'm glad I've got you to talk to." He hesitated, "Mind telling me what behavior you had to explain to Debbye?"

"Not at all. Ever since that accident, I've been real careful not to drive when I was really tired or to schedule a long drive for when I know I'll be tired. It's been a bother at times; I had to turn down an invitation to be best male at a good friend's wedding because it would've required an all-night drive. Debbye wondered about that and I had to explain why I was so cautious there. She agreed she didn't want to take that chance on losing me."

The skunk nodded, "I can appreciate that."

The feline noticed a sign ahead and looked at his watch. "Tell you what, we're making good time and have plenty of 'cushion'. Why don't we stop at that truck stop and talk about what's bothering you over a cup of coffee? Without having to watch the road, I can give you my full attention."

His friend nodded. "I think I'd like that; I'd like to get this resolved before we get there. Both she and Cindy deserve that effort."

With Rodney listening to his portable player and reading a book while he sipped a cola, Lee relaxed back with his cup of coffee and considered the young skunk's father across the booth. *Well, he's calmed down nicely; that's good. Now let's see if I can help him with this problem.* Setting the cup down, the cat leaned back. "Okay, we're both relaxed now; let's go over what's bothering you."

Clarence took a deep breath and started, "Well, you know that I had a crush on Sabrina before Cindy and I got to know each other. I thought that'd dropped to just friendship, but..."

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Lee nodded as they finished talking. "I think you've got it pretty well worked out now. Just remember that, when it's all said and done, what you have with Cindy far outweighs any 'might have been'."

"Thanks, Lee. That does help put things in perspective."

"De nada, amigo," replied the cat as he clasp the skunk's shoulder. Glancing at his watch, he continued, "Now let's see if we can make good time while we've still got the interstate. I'd like to have time to take care of some things before the service."

"Yeah, let's. After this discussion I find I want to see Cindy and hold her close while we talk."

The cat smiled as they entered the car. *Yes, that talk definitely helped him. Funny, but it makes me want Debbye just as intensely.* With care, they got back on their way.

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Clarence relaxed as they pulled into the funeral home parking lot, as near the door as possible. "Well, that drive went rather better than I was afraid it would."

"Yeah, they did a good job of clearing the road from the Interstate."

"At least it gave us time to get motel rooms and get ready for the service."

The cat nodded as he opened the trunk and removed what luggage he'd not left in the motel room. Padding over to Debbye's car, he popped open the trunk and found that she'd already loaded her luggage in. *Yet another reason I love her, we understand each other so well.* Loading his items into the trunk, the feline followed his traveling companions to the front door.

A somber and worn Chris Foxx met them at the door of the viewing room. "Thanks, guys; I really appreciate your being here."

Clarence just shook his paw. "No way I could've stayed away and lived with myself."

With the simple directness of the young, Rodney slipped past the adults and ran to hug his friend Alan, clearly seeing his hurt. The young todd hugged back and these simple acts brought a lump to the throat of every fur present.

Lee gave the fox a hug of support. "Like I'd ignore a friend in need? Seriously, I come bearing sympathies and condolences from several folk who couldn't make it, especially the Squirrels and the Aquilaferis."

As he stepped back, Chris nodded. "That would be Debbye's folks and the fur who drove back with you for our wedding, right?"

"Right, and his wife, too." Moving on inside, Lee turned to Endora and clasped her paw. "George and Linda Squirrel asked me to especially express their sympathies and condolences to you; the Clique was over there often enough that they felt this quite strongly. They also send their profuse apologies for not making it here themselves. This weather has George overloaded with work and it's left Linda running the office short-pawed."

"Thank you, Lee. I appreciate their consideration, but I'd hardly expected them to be able to get away."

"Be that as it may, they both want you and Tabitha over for dinner when you get back. They care a lot about their friends."

"We'll do that. Thanks again."

“De nada, my pleasure.”

Turning to the third fur to greet him, the feline embraced his sweetheart in a fierce hug and kissed her passionately. “It’s only been a few days, but I really missed you.”

“Same here, love. Not, of course, that I could ever know that from your actions.”

Lee wiped a tear from her eye. “Hard time adjusting?”

His wife nodded. “But I know I’ll see her again and that’s a comfort.” Bending close, she whispered, “I do want to talk with you on the way to the reception, this has made me think about us.”

