

From The Wings
by Evan "Cateagle" Mayerle

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In addition to those characters many of us know and care about from ["Sabrina - Online"](#), ["Sabrina, the Story"](#), and ["ZZ Studios"](#), the following characters appear:

All New Characters

Lee Paul Evans

Age: 25 Sex: Male Species: Maine Coon Cat (brown tabby markings)

Physical description: approx. 5' 11", large boned, trim & in good physical shape; dark brown/brown striped coat with a ringed bushy tail with tawny fur from the underside of his muzzle down his front. He wears thin metal framed bifocals and is generally found wearing pocketed shirts, even casually, with at least one pen or pencil in the pocket (at work, it's generally one automatic pencil and two pens (black & red ink)).

General description:

A well-mannered gentlefur (example set & taught by father in word and deed, reinforced by the standards of his alma mater), he is the oldest of 3 brothers/1 sister from a stable family (sister is twin, Marilee Marie). Both parents have degrees in chemistry; his father works full time as a research chemist while his mother "keeps her paw in" by working part time at home doing translations for professional journals. Lee is easy-going and given more to listening than talking; he sometimes comes across as being shy but isn't. This cat is sharp (both SAT & GRE scores qualify him for Mensa), reasonably talented, and capable of digging in and working things through when necessary (Eagle Scout); he's self-confident but not cocky with a realistic sense of his strengths and weaknesses. A voracious reader on a variety of subjects (remembers "Chance favors the inquiring mind"), his special interests are aviation history, sf, and techno-thrillers. From grammar school through high school, Lee took piano lessons (primarily classical) and did well; he has an electric piano to keep his paw in and because he enjoys it. His favorite sports include racquetball, swimming, target-shooting, and bowling.

Growing up with his father's science fiction library, he developed a taste for engineering that then focused on aeronautical engineering; trying to understand what was going on in the industry led him to discover an interest in aviation history, not just what happened, but the ideas and concepts that were around.

Though he's easy-going, he can get impatient at times and he doesn't suffer fools too gladly at the best of times. Patient with a high "flash point", he can work up quite a "mad" but gets over it quickly.

He enjoys being with people, though not a "party animal", but can be quite comfortable by himself or with a few friends. With sensitive hearing, his music tastes are classical & instrumental with some easy listening.

Car: Contour SE (graduation present) with 5-speed stick; champagne exterior with tasteful antique gold pinstriping, dark-gold tinted windows, and a gray leather interior. Well maintained, the car has been "massaged" with useful parts from a salvaged Contour SVT and a judicious selection of aftermarket parts to enhance both performance and handling. The car is intentionally a "Q-ship" that doesn't attract attention (especially the police on those occasions when he has to "push" it).

Lyman Augustus Aquilaferi

Age: 25 Sex: Male Species: Wolf / Red Fox mix

Physical description: approx. 5' 8", medium boned & in good physical shape; somewhat unique coloring combining his father's dark gray coloring with his mother's red fox coloring; his physical features are also something of a blend between wolf and fox shapes (especially noticeable in a muzzle that's a blend of the two shapes) (n.b. the ladies seem to find this somewhat exotic). He wears contacts most of the time and, like Lee, favors pocketed shirts, though his generally have a six-inch scale in addition to pen/pencil.

General description: another well-mannered gentlefur, though in Lyman's case the example in word & deed was backed by a father who didn't (and doesn't) hesitate to call him down. Although he enjoys being with people, he's not given to partying or clubbing, preferring to be by himself or with a few friends. Though he tends to keep his own counsel, Lyman is always willing to lend a shoulder or ear to a friend that needs help and will, if asked, do what he can to provide helpful advice. Lyman tries to stay out of arguments as he can get quite passionate when engaged in them. Both of his parents are sharp and he inherited this as well as his father's "feel" for how things can go together.

Sports: racquetball ("killer" games with Lee), bicycling, swimming, target shooting

A voracious reader like Lee, Lyman especially enjoys aviation history, sf & f, and "adventure fiction" (his secret "vice" is to acquire the complete works of Mickey Spillane and Donald Hamilton)

Car: "Monster Miata" custom coupe, converted from a roadster, with a 6.3 liter V-8 that he and his dad built up themselves using a kit of that name from Panache of San Marcos, CA. With a custom front end with fixed "bug-eye" headlights, it's finished in British Racing Green with a tan interior.

Lyman's father is a long-term air force maintenance officer (a "mustang", he started as an enlisted man) whose wolf family came from the Lombardy region of Italy, north of Milan, in the late 1800's. In his first post of his first re-enlistment, Lyman's father was posted to a base in the UK where, at a welcoming party, he met a comely young red fox vixen and the rest is history (he did have to behave himself, though, her father was the RAF base commander: clearly, Lyman's father had taste). Growing up an "air force brat", Lyman moved enough that he learned to make friends easily, but never had any really close one. Exposure to aircraft gave him an interest in aviation

history and chaperoned visits to his father's different postings gave him an appreciation for the needs of the people who "keep 'em flying."

Lyman has an eclectic taste in music, from having lived in a variety of places, but his special tastes are Scottish / Celtic and country & western (go figure!).

The Two as a Team

Both Lee and Lyman are currently employed at an aircraft plant at the Columbus airport and are assigned to the "Special Engineering Team" (the youngest members of this trouble-shooting team), working on both commercial and military aircraft. As a result, both of them hold fairly high & stringent security clearances.

The two met during freshman orientation at Texas A&M, found they had similar majors, interests, & tastes, and agreed to room together. (Those interested in astrology should note that they were born only two weeks apart and share the same sign) They soon became best friends and their freshman design project showed nicely complementary skills. By the time their junior projects arrived, they were a good strong team. In the meantime, they'd visited each others home and been accepted into the other's family; as a consequence, Lee gained a knowledge of Italian and Italian cooking that was to serve him well between his junior & senior years in college. Both had applied to an exchange program that would let them work overseas; Lyman, with his ancestry, had asked for Italy, while Lee had asked for "somewhere in Europe". Bureaucracies being what they are, Lee spent his summer in Italy, and got to meet some of Lyman's extended family while Lyman spent his summer in England and got to know his mother's family better. Back for their senior year, the outside reviewers who critiqued their senior team project were sufficiently impressed that they got a number of job offers which they evaluated on the basis of keeping a winning team together. Both are now taking graduate courses at Ohio State but, since their job can have sudden overtime requirements, they are only taking one course per semester.

Rather nerdish when they started college, a few young ladies each helped refine their styles and tastes; direct feed back from Marilee Marie Evans (Lee's twin sister), who was also attending their alma mater, greatly assisted in this.

At college, their room was considered an anchor for the quiet end of the dorm, not just because they were quiet and not given to horseplay, but also because, on those times they became engaged, they tended to give decidedly better than they got.

Currently both are dating occasionally, but have no real steady girlfriends (at least, not until Lee met Debbye). Each rents a two-bedroom apartment, in the same complex, with the second bedroom set up as an office/den/library and they carpool to work whenever possible.

Shortly after they moved to Columbus, they found Trattoria Salvatore and their ability to speak the language, their appreciation for good Italian food, and their

general good natures got them accepted as "part of the family" by the staff and owner of this establishment.

Expanded Description of Existing Character

(Derives from Chris Foxx's Writings on her, both on his website and in his Live Journal, and private conversations)

Debbye Jana Squirrel

Age: 19 Sex: Female Species: Brown/Red Squirrel cross

Physical description: approx. 5' 6" and 125 lbs., gray eyes, a shapely young femme with a noticeable but not over-endowed bust (38C), her main fur is a dark russet color with a beige patch from her lower face and muzzle down her front and back out along the underside of her tail. Her auburn headfur is worn in a shoulder-length bob.

The middle daughter of George Leland and Linda Jane Squirrel *nee*' Beachey; her sisters are Georgia Lynn (25) and Melissa Anne (17). Her older sister has a BS in Chemistry with a minor in Criminal Justice from Ohio State and works in the forensics lab of a government agency while her younger sister is a senior in the local high school.

Debbye's Parents

George & Linda Squirrel

George & Linda Squirrel are both in their mid-forties and are both employed professionals. George is employed by the City of Columbus while Linda is the office manager for one of the state government offices.

Debbye is the middle child of three and received her share of love & encouragement, along with loving discipline, as a child; this plus having to share with her older and younger sibs has shaped her. The results, in Debbye, vindicate her parents' efforts. The effects of being the middle child were also mitigated by the presence of her older cousin for support and refuge on occasion.

George is a typical father in that he still somewhat sees his daughters as his "little girls", so the inevitable evidence that Debbye is becoming a mature adult jars him, though not as much as the same situation did with Georgia (though more than it will with Melissa). He is, however, intelligent enough to realize that polite suggestions will work far better than telling his daughters what to do and expecting obedience. For her part, Linda recognizes that Debbye has grown into an intelligent, capable young lady with high standards & expectations and a mind of her own. Consequently, they have a close mother – daughter relationship that is in the process of becoming a friendship between two adults.

Coworkers at Columbus Aircraft Division

Joe McDonald

Age: 50 Sex: Male Species: Black Wolf

Manager / Team Leader – Special Engineering Team

Lt. Col., USMC (ret.) A specialist in aircraft maintenance/overhaul/modification, he has the challenging job of "riding herd" on the bunch of creative individuals that make up the Special Engineering Team. At the same time, he also serves to "protect" the team from the excesses of the normal management chain, especially since the team functions in a "paws off" mode similar to that pioneered by Lockheed's "Skunk Works"™. A native of Altoona, PA, he enjoys living comparatively "close to home" after his service career sent him to some "interesting" locales to "keep 'em flying".

Nick Ferox

Age: 38 Sex: Male Species: Madagascar Fossa

Shop Lead in support of the Special Engineering Team

A first-generation American, his parents left the area around Africa during the turmoil of the late-50's/early-60's. His strength, agility, and grace, especially for moving smoothly around high places, got him a position working in the "high bay" of the VAB (Vertical Assembly Building) at Kennedy Space Center; his brains and talent earned him promotions and offers of better positions. He currently oversees all manufacturing and assembly efforts for the SET.

Rava Purr

Age: 26 Sex: Female Species: Domestic Cat

Manufacturing Engineer – Systems; Special Engineering Team

B.S. in Mechanical Engineering and A&P (Airframe & Powerplant Mechanic) License from Embry-Riddle; paid for by working summers on a Nascar pit crew. She joined the team at roughly the same time that Lee and Lyman did and the three became good friends; sharing common interests in cars and target shooting. She also owns a garage in Columbus and does all the work on both guys' cars as well as various commissioned efforts. Naturally extroverted and outgoing, she has learned to control herself in the work environment but can be quite a shock for the unprepared outside of work. A native of Columbus, her father is retired from the Columbus PD and is now working to establish a security firm that he and some friends founded. Divorced after a short marriage to a fur who turned out to be a liar, cheat, and fraud (and those were his good points), she is not as trusting as she once was and is a whole lot more cautious.

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Chapter 1.1 - When Debbye and Lee Meet

Debbye stretched to reach the book on the top shelf. *If I can just pull it out a little farther, it'll drop and I can grab it; just a little farther...*

Just then she felt someone behind her and saw a pair of paws gently reach up and catch the book. "Please, miss, allow me to get this down for you. I'd hate to think of either you or the book being damaged, should you miss it." Requested a pleasant male voice.

Taken somewhat aback, she hesitated a minute, then "Please do, thank you."

The paws deftly slid the book into the firm grip of one and the fur behind her stepped to the side, handing her the book with a small bow. "Your book, fair lady."

A touch amused, Debbye accepted the book and examined her unexpected helper. He was a cat, somewhat taller than she, with a big frame, but a trim build. From what she could see, his fur had a nice brown/dark brown striped pattern, including a ringed bushy tail, and a tawny front. An attractive, but not handsome, face held bright blue eyes framed by thin metal frame glasses. *H-m-m, not bad at all*, she thought. "Why, thank you, Mr. ..."

"Evans, Ma'am; Lee Evans. It was my pleasure to help out an attractive lady."

"My name's Debbye, Debbye Squirrel. Are you always so formal Mr. Evans?"

"Well, dad raised me to be polite and well-mannered and my alma mater reinforced the idea. I don't claim to be a perfect gentlefur but I do," he chuckled, "try to keep my lapses to a minimum. Now, let me get my stuff", as he casually scooped up a stack of books and magazines, "and I'll help you carry your books to the register."

Chuckling at the sight of the stack, even larger than hers, she queried, "Let me guess, another inveterate reader?"

"Well, yes ma'am, you caught me."

"Please, Mr. Evans, I'm not used to the formality; just call me Debbye."

"Okay, as long as you call me 'Lee' instead of 'Mr. Evans'".

"Deal. Shall we head to the register?"

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Standing in line:

"May I offer a pretty lady a bit of refreshment afterwards?"

"My, you do have a way with flattery, Lee. Do you try this with all the girls?"

"Actually, no. I'm not a major partying type and I don't date that much. However, an attractive young lady who reads definitely catches my eye. I'm not trying to be forward, but I'd like to enjoy your company for a while longer."

"Well", she giggled, "put that way, I have to accept. The books seem to scare off most guys, especially when they see that the books aren't 'typical' for women to read."

"The more fools they; I should warn you, I'm not 'most guys'. I tend to go with my own tastes and intelligence is an attraction for me."

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Leaving the register, Lee politely insisted on carrying both their purchases, held the door for her, and offered her his arm as they strolled toward the food court. *A natural gentlerfur?* she wondered, *I didn't think they still existed!*

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Seated at a table (he had indeed held the chair for her), with the packages on nearby chairs, Debbye sat across from him.

Looking over her coffee, Debbye queried, "So tell me, Lee, what brings you to Columbus?"

"Well, I earned a Bachelor's in Aeronautical Engineering from Texas A&M and the aircraft company out at the airport here made my college roommate and myself very attractive offers, since we'd proven to be a very good team. We've been here four years now, both done well, and now we're both also working on our Master's degree in Engineering."

"Are you still roommates?"

"Nah, we both wanted and needed more room. We both rent in the same complex and carpool to work, but we've each got our own place."

"From Texas? Hmm, I think I see where some of your manners come from."

"I suppose so; never really gave it much thought. Now, tell me a bit about yourself, are you a Columbus native or did you move here from elsewhere?"

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"Well,..."

Debbye glanced at her watch and started, *Two hours!? We've been sitting here, talking, for two hours!?* Aloud she said "Yipe, look at the time, I can't believe it's that late!"

"Huh? I'll be! It just shows how pleasant company makes the time pass. I do hope I've not kept you from anything nor spoiled any plans."

"No, nothing like that. This was just a quiet Saturday. I would, though, like to get this material home."

"Understandable, I need to do the same. May I see you again?"

She started again, *He wants to see me again?* "Well, sure, I'd enjoy it; let me give you my phone number on this receipt."

Pulling out his wallet, he slipped a business card out and wrote on it, "And here's mine with my work number on the front."

Exchanging the pieces of paper, she looked at the front of the card. "Special Engineering Team? What's that?"

"Well," he answered with a touch of embarrassment, "it's a special troubleshooting team for when especially difficult engineering problems come up, either on a current project or with something that's already delivered and working. It's generally either a quiet job or lots of sudden intense effort to fix things quickly."

"Sounds important, especially for someone out of school for only a few years." She added smiling.

Lee blushed, but looked pleased at the compliment, then stood up and helped her out of her chair. "Now, please allow me to escort you to your car and carry these items for you. It would be a pleasure for me."

She blushed, giggled, and then admonished him, "You're spoiling me, you know."

"Undoubtedly, but it's still a pleasure."

"When could I see you again?"

"Depends, do you have any plans for the evening?"

"No, nothing definite."

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"Well, how about I pick you up in a couple hours and take you to dinner, say Italian?"

Again? Today? He wants to spend more time with me!? And my folks are out of town this weekend? Debbye's mind raced, "Sure, I'm a bit surprised after I've monopolized your afternoon, but I won't turn it down. Let me give my address."

As she reached for the slip with her telephone number, he held his paw up. "Hold it, you don't know me that well, yet, and fairness demands I give you the same advice I'd give my sister." He stopped for a moment and smiled at her. "Think of a comfortable neutral site, and have me meet you there. You've got my number, just leave a message as to when and where if I'm not home yet. I know I'm not going to try anything stupid, but I'd still prefer that you be careful, even with me, 'til we know each other better."

Slightly stunned, Debbye could see the rationale and agreed. She was, though, a touch surprised that any guy would play that straight. Of course, he did seem more substantial than most guys she'd met.

"Okay, I'll have to think of a place, but I'll let you know in a about an hour. Meanwhile, shall we go to my car?"

"But, of course." He casually picked up the packages and offered her his arm. Somehow, it didn't surprise her when he held the mall door for her nor that he held the car door for her after she'd unlocked it. She unlocked the passenger door and he gracefully set her purchases down in the footwell, locked the door, and gently closed it. "You take care, now, and I'll be waiting for your call."

Driving off, Debbye watched him in the rear view mirror as he walked off to his car; the view was very easy on the eyes. *And he's a gentlefur, too; a girl could get to enjoy this.* She sighed dreamily.

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Driving home, she pondered where to meet him, especially since her parents weren't home and she'd have to explain this later. Susan was busy & Cindy was at work, which left Amy & Sabrina's apartment as the next best choice. Not only would she be protected, she could get their impressions, too. Pulling over to a pay phone, she called their apartment.

"Sabrina? Debbye. Can I ask a favor of you guys?"

"Sure. What's wrong? You sound kind of funny."

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"I just had the most interesting experience. A guy helped me get a book from the upper shelf at the bookstore and then bought me a snack at the food court. We stayed and talked there for two hours, and he still wants to take me to dinner tonight."

"Great, but why did you call us?" asked Sabrina

"That's the real surprise. He was a perfect gentefur throughout the time we were together, yet he insisted that, for my safety, I pick a neutral spot I was comfortable with, rather than home, where he could pick me up. I'd feel safe with all of you there and I'd love to get your opinions of him. I mean, I didn't think there were that many gentefurs left; other than your guys; they seem scarce as unicorns!"

Sabrina replied dryly, "I remember. Chris proved you wrong, once, and this guy sounds like he might do it too."

Sabrina thought for a moment. "Sure, have him come by here at, say, 7 PM. Okay with the rest of you?"

"Sure." said Chris.

"Definitely." said Thomas.

"I've gotta see this guy before she goes out with him!" said a suddenly protective Amy.

"Thanks, you guys are the greatest." Debbye hung up and headed for home.

Debbye waited nervously at Sabrina and Amy's apartment,

"Relax, not even Amy's going to kill him immediately." chuckled Sabrina.

"Thanks, Sabrina; that just so relieves my mind." Debbye replied somewhat sarcastically.

"That's what friends are for." Sabrina added smiling widely.

Precisely at seven, there was a knock on the door. Chris and Thomas looked at each other, grinned big, and chorused, "Give him points for punctuality."

Chuckling, Debbye opened the door and found that Lee had indeed dressed for the occasion. A dark gold shirt with maroon trim was tucked into dark brown slacks. A wide western belt, with an eagle motif on the buckle,

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secured the slacks and a bolo tie with a similar motif closed his collar. Well-groomed footpaws completed the tasty picture.

"Lee, please come in. I'd like you to meet my cousin, one of my best friends, and their guys."

A quick grin, so as to say *You definitely took me seriously, didn't you?* and Lee walked in.

"Lee, this is my cousin, Amy"

"My pleasure" – with a polite kiss to the back of Amy's offered paw.

"Her fiancé, Thomas."

"Pleased to meet you." – with a firm pawshake.

"Sabrina, one of my best friends."

"Again, my pleasure." – with a polite kiss. Over his back, Sabrina & Amy raised eyebrows at each other *This guy didn't do things by halves!*

"And her fiancé, Chris."

"Pleased to meet you." – with another firm pawshake.

"Haven't I seen you around campus?" queried Thomas.

"If it's in the evening, probably. I'm working part-time on my Master's program in Aeronautical Engineering."

"And just what ...", started Amy, only to be interrupted by a howl from the bedroom.

"Darn, I thought I'd finally gotten him to sleep."

"I do hope my unfamiliar scent didn't disturb him," apologized Lee. "However, since he's awake, may I please be introduced to the young man I've heard so much about?"

A beaming Amy brought Timothy out. "Here's our pride and joy, Timothy Jacob Woolfe-Squirrel."

"May I hold him?"

"Certainly."

Lee carefully accepted Timothy and gently cradled him with one arm while entertaining him with and end of his bolo tie held in the other paw. Suddenly

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Lee stiffened, then sniffed. "I think that explains what woke your young gentlefur up; something obviously needs changing."

"Oh," exclaimed an embarrassed Amy, "hand him over and I'll take care of it."

"Ma'am, you obviously have to do this often. If you'll show me where to take him, I'll take care of this for you as a gesture of appreciation for having me here. Besides that way you can all cast your vote." He added with a smile.

Amy laughed. "Well, if you're certain you don't mind. Right this way." Amy showed Lee into the bedroom where they kept Timothy's things.

When Amy returned, all five looked at each other with somewhat bemused expressions.

A voice shortly was overheard, "I say, Master Timothy, you are obviously well fed." Everyone in the living room chuckled.

Not long thereafter, Lee returned and handed Timothy to Amy, "Here you are; clean, dry, and happy."

"Thank you, Mr. Evans. That was beyond the call of duty." Amy then got a slightly stern face on and then asked him, "Pardon me if this comes out too strong, but tell me, how does a bachelor know so much about dealing with babies? If there's something you're hiding, spill it now before Debbye gets hurt." Chris & Thomas winced at this. Debbye grimaced and shut her eyes.

"No mystery at all," chuckled Lee, "My twin sister would have done equally well. When you're the oldest kids, you get to help in all sorts of ways with your younger siblings and our folks made sure we could handle anything." Chris and Thomas gave a thumbs up sign to each other when they were sure no one was looking.

With chuckles all around, the tension perceptibly dropped. Amy chuckled, "You better grab this one, Debbye, he's already trained." Turning to Lee, "As for you, Mr. Evans, what is your interest in Debbye?"

A nonplussed Lee replied, "At this point, strictly an intelligent, attractive, and enjoyable dinner companion. Beyond that, we'll both have to see what happens. I must admit, though, that I find an intelligent young lady who's also a voracious reader to be rather attractive." – Debbye blushed.

After some further conversation, they left, with Lee agreeing to have Debbye back by 11PM.

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As they walked down the steps arm in arm, Debbye apologized still slightly embarrassed, "I'm sorry, you really didn't have to do that, especially when you knew it would raise suspicions."

"No problem. Amy looked like she could use a break and it's good to have people that care about you that much." He looked down at her and smiled. "Ah, here we are." and he held the door of a champagne Contour SE for her. Once she was properly seated, he went around to the driver's side, got in, made sure both seat belts were properly fastened, started the car, and smoothly pulled out into traffic.

"Isn't a 4-door sedan, even a sport model, a touch sedate for a young male fur?" Debbye asked with a chuckle.

"Probably, but I've always preferred an understated approach, based on demonstrated performance and ability, to a flashy appearance. I've worked on her and this car will easily hold her own. Besides," Lee chuckled, "any car that gets good marks from the enthusiast press, the consumer press, and the industry press has to be a pretty good package. Of course, there is another advantage, if I'm pushing things, this car doesn't attract attention like a flashy one would. Of course, those times I do go to a party with my friends, I'm always the designated driver, so the four doors come in handy."

With a raised eyebrow she cooed, "Oh, a man of thought & concern as well as action. I think I'm going to enjoy this dinner."

"By the way, you said we were going for Italian food, where are we going?" she asked.

"To the best Italian restaurant I've found here, Trattoria Salvatore."

As they entered the restaurant, Lee, as usual, held the door for her. *A girl could most definitely get used to this.*

When the hostess saw Lee, she immediately smiled. "*Buona sera, signore Evans. Uno, como sempre?*"

Lee smiled back & linked his arm with Debbye. "*No, due.*"

"Ah, molto bene. But we should speak in English so that the young lady will understand us. You evidence as good a taste in a young lady as you do in a restaurant."

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Lee chuckled as Debbye blushed.

"We're rather full at the moment, but for a good friend and customer as yourself, we would be pleased to seat you in the private dining room."

"Grazie, thank you very much; but I wouldn't dream of putting you to extra trouble."

"For you and your lady, no trouble; the same for a few other good people. Beyond them, it is an imposition for which a premium must be paid. Now, please come this way."

As they followed the hostess, Debbye noted that all the staff greeted him as an old friend and, fighting a blush, saw their obvious approval of her as his dinner companion.

Seated, with their drinks delivered and their orders taken, Debbye examined Lee with a puzzled expression, "Okay, give, how did a young fur manage to rate such service?"

"Well," he blushed, "nothing I'd consider that special but I guess a lot of little things add up to more than I thought. For starters, this is the best Italian restaurant in Columbus and I've been a regular here since shortly after I moved here. I've always been polite and friendly with the staff, especially since mom worked her way through college as a waitress; they were surprised that I speak Italian but everyone here seems to appreciate the effort. I suppose, though, that the final "icebreaker" was a couple of times I caught an undercharge and politely insisted that they fix it. They're used to vociferous complaints about overcharges, but having someone object, politely even, to an undercharge, was a new experience." Lee chuckled, "It even brought Salvatore himself out from the office. Since then they've treated me as family. I just didn't expect this, though," as he waved to indicate the private dining room.

Debbye thought for a moment, then, "Lee, you might be a bit more than you realize. I've met only a few guys that were as mannerly a gentlemur as you, but I can't remember being with another fur that would care that way about somebody undercharging him."

"Um, I wouldn't know. It's both nature and personal philosophy, so I couldn't easily change it, even if I wanted to." He said slightly puzzled.

"Don't! Please don't change it. Such concern and thoughtfulness is something special and I appreciate it in you."

"That's flattering. I hope it means you'll be willing to see me again."

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Debbye blushed, "I'd like that, you're one of the most interesting guys I've met in ages."

"I'll be looking forward to it, especially as I find you a most interesting & attractive lady."

Arrival of their food prevented further blushes as conversation ebbed while they did justice to the repast.

With a sigh, Lee wiped the last of the food from his muzzle using a napkin. "Delicious food and an enchanting companion; this is one bill I'll enjoy paying."

"Flatterer. Though I could say the same about the food and about my companion." She replied coyly.

The waitress stuck her head in to see if they needed anything else. "*// conto, per favore,*" replied Lee.

The waitress nodded and stepped away.

"Let me guess, you just asked for the bill."

"Correct. Actually, it was 'The bill, please.' "

The waitress returned with the bill and Lee examined it. "What's this discount for? I don't remember any specials."

"Ah, that's our gift to you, signore Evans. This is the first time you've brought a young lady here and we wanted to show our happiness and appreciation. Salvatore himself insisted on it."

At this, Debby started a bit.

"Well, I'm flattered and I reckon I can't object; but you must not complain if I base the tip on the full amount."

With that he handed over a platinum credit card; on the final charge slip he added a generous tip.

Walking arm in arm in the parking lot, Debbye stopped & turned to face him. "Okay, Lee, what was that all about? I know I'm not the first girl you've dated in Columbus, even if, as you say, you don't date often."

Chapter 1.1 - When Debbye and Lee Meet

"True, but you are the first one I've found interesting enough to want to bring here."

"Lee, that's sweet, and so-o-o-o flattering."

Debbye stretched up to kiss him on the cheek, but both of them felt something more. His arms went around her, pulling her close and nestling her head on his chest.

"Wow!"

"Likewise. I've never felt that before." She reached up and pulled his head down to kiss him fully on the mouth. *I gotta see if it happens again.*

"Oh! My!" The feeling hit stronger this time. Her arms curled around his neck and he pulled her closer. She could feel an unmistakable response from his body, but her body's equally strong response surprised her.

"Debbye, please. I wouldn't want to make a spectacle of you in the parking lot."

"Self control? After that? *You are something special!*"

He stopped a minute, "You wouldn't believe the control it's taking. I would prefer, though, to follow up in a somewhat less public location."

"Okay, we'll at least get to the car, but with a little change in style." Debbye slipped her arm around his waist. "I want you closer."

Chuckling, Lee curved his arm around Debbye and walked her to the car.

By rights, the kiss in the car should have caused a major meltdown due to intensity and duration, but it did leave both quite breathless.

Finally separating and buckling up, they pulled out of the parking lot.

"Debbye, we've got some time before I'm supposed to have you back at your cousin's. Any place you want to go?"

"No place I trust myself, yet. Could we just drive around?"

"I know what you mean. I'll just take a winding route back there."

Her paw resting on his, on the shift lever, they drove with a somewhat more serious and subdued conversation.

They pulled up in front of the apartment complex and he helped her out of the car. "It's almost 11, I'd best walk you to the door,"

Chapter 1.1 - When Debbye and Lee Meet

At the door she turned and kissed him fully once more. "Good night, sweet prince. Pleasant dreams."

"With you in them, my princess, they could be naught else. Shall I call you tomorrow afternoon?" he asked.

"Yes, please, I'd love to talk more."

"Then, adieu, fair lady." As he kissed her paw and headed back out. Lee drove home in a pleasantly bemused air.

Debbye knocked at the door and it opened to an anxious Amy and Sabrina. Seeing her dreamy look, they relaxed, smiled at each other, and eased Debbye inside and into a chair. Sabrina brought out some glasses of juice and they all sat down.

Amy started in, "Okay, the guys stepped out 'to run an errand' and give us some time to dish. And from the look on your face, it went more than just 'okay'; so, c'mon girl, give us the details."

"Ya, spill it Debbye!" added Sabrina.

Debbye blushed, "Well, for one thing, he was a complete gentlefur the entire time. No pawing, no forcing himself on me, just a very mannerly gentlefur. Responsible, too; he won't touch anything with alcohol if he's driving."

"So where'd he take you?"

"Trattoria Salvatore. The food there's excellent, he seems to know everyone there and he's treated like family. Since it was crowded, they put us in the private dining room at no extra charge."

"The private dining room?" interjected Sabrina.

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, that's where they put us when James Sheppard took ZigZag and me there for a business lunch. They don't usually do that; he must really rate with them."

"I think he does," she answered.

"You know," she admitted, "I found out afterwards that this was the first time he's ever taken a date there. Apparently I'm the first lady he's found worth taking there."

Chapter 1.1 - When Debbye and Lee Meet

Sabrina and Amy looked at each other with raised eyebrows and a common thought, *Oh, really?!!*"

"And your reaction was?"

"I kissed him on the cheek."

"Um-huh, and then?"

Debbye blushed again, "It was such a strong shock, I had to kiss him full to see if it happened again. Did it ever, even stronger; & I know it hit him just as strong. He didn't try anything, though; just said he didn't want to make me a public spectacle. After we got in the car, we kissed again before buckling up. It was hot enough that I know he's got self control if he didn't try anything then."

Amy and Sabrina exchanged knowing smiles.

"And then?" asked Amy.

"Well, he took a winding route back here and we talked as we drove."

"He didn't try to park somewhere and try something?" Amy asked slightly suspicious.

"Nope; a perfect gentlefur, like I said. We kissed goodnight at the door and he promised to call me tomorrow."

Sabrina chuckled, "You're clearly smitten, I recognize all the symptoms and it sounds like he's just as smitten. You can relax on one count, Thomas & Chris did a little discreet sleuthing on the 'net and Lee's told the straight truth; they both like him."

Amy interjected, "As for Sabrina and myself, we want you to be safe and happy. He sounds like he qualifies; I'd say 'Go for it.' " she said smiling again.

"As would I," echoed Sabrina.

Debbye got up and hugged them both. "Thank you both for your caring and concern."

They both blushed and Sabrina chuckled, "One final question, do you want to tell Susan & Cindy tomorrow or do you want to tell 'em on Monday?"

"Uh, if you'll give 'em the basics, I'll go along with a full interrogation on Monday."

At that, they all laughed. They were still laughing a few moments later when Thomas & Chris came through the door.

Chapter 1.1 - When Debbye and Lee Meet

"Well, it doesn't look like you had a bad evening," observed Chris.

"Anything but," replied a beaming Debbye. "And on that note, I'd best get myself home. Thanks, all of you."

After she left, Thomas cleared his throat; "I take it that her date went well then?"

Sabrina & Amy looked at each other, smiled, purred in chorus, "Ver-r-r-y well!", and stepped up to embrace their guys.

Outside, Debbye was driving home in a most excited state.

Chapter 1.2 - Intermission

—SUNDAY—
—That Morning—

Lee and Debbye both had pleasant dreams that night, but it could hardly be called sound sleep given the intense and explicit nature of the dreams.

Morning arrived, as it does, and both of them managed to attend the respective Sunday services [no, not the same church; coincidences like those happen only in really bad fiction and, occasionally, real life]. It may be said, though, that both were concentrating on something besides the sermon topics. Each survived, independently, through lunch and the return to their respective residences.

—2 PM—

Ring-g-g-g, Ring-g-g-g

"Squirrel residence"

"Good afternoon, fair princess. I hope you feel as good as I do today."

"Lee, I'm so glad to hear from you. I was beginning to wonder if last night was real or just part of a beautiful dream."

"Oh, 'twas real, though 'twas also a dream come true for me. I shan't shock you, though, by describing the dreams I did have."

Debbye blushed, "Er, mine were embarrassing enough, thank you."

Lee chuckled, "You're welcome. It's a pleasure knowing my feelings are reciprocated."

"As if you didn't already know." "So tell me, how did you become so fluent in Italian, the way you chatted with the hostess, you're quite at home speaking it."

"The short form of the story is that I learned Spanish growing up in Texas, took both Spanish & Latin in high school, learned conversational Italian from my college roommate and his family, and then polished it by working in Italy between my junior and senior years of college. I admit, though, my roommate was a bit ticked off by that trip."

"Because he didn't get to work overseas?"

"Worse," chuckled Lee. "We'd both put in for this exchange program; he'd requested 'Italy' so he could have a chance to meet the "old country" branch of

Chapter 1.2 - Intermission

his family while I'd just requested 'Europe'. Bureaucracies being what they are, he ended up in the UK with the chance to visit his mother's family while I ended up in Varese, Italy, not far from where his father's family came from. Lyman's father was pleased to give me a letter of introduction and I had a delightful time with these people."

"Uh-huh, and how many young signorinas did you get to know well?"

"Well, I became friends with a few of them, but nothing untoward. I was a guest in their country, so I behaved as I'd wish a guest to behave in this country. I even managed to make it to church every Sunday."

"Impressive, a world traveler and a real gentlefur."

"I'd hardly class myself as a world traveler, that's the only time I've ever really left the country."

"It's more than I've done. All I've done is go across to Canada a couple of times with my folks."

"It's nothing, I just got lucky."

"Oh? It sure sounds like you worked for that 'luck'."

"Perhaps, but I sure didn't work for the great luck of meeting you."

"Didn't you? How many other guys would've stopped and helped?"

"Put that way, maybe I did help luck along. Mind you, I can't see how a guy could fail to come to such a beautiful lady's aid."

"Flatterer."

"And a shameless one, at that,"

"The best kind," chuckled Debbye. "I hope you've got something more substantial, though, when you meet my folks."

"I'm prepared to cross that bridge when I come to it. For the nonce, my lady, I'd rather have some more 'no strings' dates with you; just to get to know each other better. If there is really something between us, we'll know our hearts and minds better for the wait."

"My prince, I don't wish to rush either and I'm relieved that you feel the same. Your patience is appreciated and your concern, as evidenced last night, doubly so. When might I see you again?"

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"I prefer to leave week nights alone, since crises at work and class work can make for long hours sometimes. This Friday night is taken, I'm an officer of the local modelers' group and I should be at the monthly meeting. So, are you available on Saturday?"

"Saturday? The College & Career group from church is having a "Back to School Day" then at the home of one of our leaders and I do enjoy those times. Would you be willing to come as my guest?"

"It sounds like it could be fun. What all is planned and how long does it run?"

"Well, it starts mid-morning and runs into the middle of the evening. During the day there's swimming, volleyball, and other games; then, after dark, there'll be some fellowship time. Lunch and dinner are generally grilled outdoors. So, again, will you come as my guest?"

"I'd be honored to; it sounds like an enjoyable day. The only hitch is that Lyman and I have a standing 'court date' on Saturday morning for racquetball. I could probably show up around noon or so."

"That'll be fine, I'll mail you a copy of the church bulletin with the address. Which reminds me, what is your address?"

"If you look in the phone book under the Oakhollow Apartments, that'll give you the basic address and I'm in number 603." "That takes care of Saturday, would you care to meet on Sunday afternoon, also?"

"If it was something that would show me another side of you; yes, I'd think I would."

"It would definitely be a different side of me. Lyman & I go target shooting every other Sunday and you're welcome to come with us and to either watch or participate as you choose. Besides, Lyman's my best and closest friend and I'd like you two to meet."

Debbye chuckled, "Well, that combination should definitely show me another side of you. When I was much younger, my father gave me basic gun safety training but I've not done any shooting for some years." "Tell me, how many of your secrets does Lyman know?"

"Most of them; why?"

"I can see I'm going to have to question him intently."

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"Good luck. He's had the same security training I have and he knows that I know his secrets equally well."

"Ah? Well, it was just a thought. I'd still like to meet him, though."

"You shall, you shall." "Now, we were talking favorite music and you said you played an instrument but not which one. Since I play too, I'd like to know."

"The flute. And you?"

"The piano. I had lessons from 4th grade through high school and I still keep my paw in. I wonder if we can find any duets for piano and flute?"

"Depending on how our situation goes, it might be fun to explore the possibilities."

And so the conversation ambled amiably for another hour or so.

—4PM—

Ring-g-g-g, Ring-g-g-g

Debbye grabbed the phone. He couldn't be calling again, he said he had errands to run.

"Squirrel residence."

"Debbye, it's your mother, is anything wrong? We tried to call last night and didn't get an answer. Then, earlier this afternoon, the phone was busy."

"Nothing's wrong, mom; honest. There just might be something quite right, though; it's been a very interesting weekend. I'd rather tell you and dad about it when you get home, though."

"Sounds serious. Do I need to start worrying now?"

"Mother! No, you don't have to. I'll see you guys when you get home."

"I'll be good darling. We'll see you about eight."

—Shortly after 8PM—

Debbye was waiting when her father escorted her mother through the door. *Still the gentlefur; I imagine Lee would do the same.*

"You two look radiant. That weekend off by yourselves seems to have had quite an effect."

Chapter 1.2 - Intermission

"That it did, sweetheart. Thanks for encouraging us to go." "Now," inquired her father, "what so affected your weekend?"

"Can we sit down and talk about it, all of us?"

"Sure, pumpkin." Mr. & Mrs. Squirrel sat together on the couch while Debby took the armchair across from them.

"Okay, darling, what was so interesting about this weekend?"

"Mom, Dad, I met the most wonderful guy last Saturday. He helped me at the bookstore in the mall & then took me for a snack at the food court, where we sat & talked for two hours. He not only wasn't bored after this, but he asked me out to dinner and I had a delightful time." "If you can believe it," Debby chuckled, "he reads even more than I do. A complete gentelgur, he's intelligent & thoughtful and I can't get him off my mind. He's so unlike the other guys I've dated."

"You had a strange boy pick you up at home?"

"No, mom, he didn't pick me up here and it was his idea, not mine. He said he knew he wasn't dangerous, but I didn't, yet, and he wanted me to be cautious by meeting him at a neutral site of my choosing. I checked with Amy & Sabrina and had him meet me at their apartment. It may have been a bit more than he expected since they, Thomas, & Chris all questioned him. Of course, he surprised them, too. He was holding Timothy when it became obvious that a changing was needed. He offered to help Amy by doing it and did a first rate job."

"And how did a single guy develop this expertise?"

"He's the oldest kid in his family, and got plenty of experience helping with his younger siblings. Amy thinks I should grab a guy that's already trained. Seriously, though, they all had good opinions of him."

"And what is this paragon's name?"

"His name is Lee Evans. He's an engineer at the aircraft plant out at the airport. Here's his card."

Debby handed Lee's card over to her father; he looked it over and passed it to her mother.

"And how old is he?"

Chapter 1.2 - Intermission

"Twenty-five"

"You said you can't get him off your mind. Just how serious are you about this young gentleafur?"

"We've only had one date, daddy, and we've agreed to see each other again, but nothing more than that. He's said that he is in no hurry and wants to take the time for us to get to know each other and see where events lead rather than just jumping into something extreme. You can relax, he's not asking for my paw or anything like that."

"In that case, darling, we'll trust your judgment. If matters start getting more serious, though, we'll want to meet him."

"Understood."

"Debbye, dear," queried her mother, "did he really insist on meeting you elsewhere for your safety?"

"He sure did, mom: he's a very careful fur. He seems to put an emphasis on actions, not just words."

"I like him already," chuckled Linda Squirrel and George just grinned.

"Now, you go ahead and get ready for tomorrow. Your father and I have things to do."

