

SABRINA

a story by

CHRIS YOST

Book 11

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Character Biographies

Your scorecard to the players of Sabrina the Story

Sabrina Mustelidae: A skunk, 24 years old, with an intense interest in computers, romance novels, collecting action figures, the Internet, and Internet Relay Chat. She's quiet when not with her girlfriends in "The Clique", with a girl-next-door personality and glasses with near-invisible frames who will always help a friend if she can, and has just the right mix of naiveté, intelligence, looks, and has a heart she'd willingly give to the right man when he came around.

Chris Foxx: A male fox, 27, network engineer and PC hardware technician for a major telecommunications company that owns a cable TV franchise, telephone companies, and Local/Wide Area Networks, which is the department in which Chris earns his living. He also wears glasses, has an intense interest in Pittsburgh Penguin hockey, has an off-beat sense of humor, and was raised in a strict atmosphere with his elder sister which he believes is what fuels his wild fantasy life. He is also quite possibly the world's last contemporary gentleman, never above holding a door for a lady or picking up the check.

Amy Squirrel: A 26-year-old blonde squirrel who models for cartoons, monitor backgrounds, and functions as part-time spokeswoman for Amiga computers. Her complete history can be seen at the E.S. Productions website (see Links page here). She works with her cartoonist as co-star in Sabrina's comic strip and helps handle whatever work comes to the studio. She's engaged to Thomas Woolfe following a long courtship and a surprise pregnancy.

Thomas Woolfe: A male wolf, and Amy's fiance, working on his Master's Degree in botany. Slowly coming to grips with the prospect of being a father. Loves sports, in fact he played basketball on weekends until Amy's pregnancy and a pending marriage began to occupy his mind. He likes to cook and loves Amy to a fault.

Wendy Vixxen: Chris Foxx's college sweetheart, 25, who left Chris and the college when she developed a case of wanderlust. Before she left, she and Chris were a popular couple on campus. She never forgot Chris, and when she matured she finished her degree work in accounting and bookkeeping.

The Clique

Susan Felin: A lioness, Sabrina's oldest and best friend, almost inseparable since high school, although they were separated for a short time when Sabrina went to Columbus College of Art and Design and Susan went to The Ohio State University at Dayton. Her main interests are boys and cheerleading, and tries to work English and Journalism in as her major. She's very socially active and dates often.

Cindy Lapine: A lop-eared rabbit in her sophomore year, 22, athletic and very shy when away from The Clique. She majors in writing and minors in music, which she loves. She lives with her parents and is very self-conscious and trusting.

Debbie Squirrel: Amy's younger cousin and the youngest Clique member at 19. She met Sabrina through Amy and they instantly hit it off, so Sabrina was insistant that she be accepted by The Clique, which she immediately was. She's a voracious reader and an accomplished flutist. She envy's Amy's popularity and hopes to achieve it herself someday, but studies music and writing in hopes of obtaining a real job.

... and the rest!

Dexter Collie: A 30-year-old border collie and the WAN administrator who works with Chris in the Networking Group, and Chris' closest friend and confidant. Married with two children and still madly in love with his wife. He has the same sense of humor as Chris, and is slightly more pragmatic and logical, supplying Chris with the voice of reason when his own has run out on him.

Clarence Skunk: Your basic nerd with severe nearsightedness, an underactive imagination, and a desire to make people like him by trying too hard. He's had a crush on Sabrina since he took her out after she came to the college from C-CAD, convincing himself he and Sabrina are, at the very least, the best of friends, when in reality she can barely stand being on the same campus with him.

Mr. Canis: A greying wolf teaching college writing and multimedia, fortunate enough to have The Clique as students in his class. He makes his lesson plans with the full knowledge that as long as they're in class every day, he can expect to get about 1/3 of his lesson plans accomplished.

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ACT 17 -- SECRETS TOLD AND COFFEEKLATCHES

Chapter 57

Sabrina rolled over in bed and into the diffused sunlight streaming through the bedroom window, plastic sheet covering, closed miniblind, and burgundy lace curtains. It was Sunday morning; at least she thought it was still morning, and still Sunday. Thanks to the efforts of ODoT and PennDoT, the highways and byways were clear enough to allow them to make their way safely home from her parents' house to his parent's house for New Year's traditional dinner.

Making it relatively on time, Chris was finally able to relax and she was able to stop finding religion and praying for clear roads. "Just please, no *Passion Play* on the way home?" she'd begged.

"Of course," Chris assured her. Putting the CD back she fiddled through the small collection of music they'd brought with them, and Chris said, "Snag *Thick as a Brick* instead."

And she did.

And thirty minutes later, "How much music *can they put on one track??*"

Back in Butler, Pennsylvania for New Year's Day dinner, Sabrina found out that Chris' dad turned out to be a pretty good cook. When they arrived there wasn't anything for them to do except eat. Pork chops, hot dogs, and sauerkraut were all done in the slow cooker, mashed potatoes on the stovetop. So now, everyone was filled with good luck for 2000.

Sabrina stretched in bed and rolled over to lay an arm over her fiancé. Quickly she felt around and couldn't find him. Opening her eyes he still wasn't there. And the clock said why, it was already after noontime.

Sitting up in bed, Sabrina turned toward the open bathroom door and yelled a "Hell-o-oooo!" Stretching herself she lazily rolled over onto his side and pushed herself out of bed with a push-off from the side rail, a trick she learned very quickly after moving in some chapters ago. She padded through the first floor of the house and found no sign of her fox, but then a glance outside through the dining room window told her why: two to three inches of snow had fallen during the night. Trying to look through the plastic over the window she could make out the path from the back porch appeared to be cleared. Solving that mystery: "He's out shoveling snow." Looking the other direction, she caught a glimpse of Chris' tail through the bare branches of the lilac bush and the crabapple tree as he worked clearing the spot behind his car in the driveway.