The cat nodded. “I’ve been doing that, too. Nothing like getting slapped in the face with mortality to make you stop and think.”

Further discussion was cut short by the announcement that the service was about to begin and that everyone should take their seats.

As the service progressed, Lee found himself quietly shedding a few tears, to Debbye’s more open sobs, and he raised his free paw to wipe his eyes while the other tightly held one of Debbye’s paws. Like nearly every other fur there, he was taken by surprise by the sweet contralto singing *Amazing Grace*; his ears pivoting to locate the source and noting, with surprise, that Zig-Zag was the singer. *I never knew she could sing like that! How appropriate a song, in so many ways.* As other furs joined in, he added his purring baritone to the chorus while Debbye sang in her clear soprano. As the song ended, his sweetheart turned and buried her face against his chest, hugging him tightly as the reverend gave the benediction and comforted the family. As the rest of the Clique moved to the casket to pay their final respects, the squirrel femme broke away to join them and Amy in placing white roses in the casket with their dear friend. As the moments stretched, Thomas, Josh, Clarence, and Lee looked at each other and, in agreement, they stepped up one by one to ease their respective wives away and allow the family to finish. Standing in the door watching, neither of the Evanses could restrain a sob as Chris made his last, tearful goodbye and stood with Endora as the casket was closed and wheeled out. The couple followed the others out and without a word climbed into the Crown Victoria for the procession to the burial.

As they returned to the Foxx residence for the reception, Debbye turned toward her husband in the passenger seat. “Sweetheart, I don’t know what you planned, but I’ve been thinking; let’s get ourselves a room and not impose on Chris.” She blushed through her fur, “I’ve other reasons too, as I imagine you can guess.”

“Actually, I’m ahead of you.” Replied the cat with a small smile. “We stopped at a motel on the way in and each got a room so we could change and with the idea of having some privacy with our wives. We can go there right after the reception. Oh, and don’t worry, Clarence and I were careful to get well-separated rooms so that we won’t ‘bother’ each other.”

His wife gave a knowing laugh, “I figured you’d miss me as much as I’ve missed you. It’s just not the same laying there in a different place without you. I’ve already got my luggage in the car; I loaded it after dressing for the service.”

“I know; what I didn’t leave in the motel room is sitting with it,” answered the feline.

The squirrel femme reached out and squeezed his thigh. The cat replied by raising the paw to his muzzle and softly kissing it in promise. “Mmm, I never tire of kissing you.”

“Just like I never cease to enjoy your attentions, love.”

Pulling into a parking space as near the Foxx house as possible, they were amused to see Rodney and Alan run into the house while Clarence and Cindy sat in their car and talked quite animatedly. “I know she wanted to talk to him,” mused the squirrel, “but that looks like he was just as anxious.”

“He is. I think both of them have some things to tell the other and, given what we talked about on the drive here, both are realizing the same thing we have. Clarence managed to work out the conflicting feelings this situation has brought out and it’s deepened his feelings for Cindy.”

“She’s feeling the same.” The squirrel femme gave a soft chuckle, “You’re corrupting me, love. Now I’m wondering which room will hear more tonight, ours or theirs?”

The cat laughed softly, “With Rodney there, dear heart, most likely ours. But does it matter? The important thing is you and I love each other something fierce and those two love each other just as strongly. I don’t think they quite realized how strongly until now.”

Debbye nodded, “All to the good, certainly.” As the other couple came to a conclusion and embraced for a passionate kiss, Debbye turned to Lee with a certain light in her eyes and was swept into an equally passionate embrace and kiss.

Breaking apart after an enjoyable span of time, the cat whispered, “Let’s not stay here too long. I want to have you all to myself.”

“Suits me fine,” replied his mate.

As the couple in the car broke their clinch, never noticing the Evanses regard and approval, the cat and squirrel turned and headed on into the house.

The reception was animated without being noisy as folks dropped by for a while, chatted, and then left for other venues. As the sun set, Thomas looked around and then padded over to Endora. “Have you seen Chris? I’ve looked all over and haven’t found him.”

The older skunk femme shook her head. “Come to think of it, I haven’t either.” She turned and waved Dexter and Angel Collie over. “Have either of you seen Chris? We can’t seem to find him.”