"Thanks, mom; I appreciate your support. Dad, I appreciate your concern and your trust. G'night, both of you."

—MONDAY—
—6:30AM—

Lee was waiting when Lyman pulled up and he hopped in for the drive to work.

"You're extremely chipper for a Monday. Have a better weekend than you expected?"

"Much better. Remember all the discussions we had on what we were looking for? Well, I found a gal that sure fits my 'parameters'. She's intelligent, fascinating, and as voracious a reader as I am. To top it off, she's gorgeous."

"Oh, that's all? You sound thoroughly enraptured. Now, as a firm believer in "Murphy", I gotta ask, what's the downside?"

Chapter 1.2 - Intermission

"Well, she's nineteen and there are some familial situations that will probably complicate things."

"Have you met her parents yet?"

"Nope, not yet. They were out of town this weekend. Besides, we're just dating right now; we want to get to know each other before we think about getting serious."

"I know you well enough to know you were careful. Still, *buono suerte*, my friend; you'll need it."

—Lunchtime—

Debbye rode with Sabrina to where the Clique was meeting for lunch. "Thanks for the lift, Sabrina. You, at least, have an idea how nervous I am."

"Why should you be nervous? He seems like a great guy. 'Sides, it's not like they'll completely dissect him."

"Sure they won't, but not for lack of trying." They both chuckled.

Once they were all seated with lunch, Susan looked over at Debbye. "We hear you had an interesting weekend, anything long term?"

"It's too early to tell, yet; we're going to just date for a while and get to know each other better before we even think about getting serious."

"So how did you two meet?" inquired Cindy.

"On Saturday he helped me at the bookstore in the mall & then bought me a snack; we talked for two hours over that snack. Then he asked me out again that evening and insisted that for my safety, I have him pick me up at a comfortable neutral spot of my choosing. I knew you were working, Cindy, and you were busy, Susan, so I called Sabrina and she & Amy agreed to my meeting him at their apartment. I even think," Debby chuckled, "that Amy was feeling rather protective."

"And the consensus of opinion, there was...?" purred Susan.

"Very positive, indeed," chuckled Sabrina. "First he arrives precisely on time, the very essence of punctuality. Then, he was every bit the perfect gentlefur, kissing the back of Amy's paws and mine when introduced and offering Chris and Thomas firm pawshakes. But the real surprise came when Timothy woke up, this guy asked to hold him & did it properly while keeping

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him entertained. When he realized why Timothy had awakened, he insisted on sparing Amy the trouble and did the changing & cleaning up by himself; a job he did quite well."

"And how did a bachelor learn such skills?" quizzed Susan. "Has he been hiding something or someone?"

"Nothing that dramatic," defended Debbye. "It seems that he and his twin sister are the oldest of four siblings and had the 'pleasure' of baby-sitting their younger siblings, including changing and cleaning up the youngest."

"After that," continued Sabrina, "things were pretty friendly. He promised to have Debbye back at 11pm and kept his word. Meanwhile, Chris & Thomas did a bit of sleuthing on the 'net and he comes up solid. All four of us have a pretty good opinion of him."

"That's good," grinned Cindy. "Now, what's his name and where does he work?"

"His name is Lee Evans and he's an engineer at the aircraft plant out at Port Columbus. He's twenty-five and has been there for four years."

"Nice," pressed Susan, "but how was the dinner date?"

"Fantastic!" bubbled Debbye. "He was a perfect gentlefur throughout and took me to an excellent Italian restaurant, Trattoria Salvatore. We had excellent service, it seems he's been a good customer since he moved here and is considered 'part of the family', and the food was delicious. What was surprising was to find that I'm the first girl he's ever found interesting enough to show her to his friends there."

"Do tell," Susan responded dryly. "And what was your response to this?"

Debbye blushed, "I kissed him on the cheek and the feeling was so strong that I had to kiss him fully to see if it happened again. Did it ever, and I know he felt it too."

"Ah-hah," exclaimed Susan, "and how did the rest of the evening go?"

Debbye's blush deepened. "We kissed, spectacularly, again, once we got in his car, then took a leisurely drive back to the apartment while talking over a lot of things. He gave me a goodnight kiss at the door that curled my toes and tail, then kissed my paw and wished me 'pleasant dreams'. Then, yesterday

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afternoon, we talked for another hour or so. He's not like the other guys I've dated and I can't get him off my mind."

"Smitten, clearly smitten," observed Susan. "Is there something going around, here? First Sabrina, then Cindy, and now you, Debbye. I'm starting to get a little worried about it hitting me."

"And is that so bad?" queried Cindy. "I know you've dated quite a portion of the eligible males in Columbus, but I'm finding, and I think Sabrina will agree, that finding one guy you care about and who cares about you has its own special aspects. What do you think, Debbye?"

"I don't know enough, yet. If things work out, I'll let you know."

Everyone chuckled and relaxed.

"So what does this paragon look like?" queried Susan.

Debbye replied, "To start with, he's a cat, a bit taller than I am, with blue eyes and thin-frame glasses. He appears to have a big build, but he obviously keeps in shape. He's got long fur with brown/dark brown stripes and a tawny patch starting under his muzzle and going down his chest." With a blush she added, "And, no, I don't know how far down it goes. Anyway, he's also got a long bushy tail that's ringed in the stripe colors. He dresses well, in coordinated colors that go with his markings."

"Anything to back up the physical impression?" asked Cindy.

"Well, he reads at least as much as I do," chuckled Debbye. "He seems fairly well informed and has his own thoughts on matters. From what talking we've done, he seems pretty sharp. Oh, I almost forgot, he also plays classical piano. We're talking about finding a duet for flute and piano."

"Sounds like quite a guy," said Susan somewhat wistfully.

"I sure think so," said Debbye. "This is the first guy that's been encouraged, not put off, by my reading habits. If things work out between us, I'll try to get a picture to show off."

"I'm sure we'll be looking forward to it," commented Cindy. "But," looking at her watch, "I think some of us need to get back to work."

And on that note The Clique went their separate ways.

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

—Saturday—

That morning, Debbye arrived early at the home where the "back-to-school" get-together was being held.

"Goodness, Debbye. What brings you here so early?" asked Mrs. Nash.

"Two matters, actually," answered the squirrel. "The first is a private one, a gentlefur friend will be joining me later; I just wanted to tell you privately so you wouldn't be surprised. I don't want anyone to know I invited him 'cause we're just getting acquainted and I don't want to start any gossiping. The second matter is simply that I wanted to help you with the setting up for today."

"I appreciate your consideration and help," replied Alisia. "I'll not say anything untoward when your friend shows up." With a serious look, she inquired, "So what's he like and how long have you known him?"

Debbye replied with a wistful smile, "Physically he's a cat, a bit taller than I am, with glasses and blue eyes. Beyond that, he's well read, intelligent, and seems to be of more substantial material than a lot of young male furs. I've only known him a week, but we both wish to know each other better."

The black bear chuckled, "It'll be interesting to see how he fares in this group." In a more serious tone she continued, "Just how serious are you about this gentlefur?"

"I'm not certain yet," blushed Debbye, "but I think it could become quite serious. That's why we're seeing each other in venues like this, so we can better know each other without a lot of pressures."

Her hostess nodded approvingly, "Your idea or his?"

"Both of ours, actually," smiled Debbye. "From the first he's been genuinely interested in my welfare and protection."

The lady replied with a smile, "He sounds like quite the young gentlefur for you. I'll be most interested in meeting him. Now," she continued, "shall we get to work?"

—The Noon Hour —

Wearing a one-piece swimsuit, Debbye closed her eyes and lay back in the chaise-lounge. *That was a good swim*, she thought, *and it feels so nice to let the sun warm me*. Hearing a noise behind her, she opened her eyes and turned her head.

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

"Your young gentlefur just turned up," her hostess announced in a whisper, "he'll be out in a few minutes after he changes clothes." With quite an amused expression, she continued, "He definitely is something different. He insisted on paying for whatever he consumed today."

Debbye chuckled, "Doesn't surprise me in the least. He's the only fur I've ever heard complain, politely mind you, when he was undercharged."

"Really?" responded the amused bear. "How interesting! Where did you find this rarity?"

Debbye smiled, "I didn't find him; he found me in a spot of difficulty and came to my aid. Everything else has flowed from there."

"Do tell?" smiled the woman. With a chuckle she continued, "It should be interesting to see the reaction of the others. You realize, don't you, that you'll break some hearts once it's plain he's with you?"

"Just dash some hopes," snorted Debbye. "I've led none of them on. Any hopes they have are only in their dreams, not something I've encouraged."

"I know, dear," soothed Mrs. Nash. "I've watched you; you've been honest but polite with them. Now," she continued, "I'd best introduce Mr. Evans to the group and then get the cooking going on the grill." With an amused glance, she chuckled, "I want a ringside seat."

After her hostess walked off, Debbye suddenly felt his presence. Looking up, she saw Lee quietly but confidently strolled into the backyard and looked around. No sooner had he appeared than their hostess was beside him. "People," she announced, "this is Lee Evans, he was invited to join us today and so please make him feel welcome."

"Hi, Lee." chorused much of the group.

"And hello to y'all, too," responded Lee. "It's a pleasure to be here. If y'all will give me a minute to set my stuff down, I'll be glad to join in."

Walking over to a clear spot next to Debbye, Lee bent over, with a twinkle in his eye that only she saw, and asked, "Fair lady, may I leave my 'stuff' here, next to you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Evans," replied a smiling Debbye with equally veiled amusement.

Placing his items on the ground, Lee looked around. "That looks like quite a volleyball game going on over there, care to join in?"

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

Debbye thought for a moment. *It'll be interesting to see how he plays with the others.* Aloud she answered, "My name is Debbye and I'd be glad to. If you'll lend me a paw?"

Lee extended his paw and she pulled herself up. On the way over she mentioned quietly, "I've not told anyone that I invited you; I didn't want to start any gossip."

"No problem," replied Lee smilingly, "I'll play along."

Lee was quickly drafted by one team as a player left for lunch. Shortly thereafter, to her chagrin, the other team drafted Debbye. Both teams were fairly matched and, though the action was fast, points were gained slowly. Lee and Debbye played directly opposite each other on a few occasions when rotation put them together at the net. By the end of the first game, Lee concluded, *She's good! I've seen lots of furs play poorer defense against "spikes" than what she's put up.*

Taking a drink of water between the games, Debbye considered the playing and noticed, *He's not a flashy, "big-play" player, but he almost always is where his team needs him.*

The next game played much as the previous one had with much action and slow scoring. For Debbye and Lee, now that they were familiar with each other's style, the confrontations at the net became skillful battles with no quarter given or expected.

After the second game, a halt was called so that the players could grab a late lunch. Lee handed Debbye some water and then took a drink from his own glass. "You're a challenge to play," he chuckled. "Next time, I want us on the same team."

"Same to you," replied the smiling squirrel after a long drink. "I'd much rather play alongside you than against you."

Their immediate thirst quenched, Lee walked with Debbye back to where they'd left their things. As they walked, Lee offered, "Fair lady, would you care to join me for lunch?"

Debbye dimpled and answered, "I do believe I'd enjoy that."

Their plates loaded down and chilled bottles of soft drink in their free paws; Debbye and Lee returned and sat together. "So," she asked between bites, "you'd mentioned having to be at a modeler's meeting last night; was it interesting?"

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

Lee grinned, "An interesting speaker, but the real surprise was a couple that came for the first time, Sean and Teri Picket. They model as a team with her doing the interiors and him doing the exteriors; they do quite impressive work."

"That's rare?" inquired Debbye archly.

"The teamwork is," chuckled Lee, "but not the quality."

"And how did this morning go?" inquired the squirrel.

Lee grimaced. "I've had better days," he admitted. "I forced Lyman to the two point limit in all three games but still managed to lose all three. It just wasn't my day."

"Could it be," she inquired with a smile, "that your mind wasn't totally focused on racquetball?"

With a sheepish grin, Lee replied, "Yeah, I think that's a very good possibility."

"Sorry about that," giggled the squirrel.

"No problem." grinned Lee in return. "We both still got quite a workout."

Their lunch finished and the remains cleaned up, they laid back on adjacent chaise-lounges to let the meal digest. "So, what do you think of this group?" asked Debbye.

Putting down his book, Lee looked around and thought for a moment, then he answered, "Nice people, I'm enjoying myself."

Debbye relaxed a bit. "I'm glad because I like these people." Turning her head, she questioned, "Have you told anyone who invited you?"

Lee smiled, "Nope. Even before you told me, I rather figured you'd prefer to handle matters your way."

"Trust and confidence, you do know how to treat a lady." answered the pleased squirrel.

"But, of course," chuckled Lee, "haven't I already proved that?"

"I know." answered Debbye. "But it's still taking some getting used to."

Lee just smiled and went back to his reading. Debbye took the time to covertly look him over and liked what she saw. *Hm-m-m, from what the tank top and trunks don't cover, he keeps himself in shape. I can appreciate a male fur that stays in shape but doesn't obsess about his appearance.*

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

Reaching the end of a chapter, Lee marked his place with a bookmark and looked at his watch. "There's been adequate time." He commented. "Care to join me for a swim?"

"Perhaps a bit later, I had a good one before you showed up."

Nodding his acceptance, Lee carefully slipped off his glasses, pulled off his tank top, and headed toward the pool. Debbye managed to control her physical response, but her mind went ahead, *Lord, he does stay fit and that tawny patch goes as far down his front as I can see. Oh, getting to know him better looks rather pleasant.*

Putting herself firmly under control, Debbye noticed that Lee didn't make a noisy, splashy entrance into the pool, but quietly slid in and started swimming laps. *He really is a predator, she thought, even though he keeps it under control. I think I'd feel sorry for anyone who got on his "fighting side".*

After some time spent of swimming laps, Lee exited the pool with the same quiet and grace with which he'd entered it. Picking up his thick towel, he dried himself as thoroughly as possible and stretched out, front side down, on the chaise-lounge. "I hope you don't mind," he told Debbye, "but racquetball, volleyball, and swimming have kinda worn me out. It feels so good just to bake here in the sun."

So saying, he carefully placed his glasses where they were unlikely to be hurt, protected them further with his towel, closed his eyes, and started to drowse. Lee soon fell completely asleep and the only sound he made was a deep, quiet purr.

Debbye watched and listened. After a while, the thought came to her; *I find that purr rather soothing; if things get really serious between us, it won't bother me at all. Stop that!* She told herself. *You only met him a week ago and are working to know him better. Even if there is "something special" with him, you don't want to jump ahead.*

Debbye looked down at the book Lee had been reading. *Hm-m-m*, she noticed a *paperback, inside a protective cover that completely hides the books cover.* Debbye picked up the book and opened it to the front page. *Surprise, girl!* Came the thought. *A novel by Grace Livingston Hill? No wonder he's hiding it, she thought amusedly, being found reading it would certainly get Lee some derisive laughter. I like his simple solution for reducing the chance of a problem.*

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

Debbye carefully placed the book back and lay back with a smile. *He said he was an inveterate reader, but I never would have expected that much range in tastes. I wonder what other surprises this weekend will bring?*

After an hour's nap, Lee awoke to find Debbye smiling at him. "Truly a pleasant sight to wake to," he commented, "but I think there's something more to that smile. What happened? Did I talk in my sleep?"

"Nothing so dramatic," chuckled Debbye. "I did check out the book you're reading. She's a good writer; I've got several of her books on my shelves."

Lee hesitated a moment, then chuckled, "She is good. I've always enjoyed good writing, whatever the genre. My sister, Marilee, is as inveterate a reader as I am and brought her to my attention." Looking around, he continued embarrassed, "I trust you haven't told anyone. I don't need the grief."

"Relax," assured Debbye. "I'd never tell on you. 'Sides, I like the idea of a male fur who's open-minded enough to read more than the usual 'male' genres."

Lee blushed, "Thank you, but I read some of those, too. Still, I'm glad you don't object and I appreciate your discretion."

Further discussion was halted by Mrs. Nash's arrival. "Mr. Evans," she began, "I don't mean to put you on the spot, but I wonder if you could share something with us during this evening's fellowship time? If it helps," she chuckled, "my asking you to do so would help camouflage that 'twas Debbye who invited you."

"I don't mind," replied Lee. "I'll be glad to share. I'm flattered that you feel I have something to share. As to the camouflage and such, that's for the lady to decide." Turning to Debbye, he asked, "How would you have me handle this, my lady?"

Furrowing her brow, Debbye thought for a moment and then replied, "I'd prefer to keep my private life just that, private. I won't lie to anyone about it but I don't wish to flaunt it either. I think I'd feel more comfortable if you provide some camouflage."

Nodding to Debbye, Lee turned to their hostess, "Then it's agreed. I'll be pleased to share a few things that might stimulate some thought." Shrugging on his tank top and putting on his glasses, he continued, "To do that, I'd best prepare now. If I might use the study I glimpsed earlier, I'll sit down and prepare something."

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

With that, Lee stood up, gathered his belongings, and followed their hostess into the house. Less than five minutes later, Diana Reynard, one of Debbye's closer girlfriends in the group, came over and sat down. Without preamble, she asked, "So, are you the one who invited Mr. Evans?"

"Yes." Debbye admitted with a blush. "I am. How did you know? I know neither of us indulged in a public display of affection."

"Sure, you didn't do anything overly obvious," replied her friend, "and I doubt anybody else here noticed. But you know me. I've been a fur-watcher for some time. I'm observant and you're a good friend. I could see an extra 'intentness' when you talked to him. Don't worry," she grinned, "I won't spread it around. However, I am curious; how did you meet him?"

Debbye chuckled, "Would you believe he found me having a difficult time with something and came to my assistance? Beyond that, we're just getting to know each other and to see what possibilities exist for something more."

Diana nodded, "The 'damsel in distress' situation? How romantic! At least you're being sensible about matters and not rushing ahead after that start. I admire you for that and I want to wish you both the best."

"Thanks," blushed Debbye, "I appreciate that and I know Lee will too. But, I have to tell you, it wasn't that much distress."

"It doesn't matter," chuckled her friend, "it's the principle." She hugged Debbye and headed back to her seat.

Feeling relieved, Debbye went for another swim. Exiting some time later and feeling pleasantly worn, Debbye dried off as best she could and then headed into the house to finish drying and to change into casual clothes for the remainder of the evening. On her way back out, she passed the study's open door and paused to watch Lee's careful preparations. *Hm-m*, she thought, *quite a number of references and he certainly seems well organized with that legal pad.*

That should finish things nicely, thought Lee as he organized his last thoughts. Feeling a nearby presence, Lee looked around and saw Debbye in the doorway. *Ah, my lady, if you but knew what I wanted to do when I saw you out there. But there's a "time to be quiet" as well as a "time to speak up" and this was that time. I'll not break your trust in me.* "Fair lady," he spoke, waving her in, "I hope you weren't worried about me. It took a bit of thought and a prayer to come up with something appropriate, as this trash can full of unsuccessful drafts will testify. I was just putting a final polish on when you arrived."

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

"No," smiled the squirrel in response, "I wasn't worried. From just the talking we've done, I knew you'd put together something appropriate. I was just," she continued, "passing by and wanted to watch you."

"I'm flattered," Lee answered smilingly. " 'Tis always a pleasure to be graced by the presence of one such as you."

Debbye giggled, "With lines like that, you must have some Irish ancestry. Still, I'm flattered that you feel so. Moving on, what are you going to discuss?"

Sitting down, Lee handed her the pad. "After several false starts, it came to me that something on the importance of good friends and good fellowship would be appropriate for the start of a school year. Tell me what you think."

Debbye quickly read the material then gave it a second reading. "A clear and succinct approach," she commented as she returned the pad. "I think they'll relate to what you're saying, especially with the personal experiences."

"I hope so," admitted Lee. "I tried to strike a balance between text, commentary, and example. That's part of the reason I didn't take the train of thought to its full extent."

"Oh? What's the 'full extent'?"

Lee blushed, "To me, the full extent is with a friend of the opposite sex with whom the friendship catches fire, becomes love, and forms a special bond."

Blushing in turn, Debbye quietly asked, "Would that subject happen to be on your mind for a particular reason?"

Just as quietly, Lee replied, "No offense, but for reasons you can probably guess, it most definitely is. It's way, way too premature to consider anything when we're just getting to know each other. Still, I can't help hoping."

Debbye gently touched Lee's arm. "I'm not offended at all," came the quiet response. "I'm flattered that you think of me that way, especially since I've entertained some similar thoughts about you. But there've been worries, too. Before we get any deeper, Lee, do we have a common commitment to God?"

"My lady, you have no worry on that score," answered Lee, gently kissing her hand. "I made that commitment 15 years ago; that concern can be dismissed."

Debbye hugged him close. "I know I shouldn't anticipate anything," she fiercely whispered, "but you can't imagine how relieved that makes me feel."

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

Kissing her forehead, Lee responded, "I think I can. Just from what I've learned of you, I didn't expect it to be a problem."

Looking back at the pad, Lee sighed and continued, "Now, I've got a touch more polishing to do. You go ahead and go on out; I'll be along in a few minutes."

Debbye smiled, "Ever the dedicated type; I admire that, Lee. I'll be waiting." She quietly strolled out the door.

Lee looked after her and sighed. *I wonder if she realizes what she does to me*, he pondered, *both in that 'conservative' swimsuit and dressed as she is now, she affects me more than other femme furs do in an absolute minimum of coverage. Add to that this little discussion and I'm "hulled and sinking fast."* Ah-well, Evans, you'd best get to know her well and be sure before you take that next step. Now, enough woolgathering, you've got work to finish! With that thought, Lee forced his attention back to the work at paw and finished polishing up his thoughts.

Some ten minutes later, Lee strolled into the backyard with his notes folded and tucked into his pocket. He hadn't gotten far when their hostess announced, "Dinner will be served shortly. Every fur who wants to wash up and/or change should do so now." Lee barely managed to get out of the crowd's way. Crossing over to where Debbye sat with a cluster of her friends, he asked, "May I join y'all for this meal?"

Debbye and the others looked at each other, nodded and before Debbye could say anything, Diana spoke up, "Certainly, Mr. Evans, we'd be pleased to have your company." Scooting over, she made room for Lee between herself and Debbye.

Sitting down carefully, Lee turned to Diana and the rest of the furs present. "Thanks. Please, though just call me 'Lee'. When I hear 'Mr. Evans'," he chuckled, "I keep wanting to look around for my father."

The group responded with laughter and as they waited, they included Lee in their discussions. In the course of these discussions, they exchanged information as to origins, employment (or lack thereof), and schooling. Throughout, though, Lee managed to avoid revealing who had invited him and the feeling shared with the squirrel next to him.

When everyone was ready, their hostess asked one of the group's members to say grace and then dinner was served, buffet style. Assisting the others in the cluster, Lee made a couple of trips to the supply of beverages, delaying his dinner until the others had theirs.

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

When Lee finally returned with his dinner and beverage, Diana again moved over to allow him to sit between her and Debbye. "Thank you, fair lady," responded Lee, "good company always improves a meal." Debbye managed to convert the giggle this provoked into a cough.

As they ate, one of the male furs mused, "I wonder who they'll have speaking tonight? I haven't seen any of the 'regulars' preparing anything and I believe the adults want to leave matters primarily with the group."

Lee blushed, "Would you believe I'm speaking? I hope y'all don't mind."

"Mind?" came the reply. "Heavens, no. It'll be good to hear someone different." Looking at the others he continued, "We'll be looking forward to it, right?"

"Right" came the chorus with a "Most definitely" from Diana and a "Certainly" from Debbye.

With dinner over and cleaned up, everyone gathered around the patio. Waiting for everyone to get seated, their hostess spoke up, "I thought everyone would enjoy hearing from a different speaker than the 'usual suspects'. So I've asked Mr. Evans to come and share with us." Extending her paw, she beckoned, "Come on up, Mr. Evans. This spot is all yours."

Lee stood up, picked up his notes, and calmly walked to the center of the group. "Before I get started," he began, "I'd like to tell you a bit about myself. I attended Texas A&M and was active in our church's student union there. I moved here after graduation and am active in another church here in Columbus."

"Now," Lee continued, "seeing as this is a 'Back to School' fellowship, I'll be sharing on an important source of support: friendship and fellowship. I'll be citing references, but I'll let y'all search them out."

Lee proceeded to speak to the group about the need for good friends and good fellowship using both citations and illustrations. Using his friendship with Lyman as an illustration, Lee discussed the aspects of true friendship that really mattered. Extending the concept, he further discussed how a fellowship of such friends provides a necessary counter to the turbulence of life.

Lee concluded, "The main thing I want to leave with you is that we all need friends and fellowships, but we also need to choose them carefully for they have a distinct influence on us."

With that, Lee retreated and sat with the others. After he'd gotten comfortably seated, Diana and a few of the others leaned over and whispered

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

their appreciation. Their hostess stood up. "Thank you, Mr. Evans," she stated, "For giving us all something to think about." After leading the group in a closing prayer, she announced, "Though this fellowship is officially over, anyone who wishes to stay until 9PM is welcome to do so."

Lee turned to Debbye, Diana, and the others in their immediate group. "I'd love to stay a bit longer and get to know y'all better. Are there any games around that we all can play?"

Diana flagged down Alisia Nash and, shortly thereafter, Lee found himself sitting at the dining table with the others and playing a popular multi-player board game. Between the game itself and lots of banter between the players, the next couple of hours passed speedily for all concerned.

Coming up on 9PM, the players reluctantly ended their game, carefully put up the gameboard and pieces, and cleaned up the area. As they left the home, the others thanked Lee for coming, expressed their pleasure in his company, and extended their hopes that he'd come again.

Finally, only Lee and Debbye were left of the players group. Picking up his travel bag, Lee turned to Debbye and offered his arm. "Fair lady, may I escort you to your car?"

"I'd be honored, my good fur," replied Debbye with a twinkle in her eyes, as she slid her arm through his.

Before she could pick up her bag, Lee had it in addition to his own. Debbye made to protest but Lee spoke first, "All part of the escort service, my lady. I insist."

Debbye gave a small curtsy and smiled, "Then, thank you. Shall we be off?"

They were nearly to her car when they heard running behind them. Then the figure yelled, "Evans! I say, Evans! You can't just drop in and walk off with the prettiest girl here!"

Lee turned to Debbye, "Who is that?"

Debbye sighed, "His name is Kirk Auquat; he's asked me out several times but I've always said 'no'. He's just not my type; he's not that sharp and is something of a hot head."

Lee yelled back at the young weasel, "It's the lady's choice, not mine. You've got to respect her decision."

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

"I don't care," retorted the weasel. "You're not getting her!" With that, he swung a punch at Lee's mid-section. Lee's eyes went from a warm to a glacial blue and his ears flattened as he stepped away from Debbye. Pivoting quickly, Lee let the punch go by him and grabbed the clenched paw. Very quickly that paw was immobilized between the weasel's back and Lee's other arm was around the weasel's neck.

"Fighting at a Christian fellowship? Now, the Russians would call that truly 'nekulturniy', uncultured and showing a complete lack of class and manners," snarled Lee. "Friend," he whispered lowly and succinctly, "The lady chose. I've not forced my company on her. Now, I think you'd best apologize to her for making such a commotion. It might," hissed Lee, "also be a good idea to leave her alone from now on. She most emphatically is not interested in you."

Lee turned Kirk to face Debbye. "I'm s-s-sorry," stammered Kirk. "I didn't mean to bother you or cause a scene. I-I-I promise I'll leave you alone from now on."

"Very good," commented Lee as he released Kirk. "Now, I'm sure you have business elsewhere, so off with you."

Kirk moved off quickly while Lee stood there for a few minutes, breathing deeply while the adrenaline "surge" wore off and his body calmed down. Finally, Lee turned to Debbye. "My apologies, my princess," he offered. "I had not meant to draw attention to our relationship."

"No apologies necessary," Debbye replied shakily. "I'm just glad it didn't get any more physical."

Before Lee could answer, their hostess came up. "I heard you had a problem out here, Mr. Evans, but you seem to have handled him well," she complimented. "I know several male furs in this group who would've done far more to him."

Lee gave a feral grin, "But why should I end this evening on a sour note? He doesn't deserve that much respect."

"You are a rare one, indeed," chuckled the lady bear. "I'll leave you two alone to say your goodbyes."

Lee turned to Debbye, wrapped his arms around her waist, and rested his muzzle on her head. "I'm sorry about this," he murmured, "and I wouldn't blame you a bit if it made you somewhat wary. Do you still want to go shooting tomorrow?"

Chapter 2.1 Getting to know you... Part 1.

Debbye wrapped her arms around Lee's waist, laid her head against his chest, and softly replied, "You've done nothing wrong and you've behaved with great self-control. Of course I want to join you!"

Lee smiled, "That's a relief. I was half afraid you'd be scared off."

Debbye chuckled, "You don't get away that easily."

"In which case, come by my apartment around 2PM tomorrow and we'll go."

"I'll be there," promised Debbye and she kissed the side of his muzzle.

Lee returned the gentle kiss to Debbye's muzzle and softly replied, "I'll be waiting."

Both of them drove home in introspective states.

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

—Sunday—
—2PM—

In high spirits, Debbye knocked on the door of Lee's apartment and enthusiastically hugged him when he opened the door.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Lee as he hugged back. "I'm not complaining, but what brought this on?"

With laughter in her eyes, Debbye allowed Lee to usher her inside. "It happened after the church service this morning," she chuckled, "Alisia Nash caught my father, told him all about yesterday, and praised you quite highly."

Lee stared for a moment, then chuckled himself, "Oh brother! I'd like to have seen his face; that's not the kind of thing a father's used to hearing about the fur his daughter is seeing."

"Precisely!" smiled Debbye. "It did make for a lot of questions on the ride home."

"No problems, though? The last thing I'd want to do is cause you problems."

"No problems."

"Good! Now, while we're waiting for Lyman, how about I give you the grand tour?"

"Please do, I've been somewhat curious."

"Well," continued Lee, waving his paw, "from here you can see the dining room, living room, and kitchen."

Debbye looked around. *Hm-m-m, everything looks reasonably neat and clean*, she thought. Pointing to a basket atop the set of shelves separating the living room from the entrance, she said, "Let me guess, your mail?"

"Of course."

Looking further into the living room, Debbye decided *He at least kept a good color scheme, mahogany and dark woods with maroon upholstery*.

Debbye looked back at Lee, "Do you keep it this clean all the time or is this especially for me?"

"All the time, I swear," chuckled Lee, putting his paw over his heart. "I've managed to keep a neat and clean home since college and I prefer it that way."

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

Debbie looked at the wall above the armchair where a framed print hung. "What's that?" she inquired. The print showed a twin-engined, delta-winged aircraft climbing in front of an anvil shaped cloud.



"That's a print entitled 'Before the Thunder'," replied Lee. "It's signed by both the artist and the pilot for the flight it illustrates. I received it for some help I was able to give the artist."

"That's a real aircraft?" she questioned. "I can't remember ever seeing one like it, even in pictures."

Lee nodded, "You probably haven't since it's not been around for a while. The aircraft is an Avro Canada CF-105 'Arrow' and the only groups likely to

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

recognize it are aircraft enthusiasts, like yours truly, and Canadians with a strong interest in their country's history."

"Why's that?" puzzled Debbye.

"It's a long story," answered Lee, "but that aircraft represents a triumph of Canadian technology and a disaster of Canadian politics."

"I don't think I want to know more. May I see the rest of your place?"

"Most certainly," assured Lee. Wrapping his arm around the squirrel's waist, he guided her down the hall. "Nothing fancy here," he continued, "hall closet on one side and heating/air conditioning on the other." Turning left at the end of the hall, he went on, "Here, I've converted the second bedroom into a combination of den, library, and study. As you can see, it's got my computer set-up, my desk, and as much shelving as I could get in. The walk-in closet serves for long-term storage and as a quiet place for my electronic piano. Since this place was intended for two students to use, each bedroom has a full bath."

Debbye looked around. "My, it's well organized," she dryly commented.

"It has to be," chuckled the cat. "I'd not be able to find anything if it wasn't. Now, come this way." He gestured, "and I'll show you my bedroom."

As he guided her in, Lee whispered in Debbye's ear, "Don't worry, I've no ulterior motives, at least this time."

Debbye blushed and chuckled, but she made no move to remove his arm from her waist.

Immediately inside the door, an opened gun safe sat with a partially filled range bag in front of it. A chest and a dresser/mirror set took up the remainder of the wall. A king-size bed topped by a bookcase headboard with built-in lighting was against the opposite, outside wall. The closet and bath mirrored the other room. As a final touch, shelves faced the head of the bed along each of the sides.

Debbye looked at Lee with a raised eyebrow, "all that bed for one fur?"

Lee blushed, "Much as I hate to ruin a good fantasy, it's worked out that way."

Debbye shook her head, "Tsk! Don't worry, I'll keep your secret and protect your reputation."

Lee just laughed and Debbye joined him.

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

Lee went over to the gun safe. "You interrupted me as I was packing up. Have you decided if you'd care to join us for some target practice?"

Debbye hesitated, then, "Yes, I think I would. Daddy taught me to shoot and I used to enjoy it. Then I stopped for some reason."

"Let me guess," smiled Lee. "You were outshooting male furs and they convinced you that it was unladylike."

Debbye thought for a moment. "You know, you may be right," she answered slowly. "I never considered that."

"Hah!" snorted Lee. "I know a number of ladies, including some of my father's friends, who'd quickly put lie to that. Now, since you've not done any shooting for a while, would you like to start with something easy to shoot?"

"Yes, please."

Lee reached into the gun safe and pulled out a .22LR semi-automatic pistol and a box of ammunition. Sticking the box in the range bag, he handed the pistol to Debbye. "Do you still remember the basics of gun safety?"

Debbye released the magazine, set it aside, and then worked the slide to clear the chamber; deftly catching the ejected cartridge. "First, assume all guns are loaded until you've personally verified that they are unloaded," she responded. "Second, do not point the muzzle at anything you are not willing to destroy. Thirdly, keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on the target. How'd I do?" She asked proudly.

"Perfect," smiled Lee. "Your father taught you well."

Debbye blushed. Before either could say more, there came a knock on the door. Lee yelled, "Be there in a minute", then finished loading the range bag and shut & locked the gun safe.

"That's probably Lyman. So let's go introduce you two."

With his arm around her waist and the range bag in his free paw, Lee escorted Debbye to the door.

Setting the range bag down, Lee opened the door for his friend. Lyman's eyes widened a bit on seeing Debbye, but his main reaction was a broad smile and an outstretched paw. "Hi, I'm Lyman Aquilaferi and you must be the ladyfur who's been on Lee's mind all week."

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

Debbye took his paw and gave it a firm shake. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Debbye Squirrel and Lee's told me good things about you." Turning to Lee, she asked archly, "What's this about me being on your mind all week?"

Lee blushed, "well. I wouldn't go that far..."

"But I would, pal," interrupted Lyman with a laugh. He turned to her and pointed at Lee, "Debbye, this past week Lee's ability to concentrate on work has been as impaired as I've ever seen it. Then at lunch I'd watch him daydreaming with this silly grin on his face. If it's not been you on his mind, I want to know what was."

"Lee, is he pulling my leg?" inquired an amused Debbye.

"I'm found out," Lee sighed looking slightly embarrassed. "He's telling you the truth, Debbye. My thoughts have been wandering to you a lot this past week."

"Really," chuckled Debbye. "I'm rather pleased to learn that you've been as afflicted as I've been."

Lee blinked; then chuckled, "I think that tells me something encouraging."

"Daft, the both of you," declared Lyman, shaking his head. "You're both gonna need me along just to keep you out of trouble."

To shared laughter, the trio headed for Lee's car. With the range bags loaded into the trunk, Lee & Lyman both hastened to open the front passenger door for Debbye. Lyman beat Lee to the door, but waved for Lee to do the "honors". Laughing at this competition, Debbye shook her head and chuckled, "You two are crazy! Don't stop though, cause I'm enjoying every minute. Debbye rather enjoyed the drive to the range. As she, Lee, and Lyman joked and chatted, she thought, *This is certainly a distinct pleasure, sharing a conversation with two intelligent young male furs.*

Reaching the range, in an industrial area, they pulled into a moderately full parking lot, Lyman leaned forward to Lee, "You take care of your lady, I'll get the range bags."

"Deal," replied Lee as he parked the car. Popping the trunk, he got out and went around the car to get Debbye's door.

Ushering Debbye out of the car, Lee reached in and locked the doors as Lyman came from the back of the car with their range bags. Lee took his bag and Lyman joined him in escorting Debbye to the range.

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

As the trio approached the front door, a white female cat came running up and hugged & kissed both Lyman and Lee rather enthusiastically. Debbye stopped in surprise and then shock. *This seems more than just a friendly greeting, she mused, yet Lee said he didn't date much. Green eyes and white fur start an exotic look that the sleek coat and bushy tail accentuate,. Debbye observed to herself, and her casual dress of jeans, tied-off button-front shirt, leather calf boots, and fingerless shooting gloves just complete the picture. I can't believe they're 'just friends', came the aching thought, has Lee been lying to me?* Debbye frowned.

"So how are two of my favorite guys?' enthused the cat.

"Just fine, Rava," answered Lyman.

Pulling Debbye forward, Lee introduced them "Rava, I'd like you to meet my friend, Debbye Squirrel." "Debbye, this is my good friend and co-worker, Rava Purr."

A good friend? Pondered Debbye, *It sounds like maybe Lee has been lying to me.* Coolly she shook the exuberant cat's paw. "Pleased to meet you." She turned to Lee, "I think I'll wait for you two in the lounge," she announced with a decided coldness, "I don't feel up to shooting after all."

"What?" responded Lee in a surprised and injured tone, "What's wrong my lady?"

"Please, Lee," she replied. "Let's keep this civil. You can pick me up on the way out." Debbye hurried off to the lounge, leaving a perplexed Lee scratching his head.

"What the devil happened?" Lee asked Lyman. "All of a sudden she just turned right off to me." Lyman shrugged.

"What's going on and who is that?" asked a puzzled Rava.

"I first met Debbye just over a week ago," explained Lee. "We hit it off real well and there seemed to be something special between us." He looked toward the lounge confused, "We've been dating further to explore that 'something'. Then, wham, she shuts down to me all of a sudden, right out of the blue."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Rava. "That happened just as I came up didn't it?" Lee nodded. "She must've thought there was something between us, especially if she's not used to strong extroverts, like myself."

"Just peachy," grimaced Lee, "How do I convince her otherwise?"

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

After a moment, Rava replied thoughtfully, "You don't. I was the cause. I'll do the healing. Let me talk to her first, Lee. I am sorry; I just never, after all this time, expected a femme fur to be with you. Let alone one I didn't already know. I thought she was with Lyman. He warned the last one you know." She added with a smile.

Lee sighed, "That's better than anything I can think of. I fervently hope that you can explain matters."

"Meanwhile," interjected Lyman. "Let's get our ear protection and get some practice in. Remember the advice from that old s-f novel we found? 'It's not your marksmanship on good days, but rather that on stressful, tumultuous days that determines your chances of survival.'"

"You're right," acquiesced Lee. "But I need to see this through."

"I'll talk to her right now, and don't worry. I won't hurt her." assured Rava with a wink as Lee & Lyman headed for the rangemaster's counter and then the firing line.

In the lounge, a heartsick Debbye pretended to read a magazine. *This is as bad as any of Susan's stories she thought morosely, I thought there was something special with Lee, and now this!*

Debbye looked up as Rava entered the lounge and quietly shut the door behind her. "Girl," she announced, "we've gotta talk."

"What's there to talk about?" grouched Debbye.

"For one thing," answered the cat, "I've inadvertently done a dis-service to a really good friend. Lee and I are co-workers on the Special Engineering Team and good friends outside work, helping each other out when we can, but that's all there is between us. There's no way," laughed Rava, "that I'd ever be romantically linked with him; our personalities are just way too different."

"But what about how you greeted him? That seemed more than 'just friends' to me!"

"Honey, I'm just an enthusiastic person; I greet everyone that way." She stopped and thought a second. "Well almost everyone." She looked back at Debbye smiling.

"What?" responded Debbye. *Wait a minute that sounds like Sabby's description of Zig Zag. Ohmigod, what have I done?* Her face fell. "I've misjudged Lee, haven't I?" asked Debbye apprehensively.

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

"You have," sympathized the cat, "and he's rather broken up. I'm sorry that I caused this. You OK?"

"It's as much my fault. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. I'm fine now. Can we start over as friends?" she asked shyly.

"I'd like that. After four years of working with Lee, I know anyone who affects him like this has to be worth knowing." Rava extended her paw, "Shake or hug, hon?" she looked at Debbye with a huge smile.

"Friends," agreed Debbye with a firm pawshake. "Now how do I square things with Lee?" she continued shakily. "I really hate the thought of losing him or, worse, driving him off."