Sabrina let go and the curtain floated back into place. Returning to the bedroom she got dressed in a fresh pair of black and white stretch pants and her new Pittsburgh Penguins T-shirt, bundled up against the cold, and went out the back door.

She walked over the little bit of snow the shovel refused to move and followed the cleared path out to the driveway. She saw Chris leaning against his car, taking a break. She was surprised too; from the amount of snow on the ground she expected the temperature to be much colder than it was.

Chris hadn't acknowledged her being there. With a sinister grin she squatted down beside her car and scooped up a generous mittenful of snow and began molding it into a sphere. Taking one step, then another, a third, now beside the rear hatch of her car, she raised her left arm and slung the snowball at the fox, who slid to his right and the ball whizzed past his head and smacked harmlessly in the driveway.

Now he turned around, smiling as he caught the guilty look on Sabrina's muzzle. "You throw like a girl," he told her, then raised his right paw and beckoned her over with two fingers.

"How else am I supposed to throw? And how'd you know I was there??" Sabrina said, the guilty look she had at being caught still on her face as she bravely tried to hide it. She leaned against the car with him. "Why are you doing this now?" she asked. "You should be inside, with me."

"I heard the back screen door," Chris told her, reminding her of his exceptionally keen hearing. "And it needed done. The driveway's clear now, so if we *do* go anywhere, we can get in and out. And if it snows again, it won't take as long to clear."

Sabrina considered that. "Makes sense," she admitted. "And why in the world is your coat unzipped?? Even Tabitha knows better than to go out in the snow without her coat zipped up."

"It's a lot of work clearing that much snow!" Chris told her. "I needed to vent." Reaching out to her he handed her the shovel and pointed to where her snowball landed. "I went to all that work. Now you go and clean that up, young lady."

Sabrina looked at Chris, and had a sudden flashback to the studio Christmas party when she saw that his glasses had turned dark in the sun, the same shade of dark as that other fox's. But she took the shovel and walked over to the point of impact, looked up at Chris, back to the broken snowball, and kicked it all over to the side with her foot.

"That works too," Chris nodded.

Sabrina walked back and handed him the shovel. "C'mon in and let's have some lunch."

"Works for me," Chris said. "It's the right kinda day for soup and a sammich. Just take me a few minutes to brush off the car." He handed her back the shovel. "Set this by the steps on your way?"

“Okay. And zip up!” Sabrina took hold of the collar of Chris' open coat and kissed him. “It's too cold to be out here with your coat open!” She took the shovel and started walking back to the house, dropping the shovel into the snow when an incoming snowball *thwapped* her between her shoulder blades! She turned around quickly and saw Chris readying another.

“Oh, no you don't!” she yelled back and dived in front of her car as he pulled his arm back to throw! She quickly pressed together some snow and raising her arm threw it blindly in his direction; packed poorly it disintegrated over the snow-covered roof of her car.

Chris stalked back to the gap between his car's trunk and hers, slipping in she darted into view long enough to launch and nail him in the shoulder! Chris immediately retaliated and just grazed her hair! Scooping snow on his way around; he formed another ball and walked around to her passenger side while Sabrina molded one of her own and rushed to the other side of the hood, her still-uncurled tail giving away her position. She reared up just as Chris threw, catching her in the shoulder as hers caught him in the chest, bits of snow going between his half-open coat and his sweatshirt! Both now unarmed, Sabrina made for the back deck and Chris chased her and caught her in the kitchen!

###

“I don't know how I'm going to go back to work after the weird sequence of days off these past two weeks,” Sabrina commented as she and Chris turned into the StrongArm parking lot.

“Hmm?” Chris turned down the radio.

“I feel spoiled,” Sabrina admitted. “After two three-and-a-half day workweeks, it's going to feel weird going back to a five-day schedule.” She began to think of when she worked for Zig Zag exclusively – and locally – where she set her own hours and was almost her own boss, as long as Zig Zag Herself was okay with what she did.

“You're right about that,” he agreed, “You never get used to it. Just wait until Christmas falls on a Tuesday or Wednesday, then your body clock'll be royally messed with.” He drove to the lower level with a grumble. “I never get used to how full the parking lot is after the holiday's over. We either have to get up earlier or walk.”

“I'll walk,” Sabrina said.

“Same here, my sleep's valuable to me.” He pulled into a space near a light standard and shut the engine down, getting out to hold Sabrina's door for her.

Once finally inside she checked to be sure the coast was clear. Sabrina kissed Chris and scooted down the hallway to put her pawbag away. Chris watched her tail and her backside sway, it was nice seeing her in a skirt again. *Very nice!*

Chris waved his fob over the reader and pushed the unlocked door open. Smiling, he gave a “Happy New Year” to anyone he passed enroute to his own cubicle, passing Dexter's on the way.

“Happy Two-Kay, Dex!” Chris waved his paw as he took off his coat.

“Happy New Year,” Dexter said back, pushing several leafs of paper into a manila envelope.

Chris walked around beside Dexter and leaned in. “Wazza matter?” he asked in a smug voice. “Didn't *everyone* make it with a sexy skunk girl last night?”

“Not all of us have skunks,” Dexter replied. “And mind yer own business.”

Chris grinned. “Brought 2000 in with a bang, hey?”