Neither had and, after a quick but quiet check through the house, they realized that no one had seen Chris since the burial. “I wonder,” mused Dexter. “Do you suppose he’s still there? The way he loved her, I can see him doing that.”

“Why don’t we go see?” Asked Thomas. “We can bring him home if he is there; he’s got to be thoroughly frozen by this time.”

“Good idea!”

“We’ll get some hot coffee ready,” added Angel.

The two males grabbed their coats and, with apologies that they “needed to run a little errand”; they headed for the cemetery. When they returned, they had a near-foxsicle with them. Sitting him down, Endora brought a blanket as Angel brought a large cup of coffee, fixed as he liked it. As he sipped slowly, letting it warm him, Chris looked around. *Of all of our friends, these are the closest.* The rest of the Clique and their guys, Amy and Thomas, Dexter and Angel, Endora, and Tabitha sat in a circle around the room chatting quietly. Finally Amy stood up. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I want to celebrate Sabrina’s life tonight. I’d like to go around the room and have each of you tell one of your favorite stories about her.” Looking to Chris’ left, she continued, “Cindy, why don’t you start and we’ll go around and finish with Chris.”

The lop-eared rabbit paused a moment and then started, “I’m still not quite certain how I ended up part of the Clique, but it started when I first met Sabrina...” The stories told ran the gamut from happy to thoughtful to amusing

to sobering. When his time came, Lee brought a bit of a blush to Amy's fur as he talked about the grilling he got from Sabrina and Amy the first time he picked up Debbye at their apartment.

When everyone had finished, even a warmed up Chris was smiling. "Thank you, thank you all very much," he said. "It's good to know just how warmly she lives on in so many memories. I really appreciate all of you being here and helping out this way." This was followed by a prodigious yawn. "Uh-oh, I think my body's telling me that I need to get some rest. I hate to cut this short, but I suddenly find myself fighting to stay awake. Can we pick this up tomorrow?"

"Sure!" "No problem!" "We'll be glad to." "Suits us fine." "Call us when you're ready."

Cindy looked around, "Where's Rodney?"

"Last I saw he was with Alan," answered Tabitha. "I'll go see if he's still there." Moments later the skunk femme was back and motioned the other adults to very quietly follow her down the hall to Alan's room. Looking in, they saw the two young males asleep together, back to back.

After they tiptoed back to where they'd been talking, Endora turned to Clarence and Cindy, "They look so peaceful there, why don't you let Rodney stay the night? I'm sure Alan would appreciate the company." Turning to her remaining daughter, she commented, "You can share the bed with me tonight, these two deserve their peace."

The couple looked at each other and nodded, a certain knowing, almost carnal, gleam in both pairs of eyes. Turning to Endora, the male skunk replied, "We're cool with it. We'll be coming back tomorrow to help, anyway, so he's fine here."

With that the five couples said their goodbyes, collected their coats, and departed. Chris turned to Endora, he asked, "Alan looked more relaxed when we saw him sleeping just now, didn't he?"

"He did," answered the femme with a sad smile, "and you should be asleep like that, too. Tabitha and I will clean up and get ourselves to bed. You just go take care of yourself; you've carried an awful lot the last few days."

"Thanks, Mom. I think I can just barely make up the couch."

Scant minutes later, the fox was between the sheets and dead to the world.

Carrying the last of their luggage in, Lee hung a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the outer knob and shut and locked the door. "That's the last of it," he announced as he slipped his coat off and hung it carefully. "Take yours?"

"Sure, here," replied his sweetheart as she padded up and passed it to him. As he turned from hanging it, she stepped close and embraced him. "Have I told you how handsome you looked in that coat and tie?"

In response, the feline returned her embrace and nuzzled her headfur, snuggling her close to him. "Mmm, you hadn't lately, but I always enjoy compliments from a beautiful femme."

Stepping back, the squirrel gave a slow smile. "I think, though, that you look uncomfortable in that tie, let me help you out of it." Reaching up, she slid the tie open and undid the Windsor knot, letting the ends of the tie hang free as her paws went after the shirt buttons. It didn't take the cat long to catch on and his paws were soon returning the favor and they embraced and kissed passionately; lost in their own private world and letting the rest fade away.