Rava hugged Debbye close anyway. She placed her arm around Debbye's shoulder, "Judging by the condition he was in, I don't think that'll be a problem. Shall I send him in here?"

"You'd better," sighed Debbye. "I need to know how badly I've destroyed my bridges."

Rava stepped away, "I'll send him right in." she promised. "Just remember, if you build 'em back properly, they'll be stronger than if nothing had happened."

Lee managed to cope, barely, with handling his feelings; he'd managed the energy rather than trying to control it, and was shooting decent groups. Lee had just emptied another magazine and pulled his target back when a claw gently tapped on his shoulder.

Looking around, he saw Rava standing there. "There's someone in the lounge that wants desperately to talk to you, luv," announced his friend.

Lee nodded and placed everything on the shooting bench, "Get everything worked out?" he softly inquired.

Rava smiled and gave him a 'thumbs up'. "It was pretty much what we figured. Be nice to her. I like this one. And she is more inexperienced than you are, luv."

"I couldn't do otherwise," assured Lee, "no matter what happened." With that he headed for the door.

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

Lee entered the lounge, quietly shutting the door behind him. Debbye sat downcast with her paws in her lap. "You wanted to talk to me, my lady?" softly asked Lee.

Debbye looked up with more than a hint of moisture in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Lee." She apologized. "I jumped to a hasty conclusion that hurt us both. I know I was wrong, but other than apologizing and asking your forgiveness, in addition to Rava's, I don't know how to get back to where we were."

Lee squatted in front of her, took her paws in his, looked her in the eye, and replied, "I'm not certain we can step back across this, my princess. I think rather that we have to move on and build faith & trust in one another while recognizing that we're both fallible. I can understand why you reacted the way you did, an exuberance like Rava's is kinda rare."

Debbye briefly chuckled, "Oh, I don't know. From what little Sabrina's let drop, her boss is just as exuberant."

Lee smiled, "I'm glad you understand." He paused for a moment and sighed, "I guess we haven't known each other long enough for you to really know and trust me, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt that you jumped to a conclusion and then turned on me without asking any questions."

Debbye gave him a frightened look, *Is he going to treat me just as rough?*

Noticing her look, Lee continued, "However, that pain pales in comparison to what I felt when it seemed I'd lost all opportunity to explore that 'something special' that's between us. My lady, you have my forgiveness, freely given; joyously given."

Debbye blinked and hesitatingly smiled, "You really mean that?"

Lee stood up and drew her up. "I mean that with all my heart and soul," he softly answered.

Debbye responded by hugging him tightly, "Thank you, Lee. I know it's better than my behavior deserved." She sniffled, "You wouldn't believe," she murmured into his chest, "just how painful it was to think that I'd lost you."

"I suspect I know something of that pain," whispered Lee. "Shall we agree to talk more, jump to conclusions less, and give each other the benefit of the doubt?"

Debbye beamed at him, "I'd like that agreement very much."

With a relieved smile and a twinkle in his eyes, Lee bent his head down, "Shall we seal this agreement with a kiss?"

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

"Yes," answered Debbye as his mouth came down on her's and he hugged her close. Debbye's arms went around his neck and both their tails moved to twine around the pair.

Both were so engrossed in the resulting kiss that neither saw Rava look in, smile, and turn and give Lyman a "thumbs up" and a wink.

When they finally broke the kiss, Debbye laid her head back against Lee's chest. "When you said 'all my heart and soul'," she whispered, "you weren't kidding. I felt all of that in your kiss."

"I told you," Lee gently chuckled, "and I felt the same from you."

"So, what do we do now?" smiled Debbye.

Lee smiled back, "If you're feeling better, perhaps you'd care for some target practice after all?"

Debbye chuckled, "Yes, I do believe I would." She thought a moment and continued, "Would you be offended if I asked Rava to coach me? I'd like to get to know her as a friend."

Lee smiled in return, "No, I wouldn't be offended; though I suspect you're as interested in finding out about me as you are about her."

Debbye gave a mock pout, "Darn, you found me out!"

Lee just shook his head and laughed. "I don't have any problems with that, my princess, as long as the lady herself is willing." He extended his paw, took hers, and guided both of them out of the lounge. As they exited, Lee waved Rava over with his paw.

Rava strolled up with a smile on her face. "You two get matters resolved?" she asked.

Debbye just smiled as Lee answered, "Sure did. We both owe you one. Now," he continued, "we have another favor to ask; the lady would appreciate it if you'd coach her shooting."

Rava turned to the squirrel, "Your idea, honey?"

Debbye nodded, "My idea. I'd like to get to know you better."

Rava gave her a knowing smile, "Sure, I'll be happy to. Lee," she requested, "please get out whatever you brought for her. We'll get her some ear protection and shooting goggles and join you inside."

Lee nodded, "Sure thing. I'll see you ladies on the firing line."

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

"C'mon," Rava said as she pulled Debbye to the rangemaster's counter, "let's get you properly outfitted."

Shortly thereafter, Lee handed Debbye the .22LR pistol, the magazine, and a full box of ammo. Rava led Debbye down the firing line to an available shooting station. "This okay, hon?" she inquired.

"Sure, this one's fine."

"Okay, you load up and I'll run a target downrange."

Debbye loaded the magazine and inserted it into the pistol. Working the slide, she chambered a round, then put the safety on and topped-off the magazine. "Nicely done," commented Rava, "you've been trained well. So, tell me hon," she continued her full muzzled smile showing some amusement, "are you interested in knowing more about me or in what I can dish about Lee?"

"Both, actually," replied Debbye. "If my relationship with Lee continues like it has, it'll make matters easier for both of us if we're friends. By the same token, I'd be interested in learning more about Lee; he's the most interesting gentlefur I've met in ages."

"Fair enough. I'll warn you, though; I don't know any real dirt on him. And his little secrets you need to ask him about." Rava all of a sudden took a very serious tone and stopped smiling for a second, "Now, step up here and show me the stance you shoot from."

Debbye stepped up to the firing line and took an isosceles stance with a firm, two-handed grip on the pistol. Rava stood right against her back as she helped her make some small adjustments that would help her comfort and accuracy, then when Debbye was ready she stepped back. Debbye proceeded to empty the pistol with aimed fire. Rava brought the target back and looked it over. "Not bad at all," she commented placing her paw on Debbye's shoulder, "especially for someone who's not shot in a while. You were well trained."

Debbye shrugged, "I suppose so, it kinda comes from being a cop's daughter."

Rava grinned, "That's something we have in common; my father's a cop too, or rather a retired cop." Rava paused for a moment, "I think I remember my father mentioning someone with your last name." Rava's brow furrowed for a moment, then her eyes widened, "Honey," she inquired, "are you George Squirrel's daughter?"

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

Debbye replied with a chuckle, "Last time I looked, I was." Debbye looked at Rava slightly confused.

Rava grinned, "His squad was the last one my father served on before he retired." She faced Debbye "Does Lee know your father's profession?"

Debbye laughed and then whispered conspiratorially, "Not yet. I figured how he reacts will tell me something about him don't you think?"

"That's dirty pool," chuckled Rava, "and I love it. His reaction may surprise you, though he definitely isn't like most male furs his age. Plus he knows my dad."

"No, thankfully, he's not," agreed Debbye. As she reloaded the pistol, she continued, "So tell me, Rava, how'd you get on the Team with Lee?"

"The Team was looking for someone to help on the manufacturing engineering side of things and I have both a degree in engineering technology and an A&P license. Add in that I paid my way through school by spending my summers working as part of a NASCAR pit crew and I was an excellent match for the position." Rava continued, "I still keep my paw in with a mechanics' shop not too far from here. I do some repair work, such as helping our two friends with their cars, but I also built and maintain a race car for one of the local teams."

"Very impressive."

Rava smiled, "And very time consuming."

Stepping back up to the firing line, Debbye waved for Rava to send to target back out. "Same distance," she requested. Resuming her stance, she again emptied the pistol.

Looking over the returned target, Rava commented, "Your shootings pretty impressive, itself. That's an even better group than the first one. Want me to run the next target all the way down range?"

"Please," replied the squirrel as she again reloaded the pistol. "How long have you known Lee and Lyman?" she asked in passing.

"Some four years, we started at almost the same time," answered Rava. She chuckled, "It was something of a 'scandal' with some of the older employees, it was the first time new-hires had ever been brought directly into the team. Me, they could understand, at least somewhat, good manufacturing engineers are always needed. It wasn't until our friend's first project that people understood why they'd been brought in."

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

Curiosity got the better of Debbye, "What happened then?"

Rava laughed, "It was a simple problem, but previous solutions had not produced a satisfactory resolution. Lee and Lyman got handed the job somewhat as an initiation gag. Well between their knowledge of aviation history, their ability to consider alternative approaches, and their understanding of how things are done in the shop... they came up with a solution that worked and was comparatively easy to fabricate and install. You should have seen the looks they got when at the presentation of their recommendations. Hon, it was priceless!"

Laughing along with her, Debbye gasped, "Lord, I'd like to have seen that."

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Hearing the laughter, Lee & Lyman looked down the line of shooting stations. Lyman dryly commented, "Well, I don't think we'll have to worry about them getting along."

Lee chuckled, "Yep, just so they don't make common cause against us."

"As if!" snorted Lyman. "Most likely for us rather than against us. Rava is as loyal as we are."

"Too right," agreed Lee. "Now, back to work." With that he finished reloading his .45 ACP pistol and sent his target down the range.

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Getting her laughter under control, Debbye finished reloading the pistol and returned to the firing line. Concentrating on the more distant target, she focused her aim and proceeded to empty the pistol yet again.

Retrieving the target, Rava commented, "you need to get your aim point up a little, the grouping's fine but you're a touch low."

"I'll remember that," responded Debbye as she reloaded the pistol. Continuing her inquiry, "So how much do you see of our friends outside of work?"

After a moment's thought, Rava replied, "Not as much as you'd think. I helped Lee with the modifications to his Contour, both of them trust me to handle the inspection, servicing, and maintenance of their cars, and they've helped me with design problems on a couple of race cars. I don't see much of them socially, though; neither goes out anywhere near as much as I do and they resist being dragged along. On the other paw," Rava continued with a feral grin, "when you need help, they're right there for you. When my marriage

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collapsed after only a few months, they were the first ones there to help and my strongest supporters all the way through the messy process."

Debbye looked up with a start, "I'm sorry to hear about that."

"Don't be," replied Rava, "I wasn't. It didn't take long after the wedding for the smooth talk to disappear and the abuse to start. I walked then, didn't wait a moment, and don't regret it a bit. Oh, Craig kept harassing me, trying to get me to change my mind, but I wouldn't. It had just gotten to the point where I was going to ask my father to step in when Craig called up. It was kinda funny, he said 'I was prepared for your father and his friends, but not for the big guns you called in. I'm leaving you alone and leaving town.' I never did find out what happened, but I have a suspicion our friends had something to do with it. They deny talking to him, but there was something in their eyes that said they knew what happened. I've never pressed them, but I've always remembered their help."

Looking over at Lee and Lyman, Debbye responded, "How interesting! It's good to know that they're furs you can depend on when things get rough."

Rava chuckled, "That they are. I won't claim either is perfect, either of them would be the first to deny it, but they are steady, dependable friends and those are worth something. Now," she continued, "finish reloading that pistol and let's try it again."

Debbye finished reloading as Rava sent another target down range. Returning to the firing line, Debbye concentrated on adjusting her aim point and proceeded to yet again empty the pistol.

Retrieving the target, Rava examined it and smiled, "That's the way, hon; a tight group smack in the center of the black. Load her up and let's see if you can do it again." Rava put the target aside to show Lee later.

Debbye busied herself with the reloading. "So what, if anything, can you tell me about Lee's 'dark side'?" she inquired. "I don't mean his secrets, just some of those areas where he's 'not so perfect'."

Rava smiled as she prepared the next target. "I understand, hon; you want to know where some of those imperfections I mentioned are. I suppose his worst 'trait' is his temper; he's generally quite patient and good mannered, but when he finally 'loses it' he can be a sight to behold." She shook her head at the memory, "The good side," she chuckled, "is that he doesn't hold grudges, he has his 'fit' and gets over it."

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

Debbye sighed as she finished the reloading, 'I guess he proved his patience, and maybe something more, this afternoon. You know, he said he freely and joyously forgave me?'

Rava looked up surprised. "Really?" she inquired. "I think you mean more to him than you realize. In which case, you'll probably run in to another of his imperfections. I know we cats have a reputation for being stubborn, but he takes it to extremes. Once he's made his mind up on something important, it takes a really strong argument to change his mind. He is, though," chuckled the feline, "honest enough that when an argument convinces him he'll go with it rather than sticking with his old position out of pride."

Debbye moved back to the firing line. "I expect I'll learn to cope," she answered. "That is, if things go along the way they have been. Now," she continued, "could you please send that target down range?"

"Oops, sorry Hon,"

Debbye turned her concentration to the target and her fire from this magazine chewed a ragged hole in the center of the black.

Rava smiled as she brought the target back and set it aside, "Now that is doing it again. You've got some real potential, hon. Care to try once more?"

"Once more is all I'll be able to do," replied the squirrel. "There's only enough ammo left for one more full magazine."

"Then do it in style," encouraged Rava as she sent the target out.

Debbye stepped up, concentrated, and again chewed the center out of the target.

"Hon, you've definitely finished up in style," approved the cat as she retrieved the target. Setting this target with the previous two, she continued, "I hope you'll be back here often."

"I imagine I will. Despite today's shaky start, I've really enjoyed myself," replied the squirrel. "Besides, I know you now and I won't be blindsided again." Debbye shook her head, "Lee really should have warned me."

Rava chuckled, "I said the same thing to him. I'm afraid he's sufficiently used to my behavior that he doesn't realize that it is that rare."

"Maybe," admitted Debbye, "but I don't think either he or I will take as much for granted after this."

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

"All to the good, hon," counseled Rava. "Now, do you want to keep talking here or would you prefer to move to the lounge?"

Debbye looked around at the crowded range. "I think I'd rather leave this position for someone to use. Let's move to the lounge."

Stopping at Lee's station to return the pistol, Debbye advised, "We're moving to the lounge, just come by when you finish."

"Right," replied Lee. "We shouldn't be too much longer. I've only enough ammo for another couple of magazines; I doubt Lyman has much more. We'll be seeing you in a little while." Stowing the pistol in the range bag, Lee sketched a salute to the two femmes and turned to continue his shooting.

Debbye and Rava turned in the ear and eye protection and headed for the lounge. Stopping at a vending machine, Debbye offered, "Thirsty? I'm buying."

"Sure hon, thanks. All that talking out there, left my throat a bit dry."

Taking their cans of soft drink with them, they entered the lounge and sat down. After a few swallows, Debbye asked, "So what's your father doing now that he's retired?"

"He and some of his friends have started their own security firm," answered Rava, then she grimaced, "I swear, I see less of him now than when he was on the force!"

Debbye winced in sympathy, "Ouch! That is bad. My father's had to keep some odd hours, but he's hardly ever been that busy. Of course," she chuckled, "part of that may be that I'm still living at home."

Rava chuckled, "Yah, that might help. Wouldn't work for me, though; I've been living on my own for too long to feel comfortable moving back in."

"I can understand that," answered the squirrel. Impulsively she touched Rava's arm, "Look, I know we're just becoming friends, but if you need to talk to a friend who understands being a cop's daughter, give me a call. I'd be happy to offer a friendly ear."

"Thanks luv, that means a lot," replied Rava as she covered Debbye's paw. As they both dropped their paws, Rava continued, "Ya know, you're a good match for Lee; he's offered a friendly ear and shoulder anytime I need it."

"Hm-m-m, even given the short time I've known him, that sounds completely in character for him."

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

Further discussion was interrupted as Lee and Lyman entered the lounge and set their bags down. Walking over to the two femme furs, Lee inquired, "So how did it go today?"

Before Debbye could answer, Rava handed the last three targets over, "See for yourself. Your friend's been well trained and got her 'eye' back quickly."

Lee looked at the three targets with tight ragged holes in their centers and softly whistled, "I think," he chuckled, "that I'd best stay on your good side if I want to stay healthy."

Debbye blushed as Rava and Lyman laughed.

"Seriously," continued Lee. "This is excellent. I hope you'll keep coming here with us."

Debbye nodded, "I'll accept that invitation. I've enjoyed myself and," she looked around and grinned, "the company's been excellent."

Lee blushed a bit then replied, "It's a date, then. In two weeks we'll come back for another session here."

Debbye nodded agreement with a smile.

Rava laughed, "At least she'll be prepared next time." Turning to Lee and Lyman, "I'll see you two at work tomorrow and," turning to Debbye, "I'll look forward to seeing you in two weeks." With a farewell hug to everyone she headed out the door.

After Rava's departure, Lee turned to Debbye; "You ought to keep those targets, that's really good shooting."

"Could you keep them?" she asked. "I really don't have any place at home to put them."

"Sure, I can do that." Handing her a pen, he continued, "Initial and date 'em so they don't get mixed with others."

After Debbye marked the targets, Lee stuck them in a side pouch of his range bag. "I'll put 'em in a separate folder when we get back to my place," Lee explained. "Now, are you ready to go?"

When Debbye nodded, Lee offered his arm and, preceded by Lyman, they headed out to the car.

"Don't we need to pay before leaving?" asked Debbye with a touch of worry.

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

"We took care of that before we entered the lounge," explained Lyman. "Lee covered your and his charges."

Debbye looked quickly at Lee, "Can I reimburse you?"

Lee smiled and made a 'stop' motion with his paw. "No way. You're my guest at my invitation; it's my pleasure."

Debbye gave a resigned smile, "Fair enough, this time. In the future though, I'll pay my own way."

"That's not necessary..." began Lee.

"Please," interrupted the squirrel, "I don't want to feel like I'm sponging off you."

Lee gave her a rueful look. "If you're that determined, I'll not argue further."

"You know you'd argue the same way in her position," chuckled Lyman. "I think you've met your match, my friend."

"You're right about the argument," admitted the cat with a sheepish grin, "Beyond that, we'll just have to see."

Debbye blushed, but kept her own counsel.

Arriving back at the car, Lee held the door for Debbye while Lyman stowed their shooting gear in the trunk.

As they pulled out of the parking lot, Lee noticed the time and suggested, "Given the time, how about stopping for an early dinner? We can go on back to my place afterwards and clean the guns."

"Fine by me," answered Lyman.

"Sure, why not?" responded Debbye. "How about Furry's? It's not that far out of the way."

Lee looked at Lyman in the rear view mirror to get his agreement. Lyman nodded. "Deal, then," agreed Lee and they headed off.

As they drove, Debbye looked at her two companions. "I've got a question for you two and I promise that I won't tell anyone. Rava stated that she thought you two knew something about why her 'ex' left rather in a hurry, though she says that you swear you didn't talk to him. What exactly did you do?"

Lee and Lyman exchanged looks in the rear view mirror and nodded to each other. "Okay, I'll cover that," replied Lee. "We never went near him but

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we did decide we needed to take action after seeing him badgering Rava. We figured he'd be expecting her father and his friends to make a move. So, knowing how he'd treated her, we went down to Security and laid the situation out for them; pointing out that anyone trying to establish that kind of control over someone with her level clearance might be up to 'no good'. They agreed with us and sent a team out to talk to him, one agent from DIS and the other from the FBI: I rather imagine that scared him off."

Debbye chuckled, "Well, that explains the last remark he made to Rava. Why, though, haven't you told her?"

"We were embarrassed," answered Lyman. "Both of us are used to dealing directly with problems and it feels 'wrong' to have to play bureaucratic games. Besides, we did "bend" the rules a bit in how we did it."

"Well, you accomplished your purpose and relieved her, but how did you bend the rules?"

Lee gave a low chuckle, "It's more of a matter of which person in Security we approached. We were very careful to talk to someone who knew her father and was at least familiar with her. This person was more than happy to help out."

Debbye snickered, "That was underhanded, but in a good cause. Don't worry, I won't tell her."

Pulling into the parking lot at Furry's, they were pleased to find it only partially full. "Looks like we'll get a table right away," commented Lyman. Catching Lee's eye in the rear view mirror, he continued, "Remember the last time we did this?"

"All too well," answered Lee. At Debbye's raised eyebrow, he continued, "We'd stayed late at the range and when we got here the evening rush was at full strength. It seemed to take ages just to find a parking place, then we had over a half-hour wait inside."

"Why didn't you two just go fix something at home?" puzzled the squirrel.

Lee and Lyman looked at each other and then grinned sheepishly [quite a trick for a pair of carnivores] at Debbye. "We'd both been careless," admitted Lyman, "and neither of us had anything in the fridge but milk and juice."

Debbye rolled her eyes and replied, "Bachelors! Sometimes I think all of you need keepers."

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

Lee and Lyman both chuckled, then Lee responded quietly, "You wouldn't be interested in applying for that position with me, would you?"

Debbye started and stared at Lee. "You're not serious! Are you?" came her surprised response.

Lee chuckled, "For the position of 'keeper', I'm most definitely kidding." He pulled into a parking space, stopped the car, and turned with a blush to look Debbye in the eye. "But I'm starting to think you may be quite qualified for another, more permanent, 'position' that includes those responsibilities and carries more rewards."

Debbye blushed and asked quietly, "That 'position' would be...?"

Lee smiled, "For now, 'steady' will suffice."

Returning his gaze, she replied, "I've considered applying for that 'position', though it seemed a bit premature before, but not now."

Lee's blush lessened. "Then we'll table this for now," he replied, "but let me make my feelings clear." With that, he leaned over to kiss Debbye only to be surprised as she leaned toward him and made it more than a simple kiss. Without thought, each reached out to hold the other.

Lyman's soft "Ahem" from the backseat broke the clinch and both Lee and Debbye blushed.

Debbye asked quietly, "I trust I've also made my feelings clear?"

Lee could only trust himself to nod and grin.

"If you two are quite through," continued Lyman. "I thought we were here to get some dinner."

Lee grinned, "Fair enough. That is why we stopped here."

"Then why don't I," suggested Lyman, "go get us a table while you two finish up matters here?"

Lee glanced at Debbye, who nodded agreement. "Good enough, we'll see you in a few minutes."

Lyman climbed out, locked his door, and headed for the restaurant door. Lee turned to Debbye. "'I'll be right around to get your door." Locking his door, Lee circled the car and held the door for Debbye. Holding her paw as she exited the car, he locked the door and then turned and took her paws in his. "Debbye, I know I put you on the spot just then, but I felt I had to make

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certain you knew how I felt. This afternoon scared me badly and I don't ever want to take anything between us for granted."

Debbye's eyes widened in surprise, she paused for thought, & then responded, "That also hit me hard, Lee and I feel the same way: I don't want to go through that again. I didn't feel 'on the spot', I was just surprised that you were that open."

Lee smiled and hugged her to him. "I'm a private fur and it's difficult, but you already mean too much to me for half-measures."

Debbye hugged him back. "No half-measures then; your feelings are fully returned."

"Now that we've got that out of the way, shall we head inside?"

Debbye sighed, "This is nice, but I suppose we should relieve Lyman. Let's go."

With that, Lee stepped back and offered her his arm. With her arm through his and holding paws they headed into the restaurant.

Lyman waved them over to a table set up for them. Lee held Debbye's chair, then seated himself and picked up a menu. "I took the liberty of ordering iced tea for all of us," announced Lyman. "Do either of you mind?"

Lee shook his head while Debbye replied, "No problem."

Looking over the menu, Lee quickly determined what he wanted and was ready to order when the waitress returned with their drinks. "Will this be one check?" inquired the rabbit. "Or..."

"Separate checks, please." Answered Debbye firmly.

Lee responded, "You're my guest; I insist..."

"We've gone through this once already," insisted the squirrel. "I want to pay my own way; you know my feelings."

Lee gave her a resigned grin, then shrugged and turned to the waitress. "Separate checks then, if you would be so kind." He requested ruefully.

"Certainly, sir." Answered the rabbit. "And you'll be having..."

After their orders had been placed, the trio relaxed. Lee tilted his glass at Debbye, "You're not going to allow me to do much for you, are you?"

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

"Lee," responded Debbye, "I'm used to paying my own way. I understand why you want to take care of matters and I do appreciate the feelings behind that; but right now I don't want to compromise my independence."

"I understand fully," responded the cat. He chuckled, "Well, I wanted a strong lady and it seems I've got one."

Lyman chuckled, "What was that old warning? 'Be careful what you wish for, you may get it.' "

Lee and Debbye returned his chuckle. Then Debbye turned to Lyman, "May I ask a personal question?"

"Sure," shrugged Lyman, "but you'll have to get his secrets from Lee. He knows mine and I don't want to get into that kind of contest."

"Nothing like that," chuckled Debbye. "Lee's told me that your father's family is from Italy and your mother's is from England, but what species are they? I've looked at your markings and I've looked at your features and I can't tell."

Lee winced a little at Debbye's question, but Lyman held up his paw. "It's a fair question, my friend. Besides, you know I've heard it enough times before."

Lee nodded his head, "I know. It's just that I remember some of the nonsense that's followed rougher versions of that question."

Debbye raised an eyebrow. "Oh? What happened?"

Lyman replied, "I ran into some trouble of a bunch of species purists and we had some difficulties with them."

"Species purists?" Asked the perplexed squirrel.

"Yeah," responded Lee. "They're a narrow-minded bunch convinced that members of a given species should only be involved with and have offspring with members of that species. Lyman's mixed wolf and fox ancestry really annoyed them."

"So what happened?" inquired Debbye.

Lee and Lyman both grimaced. "Ask us when we get to my place," responded the cat, "I don't want to ruin dinner by discussing this now."

Debbye shrugged. "I can understand that. I'll wait until later. So, Lyman, you're a wolf/fox mix? Which parent is which?"

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

"My father's family is an old family of Italian wolves," answered Lyman. "We're not certain how far back the family goes..."

"But I've seen church records dating from three-digit years," interjected Lee.

"But," continued Lyman, "family stories contend that we lived in the Lombardy region at least as far back as the Roman Empire. Some stories contend that our last name came from several generations which served with honor in the legions."

"Ah," responded the squirrel, "from the position of 'Aquilafer', the honored position of carrying the eagle standard of the legion. I can see where that could happen."

"Yeah," agreed Lyman. "Anyway, my father's family came to this country in the late 1800's. Dad followed in the family tradition and enlisted in the Air Force. The first posting of his second enlistment was to a RAF base in the UK; at a welcoming dance during his first month there he met a young red fox vixen and they fell for each other. Only then," chuckled Lyman, "did he find out that her father was the Wing Commander in charge of the base. My father swears that the courtship was the most circumspect behavior he's ever exhibited. When I had the chance to visit mom's family, I found that their family records also go back to three-digit years."

"Impressive," murmured Debbye. "I can't see any reason to be ashamed of anything."

"Neither can I." Lyman admitted. "But there are those narrow-minded chowder-heads that feel that way."

The arrival of their orders brought further discussion to a halt as all three applied themselves to enjoying dinner. After enjoying their dinners, they paid their bills, left fair tips, and headed out to Lee's car. As he helped Debbye into the car, Lee asked, "Are you going to come in for just the story or are you going to stay and join us in cleaning up?"

Debbye didn't hesitate, "Of course I'll help with the clean up. I shot one of those pistols and I'm not about run out on the dirty work."

Lee smiled, "I'd figured you for that attitude, but I do appreciate it."

The ride back to Lee's apartment was filled with friendly conversation on a variety of topics. Debbye was amused, and pleased, to find both males to be well read on a wide variety of subjects. Lee was equally pleased that his best

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

friend and his lady got along amiably; he'd been dreading the admittedly slight, chance that the two would've clashed.

Arriving back at the apartment complex, they found a parking slot near Lee's door and Lyman again volunteered to get the range bags while Lee looked after Debbye. Once inside the apartment, Lee and Lyman set up the dining table for pistol cleaning. Debbye required little instruction and soon all three were involved in cleaning the tools of the day's activities.

Debbye looked over at the two males, "Okay, you two; we're back here by ourselves, so spill the story of your encounter with those species purists."

Lee leaned back in his chair and looked at Lyman, "Let me see, it was the winter of our sophomore year, wasn't it?"

Lyman nodded.

"Okay," continued Lee, "it was, as I said, the winter of our sophomore year. We had been roommates since starting at A&M and were good friends by this time and well on our way to becoming a good team. We'd attended a dorm party, primarily as designated drivers, and among the others at this party were some rich kids from the 'party animal' end of the dorm. These 'animals' had wasted no time in getting exceedingly drunk and losing what self-control they had. That's when we found out that they were species purists; they started making pointed comments about Lyman's features and markings. Since he grew up on a succession of air force bases, Lyman was used to this kind of nonsense and shrugged it off. Then they started in with rude questions and comments about his ancestry and parentage; which is why I cringed a little even though you asked politely. My friend here still managed to 'keep his cool', though I could tell he was starting to get angry."

Debbye looked at Lyman, who nodded, "He's right, it was taking more effort to restrain myself, but I didn't 'lose it' at any time."

"So what happened next?" inquired the squirrel.

Lee continued, "These louts were feeling somewhat aggravated themselves by this time. They were trying to provoke Lyman into attacking them so they could 'prove' the 'superiority' of their 'unmixed blood' and it wasn't working. Finally, they ganged up on him. As the language had turned uglier, I'd kept more of an ear cocked on what was going on. When they did gang up, I stepped over and tried to diffuse the situation; my efforts were unsuccessful."

As he spoke, the events flashed before his mind's eye:

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

"Get lost, cat!" snarled the biggest of the four canines surrounding Lyman. "We're going to teach this mixed - breed a lesson. Unless you want the same, butt out!"

"Sorry, no can do," replied Lee politely through clenched teeth. With his ears back, his eyes cold, and his fur up, he clearly didn't look ready to be polite. "He's my friend; I'm bloody well not about to desert him."

"Be it on your head," snarled a wolf, swinging at Lee. The Rottweiler, Doberman, and another wolf jumped at Lyman but the initial action had allowed him to get back-to-back with Lee. "So much for a nice party," snarled Lyman. "Let's skip the next one and let 'em find their own way home."

"Fine by me," answered Lee. "Meanwhile, let's deal with this little problem."

Lee's voice trailed off for a moment as the memories surged.

"What happened then?" asked Debbye in wonder. "Isn't four against two poor odds for you two?"

Lee and Lyman both chuckled. "The odds on that fight were poor," answered Lee, "but not for us. On one side you had four drunken furs who only knew bullying, not serious fighting, while both of us were sober and both of us had well learned how to fight in self defense."

"Truly," chimed in Lyman. "As many different schools as I attended, I had to learn to stand up for myself. Lee's never told me the specifics, but I gather that learning self-defense was a necessity for him, too."

"Anyway," chuckled the cat, "we were much better prepared for this than they were and we 'wiped the floor with them' in short order. Naturally, the police were called because of the disturbance, but our assailants were the ones taken into custody, given the evidence. Since I had kept my claws retracted," here Lee flexed his paw to show them, "we were even commended for the restraint we'd shown."

"I guess that explains how you handled Kirk so well last night," commented Debbye.

"What?" asked a surprised Lyman. "Another fight?"

"Hardly that," replied Lee, "merely a fur with too few brains and too many ideas. I immobilized him quickly and persuaded him of the error of his ways."

"I'll bet!" laughed Lyman. "Did you leave with a good line like you left the fight we've been rehashing?"

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

"Nothing that good."

Debbye cocked an eyebrow at Lee. "Okay, what's the punch line I'm missing?"

Lyman answered, still chuckling, "As they were carting our opponents out the door, Lee looked at them, shook his head, and commented, 'I'd say that your efforts to maintain pure blood have produced a family tree that's a twig.' I've not forgotten the laughter on everyone else's face and the flush on our assailant's faces from that line. Between being convicted of disturbing the peace and the embarrassment of losing, especially with that critique, they withdrew and went to some other college."

Debbye shook her head, "That was truly a nasty thing to do, Lee, but it sounds like they earned it."

Lyman chuckled, "No doubt. Anyway, that little episode firmly cemented our friendship and our teaming. By the end of that school year, both of us had been unofficially adopted by the other's family and welcomed into their home."

"These days," commented Lee, "we feel like the title of a used album I saw the other day, 'Twin Sons of Different Mothers' [Dan Fogelberg and Tim Weisberg]. We come from different backgrounds but we're closer than lots of sibs."

"Do you suppose," inquired the squirrel, "that you owe those furs for that?"

Lee and Lyman looked at each other and chorused, "Nah!" The unexpected chorus set Debbye chuckling and her chuckle infected the two males.

While the story had been going on, all three had finished their cleaning chores. Lyman packed up and; looking at the clock, turned to Lee. "I'd best be getting back to my place, I've still got some things to take care of tonight." Turning to Debbye, he kissed her paw, "It's been quite a pleasure to meet you. You're even more than I expected."

Debbye blushed, "Than you expected?"

Lyman grinned, "Yeah. I know this cat's standards and I've seen his behavior this past week, so I knew something about you." Seeing Lee's deepening blush, Lyman continued, "But I'd best say no more, I think I've embarrassed him enough for tonight." Clapping his paw on Lee's shoulder, he finished, "See you in the morning." With that, he left Lee's apartment, quietly shutting the door behind him.

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

Still blushing, Lee and Debbye stood looking at one another. After a moment, Debbye dryly commented, "Well, that was quite an exit."

"Sure was," replied Lee in an equally dry tone. Stepping over to Debbye, he gathered her to him. "I'm sorry he embarrassed you like that, I'll talk to him tomorrow."

Debbye pulled him into a hug. "No, Lee," murmured the squirrel into his chest, "it was a surprise, not an embarrassment. " 'Sides I'm relieved and flattered that your best friend thinks so highly of me," Stepping back, she continued in a normal tone, "Now, shall we finish this up? I'm certain you've got matters to take care of, too, and I need to get home."

"Fair enough. Give me a paw carrying this stuff and we'll be finished shortly."

With the firearms and cleaning kits stowed in the gun safe, Lee took the trash out to the Dumpster and finished straightening up the dining room. Looking around, Lee commented, "I think that takes care of everything, I've thoroughly enjoyed your company and find I'm intensely looking forward to next weekend."

Debbye stepped forward and hugged him. "Despite the difficulties, I've enjoyed it too. Next weekend can't come fast enough."

Lee chuckled and bent his head down, "Then let me kiss you good night and I'll walk you to your car."

Debbye's arms sliding around his neck were as much an answer as her low "Yes." Hugging each other very close, their tails twined, the two reaffirmed their feelings, agreements, and commitments. After they finally broke the kiss, Lee and Debbye smiled at each other and then stepped back as if by agreement. Lee offered her his arm and, locking the door behind him, escorted Debbye to her car. After she'd entered the car and Lee had shut the door behind her, Debbye rolled down the window and beckoned Lee close. "Call me tomorrow night and we'll make plans for next weekend."

"It will be a pleasure," grinned the cat.

"Then, good night, my prince; sweet dreams," said the squirrel in a low voice as she kissed his muzzle.

"And the same for you, my princess," replied Lee with a gentle return kiss to her muzzle. "Drive safely."

Chapter 2.2 Getting to know you... Part 2.

"I shall," replied Debbye as she raised the window and backed out of the slot. Lee watched until her car left the parking lot, then went and took care of the evening's remaining matters, though perhaps with more of a distracted nature than usual.

Debbye, too, was feeling somewhat distracted and consequently paid extra attention to her driving. Arriving home, she parked where her car would not block either of her parents' cars. Entering the house, she found her father sitting in the living room reading a professional journal.

George Squirrel looked up as his daughter entered the house, "Hello, darling. Have a good time?"

"A most interesting time," replied Debbye. "I got to meet Lyman Aquilaferi, Lee's best friend, and another of his co-workers and friends." Coming into the living room, Debbye sat back in another chair and turned to her father. In a pensive voice she asked, "Dad, from your experience, what would it mean if a feline on the short end of a 4 on 2 fight kept his claws sheathed?"

Her father raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Well, first of all it would tell me he's self-controlled; it takes control to override the body's natural reaction. Secondly, it tells me that he was confident of not needing them. I take it this young gentlefur got into an altercation?"

"Some years ago," reassured Debbye, "his best friend, a wolf/fox mix, ran afoul of some species purists and Lee stepped in to help his friend."

"Then I'd say Lee has good instincts and abilities," replied her father, "I've dealt with species purist before and they're a stupid bother, especially if one gets into uniform. Coupled with what Alisia Nash told us earlier today, I'm getting a favorable impression of this gentlefur. Is that what you wanted to know?"

Debbye blushed, "Yeah, dad; thanks. I needed that to check my own impressions."

"I see," replied her father slowly, "well, just take matters slowly and be careful."

"I will dad," smiled the young lady. "G'night."

"Goodnight, darling," he answered, "sleep well."

Debbye headed to her room to prepare for the next day and then for bed, though thoughts of a blue-eyed male feline left her somewhat distracted.

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

-Monday-

Monday dawned as a beautiful day and Lee & Lyman made good time driving into work.

"I enjoyed meeting your ladyfur friend this weekend," commented Lyman. "She's everything you said she was and a good shot, too." He chuckled, "If you do go the distance with her, you'd best watch your step as she obviously knows how to take care of herself."

"I know it," replied Lee, "that's part of the attraction. I don't want a dishrag, a doormat, or a clinging vine; I want a partner."

"Well, she seems to be that."

Turning onto the street in front of the plant, they noticed a line of cars at the main gate of the aircraft plant. Lyman sighed and grumbled, "Well, there goes the idea of a lovely Monday. They're obviously doing an entry check again."

As they got to the guard, he asked to see their badges, which he compared against a list. "Ah, the first two I've seen from this list! Mr. Aquilaferi, Mr. Evans, I've been asked to inform you that you are to report to the conference room in Building L as soon as you arrive."

Lee and Lyman looked at each other with a common thought, *Building L? Oh man, it's turning into one of those Mondays.*

Building L was a non-descript, windowless building located just off the ramp in the middle of the plant; it was also a very isolated building with its own intra-net and no computer connection to the plant's intra-net or to anywhere outside the building. Not only that, in addition to offices it had its own shop and assembly areas. Still, history had been made here, and at similar facilities at other companies; these were the secure buildings where highly (often very) classified programs were conducted.

They parked in front of the windowless building, used their clearance badges to sign in, and headed for the conference room where a tall black-furred wolf waited for them; their boss, Joe McDonald.

"Lee! Lyman! I'm glad you two are the first ones here. You're going to be the point furs for design on this goodie, sign out a folder and start looking at what's going down."

"Sure, boss. What's up?" asked Lyman.

"An upgrade to that special program we did last year. They want the first one by Friday."

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

"By Friday?" queried Lee, "I hope it's a modification and not an all new bird."

"It's a 'mod', but a big one; they want to add a major new sensor system. Take a look and start figuring the approaches you two could use."

"Yes, sir; we're on it."

As their coworkers entered the room, Lee & Lyman waved the other design specialists over. "Noele, Jim, Curt, Morgan, this is the package we're going to be working with. All ideas on how best to handle this are welcome." Looking up, Lee saw a familiar white figure enter. "Hey, Rava," he called out, "bring Kim & Todd with you and come see your new headache."

When the rest of the Special Engineering Team had arrived, they all grabbed some coffee and pastries, and signed for their folders, the boss asked the guard to shut the door. Standing at the podium in the front, he started his briefing.

"All right, listen up! The Customer was very happy with what we gave him last year, but now he wants to add some new sensors. Preliminary Design thinks we can put it in, so the Customer's bought into it. Thing is, they need the first one by the end of the week; so the order of the week is 'Do and work whatever is necessary to do it right and to meet that schedule'. Now, Lee & Lyman are going to be our point men in the design phase as they did the original design of the area involved, I want full support for them and prompt turn-around on anything they hand you. Lyman, Lee; you two had best figure you're going to be at home very little this week."

"One other thing, take a look at the caveat block on these pages, this is a continuation of last year's 'black program' and all the rules and restrictions you were briefed on apply. In other words people, no discussing this project outside this building unless you are in a secure area and authorized to do so. Alright?" he looked around to see if there were any questions. "Now, get going, we're on a tight schedule and I've already wasted too much of your time."

As Lee & Lyman headed for their workstations on the main floor to start putting together the data and models they'd need, Lee turned and asked, "Do you want to call Dr. Amwald and tell him that we won't be in class tomorrow night or shall I?"

Lyman shrugged, "Doesn't matter. He at least understands the business and will give us the notes we missed without an argument. I'll go ahead and call him, you start getting the material together."

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

—Lunchtime—

Debbye enthusiastically sat down to lunch with the rest of The Clique.

"Well," observed Susan, "it looks like someone had a good weekend. So spill it, what more did you learn about this guy?"

Debbye blushed, "Well, from watching him swim on Saturday, I can verify that the tawny patch goes down at least to his waist; beyond that I can tell you that he's quite a swimmer and a good player to have on your volleyball team. On a somewhat more somber note, I can also report that he knows how to defend himself."