Dexter finally looked up. “Someone's in a good mood,” he said to divert the subject.

“If the rest of the year goes this well,” Chris said to him, “I'll be one happy fox.” As Dexter opened his top drawer and began emptying it, Chris continued. “And I owe you and Angel big time, that slow cooker you gave us was *inspired!* I actually told Sabrina I liked her cooking, and I didn't have to lie.”

Dexter grinned as he closed the empty drawer and slid open the center one. “Thank Angel for that one,” he said, “that was her idea. Based on what you've told me since she moved in with you.”

“If I didn't know you knew where I lived, I'd steal her away from you in a heartbeat.” He recounted last night's dinner. “I think she overcooked it a bit,” he told Dexter whether he wanted to hear it or not, “but if she did, there was no way to tell. She's trying her chili recipe in it as we speak, I have a good feeling it'll be edible.”

Dexter stopped and laid an arm on his leg, and looked up at the fox. “Can't you do any of the cooking if she's as bad as you say?” he asked?

Chris splayed his fingers and pressed them against his chest. “*Me*, cook? My job's here in DP. When'd you see me sprout a pair of t -- “

“Oh, c'mon!” Dexter interrupted him. “You know better than that.”

Chris shrugged his shoulders. “Do I?” He wasn't about to admit a thing as Dexter angled his head and drew his mouth tightly to one side. “And for your info, I *have* cooked dinner, and on more than one occasion, smart guy.”

“Well ... “ Dexter admitted, “After uprooting her, it's only right that you do.”

Chris agreed as Dexter returned to his drawer, throwing away random sheets of paper as he heard, “All part of taking her off the market, Dex.”

The Border collie's head shot up as Chris turned to go to his cube. “Whaddaya mean, 'off the market'?”

Chris turned back and gave his friend a “Well, yeah” look. “Think about it Dex.” Chris talked half as a fur who was serious as a priest, and half like a fur up a tree. “I bring her here, arrange a job for her -- bonus it's where *I* work -- we're together, I get to spend even more time with her. Over *there* she's out of eyeshot, she could date other guys while I'm here being faithful, and add to that the sheer economics of gas and oil ... and what the heck are you doing?? *Packing???*”

It was just now Chris became aware of the boxes of books, papers, floppy discs, CD's, and binders sitting between Dexter and the cubicle wall.

“New year, new jobs,” Dexter told him. Chris' muzzle was open, almost disjointed and on his chest before his best friend let him off the hook. Speaking sotto voce, forcing Chris to lean in to hear him, “Remember I've told you I get job offers from other companies? Sometimes as many as two a week? Well, I got one, one good enough for me to sit down and discuss with Angel after dinner one night last week.”

Silently Chris leaned an arm on the top of the cubicle wall. Was he about to lose probably the only real friend he had??

“I turned down the last serious job offer I got,” Chris whispered back harshly. “I wanted to move Sabrina over *here*, not me over there in ... oh God ... Ohio.”

Well, this isn't about Sabrina, or *you*, this time.” Dexter stood up and tapped Chris' shoulder. “Follow.”

Still dumbfounded at the sight of the mostly-neatly packed cubicle contents, Chris followed Dexter around another set of cubes to and through the side door. Down the corridor he opened the center door of three small offices, ones that had been painted only two weeks ago.

“Home sweet home,” Dexter said. “You know how I'm constantly complaining about not having tools I need to do my work, no space to lay things out, having to draw things out on paper that ends up going in the garbage ... well, we discussed a lot of things, Jim, Cameron, Bert, and I. And one of the conditions of my staying is this office. A place I can actually work.”

“Son of a gun.” Chris looked things over. Dexter had a desk now, a proper desk; still less overall space than the two the cubicles had, but he also had a small table to make up for it. A bookcase, a whiteboard mounted on the wall, and a new coffee maker he must have brought in from home in the corner.”

“Okay,” Chris admitted. “I'm impressed. Congrats!”

“Thank you,” Dexter replied. “I tried to make it a 2-fur office and get you in here as well, but I'm afraid you're stuck out there for the time being.”

That bummed Chris out a bit. A private office, that'd have been nice. But, “It's probably for the best,” he said, “the two of us in the same office and your theory about getting work done would have gone right out that window.”

Dexter smirked. “Probably right!”

Chris looked over the whiteboard again. “I can just come in here when you're out and write dirty things on the whiteboard.”

Just before Dexter rolled his eyes, he told Chris, “Nuh-uh. The door locks.”

“You bastard.”

“Hey, I said I tried to get you in here, too.” He looked at his watch. “We got a conference call in an hour. Help me move in?”

Chris pulled his shoulders back and put his chest out. “You've got an office, hot-spot, get your sec're'tree to do it.”

Dexter gripped Chris' right ear and tweaked it until he yipped, “Okay, *okay*, *leggo-leggo-leggo!*” Which Dexter did. “Jeez,” Chris said as he rubbed it back the way it was, “power's gone to your head already.”

###

Cindy and Clarence found themselves, as they often did, on the living room sofa; the lights were dimmed and Cindy was in heaven. They had fallen into the position they often found themselves in since their engagement. Cindy lay on her back; that was the tradition after all, they stuck to the basics until the experience they so desperately needed took over and took them to different places (or as Cindy would hope now and then).

Once again Cindy's pleasure made her drag her big (and to Clarence rather sexy) front teeth across her bottom lip seductively, slowly. He loved when she did that, the showing of barely contained pleasure under the surface of her body welling up at the actions he was performing for her.