Catching her tone, Cindy softly asked, "What happened?"

"Well," blushed Debbye, "you remember I told you about that male weasel, Kirk?"

"I remember," replied Cindy. "Did he try something?"

"Did he ever!" answered Debbye heatedly. "Lee was walking me out to my car when Kirk comes running up, yells at him to leave me alone, and throws a punch at him."

"Then what happened?" asked Sabrina.

"I can't say, exactly," continued Debbye, "but the next thing I know, Lee has Kirk's punching paw up behind his back and Lee's other arm is around Kirk's neck. Lee managed to subdue Kirk without doing any violence at all."

"So, what else happened this weekend?" asked an amazed Cindy.

Debbye chuckled, "Well, I did get to meet his best friend, Lyman Aquilaferi. He's got an interesting ancestry, Italian wolf and English red fox; it gives him something of an exotic air. I can see why he and Lee are such good friends, they think along very similar paths and both are quite the gentlefurs."

"Indeed?" commented Susan with a laugh, "I wouldn't have expected that many to still be around."

"I didn't expect it, either," Debbye answered, "but they both are." She sighed and continued, "Lee really proved it when I muffed it big time at the gun range and almost drove him off."

Sabrina looked at Debbye with a start, "What happened? You two seemed rather taken with each other."

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

Debbye looked down at her food and pushed it around with her fork. "It was my fault. Lee has a friend and co-worker who's just as exuberant as you've told us Zig Zag can be; I didn't realize this at first and thought there was something more between them than just friendship. I'm afraid I made a quiet scene about it."

"Is the rupture still there?" inquired Cindy. "You certainly seemed happy enough when you came in here."

"No," answered the squirrel, "it isn't still there. Once she realized what had happened, Lee's friend, Rava, came and talked to me and we settled things; then I talked to Lee and we worked things out. Rava and I talked more, later, I think we're going to become friends."

"I hope you won't forget us," Chuckled Susan.

"No way!" replied Debbye; then blushed as she realized she was being teased.

When Joe came by after lunch, they had some initial information for him. "As usual," commented Lee, "there's good news and bad news. The good news is that the basic modeling that the PD folks did is accurate, all the basic hardware seems to fit. The bad news is that they didn't look at the connection and installation requirements and we're going to have to make some additional changes."

Lyman added, "But we rather expected that from previous experience and checked that first. Barring any unexpected surprises in the rest of the installation, we should have the basic package modeled before we go home tonight."

"Good job, guys. That's why I put you two at point; neither of you misses much and you cover each other's weak spots without thinking. I'll be back this evening for a review of what you've got."

As they got back to work, Lyman looked over at Lee, "So, tell me, how's this bit of 'fun & games' going to affect matters with your ladyfur?"

"What can I do but tell her the truth? This is a part of the job and she's best forewarned; I don't think it'll faze her but she needs to know what she'll be getting into if the relationship grows as I hope."

"Planning ahead or just counting unhatched chickens?"

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

"The former I hope, there's something between us that we both feel and my hope is that it will be there, growing stronger, as we come to know each other better." He looked back towards the papers all over his desk, "Meanwhile, we need to get 'cracking' if we're to have this done so we can leave at a 'reasonable' hour tonight."

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By 8:30 that evening, they'd reviewed the full package of changes with the boss and were getting ready to leave. Lee looked at the time, "Oops, I'd best call her before we leave rather than wait 'til I get home; it'd be too late then. Can you wait a couple of minutes?"

"As late as we're running, what difference will a few more minutes make?" laughed Lyman.

"Thanks, friend."

Ring-g-g-g, Ring-g-g-g

"Squirrel residence" answered Mrs. Squirrel.

"Good evening, may I speak to Debbye, please?" asked Lee.

"Certainly, who may I say is calling?"

"Lee Evans"

"Ah, the young gentlefur..." he heard in the background as the woman called for Debbye, "She'll be with you shortly Mr. Evans; in the meantime, her father and I appreciate the courtesy & consideration you've shown her this past weekend."

"Well, ma'am, I reckon that she's worth it. 'Sides, I'd want my sister to be treated the same way by any male fur interested in her."

"Still, we do appreciate it. By the way, she didn't say and her father was wondering how the target shooting session went yesterday."

Lee chuckled, "Well, ma'am, let's just say that if my intentions were anything but honorable, I'd be worried, she did shoot well."

Mrs. Squirrel chuckled, "I'm certain her father will be glad to hear that. Now, here she is."

"Hello, my princess"

"Hello, yourself. I was beginning to think you weren't going to call."

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

"To tell the truth, I almost didn't. We're just getting ready to leave work for the evening."

"At this hour? What's up?"

"I can't tell you much more than that something big and hot came up and that I'll be working late probably every night this week. Since I don't know how Friday will be until then, why don't you call me at work that afternoon and we can plan for the weekend with some certainty. The 'last four' of the phone number here is 2922, the prefix is the same as on my card."

"Okay, I'll be looking forward to talking to you on Friday. Now you get yourself home to a dinner and a good night's rest."

"Yes, ma'am!" responded Lee in his best trainee style, "I'm on my way."

"You're nuts, but I like you anyway," chuckled Debbye, "You take care now and I'll talk to you on Friday."

"Good night, my princess"

"Good night, my prince; pleasant dreams."

-click-

Lyman looked at Lee, "I take it she wasn't too put out?"

"Nope, didn't seem to be. And she was concerned that I take care of myself. I'd consider those hopeful signs."

"They seem to be. Now, let's get out of here. Care to grab something on the way home?"

"Sure, how about Chinese?"

"You're on." And they cleared through the exit check by Security and headed for the car.

And at the other end of the line:

"So tell me," inquired Debbye's mother, "just how interested are you in this gentlefur if you're worrying like that?" smiling at her daughter.

Debbye blushed, "I'm not certain, yet, mom. I promise, you and dad will know as soon as the situation changes."

"We trust you, honey. We know you'll move carefully. From what we heard, he doesn't move rashly either."

-Tuesday-

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

For Lee and Lyman, the workday started with a quick staff meeting.

"Okay," announced Joe, "Lee and Lyman managed to get the new installation modeled late yesterday and it's in the master model file area. I want all the engineering disciplines, especially Stress, Loads, Electrical, and Manufacturing Engineering, to take a look at it first thing and check it out. We're going to have to hurry with this one and it has to be right. While that's going on, Lee & Lyman will be setting up the necessary documentation structure so we can get the drawings and other data out quickly. Any questions? If not, get to it people, we're under the gun."

By lunchtime, the few concerns that arose had been dealt with and operations proceeded forward at a brisk pace. While Lee and Lyman proceeded with getting the necessary drawings and design paperwork out, other disciplines started the necessary documentation & reportage, and, working from the details in the master model, the shop started fabricating the parts that were needed.

-Friday-

By Friday, the last drawings were finishing up through the expedited release cycle and the installation was well under way on the vehicle. Lee & Lyman had managed, through "burning the midnight oil", to get their initial job done and were now working with the assembly shop to keep the new installation going smoothly.

"Hey, Lee," yelled the mechanic they were working with, "you actually gave us room to hook everything up without scraping our knuckles or contorting our backs; you keep that up and they'll drum you out of the union."

Lee just chuckled, "Nick, you wouldn't have liked the PD version, they didn't even look at that kind of thing. Lyman and I, have been through enough that we know better."

Nick grinned back, "I know, it's just that most of what we work on doesn't have that. Can we get the 'powers that be' to have you two review new designs?"

"Right," responded Lee drolly, "as if they're going to listen to a couple of young guys like us. The best we can hope for is to give y'all the best we can, make it as good as we can for the folks that have to maintain it, and hope that we set an example. Of course, if y'all and the maintainers were to mention your appreciation, it might help point management in the right direction." He grinned at him.

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

"We'll think about it," promised the mechanic thoughtfully, "and I'll chat with my opposite number at the site this bird's going to." He smiled back.

Lee checked his watch, "Well, unless there's a problem, I'm going to go grab a lunch before the building cafeteria closes."

Lee was almost to the door of the assembly bay when Nick called him back. "Lee, it looks like they did a modification out in the field and never documented it. The plumbing change for this area won't fit."

Lee sighed, "I knew things were going too smoothly. Okay, y'all start mocking up the new plumbing we'll need and I'll alert Lyman that there's a change package coming through. Maybe I can still grab some lunch while we're working."

On his way out of the assembly shop, Lee stopped at an internal phone, "Lyman. It's Lee. We just ran into a problem down here; it seems there was a field mod that was never properly documented; we're going to have to put through a change package. I'm going to grab something in the cafeteria and then head back here. We should be able to dump the mock-up data to the database within a couple of hours, maximum."

Lyman groaned, "I knew this was going too smoothly! Okay, you stay there and support the shop. I pull the data, check it, clean up the product, and dump the final version back into the database. Since it's a drawing change, we should be able to still get the paperwork out today. Darn, I was looking forward to getting out of here at a reasonable time for once this week."

"You know my situation, how do you think I feel? I don't think I'm going to get to see her tonight," replied a frustrated Lee.

"Worry about that later, we'll need you down there to clean this up as quickly as possible."

"Wilco, I'm on my way for a quick trip to the cafeteria. While we're taking care of things here, you check and see what documentation is available on this change."

"I'm on it, I want to see if there's anything else we missed."

By the time Lee returned with his lunch, the area had been opened up and Nick, Rava, and the others involved were examining the problem area. Squatting down to look into the vehicle, Lee could see where the new plumbing and the modification interfered. Using his pencil as a pointer, Lee held the tube in place and indicated a new routing. "I think if we make this change to the tube, it'll clear no matter what hardware's there."

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

Nick & Rava squinted at it for a minute, looked at each other, and nodded their heads. "Yeah, that should do it without major changes," answered Nick, "I'll go get mockup tubing and get started."

Within two hours, the new tube was through the entire process and Lee observed the installation with pardonable pride. "Looks good," pronounced Nick as everything was properly tightened down. "Darn good thing you were down here, Lee. It would've taken a lot longer for someone unfamiliar with the area to fix this."

Lee chuckled, "Why do you think Joe supports us being down here? He knows how these things go. I'll be staying here 'til everything's buttoned up and she flies off."

—3 PM—

Ring-g-g-g, Ring-g-g-g

"Hello," answered Lyman.

"Lyman, this is Debbye. Is Lee available?"

"I'm sorry, Debbye, he's busy in another area right now. Can I have him call you back?"

"Yes, please have him call me at home when he gets free. Do you have any idea what time that will be?"

"I'm sorry, no I don't," apologized Lyman. "I would imagine that it shouldn't be more than an hour or two, he's seeing our 'headache' through to completion while I hold down the fort in this area."

"Sorry to have bothered you, I imagine you two are quite anxious to get this job over."

"You don't know how anxious. There was one night we even considered using the RON kits we keep in our desks."

"RON kits?"

"Oops, sorry," apologized Lyman, "That's a term we've picked up from some of the pilots and crew we've worked with. It stands for 'Remain Over Night' and the 'kit' is basically everything you'd need to do so and be in good shape in the morning."

"You didn't, did you?" asked Debbye with concern.

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"No, we decided that, despite the late hour, we'd both be in better shape if we slept at home."

"I'm glad of that. Now, I'll hang up and get out of your fur."

"No problem. I'll be sure to have Lee call you as soon as he gets back here."

"Thanks, bye." And Debbye hung up.

—5 PM—

A rather worn looking Lee eased in the office and sat down in his work area. "It's all done," he announced to Lyman, "they're signing the final transfer paperwork now. Good job on speeding that change through the system, I'd hate to have things held up for it."

Lyman chuckled, "So would everyone else. Besides, the Customer was embarrassed that we hadn't been given full information. They were impressed, though, that we managed to find a simple change that'd work for all the 'birds', irrespective of whether they've got that mod or not."

"Good, maybe that'll help in getting future work."

"I hope so. Meanwhile, lest I forget, you've got something important to take care of. Your ladyfur called and wants you to call her back."

"Darn, I knew I'd forgotten something; I did ask her to call me back this afternoon. Well, I'd best call her then, especially since I need something pleasant after that push to finish things up." So saying, Lee turned and picked up the phone.

Ring-g-g-g, Ring-g-g-g

"Good evening. Squirrel residence. This is Debbye speaking."

"Good evening, my princess. This is your waylaid prince returning your call."

"Lee! I was wondering if I was going to hear from you," exclaimed the young squirrel.

"It has taken time to wrap this one up. We just DD250'd the bird so I can now officially relax," responded Lee with a tired tone.

"DD250'd?"

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"Pardon me, DD250 is the form with which the government customer officially takes delivery from a supplier, so when final delivery is complete, the item is said to be DD250'd."

"Ah, just another verbal shorthand, like the RON kit Lyman mentioned."

"Precisely," agreed Lee. "Every specialty has their share; this one just has a larger share because of all the different things we get involved in." "Of course," chuckled the feline, "there's bound to be overlap between specialties; depending on who you're talking to, 'LEO' can mean either 'Low Earth Orbit' or 'Law Enforcement Officer'."

The squirrel chuckled, "I can see real potential for confusion there." "Okay, then," continued Debbye, "what are your plans for tonight?"

"I'm not certain I'd be fit company tonight. We've put in over sixty hours since coming in Monday morning and I'm feeling rather wiped out at the moment."

"Over sixty hours!" exclaimed Debbye. "You've got to take better care of yourself than that!"

"Easy; I've been most careful in taking care of myself. I've not done much else beyond eat, sleep, and work this week."

"Well, then," responded Debbye firmly, "You need to relax and let someone else provide for you, for a change. Tell me what time you'll be home and I'll bring dinner over with me. For you and Lyman."

"Debbye," protested Lee, "We can't impose on you like that."

"Nonsense!" snorted Debbye. "You're friends who need assistance, and I'm offering it. That is not imposing. Imposing would be if you insisted I do it regardless of my wishes. Now, what time do you expect to be home?"

Lee sighed, "I can't argue, and I'm not certain I want to. We should be at my place by about seven. Despite my protests, thank you, my princess. I'll be looking forward to seeing you."

"I'm glad you're being reasonable and seeing it my way," Debbye chuckled. "Now, you two be careful and I'll see you at seven."

"Of course, my lady. We'll see you then. Goodbye for now."

"Goodbye, my prince."

-click-

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Lee turned to Lyman, "Well, I guess that takes one item off tonight's agenda; she insists on bringing dinner over for two tired and overworked engineers."

Lyman raised an eyebrow, "For both of us? Why for both of us?"

"I guess that she considers you a friend, too. 'Sides, you know you're as worn as I am."

"Too true," replied Lyman with a yawn. "Now, let's get things finished up here so we can escape."

And at the other end of the line:

Linda Squirrel raised an eyebrow as Debbye hung up. "I take it you'll not be joining us for supper then?" she asked with a smile. "That was a nice offer to make, darling, and including his best friend was a good way to both show concern and avoid any problems that just the two of you being together might cause."

"Mother!" exclaimed Debbye. "You know I wouldn't rush into something like that. Besides, Lee has given you no reason to suspect him of such a thing."

"I know," agreed her mother, "but things happen sometimes and I'm glad you're being careful. Now," she continued, "did you want to fix something or are you going to pick something up at a restaurant?"

Debbye glanced at the clock. "I think I'd best pick up something on the way. If I'd known earlier I might have fixed something, but I don't believe there's the time now to do it properly and clean up the kitchen."

Mrs. Squirrel nodded, "You're probably correct on that, especially since you'd have to make some real quick decisions on what to fix if you tried now. Do you need any money for the restaurant?"

"Let me check," answered Debbye and she went to check her purse. After checking, and then double-checking, she replied "No, I don't think I will, mom. I didn't buy that much this week and I've got a fair amount left."

Her mother passed her a \$10 bill. "Just to be on the safe side, dear," she chuckled, "you're doing a good turn for those two and I don't want you to have any problems."

"Thanks, mom," replied Debbye softly. "I appreciate your confidence in me."

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"We know you and everything we've heard about Lee is good and we'll trust the other gentlefur on your and Lee's opinions. Now, where were you thinking of picking up the dinners?"

"I hadn't really thought about that, yet," Debbye admitted. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Why not Furry's?" suggested Linda, "From what you've told me, it's on the way and they do have good food and reasonable prices."

Debbye stopped and thought a minute, "Yeah, that sounds like a good choice. Thanks, mom."

"Certainly, darling," chuckled her mother. "That's what mothers are for, you know."

Debbye joined the chuckle and started getting ready.

"So, what are you two planning to do tomorrow? I imagine he's not going to be in the best of shape, particularly if he and his friend have their usual racquetball game."

"I've been thinking about that. What would you say if I took Lee on a picnic tomorrow afternoon?"

"I'd say it was a fine idea. What your father might say is another question. But, don't worry, I can talk him into it; it sounds like just the restful activity this young gentlefur of yours needs."

Debbye hugged her mother, "Thanks, mom. You know you don't have to worry about anything happening. I hate to ask, but could you help me prepare something suitable for the picnic? I want to do it right."

"Sure, dear. I'll set some thing up tonight and we can put it together in the morning."

"Thanks again, mom," said a relieved Debbye. "Now, I'd better get going if I'm going to pick up those dinners."

"Okay, dear. Have a good evening and be careful."

"I will, mom. G'night."

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Shortly after 7PM, Lee opened the door to Debbye's knock. "Sorry I'm running late," she apologized, "traffic made it a real fight to get out of the restaurant parking lot."

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Lee chuckled as he helped her carry the bag from the restaurant, "We hadn't yet become sufficiently famished to go out and hunt you down, so I'd say you arrived in good time." Setting the bag of dinners down on the dining table, Lee asked, "I know our tastes, but what would you care to drink, my lady?"

"What are the choices?" inquired the squirrel.

"In addition to the basics of milk, water, and juices, I've got the diet versions of Coca-Cola and Dr. Pepper."

Debbye thought for a moment, then answered, "I'll have whatever you two are having. There's no sense in bringing in two bottles."

"Good enough," replied Lee. He shortly returned from the kitchen with a large bottle and three disposable cups. Debbye fished the meals and plastic utensils out of the sack. "I'm sorry," she apologized, "I wasn't certain of your tastes, so I ordered something fairly basic."

Lee and Lyman looked at each other and grinned, "We're bachelors," replied Lyman, "we're supposed to be able to eat anything, even our own cooking."

Debbye just chuckled. With a silent grace by each, they sat down to eat.

As they ate, Debbye looked them over. "Do these hours happen often?" she inquired. "You two look rather worn down."

Lee looked at Lyman, who shrugged. Lee turned to Debbye, "'Sometimes' is the best answer I can give, it depends on workload and when the jobs come through. We've had it only sporadically this year, but we had a six-month stretch the year before."

Lyman continued Lee's comment, "From what some of the 'old hands' tell us, we've been lucky. Some of them have stories of doing this for several years in a row."

Debbye shuddered, "Just seeing how tired one week makes you two, I'd hate to think what that must have been like."

Lee nodded, "I understand it was a big classified program and they couldn't find enough people who could get clearances and who had the necessary background; so the ones they could find ended up working extra hard."

Changing the subject, Debbye asked, "As bad as you two are looking tonight, are you still going to have your 'court date' tomorrow?"

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Lee & Lyman nodded to each other. "But, of course," answered Lyman, "How could we skip it?"

"In that case," suggested Debbye, "I really think both of you ought to get a good night's rest after this."

Lyman & Lee looked at each other again. "Makes sense to me," answered Lee.

"To me, too." Agreed Lyman. "As soon as we finish here, I'm heading back to my place, washing up, and crashing."

Debbye turned to Lee, "From your appearance, I'd say that 'washing up and crashing' sounds like a good plan for you, too."

His mouth full, Lee nodded agreement.

"Now," continued Debbye, "had you made any plans for tomorrow afternoon?"

Lee's face lost all expression for a minute, then he answered, "Blast, I haven't had a chance to think that far ahead. No, I'm sorry, I don't have any plans."

"That's all to the good," replied the squirrel, " 'cause I'm taking you on a picnic. I'll take care of everything; you just be ready to go when I come by for you."

Lee stared for a moment, then shrugged, "I'm not really used to furs wanting to do things for me, but, yeah, I'd love to go on a picnic with you."

"Then it's a date," stated Debbye.

Lee agreed, "One I'll be looking forward to."

With a twinkle in his eye, Lyman piously intoned, "Now you two behave yourselves."

Lee and Debbye looked at each other and just smiled. "But, of course," replied Debbye, "we wouldn't dream of anything else. Would we, Lee?"

Lee smoothly agreed, "Of course we wouldn't."

Lyman snorted, "Tell that to someone who doesn't know you."

With that, all three broke up with laughter.

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

Recovering, Lee asked, "Would you mind, fair lady, if I brought some camera gear with me? It seems like an ideal opportunity, especially since I'd have a gorgeous model with me."

Debbye blushed, "Me gorgeous? I don't know what to say to that, but I'm flattered that you think so. Sure, I'd love to be your model, but I'd like to take some shots of you too."

Lee chuckled, "Deal! How can I resist?"

Lyman just shook his head. "I don't believe you two. You're as bad tonight as you were in the car last Sunday."

Debby looked over and smiled, "Were we really that bad?"

Lyman responded, chuckling, "It sure seemed like it from the back seat." He rolled his eyes, "From my viewpoint, it looked rather deep and tonight's getting to be the same."

Debbye and Lee looked at each other and smiled. "Well," answered Lee, "one of the 'side effects' of last Sunday's incident is that we've agreed to be fully open with each other and not take things for granted."

In response, Lyman raised his cup in toast, "I wouldn't have expected it from you, my friend; it's heartening to see you opening up to someone. So, here's to the both of you."

Debbye blushed as Lee returned the salute; then developed a sly smile. Turning to Lyman, she offered, "If you're so concerned about our behavior, you're welcome to come along tomorrow as a chaperone."

Lee started and then grinned craftily, "Of course, we'd be glad to have you, in the role of photographer's assistant. You would be a definite help."

Lyman's eyes widened. *Darn*, he thought, *they've called my bluff. I can just imagine how much equipment Lee will bring if he's got 'help'.* Aloud, Lyman responded, "Knowing Lee, I really don't think that's necessary. Besides, I rather imagine y'all would rather just have more fun as a twosome."

"Can I quote you on that?" asked Debbye, sweetly smiling. "Just, of course, on the off chance that my father expresses some concern about the two of us going off on a picnic by ourselves."

Lyman grimaced, "Mouse trapped! Very nicely done, too. Yeah, you can quote me to your father." Turning to Lee, he added, "You'd be advised to consider your actions carefully, she's sharp."

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Lee chuckled, "I know she is. You don't think I'd be attracted to a dull femme, do you?"

Lyman shook his head smiling, "Nah, neither of us would go for anyone like that."

"Why, thank you both," replied Debbye with a smile. "It's nice to know a gal's appreciated for her mind, too."

"Mens sana in corpore sano [a sound mind in a sound body], fair lady," commented Lee. "I, for one, find both the 'mens' and the 'corpo' quite attractive."

Debbye blushed, "Thank you. Would you be offended if I said the same about you?" she asked shyly.

"Really?" blinked Lee. "I'm flattered, quite flattered, that you feel that way."

"Now that we've got that out of the way," interrupted Lyman slightly amused, "do you have any dessert?"

Debbye shook her head, "I wasn't certain there'd be room for it."

"That's all right," assured Lee. "I've got enough of a cheesecake left to take care of all three of us."

Lee served generous slices each and dessert soon disappeared. Sweeping all the remains of dinner into a garbage bag, Lyman announced, "I'll just throw this in the dumpster on the way to my place. Y'all just stay here. Thank you very much for dinner, Debbye; I'll see you in the morning, Lee." With that, he headed out the door.

Debbye turned to Lee. "I really should be leaving shortly, too," she said, "I want you to get a good night's rest. How are you planning to wash up?"

A puzzled Lee replied, "Just my usual hot shower, I figured. Why?"

Debbye turned away and blushed, "I just wanted to be sure you relaxed as completely as possible," she said quietly. "I'd suggest that you take a nice hot bath; I know it always relaxes me." The young squirrel hesitated a moment, then looked shyly at Lee, "Would you consider it too forward of me if I offered to draw the bath for you? I really do want to help."

"Forward? No," replied Lee with a smile. "But I do find it very considerate. I accept your kind offer."

"If you'll wait right here then, I'll go draw it for you. May I use some of your shampoo as bubble bath?"

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

"Certainly. I'll leave everything up to your judgment."

Some ten minutes later, Debbye returned. "It's all ready," she announced. "Is there anything else I can do to help you relax?"

Lee smiled dreamily, "Well, if I really wanted to relax, I'd ask for a massage afterwards."

Debbye thought for a moment, "I don't know that I'd be that good, but I'm willing to try."

Lee gave her a horrified look, "That was meant only in jest. I can't ask that of you!"

"But, why?" asked Debbye looking slightly confused. "What's so bad about it?"

Drawing her close, Lee rested his muzzle on her head. "My somewhat naive squirrel," he answered quietly, "while massages are generally relaxing, they can also have certain 'stimulating' effects, especially on male furs, and I'm tired enough that I don't know that I could control myself. If things were much, much closer between us, I might consider it, but not as things stand now. I don't feel I dare chance it."

"Oh!" Replied the young squirrel. Her face turned a deep red under her fur. "I didn't consider that. I guess then," she continued, "that I ought to wish you 'good night and sweet dreams' and leave."

"I imagine so. What time will you be by tomorrow?"

"Noon okay with you?"

"Fine! I'll see you then."

Turning her mouth up, Debbye whispered, "Then let me give you a good night kiss and I'll let myself out."

Bending his head down, Lee hugged her close as her arms came around his neck; the kiss lasted 'til both were breathless. "That, my lady," Lee said breathlessly, "is all the more reason for us not to tempt matters tonight. I'll see you tomorrow."

Her eyes slightly glazed, Debbye softly whispered, "I understand much better now. Good night, sweet prince."

"Good night, my princess," responded Lee as he walked her to the door.

Chapter 3.1 Intrusions and Interludes Part 1

Debbye drove off in a somewhat bemused state. Lee enjoyed a very relaxing bath but required further, active efforts to completely relax. Both of them had "interesting" dreams that night.

Chapter 3.2 Intrusions and Interludes Part 2

- Saturday -

Debbye pulled up in front of Lee's apartment building to find Lee waiting with a single carry-bag. Looking at the single bag, she puzzled, "I thought you were bringing a lot of camera stuff?"

"This is all I'll really need," Lee smilingly replied. "I decided to just bring the basics rather than a complete set of hardware. Especially," he chuckled, "since someone slipped out from the role as 'photographer's assistant'. That was a nice 'number' you pulled on him. So," continued the cat, "was your father concerned enough that you had to quote Lyman?"

"No, mom had already 'worked' on him," answered the squirrel. "Lyman's comment did help reassure him."

"I'm sure Lyman will be overjoyed to hear that," answered Lee with a grin.

Depositing the bag in the back seat, Lee climbed in and buckled up. "So where are we going?" he asked.

"It's a surprise. You just relax and let me take care of everything."

As she drove, Debbye inquired, "So how did the racquetball games go this morning?"

Lee looked somewhat rueful. "I'm afraid it should be 'game' not 'games'. Neither of us was in good form and it took the entire time to play one game, which I eventually won."

"That's good to hear," Debbye enthused. "I take it that you relaxed enough to get a good night's rest?"

"Very much so." answered Lee, adding with a wide grin, "Though the effects of that kiss required some extra time to overcome."

Debbye blushed; then shyly asked, "It affected you that strongly?"

"Truly! But then, you always have."

Under her fur, Debbye turned an even deeper shade of red. "I'm embarrassed," she mumbled, "I knew what you do to me, but I never thought, never imagined, that I'd affect you that strongly."

As they stopped at a stoplight, Lee smiled tenderly and spoke quietly, "Debbye, believe me, you do just that. I've been on my own for a few years and know the downside of that. So finding you, and that you feel similarly about me, well, that's awesome and wonderful enough to be scary." With that, he leaned over and kissed her gently on the muzzle.

Chapter 3.2 Intrusions and Interludes Part 2

Debbie smiled blissfully for a moment; then reverted to a more normal demeanor as the light changed and she drove on. "Hold that thought," she requested with a smile, "until we get to where we can talk without interruptions."

Working her way out of the city, Debbie finally headed north on I-270. Exiting east on highway 161, she turned left at the first traffic light. Lee looked around and commented, "I've got some idea of where we are, but I'll be interested in seeing which park you've picked."

Debbie just grinned at him and returned her concentration to following the route she'd memorized. Finally, she pulled into the parking area for Walnut Bluff Park. Turning off the engine, she turned, leaned over, and returned Lee's earlier kiss. Holding him there, muzzle to muzzle, she whispered, "I, too, know that awesome and joyous feeling, Lee. The intensity's scary, but," she added, "you take the edge off that. When I'm with you, it just feels 'right'; like the two of us together can cope where separately we couldn't."

Lee hugged her close and whispered his reply, "You do the same for me."

They stayed that way for a few minutes, but before they could do anything more, they were interrupted by a growl from Lee's stomach. Backing away, Debbie laughed, "It seems that we're being reminded of something."

Lee shook his head and chuckled, "I knew I should have grabbed a snack before leaving the club." Gesturing at the expanse leading up to the edge of the inlet from Hoover Reservoir, he continued, "How about we find a nice spot on the top of the bluff?"

"Sounds good to me," replied Debbie. "The cooler really is a 'two-paw' carry," she continued. "Do you want to carry it while I carry the spread and your camera gear or would you prefer to carry it between us while our free paws carry the other stuff?"

Lee looked at the terrain and answered, "I think I'd rather carry it between us so I can better watch for my footing."

As they got out of the car, Lee picked up his camera bag, and Debbie carefully locked the doors. "Can't be too careful," she explained in response to his questioning look; Lee just nodded. Lee arrived at the back of the car just as Debbie opened the trunk and lifted the spread off of the cooler. Grabbing the handle on one side, she nodded to Lee, "Grab the other side and let's get going with this."

Chapter 3.2 Intrusions and Interludes Part 2

Lee grabbed the other handle and they lifted the cooler out of the trunk. Catching the trunk lid with the spread, Debbye shut it and then led the way to a spot at the top of the bluff. The place she selected was a nice flat area shaded by an old walnut tree. They were far enough along the curving inlet that the houses and buildings on the western side of the reservoir were hidden from view. Gesturing with her head, Debbye asked, "This seem like a suitably idyllic spot for our picnic?"

Lee looked around and grinned, "Seems perfect to me, let's get things set up."

Setting the cooler down out of the way, Debbye unfolded the spread and positioned it so that they could sit comfortably in the shade. With Lee's help, she positioned the cooler off to one side so that it was accessible, but didn't block their view. Lee placed his camera bag next to it.

Debbye opened up the cooler and set out plates and utensils for lunch. Waving Lee over, she gestured at the setting and the cooler. "Lunch's ready. Help yourself and don't worry, there's plenty."

Lee picked up his setting and joined Debbye in front of the cooler. After a quick look inside, he turned to Debbye in surprise, "I know I've got a hearty appetite, but that's a lot of food for just lunch for the two of us."

Debbye blushed, "It's not just for lunch. I was rather hoping that you'd want to have dinner out here, too."

"I'd certainly enjoy that," smiled Lee, "but not if it gets you into trouble."

"No problem; mom was with me when I fixed this. She told me to just be home at a reasonable hour, so I don't miss church tomorrow. She'll square things with dad."

Lee shook his head, "I can't turn away such good fortune; of course I'll have dinner out here with you. Thank you very much for thinking of it." With that, he leaned over and kissed her muzzle, giving it a little lick as he pulled back."

Debbye jerked away and Lee barely caught her before she fell over. "My apologies, I didn't mean to scare you. Since it bothers you, I won't try it again."

Shaken, Debbye blushed, "No, that's not it at all, Lee; I was just surprised. I kinda enjoyed it. Care to try it again?"

Chapter 3.2 Intrusions and Interludes Part 2

"Fine by me." Lee leaned over and gently licked his tongue over Debbye's muzzle.

"M-m-m-m. Yes, I do enjoy that feeling. Let me try it on you." Debbye turned her head slightly and licked out at Lee's muzzle, gently tracing its curve.

"M-r-r-r. Yes, that's very nice."

Only the awkwardness of their positions kept the two from immediately continuing this exploration. Returning their attention to lunch, they loaded their plates, grabbed drinks, and shut the cooler. Sitting companionably together on the spread, the pair enjoyed lunch with light conversation.

Lee wiped the remains of lunch from his muzzle; then gently wiped Debbye's. "All part of our personalized service."

"Right. I'll bet you tell that to all the girls."

"Just the ones I'm especially interested in."

"Well then, it's a good thing I'm especially interested in you, too. Tell me, when do you want to shoot the photos?"

Lee stretched, "Actually, I'd like to give lunch a chance to settle first. How about you?"

"Sounds good to me. Where do you want to sit and rest?"

Lee gestured at the old walnut. "Over against that tree looks perfect." Taking Debbye's paw, he led her over. Finding a suitable spot among the roots, he sat down carefully, being sure not to trap his tail. Leaning back against the tree, he guided the squirrel to sit between his spread legs, carefully position her tail, and lean back. Wrapping his arms gently around her, he rested his muzzle on her head. "Comfortable?"

"Very," sighed Debbye, interlacing her paws with his, "It just feels good to sit here with you, like we're in our own private world and safe."

" 'Tis a pleasant interlude, though I don't know how safe you'd feel if you knew some of my thoughts."

A chuckle, then "Lee, I've got older girlfriends who've told me plenty; I doubt I'd be surprised at your thoughts and you've already shown yourself as a gentlefur who keeps himself under control. I do feel safe with you; let me show you how safe I feel." With that, she wriggled against him as the tip of her tail traced the curve of his muzzle.

Chapter 3.2 Intrusions and Interludes Part 2

The tensing of his arms and the hiss of an indrawn breath evidenced the effects of her actions. "Debbye! Are you sure there's not some vixen blood in you?"

"Absolutely!" Chuckled the squirrel. "I learned those moves years ago but you're the first male fur to catch my interest with whom I've felt safe enough to try 'em."

"I'm flattered but curious. How many others have caught your interest?"

"Only a couple," she admitted with a blush. "I'm afraid I've been very picky."

"If it makes you feel any better, I've been just as picky. In all the time I've dated, there've been only three furs, before you, that I've really been interested in and none of them affected me like you do."

"My turn to be flattered. Since you mentioned it," she grinned, "as strongly as we're falling for each other, I'd really like to know more about you than just what I've picked up from our conversations."

"Fair enough, long as you match me. For me, though, you're using the wrong tense. It's not that I am falling for you, but that I have fallen for you, Debbye; utterly, completely, and irrevocably."

"Lee! How long have you known, and how?"

"Since the week after we first met and," he chuckled, "There's a story there that I think you'll find amusing more than anything else."

"Do tell? I guess I'll just have to coax it out of you." The tip of her tail again traced his muzzle and this time added a gentle caress.

Lee's arms again tensed and Debbye could feel other reactions. "Enough!" groaned Lee, and Debbye relaxed into him. "I was going to tell you anyway. It was mid-week after we first met and I was showing all the 'symptoms' so Lyman set up a little 'test'."

"Why do I think this part of the story isn't going to amuse me?"

"Probably 'cause you know too well how young male furs think. Anyway, he suggested that we 'get out for some air' one night and we 'just happened' to end up at 'The Gentlefur's Club'."

"Grrrr. Is that what I think it is?"

"Probably, though at least he didn't insist that we sit 'stage front' nor did he set me up like another fur was that night. The interesting thing was that

Chapter 3.2 Intrusions and Interludes Part 2

though I could appreciate the performers' 'charms' aesthetically, they didn't affect me in the way you would expect them to; Lyman was quite surprised at my lack of reaction. The following Saturday you hit me with far more effect and I knew I'd fallen hard."

"That Saturday? Lee, I was wearing a very conservative swimsuit and later just a regular blouse and slacks, nothing exotic."

"I know, and you still rocked me back like those furs in the 'bare minimum' never did."

"That's amusing," she chuckled, "that I should've affected you so strongly, so quickly; especially since I've never considered myself anywhere near as attractive as one of those performers."

"Debbye, to this fur you're all that and much more," replied Lee as he gently traced the outline of her ears with his tongue. He chuckled at her indrawn breath. "Two can play at that game; shall we relax and talk now?"

"I think we'd best,' came the reply as she relaxed back against him. "I realize it's more your nature than mine, but you've aroused my curiosity. What happened to that other fur you mentioned?"

"Well, there was another pair of friends there, a big fox and a ferret. It seems that the fox had annoyed his friend not long before and the ferret took a unique revenge. That ferret," chuckled Lee, "must have known every fur working at the club. He got the fox relaxed; then sprang his trap. One of the girls stepped up on each side of him and the pair escorted him up on stage. They then announced that he'd 'won a special treat'; the next thing you know, they'd pulled his shirt off and used it to tie him to the pole onstage before he realized what was going on. For the next half-hour or so, every performer made certain that he got an 'up close & personal' performance. Most of the male furs there envied him, but I rather felt sorry for him since he was clearly embarrassed by his situation and couldn't do anything about it. His 'friend', the ferret, had an electronic camera out and took lots of 'incriminating' pictures, which I'm certain he'll bring out at the most inopportune times for the fox. Anyway, they finally let him go and thanked him for being a good sport about it, but I suspect he'll be a while living this down."

"Poor guy," chuckled Debbye. "Now, back to my original question, what's the basic info on Lee Evans?"

"How about we trade information?"

"I ask a question, you answer it; then I give you my answer?"

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"Sounds fair enough to me, so fire away."

"Okay, what's your full name?"

"Lee Paul Evans. Yours is?"

"Debbye Jana Squirrel. What's your birth date and place of birth?"

"I was born on November 26, 1973 in Brazosport, TX. When and where were you born?"

"I was born on February 17, 1980, here in Columbus."

Lee laughed, "You don't know how much this sounds like a job interview!"

"Well," grinned Debbye back at him, "aren't we discussing something equally important to us?"

"True; okay, next question?"

"Do you have any siblings?"

"I sure do; my slightly younger twin, Marilee Marie Evans and my brothers Jonathan Thomas Evans, 19, and Raphael Charles Evans, 15, also known as 'the brat'. Do you have any sibs?"

"Two, an older sister, Georgia Lynn, who's out of college and on her own as a forensic chemist in law enforcement and my younger sister, Melissa Anne, who's a senior in high school; she can be a pain at times, but we love each other. So, how about your parents?"

"My folks are Jonathan Lee Evans and the former Marie Adele Downhope. Yours are?"

"My father is George Leland Squirrel and my mother is the former Linda Jane Beachey. So, are your folks still alive?"

"Sure are and still happily married to each other. It's kinda amusing how they met. Mom's from southern California and grew up with hot rods and surfing in the fifties before they became big; she got a BS in Chemistry from UCLA and then came east to get her MS at her father's alma mater. Dad was in his early teens when his family moved from Chicago to Texas. He completed his BS, also in Chemistry, at Texas A&M and then went to his father's alma mater for an MS degree. As you've probably guessed, both of my folks went to the same graduate school. They were thrown together in their first class of the semester and dad still insists that the chemistry between them was far more powerful than the chemistry they were studying."

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"I wish my folks' story was that outrageous," grinned Debbye, "but it's much simpler. Mom had just started in the secretarial pool of one of the state government offices when dad showed up to give a deposition; she typed it and worked with him to correct it. They both liked what they saw, started dating, and the rest is history." Debbye stopped and considered for a moment, then asked, "How do you and your sister get along?"

"Marilee and I get along pretty nicely now. When we were young, we fought and played like most youngsters, then our younger brothers came along and it was us against these 'interlopers' and we developed a close bond. We helped each other study starting in junior high and it worked pretty good all the way through high school. She sometimes studied with her friends, but they'd ask me to join them if it were a course I was also taking. It didn't take long for them to accept me as a friend of theirs who happened to be a guy. It had an interesting side effect," chuckled Lee. "I was considered a 'safe friendly date' when they were 'tween romantic interests and I ended up going to a number of events I probably wouldn't have attended otherwise."

"As long as they stayed strictly 'between friends', I guess I've no cause for worry," she chuckled. "I got along fine with Georgia while we were growing up together, and we still get on great when she's home. Melissa's just a little younger than me and sees me as competition, so while we generally get along, it's not as close as when we were younger; 'sides, she's a bit more into teenage fashions and such than I ever was. Did you and Marilee go to the same college?"

"Sure did and we continued our joint studying, with Lyman's presence giving additional perspective."

"You mentioned 'friendly dates' and that brings up a question I'm definitely interested in. You've said you don't date much, but what is your dating history?"

Lee blushed, "Not as extensive as you might expect. In all of junior high and high school, I had maybe six real dates."

"Only six? Lee, you're not that unattractive!"

"Thank you, m'dear," chuckled the cat. "Anyway, there is an explanation, though it's a part of my history I'm not fond of revisiting."

Debbye leaned back against him and squeezed his paws, "It's okay, you're here with me and it's just between us."

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"Well, I had a normal enough kitten-hood. Then, about seventh grade, I started a bit of precocious internal growth and developed different interests and tastes from my 'peers'. I didn't really fit into any of the social groups that formed and there weren't that many furs that shared my interests; so I became something of a loner. It didn't help that I looked like a 'young nerd' with thick-rimmed glasses, pens & pencils in his pocket, and carrying a briefcase."

"I imagine it didn't," came the droll reply.

"In any case, this status brought out the bullies in the different groups and I was beaten up more than once. In exasperation, dad signed me up with a friend of his for self-defense lessons; I don't think he quite expected his friend to teach me not just the physical aspects but the understanding and discipline that went with it. The next few encounters with the bullies went my way and they decided to pick on a safer target. I still keep in practice and the understanding and discipline have helped in many other areas."

"So when you came to Lyman's aid at that party, you were hardly unprepared."

"Precisely. Settling those furs was easy in comparison. Back to my story; since I had the 'nerd look' and wasn't in any of the groups, not many young femme furs were interested in dating me. I wasn't a hermit or anything like that; I had a few friends, was active in scouts and church, and generally kept busy with my own interests. I did, though, hide somewhat behind a shell and dated rarely, only with a femme whose company I enjoyed and only to something we'd both enjoy."

"That male would never have helped me out and then treated me the way you did. What happened?"

"A number of events changed me. The first happened between my junior and senior years in high school. Both Marilee and I attended NSF [National Science Foundation] summer programs that summer; she went to one at UCLA, so she could see mom's folks, and I went to my folks' alma mater just north of Chicago. It was my first real time 'on my own' and it was with furs I had a lot in common with. My shell ended up breaking quickly as I made friends and enjoyed an occasional date with one or another of the few girls who attended. 'Twas only occasional and nothing serious; just a group of friends going out together. There were some romantic relationships that developed, but none that involved me."

Debbye grinned, "Well, I'd hate to think you were fickle. So, did you go back into your shell after that summer?"

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"Nope, I was a whole lot more comfortable mixing with other furs when I got home. Then Marilee and her friends started helping me with little tips on fashion sense and such. I think," he chuckled, "that they were using me as a bit of a project in learning how to make a guy over. It didn't take me long to realize what was going on and then we had a little chat. I explained that, while I realized my ignorance and welcomed their comments & advice, other males might not be so appreciative and accepting; they laughed, admitted I was right, and thanked me for handling matters tactfully. This did not hurt my self-confidence."

"I rather imagine it didn't."

"That year I managed more dates than in the previous three years combined and I was noticed more by the girls. It was," he chuckled, "the only year I got asked to the Sadie Hawkins Dance; even had to choose which invitation to accept."

"A Sadie Hawkins Dance? We had those in high school, too."

"I think it's common. So, tell me, who'd you ask?"

Debbie looked down and blushed, "I'm afraid I didn't ask, not any of the years."

"But why? I'm certain there must've been some guy that you were dying to date."

The squirrel's blush deepened, "I told you I've been very picky. The couple of guys that did catch my attention and interest had already been asked and, well, I wasn't going to ask just any fur."

"I think I've just been complimented," chuckled the cat.

Debbie matched the chuckle as she leaned back against him and relaxed. "So which invitation did you accept?"

"The one from a young lady who'd been interested and friendly before that year. I figured she'd be a much better companion than one who'd only taken an interest in me recently."

"I knew it! A fur of honor, discernment, and intelligence."

Lee chuckled, "I don't think I'd go quite that far, but thank you."

"Modest, too." Chuckled Debbie. "So how was college for you?"

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Since I'd broken out of my shell, I had no problem making friends of either sex. There were a number of friendly dates, but there were only three femmes I had anything approaching regular dates with."

"And they were?"

"Well, there was Patti; she was the sister of a good friend and I served as her "escort" whenever she brought his girlfriend up to see him. We enjoyed each other's company, but there was never anything more. The other two ladies were Sherri and Meryl. I met Sherri through the campus SF society and we became friends; we enjoyed going together to various events that were more fun that way. I met Meryl at a dorm party where we were 'bout the only two starved for intelligent conversation; we became friends and escorted each other to more than one function. In both cases, though, it was strictly friendship without that 'spark' needed to take it to another level."

"I believe it's my turn to be complimented."

" 'Tis. 'tis. I've been just as picky since I moved to Columbus. With the exception of the times I've escorted Rava to a company function, I've not dated any femme fur more than a couple times. A couple of them remain as friends, but that's it since there's just not been that 'spark' there."

"But why should Rava need an escort?"

"Think about it, m'dear. She's got a very lively personality and if she didn't have an escort, some of those wives would gossip more than they do now and with considerably more venom."

"Why do they gossip now?"

She's doing what some consider a 'male's job' and she's doing it well, she's single, she's well off, and she's living on her own. There's lots of material there for those who feel threatened by her or who are envious of her. I know her better than to believe any of that and, as a friend, I've tried to help her keep down the opportunities for the gossips to feed. I think," he chuckled, "that she'll have to find another escort now that I've got you." A gentle hug accompanied this.

"I suppose I should apologize to her," agreed Debbye, "but I'm not going to apologize for finding you."

"Nor I for you. So, tell me, you said you were picky – how much have you dated?"

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"Well, some in high school, though there were few repeats. Most teenaged males seem somewhat afraid of my father."

"If he 'played with their minds' like my dad dealt with the guys that came for Marilee, I see why they might."

"Anyway, that was in high school. In the last year, at college, it's not been all that different; though the other girls in 'The Clique' have tried unsuccessfully to find me a steady guy."

"I'll bet you've told them all about me," chuckled Lee.

"Well, yeah," admitted Debbye. "We don't keep too many secrets from each other."

"I know Sabrina's situation, do the others have guys?"

"Susan's always had guys," chuckled the squirrel, "though lately she's been interested in one guy in particular. Cindy's found herself dating a guy we used to consider a 'nerdy nuisance' at best, but he turned out to be just the fur for her."

"I could've told you, there's more to 'nerds' than meets the eye.'

"As you've admitted. After watching all that, now I have you."

"Yes, you definitely," as he hugged her close, "have me."

With the hug, her muzzle came around and up to lick Lee's muzzle. He responded by moving his muzzle to lick hers. This mutual licking evolved into a deep kiss that both held for as long as possible.

Debbye's eyes gleamed as she broke from the kiss and relaxed against Lee's chest. "I'd say we've got each other. I can't tell which of us put more into that."

Cuddling her close, Lee smiled. "Agreed; this openness between us definitely improves communications. After that last, though, I think perhaps we should divert ourselves for a while."

"Yes, things were starting to get a bit intense and I don't want to rush matters. Care to take the pictures now?"

"Just the thing. Let me help you up." With the aid of Lee's offered paw as a brace, Debbye stood up and then extended a paw to help Lee stand. After a brief hug, they headed over to Lee's carry bag. Opening the bag, Lee explained its sparse contents. "I decided that a good basic set-up and some

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good film made the best choice for today rather than a bunch of lenses and a selection of films."

"Sounds good to me; I've really only used a basic camera."

"Well, this one's all manual and easy to use. I loaded a short roll in first so that you could practice if needed."

Debbye turned and licked the side of his muzzle, "Thanks, I want to take some good pictures of you."

Lee blushed and turned to explaining how the SLR [single-lens reflex] camera worked. By the time she'd worked through the practice roll, Debbye showed comfortable proficiency with it. As he replaced the practice roll with a full 36-shot roll, Lee inquired, "Do you want to be the first subject or do you want to shoot first?"

Since I seem to be 'on a roll' now, I'd like to continue shooting."

"Good enough." He handed her the reloaded camera. "Now, where do you want me to pose?"

After the twelfth shot, Debbye stopped. "Lee, can I ask a personal favor for my remaining shots?"

"Sure, long as it's not too outrageous."

"Well,' she blushed, "I'd like to take my remaining shots of you with your shirt off." At his quizzical glance, she blushed more deeply. "I, ah, liked what I saw last Saturday and I wanted some pic's of you like that."

"I'm flattered," came the blushing reply. "I know I'm no outstanding specimen..."

"You are to me."

"Then, sure. As long as I can ask something similar of you when it's my turn."

Debbye hesitated, looked down a minute, then looked Lee in the eyes and quietly replied, "With the same restrictions you asked for, yes, you can."

Lee smiled, then started to slip off his shirt. "It's a deal then." At the look in her eyes, he continued, "Don't worry, I'll not ask for anything you'd be uncomfortable with."

"I know, Lee. I considered that when I answered; I trust you."

"Thank you."

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For the next six shots, Debbye concentrated on poses that defined Lee's fur pattern and musculature, a process she found quite pleasurable. After the final shot, Lee slipped his shirt on. "I feel like I've just done a photo shoot for 'Playfemme'."

"It'd better be for just this femme," she joked.

"There's none other I'd pose for."

Taking the camera, Lee took an assortment of shots for his first twelve, then, "For my last six, I'd like to get some 'special' poses of you – no removal of clothing, just some poses I'd like to shoot."

"No problem, Lee. As I said, I trust you."

"And I'm not about to abuse that trust."

"I know," she hugged him, "where do you want me to pose?"

In three poses on the edge of the spread, shooting so that the spread didn't show, and in three poses on the front of her car; Lee captured different aspects of Debbye as he saw her.

Afterwards, as they walked paw in paw back to the spread, Debbye commented, "That was 'interesting'; I think I caught something of what you were feeling in those last two shots."

When Lee turned toward her with a raised eyebrow, it was replaced with a gleam in both eyes that reflected hers. "I think you may have at that, he murmured as he pulled her close and they kissed ardently. At the feel of the camera pressing into him, Lee pulled back and smiled, "Most definitely! Shall we finish our walk back?"

At Debbye's nod, they turned and finished the stroll with arms around each other's waists, Debbye's head nestled against Lee's side, and their tails twined. Back at the spread, Lee helped Debbye sit comfortably, put up the film and camera, grabbed a couple drinks from the cooler, and handed her one as he sat next to her.

Relaxing together, they sat holding paws with their tails curled together. Presently, Debbye turned and asked quietly, "May I ask another question?"

Noticing a certain tenseness on Debbye's part, Lee mentally braced himself. "Sure, go ahead."

"Well," she continued with a blush, "last night you mentioned the effects of massage on male furs. How did you know about it?"

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Blast, he thought, *she would pick up on that; I forgot there's a good memory to go with the sharp mind. There's no easy way out of this, so I'd best tell the full truth.* 'Sides, he chuckled to himself, *it's best I speak the truth, she deserves it.* With a slight blush he answered, "I'll not lie to you, I know about it from direct experience."

Debbye raised an eyebrow and blushed a bit further, *I wasn't expecting quite such blunt honesty; at least he's willing to "tell it straight" and not try to cover up anything.* "Tell me more."

Blushing in return, Lee answered, "There are establishments that offer a massage for all the muscles a fur has."

With a hard look in her eye, "And how did they do the massage?"

"With paws, only."

"Really?"

"Yep."

"Really?"

"Really!" He raised his paw in the appropriate sign, "Scout's honor."

From you, I'll believe it. So, are you a virgin?"

Lee blushed, looked down for a moment, and then looked her in the eyes. "Despite a bunch of reading and a very active imagination, yes, I am."

Debbye hugged him warmly, "You don't know how good that makes me feel." Then, shyly, "Would you believe I'm one, too?"

"I never really thought else wise."

"Thank you. Would you consider me strange if I said I wanted to stay one until I got married? If I'm getting married in white, I want it to mean what it's supposed to."

Lee returned the hug, "Strange? No, but I would consider you a femme who's made up her own mind and decided what she'll do. I admire that and," here he blushed again, "I find you all the more interesting because of it."

Debbye looked down shyly, "I'm flattered you feel that way; I know I'm jumping the gun, but would you still feel that way if we got involved further and there was a long wait because of it? I'd not want to get married until I finish college and I know guys have 'needs' and I'd hate to drive you off."

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"Yep, I'll still feel that way. You're worth waiting for. An adolescent might not be willing, but an adult guy that really cared about you would; I would. 'Sides, I've got to finish my Masters degree and that'll take about as long."

"Lee! You're that sure?" she asked with amazement.

"Absolutely!" he firmly responded.

Debbye moved from the hug to warmly embrace Lee and was met with an ardent kiss. A bit later, somewhat breathlessly, Debbye asked, "You said you'd fallen hard, but that hard?"

Moving his head back, Lee caressed her cheek with his paw, "I'm certain of it, my very dear squirrel. I know we've still got a lot to find out about each other, but I'm certain that I've fallen hard and permanently."

"I don't want to rush into anything."

"Nor do I; I'm quite willing to take all the time for us to be certain of our hearts before doing anything. You mean too much to me for rash actions."

"It's not rash, my sweet cat, but you're too far away from me now; c'mere."

Lee moved his head back and the world went away for a while for both of them. Finally, the kiss broke and Debbye moved to lay her head against Lee's chest. "I guess I'm just not yet that certain, Lee; can you be patient with me until I am?"

Holding her close, he whispered, "Of course I can. How could I not? Given how I feel, I can be quite patient."

Debbye snuggled against him and just lay there for a while enjoying the warmth of being close to him. Presently, an impish smile formed on her face. "Lee, how much attention did you pay when you were getting those massages?"

"Well, I did pay some attention to what was being done to me. Why?"

"Could you give me at least a partial massage, I feel like I could use a good backrub."

"Sure, stretch out on the spread and I'll see what I can do."

Stretching out with her head resting on her paws, Debbye waited for Lee's attentions. Sitting carefully beside her, Lee started with her neck and shoulders; then proceeded to work on her back, proper, with careful attention to truly relieve and relax her. As he was finishing her back, Debbye spoke up,

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"The moves that served to stimulate you, do you think that they would work on femmes too?"

"I don't know,' he replied in a distracted tone, "I never considered that possibility."

"Well, how about an experiment to see if they do?"

"I don't think we'd better. Like I said last night, not unless, or until, things are much closer between us; especially now that I know your stand on waiting.'

"You feel the need to be that cautious?"

"I do, dear one. If it affects you as it does me, you've got me sufficiently aroused already that I'm not certain either of us would be in control of ourselves. I care about you too much to take that kind of chance."

"Then," she said as she twisted to open her arms to him, "can you let me hold you and thank you for this?"

"Certainly." Laying down beside her and taking her in his arms, he gently licked her muzzle. Reaching behind him, she reached a paw up and teased the ruff on his neck, provoking a soft, deep purr from him. "So, kitty likes this?"

"You know I wouldn't take that from any other fur."

"Going to do anything about it?"

"Just this," came the answer as he pulled her closer, into a gentle kiss. Her paws moved to stroke his back as they snuggled together, gently enjoying each other's company.

Some time later, Lee lay on his back with Debbye snuggled close, her head resting on his chest and brushing the underside of his muzzle. "Thank you, Lee;" she murmured quietly, "for caring enough to keep control when I didn't. What happened scares me a bit; I've never done something like that before."

"Perhaps it took special company?" asked the cat with a chuckle. "It'd be rather flattering if that were the case."

"Well...", came the wry reply, "it might be."

Chuckling, Lee gently licked her headfur and ears. "Your actions tell me plenty, dear one; I can wait 'til you're comfortable with saying the words. As to the other, I suspect you'll have your turn to restrain me."

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Debbye smiled to herself and held further response. Looking around, she suggested, "How about taking a walk to work off some of this 'nervous energy'?"

"Fine by me; let me help you up."

After assisting Lee in turn, Debbye grabbed drinks from the cooler and they set off paw in paw.

Working their way carefully, they headed toward the end of the inlet the park surrounded. There, on the water's edge, they enjoyed each other's company while skipping stones across the water. They were sufficiently engrossed in this that it wasn't until a significant portion of the sky had darkened and a wind had picked up that they realized the changing weather.

Looking up, Lee reacted first, "Uh-oh, that's a thunderstorm brewing, and quickly; we'd better head back and pack up."

"I'm with you on that!"

The two of them were still some twenty feet from the spread and moving as fast as they could when the heavens unplugged and drenched them thoroughly. Lee slowed to a walk. "Can't get any wetter; might as well move more carefully now."

Debbye looked at the carry bag, "Are the camera and film safe?" she asked as they folded up the spread.

"No problem, the bag has a water-proof liner since it's intended for rough use."

They got everything loaded back in the car and climbed in. Debbye started the heater on its highest setting and turned on the wipers. "So, what now? Even if it stopped right now, it's going to be way too wet to continue here."

"Well...how about taking the stuff back to my place and finishing there? We can dry off; then dry our clothes and the spread while we're eating." He looked Debbye over, "I think one of my shirts and a pair of shorts will fit you. I do like, though, the way that wet blouse fits you."

"Keep your eyes to yourself, buster," she chuckled as she gently punched his arm.

Lee made a big show out of averting his eyes as she headed the car out. By the time they'd arrived at the freeway, both were chuckling and they remained in good spirits all the way to Lee's apartment.

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By the time they arrived back at Lee's apartment, the storm had passed on; still, they were lucky to find a parking space close to the door. They carried in the cooler and Lee escorted Debbye into the main bathroom, laid a shirt and a pair of shorts on the bed [while grabbing some dry clothes for himself], and shut the bedroom door as he went out to get the rest of their things from the car. Returning, he set the soaked spread in a laundry basket, left the other stuff for later, and headed for the second bathroom.

Somewhat later, dry and in dry clothing, he came out to find Debbye setting out supper, her back to him. His sight of her in his shirt brought a whistle and a smiling comment, "I think that shirt looks better on you than it's ever looked on me." When Debbye turned, blush and all, and curtsied in response Lee stepped up and hugged her. Seeing what she was doing, he softly kissed her headfur and quietly admonished her, "You didn't have to do it all, I'm willing to do my share of that."

She smiled as she answered him, "You've done plenty, bringing everything in, loaning me these clothes, and agreeing to handle the drying of everything. Lee, this is my share of tonight's efforts."

Lee gathered her close and whispered into her hair, "Dear one, now I know I'm blessed. A principled, spirited femme with beauty and brains; I could never ask for more."

The squirrel blushed at the praise, "Lee, really, I'm not..."

"Yes you are," he replied, kissing her forehead. "You're all that and more to me."

Debbye hugged him for a moment; then stepped back, "I really need to finish this, Lee; much as I'm enjoying this..."

With a chuckle, he released her, "And I need to take care of these wet things." Gathering their wet clothes into the basket, he headed for the door. He winked at Debbye in passing, "I'll be right back."

"I'll be waiting," came the warm response.

Returning to the apartment, Lee found Debbye almost finished with her chosen task. "They're all in the washers," he announced. At her look he shrugged, "Well. I figured we might as well do 'em right."

"Good enough," she nodded. Gesturing to the table, she continued, "It's ready. Where do you want to sit?"

"How about keeping things informal and sitting together on the couch?"

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"Suits me; come and get your food, then."

Their plates filled and drinks in their paws, they moved to the couch and sat side-by-side as they ate, their tails curled around each other.

Finishing his meal, Lee wiped his muzzle and then gently wiped hers. Picking up the remains of their dinner, he carried them over to the trash. Looking at the clock as he bent back up, Lee turned, "I'll be back in a few minutes, it's time to put our things in the dryers."

After a quick mock pout, Debbye smiled, "Hurry back, I'm growing used to your presence."

"With an incentive like that? You'd better believe I'll hurry!"

Both were chuckling as Lee stepped out the door. Ten minutes later he was back. "We've got about forty-five minutes 'til everything is dry."

"Good enough. Now c'mere, I've missed you."

Sitting down beside her, Lee wrapped his arm around her as she wrapped hers around him. For a short while, they quietly, contentedly snuggled. Stirring himself, Lee turned to her, "So. What did you have planned for tomorrow?"

"Well, nothing definite; I was thinking that it'd be nice if we went to a movie."

"Sounds good to me, any particular one in mind?"

"Er, no. Can I pick one and surprise you? I'll even drive."

"As long as you let me pay our way in and we swing by a 1-hour photo place."

"Why?"

"I thought we'd get these pictures processed right away. I don't normally feel like paying the extra fees, but these seem worth it."

Debbye softly kissed his cheek, "Thank you. I very much want to see how the shots turned out. I was a little afraid to ask 'cause I wasn't certain how you'd react."

Returning the kiss, he quietly assured her, "You never have to worry about speaking your mind to me. I much prefer 'straight talk' to 'beating around the bush' or not talking at all."

"I'll remember that and remind you that I'd appreciate the same treatment."

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"It's a deal, then."

"Let's seal it properly," she smiled as she turned her muzzle to his. The resultant slow, sweet kiss left both pairs of eyes glistening as they finally broke apart.

"My, that does seem properly sealed," he chuckled as he held her close. Stirring after a bit, he asked, "Care for some music while we wait?"

"Sure, what do you have?"

"Let me show you."

Standing up, he helped her up and led her over to the shelves where the CD's and tapes were stored. Gesturing at the selection, he offered, "Take your pick."

Looking over the selection, Debbye noticed one thing first. "You don't have any type of music that's too loud. Is it taste or something more?"

"Mostly 'something more' affecting taste. This cat's got fairly sensitive hearing and I won't buy anything that hurts my ears at normal sound settings."

"Sounds reasonable. How many of these can I pick?"

"The CD player takes up to five."

Lee smiled as he looked at her choices, then at her. Loading up the player, he turned the system on and the apartment was filled with soft, slow music.

"Umm. Nice choices you made." Lee looked at Debbye and smiled, "Neither of us is dressed for it and there's not that much room, but – care to dance, my princess?"

Her eyes glistened as she replied, "With you, my prince, most definitely."

Taking her paw, he led her to a clear area and held her close as they started dancing. The two of them danced through the first CD and most of the second before returning to the couch to snuggle, Debbye's head nestled in his soft neck fur, and listening to the music.

Presently, the time came to retrieve their items from the dryer. As he stepped out and pulled the door partially shut, Lee waved at the stored music. "Go ahead and pick some more out, I'm enjoying just relaxing here with you."

I don't know that I find it so relaxing mused Debbye as she padded over to the shelves; *just his presence affects me intensely.*

Chapter 3.2 Intrusions and Interludes Part 2

Lyman pulled into the complex parking lot after a good dinner and saw the lights on in Lee's apartment. *H-m-m-m! That's odd. I'd have expected them to stay out later; I hope nothing happened. Maybe I should stop by and see.* Pulling into an empty slot, Lyman headed for Lee's apartment. Reaching the door, he knocked vigorously and was surprised to find the door ajar and opening under his knock. "Hey, Lee, what..." he started, then stopped with a bit of a blush as he saw Debbye standing there in Lee's shirt.

At the sound of the door, Debbye turned. "That didn't take long, Lee..." she began, then halted and blushed as she saw Lyman in the doorway.

What?! Thought Lyman. Why is she wearing just one of Lee's shirts? Could they have stayed here and...Nah, I can't really see either of them doing that. But then, what...?

The shifting expressions on Lyman's face, moving to one of incredulity, gave a good indication of Lyman's thoughts. *Oh, drek, realized Debbye as she blushed more deeply, he sees how I'm dressed and he thinks we "did something". I'd better try and correct his impressions.* "Lyman, I think..."

"Gangway!" came Lee's interruption as he barreled in carrying a basket of freshly dried laundry. His eyebrows raised, Lyman stepped out of the way as Lee carried the basket into his bedroom. Moments later, Lee reappeared, looked at Debbye, and gestured to the bedroom, "Your cleaned and dried clothes await, m'dear."

Unable to resist the impulse, Debbye curtsied, "Thank you. I'll be back in moments."

As Debbye shut the bedroom door, Lyman turned to Lee, "Okay, what was that all about?"

"That? We got thoroughly drenched in a thunderstorm that hit our picnic. We came back here and I loaned her a shirt and a pair of shorts to wear while I washed and dried our clothes. We finished up the picnic supplies for dinner and we've just been relaxing together, listening to music, while waiting for the dryer to finish."

"A shirt and a pair of shorts?"

"Yep. Why?"

Lyman began to blush. "I didn't see the shorts and, when I saw her here in what appeared to be just one of your shirts, I kinda wondered if..."

Chapter 3.2 Intrusions and Interludes Part 2

"If we had 'done something'?" Lee answered. "You'd think that of me or any femme I'd be this interested in? Shame on you," grinned Lee, "you've a dirty mind and you're getting too much exercise by jumping to conclusions."

"So I see," sighed his friend. "I apologize to you and I'll apologize to the lady when she reappears."

"Apology accepted."

"So, do you two have anything planned for tomorrow?"

"Sure do. Why?"

"If you hadn't, the sports car club has trials tomorrow and I'd've asked if you wanted to join me."

"I am sorry, but we've already made plans."

Lyman shrugged, "I understand; no problem."

Debbye opened the bedroom door and returned to join them. At Lee's soft "ahem", Lyman turned to her, "I owe you an apology for jumping to conclusions a little while ago; I really should know better."

"Yes, you should," answered the squirrel drolly. Sticking out her paw, she continued, "Apology accepted."

Lyman shook her paw then sighed, "I guess I'll be on my way then. Sorry to have intruded."

Debbye just smiled and Lee reminded him, "I'm driving Monday – see you then."

After Lyman's departure, Lee changed into his freshly dried clothes and rejoined Debbye. Gently holding her from behind, he whispered, "I'm sorry about that intrusion. Worse, I don't think we can recover the mood."

"I'm afraid you're right," she sighed, intertwining her paws with his, "but I did enjoy that time." She turned her head to softly lick his neck, "Further, I've no desire to leave your company at this hour. Any suggestions?"

"Well, since you really didn't pack a dessert, how about we go out for ice cream and a stroll?"

"I know just the place for both."

"Then if you'll do the driving, I'll do my share by treating."

"Fair enough; you're learning fast," she answered with an open smile.

Chapter 3.2 Intrusions and Interludes Part 2

"I have to," Lee grinned. Offering her his arm, he escorted her out the door.

At the ice cream store, Debbye chuckled, "I really shouldn't tell you, but this is one of the Clique's favorite hangouts."

"Don't worry," came the amused response, "I won't tell."

Strolling paw-in-paw, they ambled through the little park as they ate their ice cream cones. Somewhat enthralled watching Lee's tongue systematically lick his cone, Debbye was startled by a cold drop of melted ice cream landing on her fur. "Darn, and I forgot a napkin; that's going to be a mess before I can clean it."

"Not necessarily," grinned Lee with a gleam in his eye. "May I help?"

"Sure, but..." Her words were cut off by the feel of his tongue licking the spot and continuing with the surrounding area. "Ohhh! I love that my sweet kitty! I think you'd better stop before at least one of us loses control."

"Agreed," came a slightly ragged response. Standing straight, Lee pulled her into a tight hug and then led her over to a park bench where they cuddled while finishing their cones. The cuddling continued, with small talk, 'til dusk forced their return to the car.

Returning to the apartment, they cleaned out the cooler and Lee folded the spread. Despite reluctance on both parts for the evening to end, Lee carried both items out and placed them in Debbye's trunk. Returning to his apartment, he took her in his arms and kissed her deeply, their tails twirling around the pair. "I hate for this to end, but you do need to get home at a 'reasonable hour.'"

"I know," she sighed, "So, 2pm tomorrow good for you?"

"Fine, I'll be looking forward to it."

"No more than I will."

Escorting Debbye to her car, Lee held the door while she seated herself and buckled up. As the door shut, she lowered the window. "One for the road?"

"How can I resist?"

After the kiss, Lee whispered, "Good night, dear princess. Take care."

Chapter 3.2 Intrusions and Interludes Part 2

Her paw caressing his muzzle, she replied, "To you, too, my feline prince. Pleasant dreams."

A whispered, "Likewise for you." and he withdrew.

Raising the window, she waved and drove out.

After Debbye's car had passed out of sight, Lee returned to his apartment, finished cleaning up, and prepared for bed with a somewhat distracted air. His dreams that night were "colorful".

For her part, Debbye drove carefully, realizing that her reflections on the day were something of a distraction. Once home, she took care of necessary things with a distracted air that matched Lee's. She too had "colorful" dreams that night.

Chapter 3.3 Intrusions & Interludes – Part 3

— Sunday —

— Morning —

"I can't concentrate on the preacher preachin'

My attention span done turned off"

"Daddy's Money" – Ricochet

©1995 by Sony Music Corp

It would be unfair to say that this exactly characterizes the state of mind that both Lee and Debbye found themselves in on Sunday morning, but they were definitely concentrating more on the previous day's experiences than on what their respective preachers were saying. They did, however, make it through their respective services without undue problem.

As they left church after the service, Diana Reynard padded up beside Debbye. "You seemed a bit distracted today," she commented, "Anything wrong?"

Debbye blushed slightly, "No, nothing's wrong. I was just lost in thought."

Diana smiled, "I'm glad to hear that."; with a grin she continued, "Would it happen to be something good then? Say, something to do with a certain male feline?"

Debbye's blush deepened as she laughed, "You got me! He was very definitely on my mind this morning."

"Any particular reason?"

"Well, more like just reflecting on the last week or so before I meet him again this afternoon."

"Oh? That often? What's been happening between the pair of you?"

"Well..." began Debbye and she proceeded to give Diana a quick review of the last week.

"And your feelings about Lee are?" inquired Diana afterwards.

"My feelings about Lee are complex," admitted the squirrel. "I'm strongly attracted to him and I know he feels the same toward me. Beyond that, he's got a lot of depth to him and the way he respects my choices and me reflects that. The only thing I'm worried about is moving too fast."

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"He hardly sounds like he's pushing things; unlike a lot of males. Has he met your folks yet?"

"No," grinned Debbye, "he hasn't."

"Well then, I'd say that'd be your next move." She giggled, "I wonder if your dad will over react? In the meantime, enjoy your afternoon with him; I know I would."

Debbye hugged her friend. "Thanks for listening."

"Glad to help. Always glad to help a friend."

With one more hug, they parted company and Debbye padded over to her car."

— Afternoon —

Lyman parked at the sports car club's trials area and padded over to the registration table.

"Afternoon, Lyman," greeted the badger. "Where's your navigator?"

"Good afternoon to you, too, Art. I forgot to tell him until yesterday and he'd already made other plans." Lyman grinned, "I'm going to have to get used to him having a social life of his own."

"Lee?"

Lyman nodded.

"Will wonders never cease?" chuckled Art. "In that case, do you want to pick one of the members to fill his seat?" He waved at some seated members watching the trials.

Lyman shook his head, "After the week I've had, I don't think I care to adjust to a new navigator. Got any place I can help out?"

Art responded with an enthusiastic grin. "Do I ever! I've only got one fur on stage 7 and that really needs at least two. Let me show you the way."

Guided by the badger, Lyman soon found himself at a timing station with an attractive female snow leopard. Art performed a quick introduction, "Lyman Aquilaferi, allow me to present Amandajean Snowpaws – and vice versa."

"My friends call me 'Mandy'," she purred with a hint of a chuckle as she shook Lyman's paw. Turning to Art, she continued, "Thank you for getting a

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second fur here so quickly. I thought I'd get overloaded before you got another fur."

"You can blame my faulty memory," chuckled Lyman as he recounted why his normal navigator wasn't with him.

"Then I'll thank your memory and your friend's girlfriend; I definitely need a second fur here." As Art left, she smiled, "During the week, I'm a professional photografur; what do you do?"

"I'm an engineer at the aircraft plant in town," responded Lyman as he relaxed into the chair, and this has been a rough week there."

Before further conversation could occur, a car came up and the two of them began an afternoon that was alternately busy and slack enough to allow pleasant conversation. Each party shortly became convinced that the other was good company and they passed a delightful afternoon.

— 2 PM —

Debbye pulled up promptly and found Lee awaiting her. He gave her a kiss as he climbed in and she drove off as soon as he buckled up. "Got the film?" she asked with a touch of concern.

"Right here," he patted a pocket of his khaki cargo pants. "I wouldn't dream of forgetting either roll." Looking over, he complimented her on an attractive outfit pairing a dark green peasant blouse with a dark brown skirt.

"Thank you," she dimpled as she glanced appreciatively at the way his light tan tee shirt fit his torso. "You don't look bad, yourself."

He blushed in response and settled back. Looking around, he chuckled, "You know, I hadn't noticed until now how this car doesn't seem to match 'you'; it doesn't seem the kind of car you'd choose at all."

"Debbye shrugged, blushed, and grinned. "It wasn't my choice. When I started college, I needed a car and didn't have enough for anything decent. My folks offered to buy me one if I'd handle the insurance, upkeep, and so on. They found me this LTD in "cream puff" condition at a surplus property auction and managed to get a good price. Working for the city or state government does have some advantages." She chuckled, "Daddy says he wouldn't have bought this car if I'd been a son rather than a daughter."

"Oh? Why's that?"

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"It seems that, though it was driven by an 'administrative fur', it still had all the mechanicals for a full 'police package' and you know what kind of drivers young male furs are."

"I do indeed. I saw some real reckless driving while in college; even refused to ride with a couple of furs. I think, perhaps, you'd best not let Rava see this. She'd start drooling at the thought of what she could do with it."

"Really?"

"Really! She's an excellent mechanic as well as an engineer and always has an eye out for good material."

"Then I'll be careful," grinned the squirrel. "After the effort to fit this car out the way I wanted, especially since the stereo fit so nicely where they took the radios out, I want to enjoy it."

Lee grinned at that and they traded small talk for the rest of the trip. Finding a decent parking spot at the mall, they dropped both rolls of film off and strolled paw-in-paw to the multiplex at the other end of the mall.

"So what will we be watching?" asked Lee as they neared the ticket booth.

"I thought 'Sixth Sense' would be a good choice. From the reviews it sounds like something we'd both enjoy."

"Sounds good to me. I've seen some good reviews, too; it's not like some of Willis' 'stinkers'."

Arriving at the ticket booth, Lee fished his wallet out and passed over the money. "Two for the next showing of 'Sixth Sense', please."

"Here you are, sir," replied the young femme. "The last showing just finished and the next showing doesn't start for a half-hour."

Lee looked at Debbye, who nodded. "That's okay, I imagine we'll be able to pass the time."

Seeing how close they were standing, the ticket seller grinned and drolly replied, "No doubt."

As they padded inside, Lee looked over the mammoth refreshment stand and then turned to Debbye. "See anything you want?"

"Besides you?" she giggled. "Something to drink, I think. Could we share a large popcorn if there's any fresh? I don't see anything else I really care for."

"Any preferences?"

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Well, diet cola for the drinks and, if you can get it, unbuttered popcorn. A gal's gotta watch her figure."

"Yours is quite nice and I enjoy watching it," quipped Lee with a smile as he headed for the counter.

"Trust you to notice," she chuckled.

Carrying a tray holding their refreshments, Lee followed Debbye to the theater for their movie and then to seats in the back row. Debbye grinned, "I thought we'd get a bit more privacy this way." Lee's answering grin was sufficient.

Settled in, with his arm around Debbye and her paw in his lap to help hold the popcorn, they indulged in small talk, and the occasional gentle kiss, while waiting for the movie to start.

Some two hours later, they left the theater, paw-in-paw, and headed back down the mall. "You have to admit," commented Lee, "that the film makers played fair with the viewers. There were plenty of clues as to 'Malcolm's' state."

"True," answered Debbye as they padded along. She grinned, "I didn't catch one 'til afterwards. In the scene where Cole is describing his ability, the camera focuses on Malcolm when Cole tells about some ghosts not knowing that they're dead."

A stray thought brought a laugh to Lee. At Debbye's quizzical look, he explained. "I told you that both of my grandfathers came from Chicago?"

She nodded.

"Well, both of them have told stories about the political machine there and I can imagine both of them making the same comment about that movie."

"Which is?"

"If it had been filmed in Chicago, Cole's line would have been 'I see dead people...and they're voting.'"

"Tch," responded Debbye as they arrived at the film developer. Lee passed over his claim slips, paid the charges, and accepted two envelopes of prints.

Debbye looked askance at the two envelopes, "Kinda thick, aren't they?"

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"Not really," replied the cat. "I ordered double prints so we'd each have a full set."

"Thanks."

They continued their conversation on the way to her car and then on the way back to Lee's place. Escorting Debbye to the couch, Lee laid the photo envelopes on the coffee table. "Something to drink, dear one?" he inquired.

"Yes, please. Some more diet soda?"

"Coming right up." Lee stepped away and quickly returned with two tall glasses. Passing one to her, he sat down beside her.

Opening the envelope of prints from the practice roll, Lee separated them into two sets and passed one to Debbye. Sitting side by side, their tails intertwined, they reviewed the shots; discussing what worked in setting up the photos and what didn't for these photos. For those photos that didn't work out as Debbye intended, they went over other approaches that might yield the image she was trying for. Finishing the 12 prints, Lee placed the negatives with his set and offered Debbye the print envelope for her set.

"Gladly, thank you," she answered with a dimpled smile.

Turning to the second envelope, Lee again separated the two sets but this time he placed his set to one side and slid his arm around Debbye. "I thought we'd look at these together," he answered the squirrel's questioning look and then softly kissed her cheek.

Debbye's blushing grin evidenced her approval of this; her arm sliding around his waist and her paw on his thigh further showed her feelings. Starting with the basic shots, they reviewed the prints. The evidence before him and the comments of his companion gave Lee an encouraging appreciation of the femme squirrel's feelings. When they got to the "special" photos that she'd taken, Debbye blushed a bit but continued going through them with the cat. After they'd discussed the sixth and last such picture, Lee turned to the lightly blushing squirrel, "Does my body really affect you that strongly?"

She blushed more deeply but met his gaze squarely, "I find you quite attractive, but I enjoy your mind even more."

He bent over to kiss her cheek as she moved to meet him directly in a deep kiss and their tongues played together for a bit. Murring softly, Lee

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pulled back a bit. "I think that answers my question. Shall we continue with the pictures I took?"

Nodding, Debbye snuggled back against him as they returned to reviewing the prints. Her turn, now, as the evidence before her eyes and the comments from her companion, conveyed the nature of his feelings. When the first "special" that he took came up, she looked it over carefully and then looked at Lee. "Tell me," she asked in a somewhat husky voice, "how you see me in each of these pictures."

Turning to the first picture, depicting her head resting on crossed paws with slightly closed eyes, Lee answered, "I tried to get your dreamy, imaginative side here." Debbye smiled as they moved to the next shot where her chin rested on interlaced paws supported by her forearms while her face held an open, quizzical look. "That," chuckled Lee, "is the side of you that's curious about things and furs." Debbye nodded as they proceeded to the third photo. In this one, she lay on her tummy, her arms crossed on her chest with an open, smiling face presented to the camera.

"Even I can read this one," stated Debbye. "It's the open, friendly side of me; though I don't think I'm normally that open to other furs."

"I couldn't say" responded the feline, "you've always been that way every time I've been with you."

"Well..." continued the squirrel with a hint of blush. "I'm not always that way. I often feel shy and get somewhat standoffish."

Lee's silent answer was to just hug her close and stroke her headfur and upper back. After a few moments of silent communication, they returned to reviewing the three remaining picture. The next one, the first taken on her car, showed her perched on the left front fender, right foot paw braced on the bumper, with her left paw braced on her hip and her right paw shading her eyes. "I see this as your adventurous side," offered Lee, "the part of you that's willing to step out and try something new or different."

The squirrel blushed. "I don't know if I'd go that far," she demurred, "I don't often do that. It's only when I'm with special company," here she looked directly at him, "that I feel secure and comfortable doing that."

The smiling feline bent his head and softly kissed her forehead. "Then may you always have that special company," he murmured almost prayerfully.

Her eyes shining, the squirrel's soft "Thank you" spoke as loudly as her gentle kiss on that cat's cheek.

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Betraying a touch of nervous excitement, Lee lead in returning attention to the next photograph. The photograph itself did not reduce his nervousness. In it, Debbye lay across the hood of her car, on her side, with her head pillowed on an outstretched arm, her free leg bent, and her tail curled over her lower torso and hugged to her. A slow, soft smile completed the look. At the squirrel's questioning look, a slightly nervous cat blushed and answered, "Sexy and innocent; you're a most devastating combination, dear one."

Debbye smiled around her blush as her paw slid up to caress the fur at his neck. "Dear, sweet cat; you flatter me extremely. No fur has ever called me 'devastating' before."

"Maybe the right fur hadn't found you before."

Her ears blushing, she kissed his muzzle again and added a gentle lick. "Shall we look at the last picture?"

Not trusting himself to speak, due to his excited reaction, Lee nodded. The final picture in the set had Debbye laying back on her car hood, paws behind her head and elbows back, with her right leg draped over the fender, her left foot braced on the fender, her tail curled between her legs, and a welcoming smile on her face. "Your sexy, sensual side," whispered the cat through very evident nervousness.

"Me?" Questioned the squirrel. "You see me that way?"