Cindy was elsewhere from then on; she loved what Clarence was doing for her, they were not as experienced as they would have liked, but as Cindy gripped the sofa with her paws and curled her toes around the arm rest she came to a big conclusion, as her thoughts and her body collided: *What Clare does know he's doing well, what he does well he's doing A LOT!*

But with all good things there comes an end, and Clarence came to that end at that moment. In the low light of the living room Clarence stopped his actions slowly but the rhythm had become sporadic, his breathing was shallow and his paws hurt; he had been going at it for twenty minutes, at least a new record for the partners.

Cindy raised her fuzzy head. “My goodness Clarence, that was the best foot rub, how do you do it just the way I love it?” He paused, staring at her, his eyes into hers. “I love you.” She sat up and wrapped her arms around the skunk's neck and kissed his cheek.

They both sat around, Cindy held to Clarence lightly as they both sighed. It reminded him of that day on the bench that fateful summer. Cindy looked at him and smiled, he wondered if she was thinking the same. “Clare, I know it doesn't really matter now, considering.” She looked at her diamond ring, and they smiled. “I don't really know anything about you before I met you.”

Clarence pursed his lips and raised his left eyebrow over the rim of his new gold rims. “Well,” he started, “what do you know about me?”

Cindy thought, then smiled. “I know you have a gift for poetry, you have an obsession for neckties, you use outdated computers ...” She giggled slightly.

“Amigas” Clarence corrected with a nod and a small giggle of his own.

“Amigas, sorry.” She paused. “I know you like martinis and James Bond, old bands like Pink Floyd and ELO, that and you still have a Care Bear on your side table by your clock ... “

Clarence started to shake a little out of embarrassment. “W-What's wrong with having Good Luck Bear?” he asked. “Dad bought that for Mom when I was born.”

“I know Clare, and it's so sweet that you do, that's why I love you. The other thing I know about you is that you are one of the most sensitive men in the world and I would never change that, I love it too much.” She smiled and kissed him again, making a smile force its way out. “But what about your early self, your teenage years, what were they like?” Cindy folded her paws and set them in her lap as she chose her words. “They must have been hard,” she pondered, “seeing as how Sabrina was your first real girlfriend ... was it as lonely as I believe?”

Clarence took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose as he thought back. “It was, in a way,” he admitted, staring at his knees. “Most of it was my own fault really. In high school I wasn't really the same outcast I was in college. When you and the other girls knew me, I had good friends and many good times.” He slid his glasses back on and smiled, finally turning to look at Cindy. “I even had a girl who tried everything to be with me believe it or not.”

Cindy didn't, but it was very interesting for her to hear it. Clarence looked at her face and the blank expression it wore, and sighed. "This is why I don't say anything. No one would believe me anyway. Sure, I still looked like a nerd with no dress sense or good looks, but they didn't even see that, she certainly didn't."

"That's why I asked you," Cindy admitted, placing a caring paw on his forearm. "I want to know. Who was she?"

Clarence had friends? Had girls wanting him? What happened to that Clarence?

"I'll do better than that, I'll show you. That is, if you want to see." Cindy nodded and started to get up, Clarence put his paw softly on her shoulder and kissed her forehead. "Sit here, I'll go and get something I've had hidden for about eight years now."

With that he was gone, moving like a specter around his house. Cindy sat there in the dim coolness of the living room, wondering what could be so important to him, she was also beginning to wonder if it was such a good idea to ask him such questions.

It was nearly five minutes before a slightly teary-eyed Clarence appeared in the doorway. He just stood there looking at what Cindy could figure out was a very wide photograph, larger than the standard eight-by-ten. She noticed he had others in his left paw as well. Clarence entered his living room and sat down next to his love. "I-I-I ... " He tried to get out between the breaths as he feverishly fought back the crying urge. "I haven't looked at these for such a long time, it amazes me how young I look."

Cindy reached out a paw and turned the photo so she could see, the photo so tightly held in Clarence's grasp. With a faux smile she asked, "So, who is the girl you broke the heart of?" She was very interested to see the woman that thought of Clarence as the man of her dreams.

Clarence simply pointed to the girl who stood next to him in the photo. "She later said she just had to stand next to me, she wanted it to be 'forever captured'."

Cindy's eyes went wide. "H-her??" She rubbed her eyes. "That's amazing Clare, she's so pretty." The fur on the back of her neck stood higher than it ever did before. She found she was jealous. *Very* jealous.

Clarence wiped his eyes and smiled, he knew what she was thinking. "Second most beautiful girl I know!" He winked at her, telling her who Number One was. Is.

"You were a cute boy Clare, I love the school uniform." She giggled again, trying to break what tension there was around the subject she shouldn't have brought up, and then she remembered she never wore a uniform. "Clarence, you went to private school?"

Clarence nodded. "Yup," he answered. "Mother thought it would be good for me to experience a more formal education system, she was determined I would go to the

school that she taught in herself.” He rolled his eyes but Cindy wasn't looking at him anymore, she was looking at all the children lined up in perfect little uniforms wondering what trust fund was running dry as they stood there.

Now a lot of answers fell into her lap all at once, the stammer he was inflicted with, the way he seemed out of place, it was because he was. *Having to be with his mother 24 hours in the day certainly didn't help*, she thought.

She looked at him and for once a smile didn't come to her face; for once she felt like the insecure one. “Why didn't you ever say anything, Clare? I mean, you had a wealthy, very attractive young woman falling at your feet and you never even thought that was something you needed to tell me before?” It wasn't anger in her voice, but more concern, concern that she wasn't good enough for him. She never would have thought it, maybe, she thought to herself that she did take him for granted, it would always be Clarence and Cindy. She had to admit it to herself, she liked the idea of Clarence being a timid male, one she knew she could trust, now she saw him as how others could have back in his teens, someone of stature if not the social graces.