The feline's nod was sufficient verification, though his nervousness and other signs clearly supported that conclusion. "That meets, I hope, with your approval?"

"I wouldn't say that," replied Debbye. At Lee's crestfallen and worried expression, she laughed, "It meets with my most enthusiastic approval!!!" With that, the paw on his neck pulled him toward her waiting mouth.

Needing no further encouragement, the pair embraced tightly as their tongues tangled in a fervent sharing of feelings. Maintaining the embraces, they progressed to nuzzling and licking each other's neck fur in mutual pleasure. A certain satiety eventually led them to relax back on the couch in a close embrace.

Nuzzling her, Lee murmured, "If we didn't already know it, this afternoon has definitely made plain how we feel. I don't think ours is going to be a short-term relationship."

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"Indeed," whispered Debbye. Her impish smile hidden as she pressed against his throat, she continued, "In fact, I think it's time to make this a bit more 'official'. Next time, why don't you pick me up at home; I think it's time you and my folks met."

Lee started momentarily then resumed his embrace with a smile. "I'll be very pleased to, my dear. I'll be most interested in meeting the parents who could produce such a delightful femme as yourself."

Debbye giggled as her ears blushed again, "Such shameless flattery – don't you dare stop!"

The cat moved back a space and ran his paw down her cheek, " 'Tis not flattery if it's what you truly believe."

After a blissful smile of pleasure, her head turned as she licked his paw. "I feel the same about you, Lee." She giggled, "You really are the answer to this femme's prayer."

Blushing briefly, he answered by pulling her close in a soft kiss. "I'm humbled, dear one." He held her there for a bit, then moved back to a close embrace. "Much as I'd like to stay like this, I think we'd best go for dinner."

The squirrel considered, "That sounds good to me, any thoughts about where?"

Lee raised a questioning eyebrow, "Chinese? I know a real good place for that."

Debbye nodded after a moment's thought. "Sounds good to me."

Lee placed the photos in the envelope, carefully separating both 'special' sets of photos. "You might not want to show these to your folks," he grinned.

"Yeah, that's probably wise," she agreed light-heartedly. "Got a separate envelope for them?"

"Certainly"

Moments later, Lee returned with a plain envelope for these prints. Placing both envelopes in her purse, the femme squirrel accepted his offered paw and stood. Linking her arm with his, they headed for the door. "Your car? After all, you know where you want to go."

"My pleasure, dear squirrel," he replied as he locked the door and they headed to the parking lot.

Chapter 3.3 Intrusions & Interludes – Part 3

As the last car of the day left, Lyman collected the record sheets and placed them in the folder provided. Turning to the snow leopardess beside him, "May I offer you a ride back?"

"You may; thanks," giggled Mandy.

The wolf-fox escorted her to his car, secured her properly in the seat, and hurried around to slide in, buckle up, and head back to the main assembly area. During the drive, his passenger surveyed the car with an experienced eye & paw, purring with pleasure as she approved of what she'd found. "The green one over there," pointed the femme as they reached the main area.

Guiding the car at her direction, Lyman wasn't aware of her car until she bade him stop. Getting his first good look, his eyes widened and he let a low whistle, "A Sunbeam Tiger? Very nice, fair femme; very nice indeed."

"Thank you," she purred, pleased by his responses.

"Clean and obviously well maintained," he continued. "I really like the way you've taken care of such a choice classic."

He parked next to it and both of them sported smiles as they exited his car and padded up to the administration table. "Here you go," he offered as he passed the folder to the badger. "We having the usual dinner tonight?"

"Fraid not," grimaced Art. "they were booked up."

"What dinner?" inquired the snow leopardess. "This is my first time here."

"Normally we reserve a room at the local buffet," explained Lyman, "it gives everyone a chance to 'meet and greet' without being too expensive. But apparently it won't happen tonight." He brightened, "In such a case, may I offer an attractive femme dinner?"

"I'll join you for diner," she agreed with a laugh, "but I insist that it be 'Dutch' this time."

The wolf-fox raised an eyebrow; then shrugged, "I still get a fascinating dinner companion. Are we through, Art?"

The badger nodded.

"In that case," Lyman continued as he turned, "I know a good steakhouse that we can stop at."

"Lead on," she replied with wave of her paw.

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Lyman climbed into his car, fastened up, and headed out. *She's keeping up rather nicely*, he mused to himself as her car stuck closely to him all the way to the steakhouse. They found the lot somewhat packed, but managed to find two adjacent spaces. Locking the cars, they strolled arm in arm into the restaurant. The young ring-tail greeter smiled as she saw them, "We're crowded, but I do have a corner booth that'd suit a couple; I warn you, it's a bit cozy."

Lyman turned to Mandy and raised an eyebrow; with a slight blush to her ears, she nodded. The wolf-fox turned to the femme, "We'll take it. Lead on."

"Right this way, then."

Despite the confines of the booth and the way their legs and tails couldn't help but rub, they had a very enjoyable dinner. Lingered over dessert, they talked and found themselves becoming quite friendly. Lyman paused as they arrived back at their cars, "May I see you again? I greatly enjoyed today."

"I did too," whispered the snow leopardess as she softly licked his cheek. Reaching into her purse, she retrieved a slip of paper, wrote her name and number, and gave it to him. "I'll be looking forward to it," she whispered. With one last peck on his cheek, she slid into her car and, with a wave, drove off. Lyman stood there for a moment with a silly grin on his muzzle, then climbed into his Miata and headed for his apartment.

As he pulled into the complex, Lyman noted that Lee's apartment was dark and simply headed for his place. As he opened the apartment door, he could hear the phone ringing. Racing for it, his answer was greeted by a relieved voice, "Lyman, it's Cathy. Rava finally let her guard down this weekend and..."

Lee and Debbye pulled into the parking lot of The Jade Palace and discovered that parking spaces were less than plentiful this evening. Finding one, they parked and strolled, paw in paw, into the busy restaurant. A party of two, they managed to get in without undue wait. Taking their drink orders, their cloud leopard waiter then inquired, "Will you be ordering a dinner or from the individual items menu?"

"Do you have dinners catering to both vegetarians and carnivores?" inquired the cat.

"We have dinners for either," replied the apologetic waiter, "but there's not been much call for the two together."

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"Bother! I guess we'll just have to order from the menu," sighed Lee to Debbye.

"Not necessarily, look!" as she pointed to a buffet being set up.

"Just the thing," agreed Lee with a relieved grin. Turning to the waiter, he continued, "we'll wait and have two buffets, then."

"Very good, sir. Would you care for some complementary soup while you wait?"

At the squirrel femme's nod, the cat replied, "Yes, thank you. Two bowls of egg-drop soup, please."

The soup arrived quickly and the couple enjoyed it slowly, engaging in pleasant conversation as they passed the time. At last the buffet was ready; they moved to join near the head of the line. *He certainly checks the dishes over carefully*, observed Debbye, but she kept her counsel as they passed through the buffet line. Finally, back at their table and eating, Debbye remarked, "I saw you examining every dish quite carefully. Are you really that 'finicky' an eater?"

"My name's 'Lee', not 'Morris'," grinned the cat as he mentioned a well-known feline restaurant critic, infamous for being finicky about the quality of food. "I am, though, a careful eater. I get a bad reaction to an ingredient they often use; I've found from sad experience that I need to be very careful."

"Oh? And what ingredient might that be?"

"Nothing fancy, just mushrooms," grimaced Lee, "I don't know why, but they make me quite sick, even if it's just finely grated ones in a sauce."

The squirrel nodded, "I can see why you're careful here, then. That's one of their favorite seasonings."

"I know," he smiled, "that's why I ordered a soup that doesn't ever use them."

"I missed that," she acknowledged, "but I will file this in memory for future reference."

The feline nodded his thanks.

Presently, the comfortably full pair left a more than adequate tip, paid their bill, and exited the restaurant. Strolling with their arms around each other's waist, they took their time proceeding to Lee's car. Holding the door as he

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helped her in, Lee inquired, "Feel like a drive and then a spot of dessert after things settle?"

"Certainly," responded his companion.

After roughly a half-hour's leisurely drive, Debbye was surprised when they pulled up outside the same ice cream parlor they'd visited the previous evening. "I didn't think you knew where this place was!"

"Well, you did bring me here last night."

"So?"

"After my hometown," laughed Lee, "if I've been to a place once, and kept my eyes open, I can find my way there again."

Debbye giggled and kissed his cheek, "Still, it's thoughtful on your part. Thank you."

A widely grinning cat helped her out of the car; he was still grinning minutes later as they exited the ice cream parlor and walked, holding each other's waist, over to the park. Finishing their ice cream cones, the couple sat and cuddled on a park bench. After some pleasant time like this, Debbye stirred and looked Lee in the eye. "I need to warn you," she started, "my folks, dad especially, aren't going to be overly happy that I'm dating a guy six years older than me. You'd best be prepared."

The cat nodded as he held her. "I'll be prepared! Is there a particular reason or is it just the age difference?"

The squirrel blushed and hugged him close. "I'm afraid there is a reason. I told you about the guys I was interested in, first, but there was one who initiated matters when he saw me at a mall."

Sensing her unease; Lee snuggled her close and simply whispered, "Go on."

"Anyway, I was a junior in high school when this hunky raccoon of a college sophomore started showing an interest in me. His name was Parker Thompson and he was cool & laid back with a delightfully offbeat sense of humor. Things went well most of that spring, but over the summer he started pressuring me to take our relationship to a more intimate level. I didn't feel comfortable or ready but he refused to take that for an answer and kept pressuring me."

The cat let out a low, feral growl.

Chapter 3.3 Intrusions & Interludes – Part 3

"Finally, I had to break things off and, when he wouldn't stay away, my father finally had to 'come down' on him. Since then, he's been a bit concerned when I see any fur more than a couple years older than me. Now I'm falling hard for you, a hunky cat, six years my senior, who's sharp & confident with his own distinctive sense of humor. The similarities are going to be too much for him not to worry." Sighing into his chest, she continued, "I'm sorry about the extra trouble, Lee."

Holding her close, he softly stroked her headfur. "Nothing to apologize for, my very dear squirrel. I can understand why you were hesitant to tell me and I do appreciate your trust and confidence in me."

The femme hugged him hard, "I was more than a little afraid; scared that you'd think less of me and back off."

"For that? Never!" he exclaimed with a strong hug for emphasis. "You mean way too much to me for that to put me off. As for dealing with your father, I'm confident I can handle that."

Her gray eyes shining, the squirrel moved up to kiss him fervently. "Thank you, Lee, for being a fur I can talk to like this. You mean every bit as much to me." Breaking the kiss, she placed her muzzle next to his while hugging him fiercely and they communed silently in the close embrace.

After some time to calm, they moved into a comfortable sitting embrace with her head on his shoulder. They talked of several "little things" as each learned more about the other. Finally, the growing night forced their return to Lee's car and then his apartment. Inside, they again embraced warmly until Debbye broke the embrace and sighed, "It's getting late and I do need to get ready for tomorrow." Fishing in her purse, she retrieved a pen and a slip of paper and a moment later passed the slip to him. "Here's my address," she smiled, " Don't lose it."

"I won't," answered her cat with a grin, "it'll go with all my other valuables."

"Need directions?"

"I shouldn't; I can read a map and I can navigate."

"That you can," giggled the squirrel. Sobering, she continued, "Now give me a kiss to keep me warm on the drive home." The resulting embrace and kiss definitely served that purpose; it would have served equally well to keep her warm under arctic conditions. Breaking the embrace, Lee took her arm and announced, "Your escort waits, fair lady."

Chapter 3.3 Intrusions & Interludes – Part 3

"Thank you, my good fur," answered Debbye with a small curtsy.

At her car, they again indulged in "one for the road" and a bemused feline watched the squirrel femme drive out of sight before turning to his remaining evening activities, albeit in a distracted state.

Debbye drove home; her memory of the last two kisses keeping a warm smile on her muzzle. Parking, she made certain that the two envelopes of prints were separate and then headed for the door. In the family room, her parents looked up from their reading as she entered.

"Good evening, darling," greeted her mother. "Did you two have a nice time today?"

"Sure did, mom," replied the young squirrel. Fishing in her purse, she retrieved the thicker envelope of prints and passed them to her mother. "Among other things, we got the prints of the photos we took yesterday. The practice pictures are first followed by the photos we took of each other."

Linda Squirrel opened the envelope as her husband scooted over to join her; both remarked on the improvements shown through the practice pictures.

"Lee's a good teacher," blushed their daughter.

Passing on to the photos of Lee, both elder Squirrels grinned. "He is an attractive young male," smiled her mother.

"The least of his attractions," responded Debbye. "His mind and personality are quite attractive too."

George looked up, "We know something about his personality from what Alisia Nash told us and what little you've let drop. Care to enlighten us further?"

"Now honey," chuckled Mrs. Squirrel, "let that wait at least until we've finished with these pictures."

Debbye's father thought a moment, then grinned, "Okay, let's see the rest." They finished looking at the remaining pictures of Lee and continued with the photos of Debbye. After the first few, both George and Linda smiled. "He does seem to catch you well, darling," offered her father.

"Indeed," continued Linda with a raised eyebrow, "he does already seem to know you quite well, dear. Just how close are you two?"

Chapter 3.3 Intrusions & Interludes – Part 3

Debbye blushed, "That's what I wanted to tell you next. We know that whatever's between us is strong and that our relationship isn't going to be a short-term one. Beyond that, we're not making any assumptions."

Her mother smiled and nodded, "I'm glad you're being sensible, darling. I hope you'll continue to be careful."

"I will, mom. Lee's a cautious gentlefur himself; I don't think you'll have reason to worry."

George sat up a bit. "He is? Are you sure he's not like Parker Thompson? You thought a lot of him at one time."

The young squirrel stood her ground. "Daddy, he's not like that at all. He's a real gentlefur who's been very careful around me. We both have strong feelings for each other but he's kept himself under control and been perfectly behaved."

Her father stoked his chin, "He sounds a little too good to be true. When do we get to meet him?"

"That's the last thing I wanted to tell you & mom. He'll be picking me up here next Friday night."

Her parents nodded. "Good," replied her father, "if you're going to be seeing him, I want to be certain that he and I understand each other."

The young femme groaned at the thought, then grinned, "He just might surprise you, dad. He's a lot more than most males I've met."

"That remains to be seen, darling; but I will keep it in mind."

"Okay, dad," she replied grinning. Collecting the photos, she continued, "I need to go get ready for tomorrow. G'night; I'll see you in the morning." She left for her room in a very good, but thoughtful, frame of mind.

Back in the family room, George looked at his wife, "This one seems to be special to her; I hope he's as good as he sounds."

Linda nodded, "She is growing up, George. You have to trust her to choose carefully."

George chuckled, "I know and it is a bit difficult; I think all fathers remember what they were like at that age and shudder."

Linda laughed and hugged her spouse close.

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

-Monday-
-Early Morning-

Lyman's smile was as crisp as the accompanying burst of morning air as he slipped into the Contour's passenger seat and secured himself.

The smiling cat surveyed his friend. "I take it," he grinned, "that my absence yesterday was not a hardship."

"*Mas oui, mon ami,*" grinned Lyman back. "Because you weren't there, I was privileged to meet a most delightful femme snow leopard, Ms. Amandajean Snowpaws. You were of course," he hastened to add, "missed."

"Yeah; right. Tell me another fairy tale."

"You honestly were, but how about 'The check is in the mail.'?"

"That'll do," laughed Lee. "Glad things went well for you."

"Your turn," responded his friend. "How'd things go with you and Debbye yesterday?"

"Pretty good," answered the feline as he threaded the car through traffic. "Good enough that I'm picking her up at home this Friday and meeting her folks."

"Good news, guy," grinned Lyman as he playfully punched Lee's shoulder. "Tell me more?"

Lee then proceeded to give a good, if not complete account of the previous day's events, neglecting any mention of Parker Thompson, as they traveled to the plant. With a modicum of care in timing, the narrative finished just as Lee pulled into a parking slot. Talking and gesturing as they walked, the two friends headed into the building.

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

- 10 AM -

The appearance of the icon for a new email message broke Lyman's work-focus as the two engineers concentrated on resuming the tasks delayed by the previous week's special efforts. Stretching a moment, the wolf-fox opened the new message and whistled. "Hey, Lee, you need to check that latest email message. You're gonna need to call Debbye."

Lee paused and opened the message on his terminal. He smiled as he read:

Sent: Monday, 10/04/99 1000 Hours

From: Joe McDonald

To: SET Members and Associates

Subject: "Thank You"

In recognition of the effort and time that all of you put in during last week's special effort, each of you and your spouse or significant other is invited to a semi-formal dinner-dance at Green Fields Country Club this coming Saturday, starting at 7:30pm.

RSVP to the team secretary by Friday, noon.

Joe McDonald

Manager, Special Engineering Team

Grinning by the end of the message, he commented, "It's nice to work for somebody who appreciates you."

"Indeed! Going to call her now?"

Lee looked at the time. "Nope, she's in class now. I'll catch her at work after lunch." He grinned, "She deserves as much notice as possible." The feline paused; then chuckled, "She might need some reassurances, too. I can see where the

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

prospect of meeting all these furs and their spouses could initially seem daunting."

His friend nodded, "Understood. Got a minute, I'm trying to remember how we were going to handle that clearance problem."

The cat padded over to his friend's workstation, "Hmm, let me take a look and see if I remember." Five minutes later he looked up, "I think this is what we came up with before last week's fun."

Lyman looked over the display, "Yeah, I remember now. Thanks."

"De nada, amigo."

With a nod they returned to their joint efforts.

- Lunch Time –

"This is a change of pace," grinned Sabrina from the passenger's seat.

"Well, you had to go and leave your car in Pennsylvania, laughed Debbye. "Besides, this way I can pay you back for all the times you drove me." The young squirrel sobered, "It's gonna feel different not having you around."

"It's gonna feel different living with Chris full time," responded her friend. "I never thought I'd leave Columbus. I'll miss seeing The Clique regularly, but I'd miss Chris even more if I didn't go."

Debbye nodded, "Used to be, I would never have understood that but if things keep going the way they are, I'd be strongly tempted to follow if Lee moved someplace else."

The skunkette's eyebrows rose, "Oh really? Things are going that well, huh?"

"Well," blushed the squirrel, "we both know we've got pretty intense feelings for each other and, well, there's something more;

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

we understand and appreciate each other. I guess I now know how you felt after the first time Chris came here."

The skunkette grinned, "So, has he started appearing in your dreams yet?"

"He has," her friend blushed, "and they're a bit more than most romance novels."

"It was the same with me," laughed Sabrina. "Just be sure before you make them real."

"Oh I will," chuckled Debbye. "We've already talked about that."

"You'll have to tell us all about it," smiled her passenger as they pulled into Furry's parking lot. "It seems that you've already learned a lot."

Debbye just laughed in reply.

Once lunch was ordered, The Clique quickly started discussing their respective weekends. Cindy had spent part of the weekend at a church cookout with Clarence, though she implied that they'd more enjoyed chances to slip off alone. Susan surprised the others when she mentioned that she & Josh had agreed to date each other exclusively. "It's a change for me," grinned the lioness, "but it's one I want; he's by far the best company I've found. I'm not interested in even looking at any other fur lately."

The other heads nodded, each considering their guy and agreeing with ready smiles.

"So how'd your weekend go?" Cindy asked Debbye as they both dug into their salads.

"Well..." responded her friend. Finishing her mouthful, the squirrel gave a quick summary of both the weekend and the

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

strenuous week that had led up to it. Saturday's events got chuckles and sly grins from her friends. Her description of how she and Lee had spent the previous day brought knowing grins out.

"Sure that talking was all you did while waiting for the movie?" asked a grinning Susan.

"Well," replied Debbye, "I'd say there was more body language involved than just talking entails."

"Ah-ha," crowed Cindy, "I've used that line too." As the laughter subsided, she continued, "Now don't tease us; show us the photos you mentioned."

The young squirrel responded by pulling an envelope out of her purse and passing it to Cindy. "Here you are."

The rabbit perused the photos and then gave them to Susan. "Nice looking guy; if he's as good as you described, you've got a winner. If the pictures he took are any indication, he definitely cares for you."

Debbye just grinned as Susan echoed the sentiments and passed the envelope to Sabrina. The skunkette flipped through the pictures carefully. "I agree with that, but you're holding out on us, Debs."

"Oh?" responded the lioness and rabbit.

"There's a gap in the numbers on the back of the photos," explained Sabrina. Turning to Debbye, she continued, "Care to explain?"

With a sheepish grin, the femme pulled another envelope from her purse and spread the 12 photos on the table. "We took some special shots of each other, too."

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

"I can see that," murmured Susan as she surveyed the pictures of a shirtless Lee. "If I didn't have Josh, I'd be tempted to give you a run for him."

"I wouldn't go quite that far," agreed Cindy, "but he is easy on the eyes."

Sabrina chuckled and looked closer at the pictures of Debbye. "You're certain you hadn't met him before that day, three weeks ago, when you brought him over?"

Yep; why?" Came the reply.

The femme skunk continued as she pointed, "For that little amount of time, he's sure managed to understand you. These caught the real you. Just how serious are you?"

"Possibly quite serious," blushed Debbye. "We're still getting to know each other, but I'm already getting some strong feelings for him. I know he feels the same." She chuckled, "A guy can't fake that. But he's been a gentlemur, well-behaved and self-controlled."

Her friends chuckled, "That's great," grinned Cindy. "We're all finding good guys. What're you doing next?"

The squirrel grinned, "Friday he's picking me up at home and meeting my folks."

"Especially your father?" grinned Sabrina, "I remember you complaining to me and Amy about how unfair he was, driving off all your good boyfriends."

"Yeah," agreed the rabbit. "You've told us too. Think your father will scare this one off?"

"Lee? Get real!" chuckled the squirrel. "That won't faze him in the least; he's a lot more grounded and secure in himself."

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"And how do you know that?" purred Susan. "You've not told us anything to show that."

The squirrel blushed, "I didn't go into all the 'juicy bits' from Saturday. We talked about a number of personal matters and he's willing to wait on full intimacy, without pressure, until we're mutually agreed on it."

"Does that include waiting until after the ceremony?" asked Cindy. "I know you've mentioned that when we've talked. Even if it's a good while?"

"He's willing to wait," stated Debbye. "He says I'm worth the effort."

Three sets of eyebrows raised as Susan whistled, "He's that sure of his self-control?"

The femme squirrel smiled, "More that we've that much confidence and trust in each other. It's a mutual agreement."

Cindy smiled, "Sounds a lot like Clarence, he can be quite the patient gentlefur."

Susan smiled, "Josh is the same; I gotta say it's refreshing."

The skunkette laughed, "This? From you? The one who's dated most of the eligible single males in Columbus?"

"Yep," grinned the lioness. "I had to kiss a lot of frogs to find my prince."

The quartet broke up in laughter and continued their lunch with light hearts.

-2 PM-

"Good afternoon, EWS Productions."

"Debbye Squirrel, please"

"Just a minute, sir; I'll connect you."

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

Debbye grabbed the phone on the first ring. "EWS Productions, this is Debbye Squirrel. How may I help you?"

"By agreeing to attend a semi-formal dinner-dance with me this Saturday evening."

"Lee? What are you talking about?"

The cat proceeded to read the memo; then continued, "I'd be honored and pleased to have you as my companion." His voice evinced a warm smile as he continued, "I'd also relish the opportunity to have you in my arms for several dances."

"I'd like that too," blushed the femme, "but I'm a little nervous about meeting all your co-workers and bosses."

"I figured you might," replied Lee. "But look at it this way, I want to show you off; to show everyfur just how lucky I am to have you."

"When you put it that way, how can I say 'no'? laughed the femme. "But it's the evening after Sabrina leaves, what if I'm not in the best humor?"

"M'dear, can you think of a better way to shake the blues?"

"Come to think of it, no. Do you want talk about the exact time while we're out this Friday?"

"I'd rather talk tonight," responded Lee. "So we both can plan accordingly. Mind you, I'm looking forward to meeting your folks."

And I'm sure you'll handle it well thought Debbye. "I'd love to talk further, Lee, but there is work to be done here."

"As there is here, too," chuckled the cat. "Good bye, my dear squirrel; until Friday."

"Until Friday, my sweet cat."

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

As soon as Lee hung up, Debbye got a dial tone and quickly keyed a number. "Suse? Debbye; I need your help. Lee's invited me to a semi-formal dinner-dance for his job, and I need to find an outfit I can afford that will wow him and make a good impression on the others."

"Is that all?" chuckled her friend. "I imagine we can do it, though it might take some hunting"

"Tomorrow night, maybe?"

"Sure, we'll get an early start on it. See you then."

"Thanks, Suse. You're a life saver."

"Thank me after you find it and pay for it. Bye."

"Bye."

Debbye stared dreamily into nothing for a few moments before turning back to her work.

- 4 PM –

Lee looked up at the knock on the doorframe. "Come on in," he called.

To his surprise, a somewhat nervous Rava walked in. "Hi guys," she started. "Ah, you guys have a moment?"

Lee looked at her, then Lyman, with a confused look. Recognizing her nervousness, though, he stepped over to the door, placed a "Classified Materials in Use" sign on it, and shut it to gain her some privacy. He padded over to stand by her.

Her nervousness evident by the way her paws twisted her tail, Rava started, "Did Cathy call either of you yesterday?"

Lee shook his head, "We were out kinda late and there weren't any messages on the machine when I got home."

Lyman nodded, "She talked to me, at length."

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

Lee looked back and forth between his two close friends. "Okay, what did I miss?" Lyman remained quiet, watching Rava. Not getting an answer, Lee asked in a concerned tone, "Rava?"

Rava turned to him and sighed, "I, ahh, need to talk to both of you. I'm taking a small leave of absence; a few weeks, maybe, depending on any new contracts."

A stunned Lee could only keep his muzzle shut while Lyman asked with clenched jaw, "Planning on running from the problem, Rava, or facing it?"

Lee looked from one to the other, "Okay, is anybody going to let me in on the conversation? Or should I leave you two alone to discuss this?"

The cat femme sighed and responded in a trembling voice, "I need some time away from all the stress, Lee; that's all it is. I managed to fall apart this past weekend and I guess I..."

She was cut off as Lyman stepped forward and pulled her into a hug; whispering, "You should have come to us sooner, Ray. We knew you were hurting but we couldn't do anything while you refused to acknowledge it."

Lee draped his arm over her shoulders, his paw on the far one, and hugged her to his side, "You can depend on us for whatever we can do."

The white cat pulled back, looking at her friends, "I know; I just didn't realize it was bothering me so."

"So how much time were you thinking of taking?" inquired the male cat.

Rava explained her plans; then continued, "Meanwhile, I promised Cathy that if I need to talk, I would. But a lot of times I can't talk to her, so..."

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

Both male friends softly smiled and nodded. "Not a problem, Ray; if you need to talk, we will always be here," answered Lyman to the unspoken question.

"Great!" enthused Rava as her face brightened. Before she left, she got Lyman's agreement to serve as her companion/date for the upcoming dinner-dance. Promising them the full story if they joined her for dinner, she padded down the hall in a better mood.

After she left, Lee shut the door and turned to Lyman, "you knew?"

"Well, a bit," replied his friend. "Cathy called me last night while you were out with Debbye and filled me in. It seems Ray finally unburdened herself to Cathy's cousin; I understand it was quite cathartic."

The feline nodded, "I can only imagine." Looking at his watch, he continued, "However, we do have work to finish today. You can catch me up while we work."

The two returned to their desks and were soon immersed in resolving design problems.

- Later That Evening -

Lee stretched as he sat down at his home computer. *Glad we had that dinner with Rava at Aristo's, he grinned as the machine powered up. I found another good restaurant and we got a lot of things aired out. If I don't see Rava at work, I'll give her a call to check on her, but no more than that; "mother-henning" drives her as crazy as it does me. 'Sides, he thought with a grimace, Lyman's Italian side is more than going to make up for it. I just hope he doesn't push her too far.* With that thought, the feline got the address of Green Fields Country Club and proceeded to get good estimates of the driving time from Debbye's home.

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

Shutting down the computer, he padded into the bedroom to get comfortable while he talked to his lady.

Ring-g-g-g

"Squirrel Residence"

"Waiting for my call?" Inquired Lee as he recognized his femme's voice.

"Actually, yeah," blushed the femme squirrel. "I was hoping to catch you before anyone else did." She hesitated, "Are you sure you want me with you on Saturday? I've gotta be younger than anyone else who'll be there and I'm afraid of embarrassing you."

"Silly squirrel," replied the cat with warm humor in his voice. "Firstly, you're not that much younger than me and," he chuckled, "I know several of the shop personnel have femme-friends your age. More to the point, you're well-read, intelligent, poised, and beautiful; how could you embarrass me?"

"You sure know how to turn a young femme's head," she giggled; then sobered. "No more self-doubts then. What time will you be coming by on Saturday?"

"For a 7:30 start, 6:45 – 7:00 looks about right. I could never get used to being 'fashionably late'."

"Nor could I; I like the way you think, my dear cat. With that out of the way, what did you have in mind for this Friday night?"

"Considering Saturday night, I figured something simple and fun. How 'bout I pick you up around 6:30, we go out for burgers, and then go bowling?"

"Great! I'll be looking forward to it. I just wish I didn't have to wait for the weekend to see you."

"I miss you too," replied Lee with an intimate murr.

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

The couple continued their light romantic banter for some while longer before saying their quiet goodnights.

- Tuesday -

-Late Evening-

Debbye stalked from the closing mall followed by her concerned friend. "That's ridiculous," she almost snarled, "they don't have anything that fits me and projects the image I want, let alone at a price I can afford!"

Susan nodded, "It's just not the season, yet; leastways, not at these stores. We'll try some other malls tomorrow night."

The young squirrel sighed, "I suppose I shouldn't have expected it to be easy. But what if they don't have anything either?"

The lioness grinned, "In that case, Thursday we try my 'ace in the hole', the 'special' rack at a classy specialty shop I found."

"Think they'll have it?"

"If no one else does, they likely will."

"I'll take your word for it."

- Wednesday –

(Author's Note: The Activities of Lee, Lyman, Rava, and company on this day will be covered in Part 2 of this chapter so as to not interfere with the flow of this thread of the story)

- Late Evening –

The two dispirited friends trudged from yet another mall. "Well, they had something that fit me and my pocketbook," grouched Debbye, "but it doesn't suit the event."

"Yeah," grinned Susan, "that would've been a touch daring for your introduction to Lee's co-workers. You looked great in it and

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

it would've gotten his attention; but that's not the first impression you want."

Her friend lightened up and grinned, "Quite; I'd probably set Lee's career back a bit, too."

As they reached her car, the squirrel asked, "So what do we do now? We've checked darn near every mall around."

"Girl," grinned Susan, "Next stop is my 'ace in the hole'."

"Hope they have something; I want to do this right."

"They will," soothed her friend, "just wait and see."

- Thursday –

-Early Evening –

Debbye looked around as Susan guided her. "An industrial park? This place is in an industrial park?"

"Sure is," grinned he lioness. "They don't spend a lot on externals. With their reputation, and what they carry, they don't need to."

At her friend's direction, the squirrel finally pulled into a spot in front of a sign that simply said **Chantelle's**. The lioness led her friend inside where Debbye's eyes widened at the understated elegance of the interior.

The two friends ooh'd and aah'd as they looked over the sample gowns and the ones for sale. Then the prices sunk in and both handled the pieces with extreme care. After giving them some time to browse, a sales-femme padded up, "Good evening, Ms. Felin. How can we help you tonight?"

"It's not for me, Marie," replied Susan to the pine-marten, "my friend here, Debbye Squirrel, is looking for something special in an outfit and we've had no luck with the 'usual suspects'."

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

The sales-femme turned to Debbye and offered her paw. "Pleased to meet you. Now, what are you looking for and why?"

Debbye explained her situation and what she wanted; then admitted, "I really don't have the money for the gowns and outfits we've seen so far."

The pine-marten smiled, "Understood. We do have a rack of pieces better suited to our budget-conscious customers. Your friend here has used it to advantage more than once." Looking the squirrel femme over, she nodded, "In fact, I think we've got just the thing for you. Follow me." She turned and padded to another part of the store.

The two friends followed and stopped as the sales-femme sorted through a rack. "Ah, here we are," crowed the femme as she pulled an outfit up and held it against Debbye.

The squirrel femme looked down. *That midnight blue does go well with my fur and it looks like it should do what I want.* "I think this just may be the one," she enthused. "Let me try it on."

Coming out of the dressing room, Debbye turned in front of her friend. "Well?"

"Girl, the way that outfit flatters you, that cat's gotta be dead if it doesn't hold his attention," grinned Susan. "Yet it's perfect for this classy 'do'. Buy it."

The young squirrel looked herself over in the mirror and grinned, "It'll kill my budget, but I gotta have it."

The outfit draped over Debbye's arm, the two friends strolled up to the counter. "I'll take it," she announced. "What's the damage?"

The pine-marten nodded, "I thought you would. That's a were-mouse 'special' that had to be cancelled by the femme who

Chapter 4.1...Getting to Know All About You – Part 1

ordered it. After she paid cancellation fees, this is all that's left." She showed Debbye the ticket.

"I can handle that, barely," answered the relieved squirrel. "Why'd she have to cancel her order? I'd hate to profit from another fur's misfortune."

"No misfortune," grinned the sales femme. "She'd ordered it for this season after she and her husband had given up on having kids; after all, experts had told them that she couldn't get pregnant. She ordered this dress and found, to her surprise and joy, that the experts were wrong. She's now two months along and gladly paid the cancellation costs."

Both friends grinned at the story. "Good for her," chuckled Debbye as she looked at the total with tax and wrote her check. "It's a good thing Lee and I are holding off on getting that intimate; I'd hate to think of the dress having that effect again."

The pine-marten grinned as she finished up, "Good luck on Saturday; your guy's going to be proud to be seen with you."

"No more than I am when I'm with him," giggled the young squirrel as the friends exited the store, anxious to return home.

- Friday –

- Early Evening –

Lee pulled up outside Debbye's house a few minutes earlier than the agreed upon time. *Better a little early than a little late, he mused as he locked the car, I'd hate to start off on the wrong paw with her folks.* Padding up to the door, he noted that the home and the yard looked lived in but well cared for. *It fits, he thought, the same attitude shows up in Debbye.*

The lady squirrel who answered his ring smiled when she saw him. "You must be the fur we've heard so much about the last

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few weeks." She extended her paw. "I'm Linda Squirrel, Debbye's mother."

"Lee Evans," he replied, shaking her paw. Bringing it up as he bent his head, he kissed the back of her paw. "A pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

"Debbye wasn't kidding," she chuckled, "you are a real gentlefur. Now," she continued, opening the door, "come on in. Debbye's running a little late; I hope you won't mind waiting a short while."

"Not at all, I realize I'm also a touch early. I'd have been embarrassed if I'd been late picking her up."

"You'll do, Mr. Evans; you'll do nicely. If you'll follow me, I'll show you to the family room where you can sit in comfort and wait."

"Certainly, ma'am. If I'm out of line, tell me so, but I'm curious. Debbye said you worked in a state office but she didn't say which one."

"I'm the office manager for the state Attorney General."

Walking behind her, Lee gave a low whistle but otherwise kept his muzzle shut and his eyes open. About halfway down the hall, his nose came into play as a familiar odor teased it. *I know that odor, gun cleaning solvent, Hoppes – I think; why am I smelling it here?* Memories of growing up swirled quickly through his mind's eye. *An-hah! The old "Daddy cleaning his guns" gambit; I remember Dad using that one on Marilee's boyfriends.* He smiled, *"forewarned is forearmed", two can play that game.*

Linda Squirrel stepped aside as she entered the family room. "Mr. Evans, I'd like you to meet my husband and Debbye's father, Captain George Squirrel, Columbus Police Department."

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Captain squirrel stood up from where he was cleaning his pistol and shook Lee's paw; receiving a firm pawshake in return. "A pleasure to finally meet the young fur Debbye's told us so much about." Gesturing to the couch beside him, he offered, "Feel free to sit while you're waiting."

With thanks, Lee sat down. George Squirrel smiled at his wife, "Why don't you go check on Debbye while Mr. Evans and I get better acquainted?"

"Certainly, dear," she replied; winking at Lee as she headed down the hall.

George smiled after her; then turned to Lee who was ready with an upraised paw. "Captain, before we get into a discussion, I'd like to offer a few stipulations to save time. Let us stipulate that you love your daughter deeply and that, if I hurt or harm her, you will hurt me and your brother officers will make my life as difficult as possible. In turn, I'd like to stipulate that I care very much for Debbye and would be willing to do darn near anything to keep her from hurt or harm."

George's eyes widened at Lee's first words but he was grinning by the time Lee finished. "I can go with those stipulations; that's very perceptive understanding on your part. I wonder, though, has anyone ever called you 'impudent', Mr. Evans?"

"I've been called that and a few 'other things' when I've spoken my mind, Captain."

"I can believe it. Since it looks like we're going to be seeing a lot of each other, please call me 'George', not 'Captain'."

"As long as you call me 'Lee'; 'Mr. Evans' is my father."

"Deal! So, what exactly is your function on the Special Engineering Team?"

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"Well, the job title is "Integrated Design Engineer" while the reality is taking a critical design effort from concept all the way through to a vehicle out the door. All the engineering disciplines and representatives from manufacturing, field service, et al. are involved from the beginning. The designers stay involved all the way through until the vehicle is handed off to whatever customer it's for."

"Impressive for a young fur. Now, tell me, how did you know to make those stipulations before I could say anything?"

"Has Debbye told you much about my family?"

"Not much, only that you're the oldest of four siblings."

"Well, the next oldest (we differ by minutes) is my twin sister, Marilee. Dad's a long-time shooting enthusiast and he's used this same basic gambit with the young 'gentlefurs' who've called on her. Heck, I've even played the "menacing older brother" a couple of times. When I caught a whiff of gun cleaning solvent on the way back here, I had a pretty good idea of your gambit."

"Congratulations, you're the first to catch it. Now that you've impressed me with your abilities, let's cut to the chase. What are your intentions regarding my daughter?"

"Honorable, George, strictly honorable. Right now, I just want us to get to better know each other; to both know for certain if there's something solid between us, rather than just emotions and hormones. When/if we both know that there's something solid there, we'll take things slow and build on that. I know we've both got a lot on our plates and I'm a patient fur."

"Fair enough, Lee; it's appreciated that you two are thinking and not just reacting. I think we understand each other and I'll certainly not hinder you."

"Thank you, sir."

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After they'd sat for a moment, Lee chuckled, "Since you've gone to all the trouble, George, may I examine and dry-fire your pistol?"

"Certainly," grinned George as he passed the pistol over.

Lee verified that the magazine well and chamber were empty, experimented with handling the pistol, and finally pointed it in a safe direction and dry-fired it to evaluate the trigger pull. "Nice, I'll have to rent one of these 9mm Beretta's at the range some time." He smiled, "I generally shoot a mildly worked over Model 1911."

"A classicist, eh?" came the chuckled rejoinder.

"More or less, I've a carbine also chambered for .45ACP that'll use the same magazines."

"At least you plan your purchases rather than buy every new 'toy' like some shooters."

"I have to; I don't have unlimited funds."

At a sound from the hall, both males looked up. "Here she comes now," grinned George as they both stood. "I won't keep you any longer and I'll wish you both a pleasant evening."

As Debbye and Linda entered the room, both looked a bit apprehensively first at Lee, then looking in surprise at both as they recognized the obvious warmth between the two males. Lee turned to Linda, "It's been a pleasure meeting you both, ma'am, but we'd best be on our way." Offering his arm to Debbye, he asked, "Shall we?"

Smiling at nods from both parents, Debbye proudly slipped her arm through his. "Yes, let's." She turned to her folks, "G'night mom; dad. I'll just let myself in when Lee brings me home."

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"Goodnight, darling," answered her father. "You two have a good evening."

As Lee and Debbye walked out the door, George put his arm around Linda and pulled her close. "I think we're going to be seeing a lot of that cat, and I can't say that I'm unhappy at the prospect."

Linda turned a questioning eye on him. "He sold you, too? This is an event. Do you suppose they'll last?"

"I rather suspect they might. If that's the case, he's one fur I wouldn't mind as a son-in-law."

Linda looked at her husband and chuckled, "I never thought I'd see the day."

As they walked to the car, Debbye asked, "How did you and my father get along? There seemed a fair warmth there."

Lee chuckled, "Quite well, really. No reason for us to be any other way; we're both straight-talking furs who care very much about you. We got that settled fairly quickly and then had a nice chat. He reminds me a bit of my dad."

Arriving at his car, Lee gave her a quick kiss as he held the door for her. Hurrying around to the driver's side, he slid into the seat, made certain they both were buckled up, and headed the car to the restaurant.

Chapter 4.2 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 2

(Meanwhile, as Debbye and Susan hunt for an outfit for Debbye, Lee is having his own interesting experiences)

- Wednesday –
- Mid – Afternoon –

Lee paused in his work as the status bar showed an incoming email. Stretching and taking a break, he pulled it up; the subject brought a smile to his face and he grinned as he read:

Sent: Wednesday, 10/06/99 1400 Hours

From: Joe McDonald

To: SET Members and Associates

Subject: Good News!

We have just been informed by the Customer that the prototype installation we worked strenuously on last week has satisfactorily completed all tests and, accordingly, that a contract has been signed for the modification and rework of the rest of the fleet. The high regard shown for the needs of maintenance furs was especially cited.

Kudos to all of you for a job well done.

Joe McDonald

Manager, Special Engineering Team

"Yes!!" He shouted as he pumped his arm.

"What's up?" inquired his partner as he looked over from his workstation.

"Check out your email, we did good last week and got the contract to upgrade the entire fleet."

The fox-wolf's mouth split into a wide grin. "This calls for a celebration!! Trattoria Salvatore?"

"Definitely!" The feline furrowed his brow, "How 'bout we ask Rava? She picked up the check on Monday after all."

"Sure; go ahead and call her."

Lee picked up the pawset and punched her extension. "Rava? Lee; seen the email? Yeah, we thought we'd go out to celebrate and wanted you to join us at our treat. We'll take my car." He listened and nodded, "Fine, we'll meet

Chapter 4.2 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 2

you at the door and bring you back later for your car." With an exchange of grins, the two friends returned to finishing the day's work.

- Early Evening –

Three pairs of eyes widened in dismay as they took in the crowded parking lot at Trattoria Salvatore. But only the driver's eyes tracked the tall, long-tailed collie-fox cross as he headed to the parking lot. Checking traffic, Lee whipped into the parking lot and was there, waiting, when the fur reached and entered a mid-eighties full-sized Caprice station-wagon loaded down with books. Pulling out of his parking place, the stocky fur gave a smile and a wave as he drove off.

Padding into the restaurant, the trio was approached by the panther maitre d', "*Signore Evans, signore Aquilaferi*, so good to see you. And who is this lovely femme with you?"

"Allow me to present our co-worker, as talented as she is beautiful, Rava Purr. Have you a table for three?" Responded Lee.

"Pleased to meet you, *signorina*," came the maitre d's response as he kissed Rava's paw. Turning to Lee, he replied, "Alas, no; we are quite filled tonight." Consulting his seating chart, he continued, "We could, though, set you at a table with solely one other fur. Would that be acceptable?"

Lee looked at his friends, received approving nods, and conveyed his agreement, too.

"If you good furs will wait here," replied the pleased panther, "I will check on your table."

As they waited, Lee looked around the waiting area; some furs were reading, some were waiting with varying degrees of patience, and, in the back, a pair of casually dressed business furs were using their time to go over something on a laptop. As he watched, they came to a smiling agreement and the bespectacled silver-black tabby spoke, "Now that's a good agreement, Nevwyn. Both of our companies will do nicely."

"That's the idea, Mat," answered the reddish-brown furred wolf-shepherd mix. "Something that builds both our companies."

Josh took his time eating, savoring the tastes of his dinner, while observing the furs around him. *I really lucked out*, he mused, *this crowded and I've got a table to myself*. The approaching maitre d' interrupted his reverie.

Chapter 4.2 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 2

"*Scusa, signore*," said the panther with a bow, "we have a party of three we wish to seat immediately. Would you consider sharing your table?"

I guess I thought too soon, grinned the fox. *But I might get some interesting company if the restaurant is this interested in them*. Aloud he just replied, "Of course, they're welcome to join me."

"*Grazie, signore*," responded the now smiling fur. "We will, of course, give you a discount on your bill for your willingness to assist us."

The fox raised a paw, "That's not necessary."

"*Per favore, signore*. It is for us."

At the resulting shrug and smile of agreement, the maitre d' padded back to the dining room entrance. Shortly, the maitre d' lead a party of two cats and what appeared to be a wolf-fox mix toward Josh's table. The male cat stepped up and extended his paw, "Thanks for sharing your table. We really didn't relish the idea of waiting for one to become free."

The fox rose and shook offered paw, "My pleasure; I'm Josh Fox, welcome to my table."

Lee returned the pawshake, "I'm Lee Evans; these two are my good friends and coworkers, Lyman Aquilaferi and Rava Purr." After they'd all shaken, Lee assisted Rava with her chair as Lyman sat down.

"Another old-style gentlefur," quipped the grinning fox.

"But, of course," replied the grinning cat as he seated himself.

"So what brings you three here?" Inquired Josh.

Lyman answered as the waitress brought menus, "We won a big contract, today, and we're celebrating after the hard work we put in to help win that contract and the additional work it will mean."

"Understandable," responded the fox, grinning.

Dinner was quickly ordered and the company fell to small talk. Lee looked the fox over quizzically, *I swear I've seen him before*, and wasn't surprised to see a similar look on his face. A similar look on Rava's face caught him by surprise, though.

Through a sly smile, Rava purred, "So where are your two 'partners in crime', the wolf and the mangy ferret?"

Chapter 4.2 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 2

"They were busy tonight and I wanted Italian," replied the fox. "Hey, how'd you know about them?"

"I've seen the three of you having fun in Furry's often enough," returned the amused cat.

Josh nodded.

A ferret! Thought Lee. *Now I know where I met this fur.* He grinned to himself. Nudging Lyman, he whispered, "Recognize our host now? After that clue?"

The fox-wolf whacked Lee with the tip of his tail as he whispered back, "Sh-h-h, Rava doesn't need to know about that."

Rava's ears perked up, "About what, hon? No use trying to hide it now."

Lyman groaned and blushed as he replied, "We ran into our host and that 'mangy ferret' a couple of weeks ago at The Gentlefur's Club; though we didn't get his name at the time. His ferret friend sure seemed set on embarrassing him."

"The Gentlefur's Club?" Rava's eyebrows shot up; as the fox's bright blush and unintelligible mouth movements confirmed the tale. Turning to Lee, she pointed to the fox-wolf, "I might have expected this of him, but not of you."

The brown tabby grinned and shrugged, "What can I say? It was my first and only time there, thanks to this character." He pointed at Lyman.

The white cat purred as she turned back to Lyman, "Why would you drag him there and not me?"

Lyman blushed further; then replied, "It was a 'guys' night out'. I've had a membership for some time, even if I didn't go as often as our host's friend – who seems to know everyfur there."

The femme slowly nodded, "That the only reason?" She looked steadily at both of her friends.

Lee blushed, "Well, no; it wasn't. It seems Lyman had an additional motive. It was the week after I first met Debbye and, the way I was acting, he figured that a visit there was necessary to see if it was love or lust. He just suggested we take a break from studying and get some air; the next thing I knew, we pulled in there."

Rava turned to glare at Lyman, "And you say the gauntlet I put guys through is barbaric?"

Chapter 4.2 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 2

"A gauntlet?" questioned the fox.

The fox-wolf blushed even brighter as he nodded, "Yeah; she tests a prospective guy's limits and pushes him to them to see what he's made of. That is barbaric!"

"What do you call testing Lee, humm?" snapped the femme.

"Well, I'd've enjoyed..."

"I'll bet you would," growled the white cat as she turned to Lee. "I take it that it was more than lust?"

"Way more," responded the male feline with a smile, "None of those femmes affected me the way Debbye does."

Rava smiled, "Good, I think she is a sweetheart. Besides," she chuckled, "I didn't think you were like that anyway."

Chuckling in return, the brown tabby answered, "Far more between us than 'simple lust'. Though I'd be lying through my teeth if I said there wasn't a strong physical attraction on both sides."

The white femme cat grinned at that; then glared at the wolf-fox. "Lyman, I should smack you! You've been a member and you've never taken me there?" She mock-pouted.

Lyman looked poleaxed. "I never even considered that," he responded.

"Pity," answered Rava with a sly grin, "you might have gotten lucky." She winked at him.

"Darn," whispered the blushing fox-wolf, "I never thought of that."

"Well start thinking about it," responded the femme. "But," she purred softly, "now that I know this little secret of yours, you are going to limit your check-ups on me to once a day, like Lee, aren't you? I'm sure the guys at work would love to hear about this."

"A force of nature when you're determined," answered the chagrined wolf-fox, "Agreed."

The cat femme turned to the large muscular fox, "He blew his latest chance and I know Lee's taken; so, interested in taking a femme there, hon?"

Josh turned red again as he stammered, "I – I – I'm already seeing someone and we're playing it exclusive for now."

Chapter 4.2 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 2

"Um – hum," nodded Rava. "Then just why were you there?"

Before the fox could answer, Lee interjected, "Somewhat for the 'dark side' of the reason I was there. That 'mangy ferret' certainly set out to embarrass this guy. Our host here was fairly overwhelmed with what happened to him there. For that matter," he turned to Josh, "Has your ferret friend used those pictures yet?"

Josh grimaced, "No, he hasn't yet but I'm sure he will when it'll embarrass me the most."

The white cat nodded and smiled at the fox, "So what did happen to you?"

The fox blushed even deeper, "I'd rather not say."

Lyman gave a sly grin, "Something that I wouldn't mind have happen to me."

Rava turned to a furiously blushing Josh and winked, "Into that type of thing, hon?" The fox could only shake his head "no", not trusting himself to speak. The femme turned back to Lyman, "This might make up for not asking me to The Gentlefur's Club, but tell me more."

Ignoring the glare from the blushing fox, the wolf-fox continued, "you remember what happened to Evan at his 'going away' party? Think 15 times worse!"

Noticing the intense embarrassment the fox was showing, Lee interjected, "I'm sure she's got more than enough imagination to fill in the details."

The femme cat chuckled, "Especially after working with the guys in the shop for so long."

The three males chuckled with her as Josh added, "If they're anything like some of the crews I've worked with, that'll be more than enough."

The white cat nodded, "And where might that have been, hon?"

"Well," replied the fox, "I've worked as a security guard a number of places, including some rock concerts. You don't want to know how raunchy some acts and their roadies get, especially when the groupies start swarming around."

The three engineers laughed knowingly in response; then Rava turned on their "host", "So, hon, Lee's told us how he ended up there; how'd you get into a place where your mangy friend could set you up?"

Chapter 4.2 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 2

"Well," answered the fox, "I'd just started seeing that 'someone' I mentioned earlier and matters were progressing well. For me, that's something of a new experience and he said he wanted to buy me dinner to celebrate that; I had no idea he'd take me there. Though," he mused, "I should have expected something."

"Why's that?" asked Lyman.

"He's somewhat obsessed with sex, so I shouldn't have been surprised that he knew everyfur there and was able to set this up. I just never imagined he'd set me up like that," groaned Josh.

At the others' chuckles, he joined in. As things died down, Rava turned to Lee, "Speaking of things not imagined, how's Debbye going to react to your trip there?"

The brown tabby grinned, "She already knows; I told her last Saturday. She's a bit unhappy with Lyman for taking me there, but rather flattered by the reactions I mentioned earlier."

Rava grinned and turned back to the fox just as their orders arrived and delayed further discussion. Any talking at all as they devoured the excellent food was devoted to a particular item on the menu or to general small talk.

As Rava finished her dessert, she sighed, stretched, and turned to Lee and Lyman, "I'll have to thank you two for bringing me here, that was delicious." Turning to Josh she grinned, "So, what led your ferret friend to set you up like that?"

"Well," answered Josh with a blushing smile, "It started when I needed to get Rob, my ferret friend, out of my fur for a while when I was shopping." He went on to describe how he and Blue, his wolf friend, had set Rob up in the mall. He continued with the situation that led to the visit to The Gentlefur's Club and finished by regaling his tablemates with his view of the events there.

Lee chuckled, "And what did your femme have to say about that night?"

"Uhm", blushed the fox deeper, "I haven't told her yet. It's kinda hard to work that into the conversation; I've been way too embarrassed to tell her."

The brown tabby nodded with a grin, "I can see that. Still, you need to be the one to tell her; it goes over lots better than if she finds out about it else. Imagine the effect if Rob shows her those photos and catches her by surprise."

Chapter 4.2 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 2

Josh nodded and shuddered, "I hadn't thought of that; I wouldn't put it past him now that you mention it."

Rava chuckled, "I can't speak for her, but if some fur tried that with me, I'd give my guy the benefit of the doubt."

"After giving him how much 'nonsense'?" asked Lyman.

"What do you mean?" replied the white cat.

"C'mon, Rava, we know you better," continued the wolf-fox.

Lee turned to Josh, "I apologize for her treating you to the same questioning she gives friends."

The fox relaxed and waved a paw, "Not a problem, I think I'd much rather be treated as one of her friends than one of her enemies."

"You got that right," laughed the brown tabby.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rava asked Lee, sharply.

"After seeing the gauntlet and watching you keep guys on their toes, you'd really 'just' give one the benefit of the doubt?"

"Well, he might have to do a 'little' proving," answered the femme with a hint of a blush.

Lyman grinned, "I'll let this drop, but I gotta ask about last weekend. Why did it take an outsider for you to drop your defenses and open up when your friends here" he gestured toward himself and Lee "have been waiting for you to open up so we could help?"

"That's just it," answered the white cat, "I know you two and Cathy all too well and I'd have trouble looking any of you in the face afterwards. Jim was someone I don't see every day and I could be open to him."

The fox whispered to the tabby cat, "What's that all about?"

"She's been under a lot of stress," Lee whispered back, "and she finally broke down and talked to someone. He's a bit miffed she waited so long and didn't talk to one of us or any of her other close friends."

The fox nodded, "I hope it helped her; carrying too much stress can snarl you good."

Chapter 4.2 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 2

"The cat nodded, "It was showing, she needs some time off to really let it out of her system." As the level of discussion behind him increased in volume, he turned, "I think I'd better step in, we want to come back here. Pardon me."

Josh nodded and waved, with a small grin.

Lee turned to his two, now arguing, friends. "Does it really matter where or with who she got help?" he asked Lyman.

"No, not really, but..."

Turning to Rava, "Did you really mean to leave us out of helping?"

"I'd never hurt you like that, Lee. I..I just didn't want to add to your burdens."

The brown tabby shook his head as he briefly took her paw, "Helping friends isn't a burden; you know how you'd feel if we went to some other fur for help."

The femme nodded, "Yeah, I'd wondered how mad you were." She turned to Lyman and extended her paw, "I'm sorry we got into this."

"Peace," agreed the fox-wolf as he shook her paw.

All the parties at the table turned as the waiter brought their bills. Before Rava or Lyman could grab their bills, Lee had theirs and his. "My turn to pay tonight," he firmly stated. "Rava paid Monday night and you," he gestured to the fox-wolf, "can pay next time the three of us go out. We'll be certain to find a suitably expensive place; right, Rava?"

The white femme cat merely grinned widely and nodded as the wolf-fox groaned theatrically.

Josh chuckled as he paid his bill, "Now that sounds familiar; Rob, Blue, and I have gone through that more than once."

"And what makes you think we haven't?" laughed the brown tabby as he cheerfully paid. "We've been friends ever since we started together and this isn't the first round by a long shot."

The fox grinned as the waiter returned with their receipts, "It's still good to see friends who can deal with their differences and stay friends. You wouldn't believe how the other two and I get on each other some times."

Chapter 4.2 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 2

Lee gave a wry grin, "From our performance a little while ago, I think I would." He extended his paw to the fox, "It's been a pleasure to meet you, I hope we run into each other again."

"Likewise," returned the fox as he shook paws. "Though I don't know when that'll be."

The tabby shrugged, "You never know, probably sometime when we least expect it."

The three co-workers waved to their new acquaintance as the two cars pulled out of the lot. "I'm glad I was upfront with Debbye about that night," chuckled Lee. "I don't think I'd care to leave that kind of surprise out there. Especially not with a friend like this 'Rob'."

"That's you," chuckled Rava, "some furs prefer a bit more 'edge'."

"Obviously," interjected the wolf-fox, "I just wanna be outside the blast radius when his femme does find out."

The trio chuckled as they took the white cat back for her car.

Chapter 4.3 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 3

-Saturday-

-Late Morning-

THWACK!!

The racquetball caromed out of one forecorner of the court in a radically different direction from which it had entered the corner. Nearing the floor, it was met by a brown blur with a positioned racquet.

THWAPP!!

The ball pounded low and fast into the other forecorner and streaked out with another change of direction in a low path that kissed the floor twice before the hustling wolf-fox could get a racquet on it. Grabbing the ball on the rebound, Lyman tossed it to the cat. "Good hit, there," he chuckled. "No way I could've gotten that one."

"Thanks," panted his friend through a grin. "By the way, I believe that makes this game point."

Smoothing his headfur back with a paw, Lyman pondered and then nodded. "Yeppers, it is. You're definitely on your game today. Must've had a good night last night."

"I'll say," grinned Lee as he served. The next minutes were filled with grunts, pants, and the sounds of a pounding ball as the point was fiercely contested. Finally, the fox-wolf moved a fraction of a second too late and the ball bounced off the frame of his racquet.

"Game!" shouted the smiling feline as he straightened and shook his friend's paw. "A hard fought one, too."

"Yeah, but you won," replied Lyman with a mock pout as he picked up the ball. Looking at the clock outside the court, he shrugged, "Time's almost up for this week. Take it to the showers?"

His friend nodded and the two opened the small door to the court and ducked out into the hallway. Waving to the meerkat and orange tabby waiting there, Lee grinned, "It's all yours Keith, Dave. Enjoy yourselves." Lyman merely saluted the pair as he followed Lee back to the locker room. Changing in the locker room, the two furs slid into the Jacuzzi to relax after their workout.

"So," grinned Lyman, "just how well did last night go?"

Chapter 4.3 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 3

"I met her folks on friendly terms, if that's what you mean. They're quite a combination; her dad's a Captain with the CPD and her mom's the office manager for the state AG."

"Bet they don't talk shop over the dinner table," came the chuckling reply.

"Depends, I'd imagine. I'm sure there are times when it's best they don't."

"So what else were you two up to last night?"

"That I'll admit to? We just had a quiet date; we went out for burgers and such and then went bowling." The cat chuckled, "We're well matched there; we bowled four lines and each won two. None of the wins was by more than 10 – 15 points."

"And after that?"

"We went for something cold to cool off with; then I took her home. With her best friend leaving today, she wanted to get to bed early."

"Make sense," nodded the wolf-fox. "Since you're at loose ends this afternoon, how about coming over and helping me pick out what to take to the range tomorrow?"

The feline pondered a moment as he let the jets of water relax his muscles through his fur. Finally he nodded, "Sounds good to me. I gotta run some errands on the way home; probably grab lunch, too. I'll be over 'bout two or so. That'll give us a couple hours before I have to get ready and pick up Debbye."

"Good enough," nodded Lyman.

Thoroughly relaxed, the pair enjoyed the Jacuzzi somewhat more before moving on to go their separate ways.

- Early Afternoon –

Debbye, Susan, and Amy waved as the silver Mercury pulled away from the curb and drove off; then watched until it disappeared down the street. Susan sniffed back a tear, "I don't know about you two, but I'm going to find a gallon of Jen and Berry's double chocolate fudge ice cream and pig out."

"Sounds like a plan to me," agreed Amy. She turned to her cousin, "You in, Deb?"

Chapter 4.3 ...Getting to Know All About You – Part 3

The auburn-headfurred femme nodded, "Somewhat; I don't want to mess up things for tonight. Not after all we went through to find that dress. Right, Suse?"

The lioness nodded, "Definitely! Gotta do the Clique proud!" She chuckled.

The other two femmes joined her as they headed inside to work on the ice cream's demise.

- Mid-Afternoon -

Lee stretched as he got up from the couch, "I'm feeling a bit thirsty. Mind if I help myself to some cold water?"

"Not at all," grinned his friend. "You know where everything is and I can trust you not to make a mess."

Lee chuckled as he padded into the kitchen and took a tumbler off the shelf. The noise of the ice cubes dropping in masked the sound of the phone so he was surprised when he heard the fox-wolf start talking.

"Oh, heh Rava, what's up? You're not canceling on me, are ya?"

Lee smiled at the chuckle in his friend's voice, but it faded at Lyman's sharp "What?"

Lyman's next two exchanges really caught the feline's attention:

"So, let me get this straight; you made a date for tonight with a leopard you met last night?"

"What do you know about him? And what do you mean you don't have his phone number? How the hell did you talk to him this morning if you don't have his phone number?"

The growl on that last brought Lee out of the kitchen.

"That doesn't answer the question, Rava," growled Lyman as he motioned Lee back.

Lee stepped back, eyes widening as Lyman snapped, "Oh really? Ever occur to you that dating someone new right now isn't such a good idea considering last weekend?"

Whatever response Lyman got made his voice rise more as he snarled, "No, you did that once already." Shock as he realized what he'd said made the fox-wolf stop and speak more calmly, "Rava, I didn't..." The slam of the

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other phone being very forcefully hung up made him wince; he sighed and softly set the pawset down on the phone.

"What the devil was that all about?" inquired his wide-eyed friend.

Lyman answered in a low voice, "Rava's going to the party with someone else."

"Who?"

"I don't know... Some leopard she picked up and took home last night," answered Lyman in a venomous tone.

Uh-oh thought Lee as the implications hit. "Rava's not like that Lyman."

The wolf-fox just shrugged.

A concerned Lee continued, "What has gotten into you? She is a big girl Lyman, she doesn't need you to play big brother protecting her. We both might not agree with her choice of method but did it ever occur to you that this may be what she needs for her healing?" His thoughts continued, *I can't believe Rava took the leopard home to her bed, but I know Lyman too well to doubt his word. Dammit, I'm missing something here!* His mind quickly pondered the other data, *Wait a minute, Lyman's never pulled that type of attitude with Rava before, not even when they've clashed on a topic.*

"No, but..."

"Or is something more basic at work here?" Asked the cat carefully.

"Lee! She's a good friend and I'm concerned for her," replied Lyman as he looked up in surprise.

"If this had happened with the Rava we knew before her marriage, would it have bothered you?" persisted Lee. *I'm certain jealousy is the problem here, but what's the cause? Is it that she went to someone else rather than either of us or is it something more than that?*

"No," quietly answered the fox-wolf.

"Look she's my friend too, but she's also her own person. Give her room; you wouldn't want her or me second guessing you, would you?" The feline's eyes narrowed, "Is it just the selfish motive that you don't want to rush around and get another date?"

Lyman shook his head quickly, "No, nothing like that. That thought hadn't entered my mind at all."

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"Well, then, what's the problem?"

Lyman sighed and sat down on the couch suddenly feeling very weary and put his head in his paws, "I don't know, my friend. I really don't know."

With a matching sigh, the cat eased himself into the chair across from his friend. "So what exactly did Rava say?"

"That she'd met a really nice leopard last night and that, apparently, he spent the night with her since she talked to him this morning without phoning. She forgot that she had a date with me and asked him to be her date to the dinner-dance."

Lee nodded, then quietly spoke, "His spending the night with her doesn't mean that anything happened."

The wolf-fox snorted loudly, "Yeah, right. Could you spend a night alone with Debbye and not do anything?"

Thinking of the agreement he and the femme squirrel had reached, the cat replied simply, "Yep."

"Well, perhaps," came the skeptical reply. "But she doesn't have Rava's sex appeal."

"I beg to differ," offered the cat with a quiet smile. "Debbye affects me far more than any other femme I've ever been with and she reacts just as strongly to me. However, that's neither here or there; you still have no grounds for jumping to conclusions about Rava and this leopard."

Lyman looked over quizzically, "You're adamant on defending them?"

A small shrug, "Innocent until proven guilty. You've got nothing but suspicions that anything happened."

"Maybe, but..."

"But nothing, Lyman. Let it rest. You know I support my friends, all of them; even when they're in conflict with each other."

"I'm not in conflict with Rava!"

"If you say so. As I said, I support all my friends and you'd best not bring this nonsense into the dinner-dance; it's supposed to be a time to celebrate our successes, not stir trouble."

Lyman grudgingly nodded.

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Lee grinned, "Meanwhile, I think you've got other things to worry about."

"Hmmm?"

"You need to line up another date," replied the cat as he stood up and stretched. "And I need to start getting ready, myself."

"Ever the gentlefur," chuckled the fox-wolf as he stood and padded over to search his desk for a certain slip. "Mind letting yourself out? She may have dumped me but she's not the only femme."

"Lyman," cautioned his friend, "self pity ill becomes you."

"Don't worry 'bout me," snapped the wolf-fox as he found what he sought. "I'll recover."

"Okay, okay," soothed his friend. "Just don't give into it and remember what I said about disturbing things tonight."

"Yeah, yeah. See you later."

As the feline let himself out, he heard the other on the phone, "Hello, Mandy?"

- Late Afternoon -

Debbye hummed along with the Phil Collins CD as Susan drove her home. "I'd love to hit the mall with you tomorrow Susan, but I'll be going shooting with Lee."

The lioness pouted, "First 'Brina, then Cindy; now you. I swear; I'd worry about the Clique if I didn't have Josh. As 'tis, we never do stuff together anymore."

The squirrel squeezed her friend's shoulder, "We'll get together during the week; I promise." Her face took on a wistful look, "But weekends are the only time I really get to see Lee."

Glancing over quickly, Susan chuckled, "You've got it bad, I recognize the symptoms. I take it Lee survived meeting your dad?"

The femme squirrel chuckled, "More like he wowed both him and mom."

Both were chuckling as Susan pulled into Debbye's parent's driveway. Susan put her paw on Debbye's arm, "Knock 'em dead tonight."

"Thanks, Suse," came the reply as the squirrel got out. "Call me real early tomorrow afternoon?"

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"Sure will!" Susan waved as she backed out and drove off.

Debbye waved to her mother as she passed through the kitchen. Entering the bathroom, she took an antacid and then washed her face; using a paw-held dryer and her mother's brush to fix herself up. She reflected, "It's gonna be a loooong three weeks."

Her mother's knock on the door broke her reverie, "Debbye, your friend Sabrina's on the phone."

- Early Evening-

Lee finished adjusting his tie, checked his appearance in the mirror, and fixed the flying eagle tie-tac in place. The dark brown, with subdued dark gold pinstripes, suit, antique gold shirt, and off-white and tan striped tie fit his markings perfectly. He grinned at his reflection, "First time in ages I've put this much effort into my appearance; but then she's the first one in ages I've wanted to do that for."

Picking up the corsage he'd bought for Debbye, the feline exited his apartment for his freshly washed, cleaned, waxed, and polished car. Humming quietly to himself, he headed over to pick up the femme who'd laid claim to his attentions.

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Linda Squirrel answered the cat's ring of the doorbell. "Debbye's almost ready, she'll be with you shortly." She chuckled, "Her friend Sabrina called as soon as she reached Pennsylvania and they talked a good while."

Lee grinned, "Far be it from me to take exception that; friends are important. 'Sides, I'm a touch early and I left us plenty of time to get to the dinner–dance."

The older femme squirrel chuckled as she let the cat in and led him to a chair in the family room. "You're learning early, it took George a bit longer to get that practical."

"I resemble that remark," laughed Debbye's father as he greeted Lee. The three furs made small talk 'til a noise from the hall doorway caught Lee's attention. Looking up, his face took on a stunned expression as Debbye padded into the room, pirouetted, and modeled her dress for him. The basic dark royal blue dress fell to mid-calf and featured a center section, with collar, and 3/4-length sleeves of a shear ivory on dark ivory brocade. The front center panel, had it been solely lace, would have given the feline quite a view of the

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femme squirrel's cleavage. In the back, the center panel tapered down to the base of her tail while the royal blue fabric wrapped under her tail. Recovering, the cat whistled and grinned, "you're quite a vision, m'dear; even more than my fondest fantasies."

The femme squirrel blushed and, with a twinkle in her eye, curtsied. "Thank you, kind sir."

Amidst general laughter, Lee stood and padded over to pin the corsage in place, enjoying the brief touch of fur and claiming a quick soft kiss as payment.

George Squirrel looked his daughter over, his experienced eye evaluating her dress; his eyebrows rose as he noted details. "Sweetheart, just how much did you pay for this?"

Mother and daughter looked at each other and laughed. "Susan helped me find a real bargain, dad," answered the younger femme. Linda placed her paw on her husband's arm. "She showed me the receipt right after she brought it home," she assured the Captain. "You should be proud of your daughter, she hunted 'til she found a real bargain."

The male squirrel nodded and smiled. "You see how they double-team me," he told Lee with a soft chuckle. "Beware."

"Yes, sir," replied the cat with an answering chuckle. Turning to his date, he offered his arm. "Shall we be off?"

"Certainly," accepted the young femme as she slipped her arm into his. Turning to her parents, she continued, "We'll probably be in late; the dancing will probably give me an appetite. So I'll wish you 'good night' now."

"Good night, dear," answered captain Squirrel. "You two enjoy yourselves."

"I'll take that as an order," quipped Lee as he turned and escorted Debbye to his car.

Holding the door for his femme, the feline made certain she was properly belted in; the "casual brushes" and quick stolen kiss being purely coincidental. Moving quickly to the driver's side, he rapidly buckled himself in and took another quick kiss from the very willing femme before driving off.

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-Saturday-

- Early Evening-

Debbye sat in the passenger's seat wondering what had gone wrong. Lee had been in a good humor when he picked her up, but as they drove to the dinner-dance, he'd become more quiet and withdrawn. *This is weirding me out*, she thought with concern. *I wonder what's bothering him?* A sudden stab of fear surprised her, *What if he doesn't want to be with me anymore?* She reached over and touched his shoulder. "Lee, could you find somewhere to pull over and stop for a minute, we need to talk."

That last phrase got the cat's attention and, checking to make certain he had the time, he found a quiet place to pull over and park. Turning to the femme squirrel, he waited for her to speak.

"Lee," she began hesitantly, "you've been very quiet since we got in the car, is there something wrong? You seem a million miles away"

The feline grabbed her paw and kissed it fervidly, "No, sweetheart – sorry, that just slipped out – there's nothing wrong per se. It's just that some things happened today and, like that line from the original "Star Wars" movie, 'I've got a bad feeling about this'." He sighed with a hint of frustration, "Let's just say it definitely describes how I feel about tonight."

"Would it surprise you that I'm thinking the same about you? It's too early and I shouldn't, but I do," replied a very relieved Debbye in a low voice. "Now, what happened that's got you so worried?"

"Well, since you've 'taken me out of circulation', Lyman was supposed to take Rava to this event. This afternoon she called and cancelled on him; he didn't take it well for some reason." From there, Lee gave her a description of the background and what had happened. Finally he ended, "I told Lyman not to ruin tonight by causing a scene, but he seems so upset that I'm worried he'll act anyway."

The young squirrel nodded, "I can see that. Is there anything you can do to stop him before he does?"

Lee shook his head. "Well, I've already talked to him and tried to convince him not to do anything stupid, so I don't know what's left for me to do." He gave a brief shake and smiled, "Given that I can't do anything about it, it's silly of me to worry so much; I'm as prepared as I can be." Bending over, he gave Debbye a passionate kiss, "Thank you, dear heart, for making me talk about it;

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it helped put some of my reservations to rest. We're going to enjoy ourselves no matter what others do."

She wrapped her arms around the cat and hugged him close. "I was so worried that there was something wrong about us, my sweet cat." Giving him another kiss, she straightened up. "Lets go, I don't want to miss a minute of dancing in your arms."

The cat was smiling softly as he guided the car back into traffic. "I hope I'm as good for you as you are for me, sweetheart."

The squirrel settled back with an equal smile as she stroked his paw, "You are, my very sweet one, you are."

Moving with the sure maneuvers of one long-used to city driving, Lee managed to arrive at Green Fields Country Club a bit before 7:30 and was rewarded with a choice of good parking places. Picking one that offered an easy walk to the building's entrance and easy access to the parking lot's exit, he parked and then turned to his date. "Unless there's something you need in there, why not lock your purse in the glove box? That way you won't have to worry about somefuf walking off with it and we won't be tied all night to any one table in there."

"Good idea," she nodded.

The cat quickly suited action to words; then hurried around to hold the door for Debbye. Her arm around his waist as his was around hers, the couple padded into the building. At the entrance, Lee signed Debbye in as his guest and they padded down the wide corridor to the hall used for the dinner-dance. He had to grin as they neared the door and turned to whisper softly in the femme squirrel's ear, "Brace yourself, there's going to be a bit of interrogation; these folks are all used to seeing me escorting Rava."

Debbye nodded. "Ready," she whispered back.

The feline moved over a touch, offering his arm as he did so, and, arm in arm, escorted her into the room. They padded into the brightly lit hall and were immediately met by Joe McDonald, the large black wolf leading the team. "Glad you could make it, Lee," he grinned as he shook the cat's paw. Turning to Debbye, his eyes widened a bit. "I thought you were Rava's usual escort." He turned a friendly, but questioning look at Debbye, waiting for an introduction.

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Lee grinned and pulled Debbye up beside him, "Well, with Rava it was friends helping each other out; this femme is far more to me than a friend. Joe, I'd like you to meet Ms. Debbye Squirrel; I suspect you'll be seeing a lot of her." Turning, he continued, "Debbye, I'd like you to meet my boss, Joe McDonald, the head of our team."

The squirrel femme offered her paw, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. McDonald. Lee's said a lot of good things about the team."

The wolf grinned, "Well, I could say plenty of good things about him. Welcome to our party, then." Turning back to the feline, he added, "If she's not with you now, who's Rava coming with? Lyman?"

Padding up just in time to hear the last, a femme wolf looked sharply at the cat, "She's not with you tonight, Mr. Evans?"

Before Lee could answer, Joe smiled as he spoke up, "It seems that Lee, here, has met this young femme, Debbye Squirrel, who's most thoroughly captured his interest."

The femme wolf growled, "So she'll be by herself tonight?"

The maine coon grinned, "No, I didn't say that. I have it on excellent authority that she has an escort of her own."

The femme wolf raised an eyebrow, "Really? How interesting! Not your friend, Mr. Aquilaferi?"

The feline shook his head, "No, not Lyman. She does have interests outside work." With that he turned to his boss, "We'll see you later, Joe. I want to get us a good table."

The black wolf nodded, "Sound planning ahead, Lee. A trait that serves you well on the team." Turning to his wife, he remarked, "I see more guests arriving, dear. We need to greet them." With a wave to Lee & Debbye, the male wolf took his wife's paw and guided her off to greet other new arrivals.

As Lee turned to guide her, Debbye grimaced, "I thought you were kidding about how they gossiped about Rava. That bitch would try to rake Rava over the coals given the slightest chance."

Her date grimaced and nodded. "She's one of the 'ringleaders'; she seems to feel threatened by a competent and attractive femme working with her husband. It's a shame, really; she's quite a competent business fur in her own right and Joe's still totally in love with her." He led her over to a table near the dance floor and away from the bar. "This will get us out of most furs way and

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give us a touch of privacy," he commented as he held the chair for her. After he'd helped her get properly seated, the feline bent to her ear, "Get the lady something to 'wet her whistle'?"

"Please," came the response.

Shortly thereafter the feline returned with two tall glasses of red liquid. "Here you are," grinned the cat. "Two virgin mai-tai's; and they're safe, I watched them being made."

The femme squirrel grinned, "It's nice to have a date who cares about matters like that." Looking around, she saw more folk sitting down. "What's the schedule for this affair?"

"Well, that's the other item I picked up," replied the cat as he fished two schedules from his coat pocket and passed her one. "They'll give late arrivals a chance to get seated and start serving at 7:40 with dancing starting about 8:20." Sitting down next to her, he continued, "The options for dinner are given on the card attached to it, just check your choice and pass it to the waiter; we'll get our food and get out on the dance floor faster." He gave a knowing grin, "I'm looking forward to having you in my arms."

The femme squirrel winked and grinned as she studied the menu. Marking her choices, she finished the card and passed it to her date. Waving down the next waiter to pass them, Lee handed off the two cards and turned to continue talking with her when his attention was drawn to the room's main entrance. With a stunning snow leopardess, in a pink gown and red accessories that showed off her gray and black markings, on his arm, Lyman made quite the entrance to the dinner-dance. The feline chuckled softly, "Well, Lyman managed to find an adequate companion for this 'do'. I wonder if that's the 'Ms. Amandajeane Snowpaws' he mentioned meeting when I didn't make the rally?"

His squirrel companion turned and looked, "Yes, she does have 'presence'. It looks like he'll enjoy the dance."

The cat smiled, "Yes, I'd hope so; though not near as much as I will." Leaning over, he gave evidence of his feelings with a quick kiss, which his companion returned with enthusiasm. Separating, they held paw beneath the table as they watched Lyman look around, spot them, and head their way. As the other couple neared, the feline stood and helped his companion up.

As they stopped at the table, Lyman turned to his date, "Mandy, I'd like you to meet my best friend, Lee Evans, and his date, Debbye Squirrel." He

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chuckled, "She's the reason he wasn't at the rally last Sunday." Turning to the cat and squirrel, he continued, "My friends, allow me to introduce my beautiful companion, Ms. Amandajean Snowpaws."

The snow leopardess extended her paw, "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Evans." She grinned, "I suppose I should thank you for setting up the situation that allowed me to meet Lyman."

The cat bowed and kissed her paw, "My pleasure, then. I see that Lyman still shows excellent taste."

The snow leopardess giggled softly and extended her paw to the squirrel. "Congratulations, hon. You've got quite the gentlefur there."

The squirrel femme smiled and returned a firm, friendly pawshake, "Thanks, I know I am, and for far more than just that." Her tail curled around Lee, "I keep finding more reasons to appreciate him."

The snow-leopardess winked, "Then you're very lucky, hon; hang on to him."

Debbye grinned as she slid her arm around the cat's waist, "I intend to."

Throughout this whole exchange, Lee & Lyman listened with slowly rising eyebrows. At his date's last actions, Lee smiled as his arm and tail possessively reached around her. "Funny, I seem to find myself returning those sentiments," he commented as he turned and kissed Debbye's cheek.

Still smiling, the femme snow leopard turned to her date, "Let's go find ourselves a table, Lyman. I think your friends here deserve a table by themselves for dinner."

The fox-wolf nodded with a blushing grin, "Probably best, though I'm not certain they'd notice anyone else, anyway." As he turned to find a table, he commented in Lee's direction, "See? I told you I'd find a good date after Rava stood me up for that leopard she slept with."

Lee's paw came up, "Lyman, I warned you before. Drop it for tonight, we don't need that here."

"Yeah, I know. Still...". He found a table just then and his scowl changed to a smile as he turned to his date, "There's a good one." He waved at the location, "Let's grab it before some other furs do."

The snow-leopardess nodded and the couple hurried off to stake their claim to a table.

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Debbye shivered and hugged Lee. "You weren't kidding," she whispered, "He seems really bitter about it." To herself she thought, *I wonder why Lyman's reacting so jealously? I'd best keep my eyes open when Rava arrives.*

"I know," sighed her cat. "I just hope he does drop it. Joe doesn't need this nonsense tonight."

"Still, we can enjoy ourselves," smiled the femme squirrel. "I am so looking forward to dancing in your arms."

"Same here, m'dear," came the soft reply with an equally soft kiss. "Very much looking forward to it."

The arrival of the first course in the waiter's paws halted further discussion for the time being.

Lee finished his dessert and carefully wiped his mouth and muzzle with the napkin. "That was good," he commented as he watched Debbye neatly polish off hers.

"True," agreed the squirrel as she daintily cleaned herself in similar fashion. Taking a quick glance around, she leaned over and kissed the cat's cheek. "I'll be right back, sweetheart. I wanna hit the powder room before we start dancing."

The feline nodded, "Makes sense; I'll visit the male's and meet you back here." Getting up, he moved to get her chair before his companion could rise.

"Silly cat," grinned the squirrel, "You'll spoil me."

"My pleasure," he replied with an impish grin as he gently raised her paw and kissed it.

They both returned as the band finished preparations and started into their first number for the night. Lee smiled as he took Debbye's paw and bowed. "Ms. Squirrel, I do believe they're playing a song for us."

The squirrel femme smiled back and curtsied, "Then let's not keep them waiting, Mr. Evans."

Taking her paw, the cat led her out onto the dance floor and into his arms as they fell into rhythm with the music. The couple moved as one, dancing and trading the lead as if they'd been dancing together for some time rather than for the first time. The squirrel femme rested her head against the feline's

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shoulder as his arms held her in a most comfortable embrace. They danced several dances; then sat a couple out to rest their feet and enjoy each other's company. Two numbers later, they returned to the dance floor and immediately resumed their close, effortless style, though the feline's paw now rested lower on the femme's back, to the enjoyment of both.

A couple dances later, the squirrel femme noted her partner's glance flick to the entrance. "Lee, what's wrong?" She quietly asked.

"No, there's nothing wrong," responded the cat. "But I'm just wondering what happened to Rava; she hasn't shown yet."