Clarence wasn't the best person at judging how people felt, but that last line Cindy said told him that she was scared, it must be a lot of information to take in all at once. “I never thought it mattered what I did,” he defended. “I'm the only person I can be. It wasn't good enough for Sabrina, she hated every second I was with her.” He shook his head in disgust.

Cindy gripped his arm tighter. “Oh Clare, please don't look like that,” she pleaded. “It just wasn't meant to be. I said it before, personally I'm glad it didn't, I wouldn't have you if it did.”

Clarence steered himself on the sofa to better face Cindy, his eyes burning less, not wet so much as moist now. “You have to know Cindy, that you are the only one I could ever had been with. Back then I was even more

than I was in the beginning with you, I mistook her overbearing wont for what it really was, I thought she was just being friendly with me, that and I was quite scared of her. Her looks and her extroverted nature I couldn't deal with back then.” He gave another picture to her. “Not even there did I know.”

In Cindy's paw was a photo of the girl and Clarence, he in a dinner suit and she in a red low cut dress, her hair was up and they were arm-in-arm. She looked at him now, sitting there in a blue shirt and pink necktie, and then back to the picture where he was dressed in a pressed suit complete with black bow tie. “I see you always liked rabbits then,” she kidded with him, she couldn't stay jealous at a girl who obviously loved him back then, what she knew was that he was hers forever now, nothing would ever change that. “Was this a prom thing?” she asked. “You haven't even told me her name.” She noticed all of the girls were in evening dresses; it reminded her of a wedding.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Clarence said. “It was a party for us leaving the school. Her name was Charlene, it was the last time I saw many of the guys and girls from that school. Life pulls apart even the best of people, that summer I realized what she was doing all that time but it was too late, I never saw her again, I doubt I ever will. I think she moved to Oxford University, apparently she would have stayed for me.” He shook his head in an off-paw way and gave another picture to her. “These are the guys I call friends, that I sometimes see, and a few of them I found on Zig Zag's mailing list so I contacted them, not that they know I work for her.” He laughed. “Not in a million years would they even think!”

Cindy picked up the year photo from Clarence's lap. She smiled and kissed him, a long lingering kiss, one that told him she loved him more than anyone else could have. When they broke Clarence was compelled to finish his story.

“I guess after having an education like I did, I thought nothing would change, people would like me whatever I looked like or what I did. I was very wrong, I had been shielded for the most part from other people in the world, but I didn't know why it was hard for people to accept me and I didn't know how to change. I was set up to be me.” He closed his eyes, thinking back to that dance so many years ago, the way Charlene kissed him lightly on the neck as they danced in little circles at the edge of the dance floor, the way she pulled his paw down from her waist around her hips down to her ... he opened his eyes *wide* in shock! He had not remembered any of that!

Cindy kissed him again, not realizing but seeing he was shaking and looking around nervously. “You okay, Clarence? You kind of stopped mid-sentence.” She smiled an amused smile.

Clarence nodded, he would keep that memory where he could find it again another time, and secreted from his bride-to-be. “When I met you girls and after letting Charlene slip, I didn't want to make the same mistake again. I guess Sabrina didn't like the 'try too hard' Clarence anymore than I liked the naïve one.”

Cindy felt sorry for him; he really was such a lonely boy after all. “Well I'm glad I could help.” She looked at the ring again. “Very glad”.

She looked down at some of the people in the class picture. “I think I dated this cat in the summer before college.” Clarence poked his head over to where Cindy's finger was pointing.

Clarence bit his lip trying to remember the feline's name. “His name was Robert,” he told her, “He was on the hockey team. I think he became an art student later on.”

“Yes that's him, boy he was a good kisser.” Cindy remembered back to three years ago. Clarence rolled his eyes. “He goes to my church every so often,” she told Clarence, “I'll have to tell him that you and he went to the same school.” Then she

realized that she had gone out with many furs in her life, and here she was getting all worked up over someone Clarence didn't even really date.

“I'm sure he remembers me, he stopped some kids from another school trying to beat me up!” He laughed hard. “They didn't see him coming, he was like a bus!” Tears of a different kind came now, tears of happy remembrance.

Once again Cindy found herself thinking Clarence had strayed from the real conversation, but at least he was happier. “Clarence, I was looking at that dress again, what do you think about red for the bridesmaids?”

Clarence sat and thought, then nodded. “I think that's a very good idea Cindy, if it's okay with Sabrina ... that reminds me, when are you and the girls going for your fittings?”

“Some time soon,” Cindy said vaguely, “I don't have a proper date though. I just keep thinking of what *my* dress will look like. I have no idea what I want.” She stopped, then smiled. “You work with practically the best looking women in the whole of Ohio, why don't you ask what they would have or even had ... you think that could help?”

Clarence nodded. “Can't hurt if I did, I know just the person too; she has helped me before on other matters of the heart.”

“Would that be your mistress?” Cindy still knew how to catch her fiancée off-guard, he hid it well but Clarence did have to restart his actions. That made her giggle, he paid her back by jumping on her and kissed up her bare shoulder and the side of her neck.

“Well actually,” he said, still kissing her long neck, “it's a certain cat that has done a lot for me already in such a small time. I have something for you that she suggested.” Before she could reply he got up and off her and pulled out a CD from his velvet blazer that was draped over the arm of Sharon's easy chair. He pushed the button atop the portable player on a stack table near the Christmas tree and dropped the disc into the caddy, popping it quickly closed.

“You know what, Cindy?” She looked at him and shook her head. “I think I'm getting the hang of this.” He extended his arm and took her paw, pulling her from the couch, and as the music came on he dipped her and Cindy's leg went into the air.

###

Sabrina bounced between IBrowse windows, checking the weather for her trip back to Columbus next weekend. So far so good, Franklin and Akron and the I-76 Corridor all looked promising, so did both Grove City's and Columbus.

“I'll be more than happy to drive you,” Chris told her.

Sabrina shook her head. "You don't have to," she said. "The weather's going to be good all weekend. Sunday night looks a little shaky for the trip back home though; if I leave early I should be okay."

"I know I don't *have* to ..." Chris insisted. "I'd feel better knowing you're safe."

"Who do you think drove me around in Columbus winters before I met you?" Sabrina turned in her chair to face the todd. "Besides, what would you do while The Clique and I are having our fittings?" she asked him. "Who knows how long it'll take? It could take hours." Then a thought crossed her mind making her grin. "I wonder if Cindy'll want to be fitted for her wedding gown while we're there?"

Chris swiveled his own chair around and sat down. "They set a date yet?" he asked. "I never heard."

"No, not yet," Sabrina said. Just then she giggled. "I wonder how her mom'll cope with two members of the family in the porn business!"

Just as Chris was about to spin his chair around, his foot caught one of the wheeled feet and stopped quickly. "Huh?!"

"Cindy's dad works for Zig part-time," Sabrina told him, "Don't you remember my telling you?"

"I guess not ..."

"Yeah," Sabrina went on, "Clarence's mother doesn't know where Clarence works, and I don't think Mrs. Lapine does. And she certainly doesn't know that her husband does."

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave!" Chris quoted.

Sabrina caught herself slouching and decided to stay that way. "Oh, it's not really deception," she told her fox. "At least I don't think it is ... he just doesn't want her knowing."

"I think that's the definition of 'deception'," Chris told her.

"Sounds to me more like 'self-preservation'," Sabrina replied back. "Clarence's mother is really over-bearing; I wouldn't be surprised if she had Cindy investigated before she gave her stamp of approval. And Cindy's dad, well, he's afraid if her mom found out that she wouldn't understand."

"I didn't meet him yet, right?" he asked.

“Sabrina raised an eyebrow in thought. “I ... don't think you did,” she said finally. “He wasn't at the party.

“Is ... “ Chris didn't want to think it, but he felt compelled to ask. “Is he an actor?”

That made Sabrina laugh. Suddenly she had to work to get the mental image of Rodney and Rhonda on a bedroom set out of her mind. “Nooooooo,” she assured him. “He fixes her equipment when it breaks.”

“I'll just bet he does.”

“And here I am, being serious.” Sabrina shook her head as she turned back to her Amiga. “I saw him in one of the editing booths once; he may do that, too.”

Chris turned to his PC. And he pondered. And finally, after several minutes, “How long *could* it take?” he asked aloud, somehow finding his way back to the subject of the Columbus trip and the gown fittings. “You put on your gowns, if they don't fit they stick in some pins and take new measurements. You're in and out.”

Sabrina was doing her best to not laugh out loud at Chris' naiveté on the topic of women and clothes. “You're going to be in for quite a discovery over the next sixty or seventy years,” she giggled, amazed he didn't remember her shopping for a Christmas dress just a month ago.

Burying her nose into her HTML book, she made some notes in the margins and then some changes in her editing program. Soon she became focused on her work, and when Sabrina became focused it would take a bit to get her attention. Chris wasn't working, he was killing time surfing for what he used to surf for before he'd met Sabrina, with his email client open and ready to toggle it the minute he felt her turn his way ... certainly they weren't getting into ... *a rut?*

Way off in the distance Sabrina slowly became aware of the phone after the third ring. Her peripheral vision caught the sight of her fiancé's white tail tip as it disappeared through the doorway. Shortly he came back and tapped the pawset upon her shoulder and handed it unto her. “It's for you,” he said simply.

Hooking the receiver between her shoulder and her chin, she gave a pleasant “Hello” into the mouthpiece.

“Hello Sabrina, it's your mother.”

Sabrina turned her head and gave Chris a stern “*Why didn't you warn me?*” look. “Oh, hey Mom,” she replied. “How's it going over there?”

“Your father's out salting the walk,” she said. “Tabitha is helping him.”

“He has to be loving that.” She was talking and typing at the same time, correcting an error on her personal webpage, it'd occurred to her that she hadn't touched it since before Labor Day.

Endora looked out the front window from her chair. “If she's as good as you were at that age, he'll be wearing as much as he put down.”

Sabrina thought hard. “I can't remember.” *This isn't like Mom, making smalltalk.*

“The reason I called ... “

See? Toldya so.

“ ... you're coming home Saturday, right?”

“Friday night,” Sabrina corrected. “Probably late. *Very* late.”

“I was wondering what time you wanted to meet.”

Sabrina opened her muzzle to answer, but didn't have one. In fact, she wasn't expecting the question. “Oh, uh, hmmm ... “ She was flogging her brain to remember *why* she'd want to meet her mother in the first place, she couldn't remember a thing ... she was certain there wasn't anything ... “Sorry Mom, it's been a long day,” was what she came up with to cover. “Refresh my memory?”

Endora could hear what was left of her family on the front porch. “You're coming in for the first fitting of your bridal gown, right?” she asked.