Debbie smiled, "I might be jealous if I was with some other male, but I know how you care for your good friends. Is there anything you can do to check on her?"

"Not really," admitted her partner. "But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't concerned." A flash of white fur at the entrance caught his eye and he relaxed. "Ah, here she is now." Kissing his femme and giving a conspiratorial smile, he continued, "Shall we slowly work our way over to listen in on what happens?"

Returning the smile, Debbye returned her head to his shoulder as she murmured, "After what happened when we showed up? You bet I want to know what happens!"

Lee started to ease their way over the dance floor. As Rava and her partner fully entered the room, he suppressed a chuckle, "Another snow leopard? It's going to be interesting when they meet Lyman and his date."

"Mmm-hmm," agreed the squirrel as she kissed him softly. "Still, I much prefer this cat in my arms." She hugged him closer.

As Rava and her date passed, Rava gave Debbye a quick wave; both she and the maine coon smiled back and nodded before returning to looking into each other's eyes. As the white cat and the snow leopard met Joe and his wife, two pairs of ears listened with covert intensity.

After the meeting, which had been somewhat strained by the antagonistic attitude of Joe's wife, Rava led her date out onto the dance floor and moved into his arms. Lee smiled, *She's leading our way; might as well meet her half way.* As the two couples approached, he could hear Rava's date growl low in Gaelic "[She's still too attached to her wild side.]" *Gaelic?!* Lee smiled, *I can use that. Thank you grandmother!*

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Leaning closer, Lee smiled and replied in Gaelic, "[You don't know the half of it.]"

The snow leopard's face reflected such a surprised look that the white cat in his arms laughed quietly, then commented, "I don't think he wanted me to know what he said, Lee." She winked, then, and led the way to one side of the floor where both couples could talk.

With a trace of unease and embarrassment, the male snow leopard replied, "It wasn't a very nice thing to say, 'a chroi!'"

The maine coon laughed softly, "But very true."

Debbie looked at Rava knowingly. "Don't you hate it when they leave us out?"

Rava laughed heartily at the look on Debbie's face; catching more than a few stares. "It doesn't happen to me all that often."

As his companion laughed back, Lee noticed the attention the two couples were gathering. Deciding to try for a lower profile, he suggested, "How about we take this to a side table where we can talk easier?"

"Suits me," answered Rava as her date nodded.

As they turned to head for the table, Lee held the snow leopard back by the arm and whispered in Gaelic, "[You might want to watch out for my friend, Lyman. He is more than a little annoyed that you stayed with Rava last night and wants to know your intentions, as do I.]"

The snow leopard blushed as he looked back, "[I didn't mean to stay. We were talking and she fell asleep sitting on my tail; I didn't want to wake her and then I fell asleep too.]"

I can believe that, thought the relieved maine coon. *It's obvious how Lyman could misinterpret what Rava said this morning.* Aloud he continued with a widening grin, "Well, good. That's different then. He might even understand that. [By the way, 'My Treasure?']"

The other male's blush deepened. "[Emeralds are believed to have special magic in my homeland.]"

We're not that different after all thought Lee as he laughed softly, "Good enough for me; you are right, she is very special. Just understand that to Lyman and me she is more than a friend, she is like a sister."

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The Snow leopard nodded as they approached the table. *A strong friend for a strong femme; it's good she has such a friend on her side for support.*

At the table, the two femmes looked up as their guys approached. Rava breathed a sigh of relief at Lee's expression and whispered to Debbye, "Whatever test Lee just put him through, Patrick passed."

The squirrel femme looked up at the two approaching males; then smiled at Rava. *From the look on Lee's face, Lyman was obviously mistaken. I'll not tell her what Lyman said earlier.*

When the two male felines arrived at the table, the white cat formally introduced Patrick to Lee, who greeted each other with firm paw shakes and then to Debbye, whose paw he kissed in a most continental manner. "[A most beautiful lady!]" Shifting his gaze to Lee, he smiled, "[Congratulations on also finding someone so young and beautiful.]"

The maine coon laughed as he hugged the squirrel femme close. "[Don't I know, my friend.]"

Debbye looked at the two males and giggled, "There they go again."

"At least this time I understood some of what they said," laughed Rava.

As Joe prepared to speak, Lee looked up to see Lyman and Ms. Snowpaws heading their way. *Blast, Lyman said he'd play it cool and leave 'em alone, now here he comes!* When Lee got up to wave the other couple over, Rava nodded in tight-lipped understanding while she worked to stay calm as the other couple neared.

The pair arrived at the table and everyone stood. Lyman made a polite introduction, "Rava, I'd like you to meet Amandajean Snowpaws. Amandajean, this is Rava and her date - I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

Rava smiled to the femme, waved her paw toward her companion, and answered, "This is Patrick."

Patrick graciously bowed and kissed the femme leopard's paw. "I am honored." Turning to Lyman, he extended his paw which Lyman shook with a very firm grip. After the fox-wolf released his paw, Patrick gave him a questioning look as he resumed his seat.

Lee smiled as he saw the fond look the femme gave her date and he recognized the way the male leopard started to move. *Can't blame you a bit, my friend; when Debbye looks at me like that, I've got the same impulse to kiss her.* At the last moment, Patrick obviously remembered their company

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and lifted his lady's paw to his lips. Rava's half-closed eyes, low throaty purr, and facial expression clearly showed her emotions to any who cared to observe.

The calm was broken as Lyman cleared his throat, "Do you mind? This happens to be a public hall, not some bar."

The couple broke apart, Patrick looking embarrassed while Rava looked seriously angry with her ears back so far they disappeared. "Back off, Aquilaferi!" She hissed as Lee frowned quite disapprovingly at Lyman while Debbye shot the fox-wolf looks of intense annoyance.

In the background, Joe could be heard testing the microphone and then starting into a short speech about teamwork and how they considered and treated each other as family.

The fox-wolf and cat stared each other down, each looking ready to tear into the other. Lyman's date looked back and forth between the two with a worried look and finally whispered something in Lyman's ear. He looked at her in surprise, breaking his glaring contest with Rava, and began whispering frantically in her ear. As he continued, she began to show signs of amusement until Lyman pulled back and kissed her cheek.

That little gesture, so similar to the one he'd objected to minutes before, broke Rava's control of her temper as she slammed her fist on the table. The loud sound disrupted the speech and startled close-by guests who had been unaware of the by-play. Much louder than she realized, the cat growled, "That is it!" Standing, she snarled at the fox-wolf, "I am so damn tired of the double standard! So you can do anything you want but I can't?! I have to get your written permission? Is that it?" Horrified at what was going down, a concerned Lee grabbed her arm and tried to get her back down in her seat. The femme turned on him, ready to blast him, too, but the look on his face brought home what she was doing. Stunned at the realization, she dropped back in her chair as the blood drained from her face.

Looking down from the stage, Joe joked, "Well now, and like all families, we have our little squabbles." The polite laughter from the audience made the suddenly defeated-looking feline shrink further down in her chair and try to hide. Patrick gently put his arm around her and hugged her. Noting her discomfort, Joe quickly wrapped up his speech with a thank you for the hard work the team members had put in, along with the patience of their loved ones here with them, and an encouragement for them to enjoy the night's well-

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earned respite. Leaving the stage, he started working his way through the crowd toward Rava.

With the end of the speech, Patrick coaxed Rava to stand while standing between her and the wolf-fox. "Come, 'a chroi', let's get you out into the night air. It will be good for you."

Leaning against the snow leopard as she stood, the white cat held a whispered exchange with him that prompted a quick hug for her before he looked up. Looking directly at Lyman, Patrick announced quietly but firmly, "We are leaving; Rava needs some rest." With that he started to guide her out of the room.

On his left, Lee caught the first movement as Lyman started after them. Clamping his paw on the fox-wolf's arm, he hissed low, "No you don't! You've done enough damage tonight! You're going to stay here and enjoy your date with Amandajean." He inclined his head toward the snow leopardess.

Lyman struggled and still tried to rise despite his friend's warning grip. The struggles ceased when he suddenly felt claws through his coat and fur. "Lee? What are you doing? She can't do this!"

Seeing Debbye moving to follow Rava, the maine coon felt a part of his mind relax. *I'm glad she's covering things there, I certainly can't do that and handle Lyman. Interesting how we're already acting as one.* He turned his full attention to the upset fox-wolf next to him. "She can't?" he snarled. "She bloody well just did. After that stunt you pulled, even after I warned you to let things be, I don't blame her a bit." He shook his head, "I don't believe that a fur who's normally so sharp would do something so bloody exceedingly stupid."

The wolf-fox started at the scorn and disdain in the cat's voice. "But, Lee..."

"Save it!" Growled the maine coon in a commanding tone; an inner observer noting in surprise, *I didn't know I had that "voice"*. "I'm not interested," he continued. "More to the point, I'm disgusted enough not to care. Since Rava's call this afternoon, you've not been the fur I've known for so long." In the distance he saw Joe intercept and talk with the two felines and felt relief at his boss's body language of concern, not anger, for Rava. Seeing Debbye quietly listening off to one side, his spirit relaxed on that count. *I'll have to ask Debbye what went down in that conversation with Joe.*

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Returning his full attention to the male in front of him, Lee growled, in a menacing tone that carried and caused several heads to turn throughout the room, "It's as if some 'demon of jealousy' has possessed you and I flat-out don't like it a single bit. I want my friend back, permanently; so let me be perfectly clear. You'd best get your act together, Aquilaferi, and bloody quickly, or 'proper conduct' will require that one of us depart!"

At that solemn vow, the blood visibly drained from Lyman's face as he fell back in his chair. All around the room, a number of furs also recognized the full import of the maine coon's words and their expressions reflected their worry. Joe McDonald grimaced inside as the full import of Lee's words occurred to him. *Oh, shit!! First Rava's burnout and now this! One of the best design teams I've got is close to self-destructing and, if Lee's as serious as he sounds, I could lose one or both of them permanently.*

Lee turned away, having said his piece, but the soft touch of a returned Debbye's paw stopped him from stalking away. Turning the full glare of her scorn on the fox-wolf, the squirrel femme spoke in a level, cold tone, "Lee's said his piece, but I want to give you something else to think about. I've been circulating out there since Rava left and I'm appalled at the witch's brew of gossip already stirring. Lyman Augustus Aquilaferi, you claim to be Rava's friend, yet her worst enemy could not have done a better job of backstabbing her and then twisting the knife. I can't tell you what to do, but I strongly suggest that you find a way to heal the wound you made; if it involves some form of atonement, so much the better. 'Til then, I don't want to name you 'acquaintance'. Let alone 'friend'." Turning back to the cat, she slipped her arm through his. "Let's get back to pleasurable dancing and put this *merde* behind us."

The feline gave a small smile of relief as his tail curled around her. "Aye, my sweet squirrel, let us enjoy ourselves." Moving off, the couple eased onto the dance floor and effortlessly flowed into each other's arms. As they moved smoothly with the music, the squirrel femme chuckled, "Well, Rava was definitely right about one thing!"

"Oh? And what, pray, might that be?"

The femme giggled, "well, that day at the range she mentioned that you don't lose your temper very often, but that when you do it can be spectacular. This confrontation with Lyman is the first time I've seen it happen and the finale was spectacular."

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"Well," responded the maine coon after a moment's thought, "I did have intense provocation. It seems to me that you did a pretty thorough chewing, too."

She nodded, "I couldn't help it after I heard that vile gossip already starting."

Lee softly kissed his date. "Thank you, m'dear, for caring about Rava while I restrained Lyman. 'Twas nicely and smoothly done."

Debbye returned the kiss and murmured quietly, "She's my friend, too, Lee. Her father used to work for mine and they're still good friends."

The cat smiled as they danced slow, "All the better dear one. I may be getting ahead of myself, but I can't help but feel that you and I are gonna be 'tight' for a long, long time and it's a help when we get on well with each other's friends."

"Mm," whispered the femme as she shyly smiled back. "I don't think you're getting too far ahead." She blushed slightly as she added, "You give me the same feeling, Lee." With that, she initiated another, somewhat stronger, kiss and the couple, by mutual unspoken agreement, danced out onto a small balcony, off the hall, that offered a modicum of privacy.

Eventually breaking the passionate kiss to "come up for air", the two furs stood, snuggling close, with Debbye's head resting contentedly and pleasantly against Lee's chest. Finally stirring, the squirrel smiled softly as she looked up into the cat's face. "I never believed this kind of thing when I read it in a romance novel." She gave a throaty laugh, "I'm a believer now!"

The maine coon smiled back as he continued to hold her close. "Well, I can't say I believed it could happen either, sweetheart. Now I know better."

"Mmm, 'sweetheart'; I love hearing you say things like that."

The feline smiled, "Probably as much as I love saying them."

Presently the femme eased back and looked up. "Lee, what language were you speaking with Patrick? It didn't sound like one I've heard before."

"That language? It was Gaelic, dear heart. Apparently Patrick learned to speak in Ireland and is now over here for whatever reason."

"But where did you learn it?"

"That's something I have to thank my maternal grandmother for. With a maiden name of 'Doolin', she comes from a passionately Irish-American family

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and was determined that her grandchildren would be properly able to appreciate their heritage. All of us learned to speak and read Gaelic quite well." He chuckled, "It had its other uses when we wanted to exchange comments without others understanding what we said."

"I can see that," she replied, grinning. "I guess I'll have to learn it now; I'll want to be able to share private thoughts with you, too." Stroking a paw up the back of the cat's neck, the femme squirrel pulled his mouth to hers and the rest of the world vanished for a while as both wordlessly shared their feelings."

Presently, Lee relaxed and raised his head slightly to smile at the squirrel femme. "Much as I'm enjoying this, we probably should head back inside; I wouldn't want to give anyone the idea that I was taking indecent liberties with you."

Blushing, Debbye replied with a wink, "Yes, we'd best, but, Lee, as long as you didn't take it too far, I'm not certain I'd have objected to those."

The cat smiled as they turned to head back in. "I'll note that for some other time, m'dear. This is neither the time nor place for those and I'd really want to wait until we know each other, and our hearts, better before we do that. I care too much for you to want to rush into that and take chances on ruining what we have."

Resting her head against him, she chuckled softly, "That's the fur I know and care for, the one who puts 'us' first. I can wait, dear Lee, and I agree that it's too early. It's just that I have this reaction to you that no guy has brought out before."

"That's only fair, you do the same to me."

"Really? I think that speaks quite well for our future."

"Indeed!"

Moving back onto the dance floor, they again effortlessly moved into rhythm with each other as they danced together the remainder of the night.

Lyman sat dumbstruck as he watched Lee & Debbye dance away from the table. *I can't believe he said that!! After as much as we've gone through as friends, he reacts like that? He stopped a moment, But what would that say about her equally strong reaction? Did I just push things way too far?*

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His ruminations were interrupted, by a soft touch to his elbow, as Mandy leaned close. "What was that about?" She whispered. "That last line Mr. Evans spoke seemed rather stylized."

He nodded in reply, "It was intended to be that way. Lee wanted me to understand quite clearly just how badly I've jeopardized our friendship, without making a big show of it. He did a riff on some lines from Robert Heinlein's *Double Star*. The original phrase is a translation from 'high Martian' most often rendered as 'Proper conduct requires that one of us depart!'; it's a challenge statement that usually resulted in the death of one of the two Martians involved. He's just put me on notice that I'm pushing our friendship nearly to the breaking point."

The snow leopardess nodded, "So what are you going to do about it?"

The fox-wolf gave the question a moment's thought. *What am I going to do about it? Hmm, there's nothing I can really do right now, but I do have to think this over very carefully.* "Well," he spoke aloud, "I'm going to give that 'great thought' later, but for now," he rose and took Mandy's paw, "I think I'll follow Lee's other advice and enjoy dancing with my beautiful date."

The snow leopardess rose and followed him onto the dance floor and moved into his arms as they moved to the music. "You do have your moments, Lyman."

"Mmm, I had great inspiration, there."

She smiled and held him close, letting her head rest on his shoulder with a low purr. They danced comfortably like that for the rest of the night, though Lyman did take some care to stay away from Lee & Debbye.

The cat and squirrel danced, with a few breaks now and then for rest or relief, for the remainder of the evening, enjoying each other's closeness and presence. As the last piece of the evening wound to an end, Lee looked over to see Lyman and his date departing; he sighed quietly, "I hate to say it, but I want to stay a little longer so we won't run into them. After tonight, that would be awkward."

"Indeed," murmured the femme in his arms. "I liked her, but he managed to eliminate any chance that I'd get to know her tonight."

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"Watching her face during our argument, I'm not certain you'll get the chance soon. She didn't seem too happy about it. Ah, well, 'twas by his choice and he'll have to live with the consequences."

"Indeed," she hugged him close. "I'll stand by my choice, though."

Walking toward the exit, they met with Joe and Lee shook his paw. "I'm sorry about that scene with Lyman, but I couldn't let behavior like that go. You don't treat friends that way. I'm sorry if I made the party less enjoyable for any fur."

The wolf shook his head, "You didn't start it, Lee, and you tried to keep things cool, I saw that. It's not your fault that Lyman had a problem and Rava's feeling somewhat burned out."

The feline nodded, "I know, but I still feel responsible for my actions disrupting things"

"But did they disrupt things any more than they already were?" Asked Debbye. "I can't see that you made things worse and you certainly gave Lyman pause from further moves and reason to stop and think."

Joe nodded, "She's got some good points there, Lee." He smiled broadly, "She's sharp." He bowed and kissed Debbye's paw. "It has indeed been a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Squirrel; I hope to see you at more of these functions."

The femme curtsied, "Thank you very much, I did enjoy myself." With a smiling glance sideways at Lee, she continued, "As things stand now, I think that's very likely."

The male cat smiled, "No, not very unlikely at all. Barring something truly unforeseen, I rather suspect she'll be accompanying me to a lot of functions in the future."

Good, good. Now you two have a safe drive home and I'll see you, Lee, on Monday morning."

"Sure thing to both of those, Joe." Offering his arm to the squirrel, he asked, "Shall we go?"

"Indeed, good sir," she replied.

As they padded toward the exit, the black wolf was amused to notice their tail tips intertwined. "Lee really may not know it yet, but they're very much a

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'twosome' already; I expect we'll be seeing her at lots of events," he mused as he turned to take care of the final aspects of the evenings festivities.

Lee escorted Debbye to his car and helped her in; then hurried around to slip into the driver's seat. Before he could start the car, the femme softly touched his shoulder. "Lee, do you have to drop me at home just yet? I would like to go for a bit to eat and," she blushed, "I'd like to spend some more private time with you."

The feline turned, stroked her arm, and smiled, "Of course we can go for a bite, and then take a leisurely drive back to your folks home." He looked at the clock on the dash. "So where do you want to go, not that many places are open at this time of night."

The squirrel femme thought for a moment, "I think Callahan's is open; why not there?"

Her date nodded, "Sounds good to me."

As they proceeded through late-night Columbus, Lee turned and asked, "By the way, I meant to ask this earlier. What did Joe say to Rava?"

"Well, he apologized for asking her to work next week when she'd put in for vacation; said that he realized she really needed it. He told her to get a good rest and come in Monday week."

He nodded. "It's good to have a boss who understands." He sighed, "Now if Lyman will just start understanding a few things, both about himself and others."

"It hurts, doesn't it?"

"Hmmm?"

"That rather dramatic confrontation you had with Lyman. I can tell that you're not happy about it at all."

No, no I'm not. I thought I'd hid it better than that, though."

The squirrel gave a throaty chuckle that had interesting effects on the cat's anatomy. "You said we were 'tight'. You did hide it from most furs there, but I already know you well enough to know better."

"Just like I know that chewing him out the way you did was difficult for you?"

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"Indeed. Lee, whatever's between us, we both feel it strong enough to be open to the other like we would be to no other fur."

He thought for a moment as he drove. "I do believe you're right." He gave a soft chuckle, "I think our subconscious minds may know us better than our conscious minds." He picked up her paw and softly kissed it, letting his tongue linger over the fur, "I won't complain that a femme I find devastatingly attractive in so many ways feels the same about me."

She smiled and caressed his paw with hers. "And a poet, too? That was beautiful, my sweet cat."

As Lyman walked Mandy to her door, she turned and kissed him. "Thank you, Lyman. Despite some things, it was a very enjoyable evening."

"Then, may I see you again?"

The femme sighed, "I hate to say this, but not immediately. Lyman, tonight's events cry out that you need to take some time and get your own mind and heart sorted out. I've had problems before and I don't want another guy with problems. Take a month to do that and then give me a call and we'll see where we take things from there."

"I see," sighed the fox-wolf. "I suppose you're right. I need to make things right with Rava and then figure out how to square things with Lee and Debbye."

"Exactly, hon. You're a good guy but you need to work on those things before I really feel comfortable with you." She kissed him again and turned to her door. "Please don't neglect that sorting; you could lose a lot by neglect."

The wolf-fox smiled, "With encouragement like that, you'd best believe I will. I'll be calling you in a month." With that, he waited until the snow leopardess had entered and shut the door before heading back to his car with a thoughtful look on his face.

Lee held the door open for Debbye as they entered Callahan's. "For this hour of the night, that's a surprisingly crowded parking lot," he commented as they padded in, paw in paw.

The femme squirrel nodded, "More than I'd expected. I imagine that says something about their quality."

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The tigress at the hostess stand smiled as she heard that, "I'd like to think it does. You timed it well, we'll be closing before too long. So, any place special you'd care to sit?"

The squirrel smiled, "If it wouldn't cause any problems, I've a friend who works here and we'd like to sit in her section. Her name's Cindy Lapin."

The striped femme consulted the chart in front of her. "I believe there are still a couple of openings there and, as long as she doesn't linger too long, there shouldn't be a problem. Do you two want a table or booth?"

The couple looked at each other and Lee gave a little wave as if to say, "Your choice."

"We'll take a booth, please," replied the squirrel. Giving the cat a wink, she continued, "As private a one as available, please."

The other femme smiled, "Certainly, we've a very suitable one open now. If the two of you will please follow me." She headed into the restaurant and the two followed, still paw in paw.

Lee helped Debbye slide into the booth; then moved to the other side as the squirrel femme accepted menus from the tigress. The tigress smiled, "You're not sitting next to her?"

The maine coon smiled, "Well, I don't want to crowd her." He grinned, "Besides, it's a lot easier to appreciate her beauty from here."

The tigress gave a throaty chuckle, "Males!" as a faint blush showed through Debbye's muzzle fur. Noting the squirrel femme's reaction, the tigress continued, "I'll take your drink orders and your waitress will bring them when she comes over to take your order."

Both diners nodded and Lee made a paw gesture to tell Debbye to go first. The squirrel thought for a moment and then answered, "I'd like something light. A large Diet-Sprite or something similar for me, please."

Their hostess smiled, "We have Diet-Sprite". Turning to Lee, "And for you, sir?"

"I'll just have a large iced tea," answered the maine coon.

"Very well," responded the tigress. "These will be here shortly. Enjoy your meal." Tucking the order form into a pocket, she headed off toward the wait station to drop it off.

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Lee picked up his menu and glanced over it before looking at his date. "So, what's the femme's preference? A modest meal or just something to snack on?"

The squirrel femme paused and thought a moment. "I think I'd really just like a snack."

"How about one we can share?" Asked the feline. "An order or two of appetizers should do nicely."

His companion nodded, "Something we both enjoy then. See anything good?"

"Well," responded Lee, "the two items that look the best to me are the potato skins with assorted toppings and the fried cheese sticks with sauce."

Debbye grinned, "I know they're not that healthy, but let's enjoy ourselves with the cheese sticks."

"Works for me," returned her date. Shutting the menu, he looked up as a lop-eared rabbit femme approached with their drinks.

"Here are your drinks. Are you ready to order yet? Oh! Hi, Debbye." The waitress set down their drinks. "So who gets what?"

"Hi, Cindy. I've got the Diet-Sprite," answered Debbye. "The gentlefur has the iced tea. By the way, let me introduce Lee Evans." Turning she added, "Lee, this is Cindy Lapin, one of my best girlfriends."

Lee offered the lop femme his paw, "Pleased to meet you."

The femme shook it firmly, "And I you, Mr. Evans. Debbye's said a lot of good things about you."

The cat smiled, "That's encouraging. Of course, I think pretty highly of her."

Cindy continued, "So, what are you two going to have?"

Glancing at Debbye, the feline answered, "We'd like a double order of the fried cheese sticks, please."

"Certainly. Will that be all?"

"Yes, thanks Cindy," answered the squirrel femme.

The lop turned, "Nice to finally meet you, Mr. Evans."

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The cat replied with a grin, "Please, that's "Lee", "Mr. Evans" makes me feel way too old."

Cindy grinned, "I'll remember that, Lee. I'll be back later, but I need to turn in your order and check on my other tables." She turned and headed back to the kitchen as the couple nodded understandingly.

Debbye and Lee returned their attentions to each other with Cindy's departure. Sipping their drinks, both enjoyed a companionable silence as free paws found and held each other. Presently Debbye squeezed Lee's paw and asked with a chuckle, "So, where do we go from here?"

The cat grinned back, "Tonight or for the long term?"

"Well, tonight, first, but I want to talk about the long term, too."

"Tonight I figured on a nice lazy drive back to your home while we talked," answered Lee. "A part of me wants to take you somewhere private for some 'intimate communication', but I don't think that's quite appropriate yet."

The squirrel femme felt her body react to the prospect of such communication and firmly squelched the thoughts that came to mind. "No, I don't think that would be appropriate. Mind you," she continued as her fingers caressed the feline's paw, "I have heard of spots, besides where we had the picnic, that are suitable for such communication. She grinned knowingly, "Not, of course, that I've ever used such."

"Of course," responded Lee with a matching grin as a clawtip teased her palm. "But how convenient should we ever want such a place."

"Indeed. Your plans for tonight sound delightful, but what was that about the 'long term'?"

A light blush showed on the male's muzzle. "Well, it depends on how long that term is. I was thinking of leaving discussion of the more far-term thoughts for a later time, but I was looking to discuss the near-term on the drive back."

Debbye nodded, "I can see keeping such discussions to a more private place. I know what occurs to me and I'll be interested in seeing how your feelings and mine match."

Lee raised her paw and kissed it, "I'll be looking forward to that, too."

"Now, now; none of that in a family restaurant," joked Cindy as she brought their order. She laughed gently as the two furs separated, each with a bit of a guilty look. "I can see now why you two wanted as private a booth as

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possible." Placing the platter of fried cheese sticks in between them, she added two bowls of marinara sauce. "I think you'll like the marinara sauce; our cooks seem to have a special touch with it."

Both furs voiced their thanks as the lop turned to help other patrons. The cat smiled at his date, "allow me." Picking up a cheese stick, he dipped it in the sauce and held it up for Debbye to eat.

Flashing him a mischievous grin, she delicately nibbled the cheese stick up to his fingers and then momentarily sucked them gently before sitting back. The fluffing of fur on Lee's muzzle was the only visible evidence of the effect this had on him. Picking up a cheese stick in turn, the squirrel femme dipped it and offered it to him. Lee worked his way down the finger food and ended with a sensuous lick of her palm.

Debbye shivered and smiled, "Mmm, we do seem to know each other well all ready." She laughed a little shakily, "I think we should leave it at this for now, don't you, Lee? I don't want to stir things up, 'that way', yet." *Whoa! I wonder if he realizes just how much that did affect me? I just hope I had as much effect on him; his muzzle sure seemed to indicate I did.*

The couple turned to more ordinary subjects and the enjoyment of their food, though the amount of time they held paws indicated that they greatly enjoyed that, too.

Cindy padded up as they were finishing the last of the cheese sticks. "Well, you two certainly seem to appreciate those. Can I get you anything else?"

Lee looked at Debbye who just lifted her glass; turning to the lop, he replied, "We'd like refills on our drinks, but I think we're nicely full otherwise. You were right, that is a very nicely done marinara."

At Debbye's nod of agreement, Cindy picked up their dishes and headed back to the kitchen. "I'll be right back with your refills and, I'm afraid, the bill."

Lee grinned in response, "Well, that was sufficiently enjoyable eating that it'll be equally enjoyable to pay the bill."

Cindy just shook her head as she headed back while Debbye softly chuckled, "Lee, that was mean. She's not used to customers with quite your attitude."

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"Hmm? I meant it; the food and service here is top notch. We'll have to come back."

"Mmm, I'd like that. If the rest of the food here is as good, we'll have another good restaurant to choose from. Agreed, my sweet cat."

Cindy interrupted anything further by returning with their refills and the bill. "Just pay on your way out," she told Lee as she handed it to him. "It's been a pleasure meeting you."

The feline shook her paw, "The pleasure was equally shared. 'Sides, I know Debbye's got good taste in friends."

The rabbit femme blushed a touch under her fur and hurried off to take care of another table.

Shortly, the couple made their way to the cash register at the exit and Lee passed over the bill and his credit card. "That was most delicious fare," he told the Tigress, "we will be back."

"Now I like to hear that kind of comment," she replied. She offered her paw as she ran his card, "I'm Kittiarra Seng, the manager and part-owner of this place."

Lee's grin widened, "Well, then I can't think of a better fur to express my appreciation to for excellent food and service." Taking her paw, he introduced himself, "Lee Evans and," turning he continued, "this beautiful femme is Debbye Squirrel."

The tigress shook Debbye's paw and grinned back at Lee, "I'll see that your compliments are passed on. It's nice to hear good things said about you."

When the charge slip came back, he considered a minute and then added what he considered a fair tip for the service they'd received. They were on their way out the door when Cindy came hurrying up, "Mr. Evans – oh, sorry – Lee, you didn't have to leave me such a tip just because I'm Debbye's friend; really!"

Lee turned and smiled, "I didn't do it for that reason. You gave us excellent and quick service and earned that tip."

The tips of her ears blushed for a moment; then she replied, "Then, thank you very much, Lee." The rabbit femme looked at her wristwatch. "If the two of you wouldn't mind staying a little longer, I don't have the clean-up shift this week so I'll be free to leave as soon as we close, in about 5 minutes and I'd like you to meet my guy; he's coming to pick me up."

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At the squirrel femme's discreet nod, Lee agreed, "It would be our pleasure. We'll just wait out here and you can join us when you're ready."

"Thank you, again," she answered and went back to finish her shift and close down. The cat and squirrel couple cuddled and talked while waiting.

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Clarence Skunk's expression grew puzzled as he drew up to Callahan's to pick up Cindy. *There she is, but who're those well-dressed furs with her? The femme could be Debbye Squirrel, but I don't think I've ever seen that cat before. Wait a minute, Cindy mentioned Debbye was seeing a cat, I wonder if that's him?*

Pulling into the nearest parking space, the skunk hurried over to a warm embrace and kiss from the rabbit. After a moment, Cindy whispered, "There's a fur here you should meet. Debbye and her guy came in tonight and you two guys really need to meet."

"W-w-w-we d-d-d-do?"

Cindy nodded, "You do. It looks like he and Debbye will be together for a good while, so you two had best get acquainted with each other."

"We-we-we-well, all right. He-he-he looks like a nice enough fur. W-w-w-what did you say he did again?"

Cindy smiled, "That's better. I think you'll like him, he's an engineer at the Columbus Aircraft Division; Debbye said he's involved with a lot of things there." Taking the skunk's paw in hers, she turned to the cat, "Lee, I'd like you to meet my guy, Clarence Skunk. Clarence, I'd like you to meet the cat Debbye's been seeing lately, Lee Evans."

Lee looked over the skunk before him and considered what he saw. *Well, now doesn't some of that just look familiar? He reminds me of a younger version of myself, especially if I'd not made that NSF course.* The thought brought a slight movement to Lee's mouth, one that only Debbye noticed, as he smiled and stuck out his paw. "Pleased to meet you, Clarence."

The male skunk met the outstretched paw with his own in a firm grip, "P-p-p-leased to meet you, t-t-too, m-m-Mr. Evans."

Debbye and Cindy both chuckled at that and the rabbit femme hugged the skunk. "Clarence, I just went through that with him when I met him; he'd much

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rather be called 'Lee' than 'Mr. Evans'. He says that makes him feel 'way too old'."

Clarence grinned and relaxed a bit. "W-well, if that's what he wants, I-I'll not argue with him."

"I think Debbye and I would appreciate that," replied Cindy. "Right, Debs?"

"Right. Lee's generally a pretty informal fur. My father says he's a fairly direct one, too. Considering how quickly and how well they got along, that's a good sign."

Lee returned the firm grip without any games and smiled as the skunk relaxed. "I don't know if I'll live that line down." He looked at Clarence with a genuine interest, "So would I be correct in surmising that you're a student, too? If you haven't been told, I'm a design engineer over at the Columbus Aircraft Division."

"Y-yeah, I knew that. Cindy's told me that much. And you're right; I am an engineering student here at Ohio State. H-how did you know?"

The cat grinned, "Nothing magical about it, guy. Given that these two lovely femmes are both students, it seemed likely that you were one, too." He chuckled, "Besides, I was one once, too, and I recognize some of the subtle clues. You're not alone at all; there're a lot of us who've been there."

Clarence relaxed, "It seems so simple when you put it that way." He shook his head, "I never realized how easy so much was."

Lee laughed and clapped his shoulder, "Ah, you're learning. You'd be surprised at how much really is simple at heart." He relaxed to a gentle smile, "And now I reckon it's best we get our femmes home so that they avoid any parental problems."

"You're right," responded the skunk, "I wouldn't want to cause that. It's been nice meeting you, Lee. I hope we'll get a chance to talk more." He sighed a bit, "I really could use some more friends."

The feline shook the skunk's paw once more, "Well, I'd enjoy having you for a friend." Fishing a slim notebook from his inside coat pocket, he wrote his phone number down and gave the sheet to the skunk. "Here's my number; give me a call some time and we'll set up a chance to get together, 'just us guys'."

"Thanks! I'll be giving you a call early next week."

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"Fine, there's an answering machine if I'm not home. Now, go ahead and get your gal home; I reckon she could use the rest as much as she's running in there." Lee waved to the other couple and, taking Debbye's arm, turned away.

Debbye looked up at Lee, "That was nice of you to befriend him like that, I don't think he's got many friends at all. But, Lee, why did you say the bit about 'parental problems'? You know dad's not going to be waiting up."

"I know, but I wanted an excuse to let them get away. I suspect they'd both rather just turn their attentions to each other; I know I would in his place."

"Such a thoughtful cat! Of course, it couldn't be that you wanted to get me all to yourself, now would it?"

"Of course not!" Replied the cat in an innocent tone; then broke the pose as they both chuckled on their walk to the car.

As Lee settled in beside her in the car, Debbye turned to him. "You really shouldn't have laughed at Clarence when you met him."

"I laughed at him?"

"Don't think I didn't see that little curl to the ends of your smile that show a suppressed laugh."

"Well, you're partly right. I was laughing, but not at Clarence, rather at myself. You see, when I looked at Clarence it was like looking into a mirror back through time and seeing an earlier version of me. Remember, I told you that in high school I had the 'young nerd' look? Well, I can see a developed form of that in Clarence and I was amused to have such a reminder of my past. In addition to him appearing to be a good guy, that's one reason I befriended him; furs like that generally don't have many friends and I figure one who's been there could be especially helpful to him." He grinned, "You can tell Cindy that there is definite hope for him; look at me."

The squirrel femme relaxed. "Ah, that's much more understandable and fits better with what else I know of you." She hugged her guy and kissed his cheek, "I should've known you'd not laugh at him. Thank you, Lee."

"De nada," replied the cat as he started the car. "Now, where do you want to go on our leisurely drive back to your home?"

"How about taking the scenic drive along the river? It's not too isolated and I think it'd be romantic in this moonlight, not that I've really had the chance to find out."

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The maine coon gave a soft chuckle, "We'll just have to investigate that, won't we? Ah, the sacrifices we make for knowledge."

Debbye just laughed and sensuously stroked his paw as they started out.

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Once they turned onto the road along the river and she felt the romantic mood start, Debbye turned to Lee, "So, what were you thinking about in the long term?"

The cat smiled softly, "Well, I was thinking about how we're already fitting together very nicely and how much I enjoy your company and I know I want to make ours a more exclusive relationship, more than just 'dating friends'. Does that make sense?"

The squirrel femme's eyes widened, but not in surprise, as she smiled and stroked his nearer paw, "That makes a lot of sense, my sweet cat; I'm feeling the same way. Just how exclusive were you thinking?"

"It's too early to jump in too deep, but I do want things exclusive 'tween us. It sounds corny, but how does 'going steady' sound to you? I rather like the idea myself."

Debbye gave a slow, dreamy smile, "I like that a lot, sweet Lee. I do like what I've seen so far and I so want to get to know you more. My head counsels waiting and thinking about this, but my heart has a ready answer." She winked and continued, "Pull into the next observation point and I'll give you my heart's answer."

The cat's eyebrows rose, but he quite agreeably did as asked. After parking at the turn out, he turned to the squirrel femme, "And the answer is?"

In response, Debby unfastened her seat belt, turned, embraced Lee as strongly as she could and kissed him rather passionately. Lee started for a moment in surprise; then responded equally passionately as their kiss deepened. Sometime later, they broke the kiss while remaining in a tight embrace. The cat softly whispered, "Wow, that was quite a direct answer." He turned and softly kissed her cheek, "I take it, though, that your 'head' doesn't want to rush into things quite so fast?"

"Uh-huh," whispered the squirrel femme. "I want to make certain it's more than just a physical response. My heart knows better but my head needs to be certain."

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Lee nodded and kissed her again, softly but with feeling, "In that case, my sweet squirrel, I'll give you time for your head to consider things and not ask you formally 'til next weekend." He grinned softly, "Mind you, I know my heart and head well enough that I'm quite confident of your answer, but I'll not press; I've confidence enough in 'us' to let matters take their course."

"Mmm, that's just another thing I find so attractive about you; you're patient with me." She hugged the feline back and rested against him comfortably. Stirring after a bit she kissed his jaw, "Well, that takes care of the longer term, but what are your plans for tomorrow?"

Lee smiled and held her close, "Well, I had planned on us going shooting with Lyman, but that's rather out of the question at the moment." The cat thought a moment; then continued, "How about we just go shooting by ourselves? You come over about 2pm, say, and we go from my place."

The squirrel nodded, "That sounds good to me. And 2pm sounds like a time I can make, even if the sermon runs long."

The cat grinned, "I know a few preachers who've made me quite understanding of Eutyclus."¹

The femme snickered, "No kidding. There's a fur in my Sunday school class who's suggested, only half-humorously, that a reminder to 'Remember Eutyclus' should be on every pulpit."

"I'll go for that!" Lee looked at the dashboard clock, "Hmm, I know you don't have a time to be in, but I'm thinking it'd be nice if you had a fair amount of sleep before church."

Debbye stirred in his arms, "Much as I enjoy your sweet company, I think you've got a good thought there. Especially since I'm in the choir and don't dare fall asleep."

The feline gently helped her up and back into her seat, giving her time to belt up before starting the car and resuming their drive. "All the more reason to get you home in sufficient time to be well-rested. I wouldn't want any fur to think I was bad for you."

The femme's paw stroked his nearer one, "I appreciate the concern, Lee. From what I've seen and heard, most guys wouldn't even think of that. Just one more reason why I find you so attractive."

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"Thank you, my sweet squirrel." He grinned softly, "I can't admit to complete purity of motives; making certain that no one objects to my seeing you again does figure into it."

Debbye laughed quietly, "That's till more consideration than a lot of guys show. But, then again, you're not 'most guys'."

"I should hope not!" He laughed with her. "As I most certainly find you much more special, too."

The pair continued their light banter as they proceeded on a more direct path to Debbye's home. Pulling in to the drive way, Lee hurried out and got the door for his date. Offering her his arm, he escorted her to the front door where they turned to one another. Debbye hugged Lee close, "Thank you, my sweet cat, for a very nice evening, despite some furs attempts to ruin it. I'll be looking forward to going shooting with you tomorrow."

"It was quite my pleasure, m'dear," replied the cat. "I most thoroughly enjoyed having you in my arms so much of the night. He bent to kiss her paw.

"Oh no you don't," the femme squirrel mock-scolded him, "You're going to do a proper good-bye, too."

"Well, in that case," smiled the cat as he embraced her, "I really should do it right." Pulling her close, he gave her a most passionate kiss. "This is how much you mean to me."

"Mmm," replied the squirrel as she returned the passion. "That should keep me nice and warm." Pulling softly away, she turned to the door, "You take care driving home, Lee."

"I shall, my dear sweet squirrel," he replied as she entered the house. He was just barely able to hear her whispered reply.

"I love the way you say that, and what it does to me."

With a lively step, Lee returned to his car and headed home, a very happy smile on his face.

ⁱ For those who might not remember or know, cf Acts 20:9-12; Eutychus was a young man who fell asleep when the Apostle Paul preached long. He subsequently fell to his death from an upstairs window and was miraculously brought back to life by Paul