Sabrina figured it out! *Oh no*, she thought as she buried her face in her other paw, *she's going to want to get involved in my wedding gown!*

“Uh ... uh-huh.”

“Well,” Endora told her, “I know nothing about what you four have in mind as far as styles and your wedding colors and so forth. And I *am* going to have to buy a mother-of-the-bride dress.”

“Oh ... *oh!*” Sabrina suddenly realized her mother was right. Finally. In fact she'd insist upon it.

Oh my God, she thought, *how will I tell The Clique my mom's coming along with us??*

“I ... uh ... I'm surprised you haven't started that yourself already!” she said quickly.

“Oh, I have,” Endora told her. “I’ve looked through a catalogue, but I still know precious little about what you have in mind. I don’t want my outfit to be an entirely different style from your bridesmaids’.”

Sabrina covered her face with her open paw. *She’s right ...*

“And Tabitha’s going to need a flower girl’s dress, too.”

“Oh God, that’s right!” Sabrina gasped. “I forgot all about ... “

“You *were* thinking of Tabitha being in the wedding party, weren’t you?”

“Well, of *course*.”

Now officially backed into a corner, Sabrina held the “Mute” key while she moaned out loud. Releasing it, she sighed and slumped in her chair. “How’s ten-o’clock?” she resigned. “We’re down at English Bridal.”

“Alright ... yes, that’s the place ... bye ... *bye*, Mom.” She pressed the hangup button and set the phone on the desktop.

“Drive safely,” Chris said from over his shoulder.

###

Come the weekend, Sabrina wasn’t exactly true to her word, driving into Columbus after three in the afternoon. After explaining to her girlfriends the happy news that her mother and sister were going to join them, the attitude slid from “Yay!” to “meh.” But it wasn’t Sabrina’s fault, and her mother and her sister *were* a part of the wedding party too, after all. And her mother *was* one of the two who were paying the bill. Sabrina also took a moment to call Amy and give her the good news, sadly Timmy had developed a bad cold and she had to postpone until the next time she was in town.

Sabrina stayed at Susan’s apartment, like their high school days they stayed up *far* later than they should have, without a mother or father present to tell them to quiet down and go to sleep.

Overnight the snow had come and gone, but the cold temperatures remained. Thankfully everyone agreed to meet at the coffee house a few blocks away from the bridal store. Cindy held the door and they all went inside, quickly claiming two of the tables and pushing them together to accommodate everybody. After five minutes they all decided not to wait and ordered their hot drinks.

As everyone sipped their coffees or hot chocolate, they gossiped as girls do. Except there wasn’t a lot to talk about this time, everyone kept awaiting the elder and

younger skunk ladies. Sabrina, annoyed, kept checking her watch at every lull in the conversation.

“Watched pots, Sabrina,” Cindy advised her.

Sabrina sighed. “I know,” she replied. “Look, I’m sorry everyone,” she went on to explain, “She just sort of ... invited herself.”

“Well let’s be honest, girl,” Susan reminded her, “you hadn’t told her about it yet.”

“I know, but ... “

“We’ll make the best of it,” the lioness told her as she gave her free paw a squeeze. “Your mom’s not that bad, there are others a *lot* worse!”

“Boy, have you been away a long time,” Sabrina said and sipped her mocha java, a large one, then checked her watch again. “We’re going to be late, I know we are.”

“Nuh-uh,” Debbye said and nodded toward the door. “Isn’t that your mom there?”

Finally, Sabrina thought. She turned to the opening door as her baby sister preceded their mother; recognizing her sister and her friends she went running up to them! Everyone took Sabrina’s lead and forced a smile as her mother turned down the collar of her coat and walked over to the table behind her.

“Tabitha, behave. Good morning, girls,” Endora greeted everyone and hung her coat on the back of the sole empty chair. “I’m sorry if I kept everyone waiting.”

“No, Mrs. M, you’re right on time,” Susan lied with a big smile. She remembered Endora from her times in Dayton going to study or have sleepovers with Sabrina. “That’s a very lovely dress you’re wearing, is it new?”

Sabrina balled her paw into a fist and coughed “*ahem*-Eddie Haskell-*ahem!*” which earned her a kick in the ankle.

“Thank you, dear,” Endora said. “No, it’s at least a year old. With a wedding coming up, one has to pinch pennies where they can.”

Unbelievable. Already. She hasn’t even sat down yet, and already. As the words went through her head, the back of Sabrina’s neck began to burn.

Debbye put her arm around Tabitha’s shoulder. “Hey Tabby! How are you doing today?”

“Fine!” Tabitha said as she hopped on her little feet. Reaching around her, Endora untied her hood and unzipped her little coat, pulling it from her little arms.

“Oh, have you tried their peppermint coffee, Mrs. Mustel'iday?” Cindy asked. She never was very good at pronouncing Sabrina's family name, inwardly grateful it was about to be shortened in a matter of months. “It's really good on a day like today.”

“Thank you Cindy, dear ... do we have time, Sabrina?”

“We have time,” Sabrina answered dryly.

“Ah, good. Good idea you all had, meeting here first. A little girl-talk beforehand would be fun.” She walked up to the counter and Sabrina leaned into the table and dropped her voice as low as she could.

“Would you all stop sucking up to my mother!”

“*Sabrina!*” Susan exclaimed in a sharp hushed voice just as six pairs of eyes and three opened muzzles turned her direction. “We're not sucking up! We're trying to make her feel welcome!”

“Look, I'm sorry, but -- “

“Sabby, you don't have to keep apologizing,” Cindy whispered back. “It's only for a few hours, and your mom can't be as bad as you say she is.”

“You've never met her, have you?” Sabrina asked. Then she sat up straight. “Okay. I promise I'll stop. But don't say I didn't try to warn you all!”

Tabitha walked back slowly, carrying a cup of hot chocolate piled high with marshmallows. Endora returned with her coffee, a muffin for Tabitha, and a plate of baked pastries. “The mink behind the counter assures me these actually aren't stale,” she said as she set them in the middle of the table. “She called them 'biz'-something. Help yourselves.”

“Biscotti,” Susan said as she picked out the white chocolate one. “It means 'twice baked' in Italian. They're popular in coffee houses. Thank you!”

“Oh?” She picked out one with bits of cranberry through it while the other girls each took one and thanked her. Endora put the end of it in her mouth and squinted when she tried to bite into it. Drawing it out she held it up to look at it. “How in the world are you supposed to eat it without chipping a tooth?” she asked.

Sabrina was honestly trying hard not to let herself be embarrassed. It was true, her mother didn't get around as much as a lot of furs do, particularly the younger furs, but

she had convinced herself that this was going to be the most trying day of her single life and she was prepared to keep it that way.

“Like this, Mom.” Sabrina dunked the end into her coffee and twirled it. “It's like a donut, you're supposed to dunk 'em.” And she nibbled on the softened end.

“Oh!” Endora said. “I was about to resort to dunking it, I didn't realize that was by design.” She stirred hers in her cup and tapped it on the rim, biting off the end and gave a very approving expression.

“Oh, I really like what you've done with your hair, Mrs. Mustelidae,” Debbye exclaimed. “Are you going to let it grow long?”

“Thmmph -- “ Endora caught herself about to speak with her mouth full and swallowed a drink of her coffee to wash down her biscotti. “Thank you,” she said, “I've been thinking about it. I haven't worn my hair long since ... “ Even amongst the girls, she thought it better than admit how old she is. “ ... well, in years.”

“That red headband looks perfect,” Debbye said.

“Maybe when it's grown in,” Cindy suggested, “you could pigtail it like Tabitha.”

At the other end of the table, Sabrina smirked and the coffee she was drinking went back into the cup. The thought of her mother in pigtails was too much. “Sure,” she offered, “then we could get you a bookbag and a schoolgirl's uniform with blazer and the plaid skirt, the cable-knit sweater ... “

At first, Susan was actually starting to think Sabrina was being mean to her mother. But she had to smile, even she had to grin at that mental image of Mrs. Mustelidae.

“No,” Susan corrected, “the white Japanese schoolgirl's sailor uniform with the pleated yellow skirt and the neckerchief.”

Endora shook her head smiling. “Now you're just being silly,” she told them. “I was originally thinking of letting it grow long enough for a pony tail. That is, if I lose some weight.”

Tabitha had been quietly blowing on her hot chocolate, sipping it a little at a time, each sip followed by her unwrapping a bit more of her muffin and nibbling at it. It was about this time that she noticed her marshmallows had melted into the drink. She stared into it, disappointed ... she was about to complain to her mother, but she and all of the big girls were talking. Without disturbing anyone, Tabitha slid out of her seat and ran up to the smiling bunny doe behind the counter who'd served them earlier.

“... oh, and Cindy, congratulations! I heard the good news about you and your boyfriend!”

Cindy smiled uncontrollably. “Oh, thank you, Mrs. M!” She offered her paw and splayed her fingers to show off the stone.

Endora slid her glasses down her nose to look over the lenses so she could focus better. “Oh, that's beautiful.” Endora watched it sparkle. Have you two set a date yet?”

Cindy shook her head. “Not yet,” she admitted. “We both want to finish school first, and Clarence wants to get a job in his major and get himself established. Then we'll set a date.”

Endora nodded approvingly. “That all sounds very responsible,” she said. “You're going to be one very lucky young woman.”

The blush on Cindy's cheeks pulled the corners of her mouth upwards uncontrollably. “Thank you,” she beamed.

After another sip of her flavored coffee, Endora turned toward Susan. “And what about you, Susan?” she asked. “Any prospects of your own?”

That's showing some nerve, Mother, Sabrina glowered over the rim of her cup.

Susan didn't mind. “Oh, I dunno yet,” she replied smiling a very telling smile as she touched the neck-hugging expandable ornate choker she'd worn nearly every day since Christmas. “I've been a little serious about a certain someone recently. He's a fox, too.”

The doe behind the counter proved she had a soft spot for little kids. With a big smile and a wink she gave Tabitha a big bowl of marshmallows to take back to the table. And Tabitha was very polite and thanked her, carefully taking them back to the table with her and setting them beside her cup opposite her partially-eaten muffin and pushing it back, then all by herself climbing into her seat. Tabitha reached for three marshmallows and succeeded in making two fit, no matter how hard she tried the third one would simply not cooperate, bobbing atop the hot drink and its brother marshmallows. So Tabitha made it meet its fate at the mercy of her teeth and mouth, devouring it and another before taking another drink, slurping around the two new additions.

As the others talked around her, she slurped one of the partially-melted ones in and immediately replaced it with one from her dish.

Sabrina had calmed down, meanwhile. Her mother was actually making an effort of sorts to fit in. Not too hard, after all this was still Mom, but her girlfriends seemed to be okay with her. *Maybe it won't be so bad after all* Sabrina surmised, finishing her

coffee drink, oblivious to her sister playing with her marshmallows and gorging herself on them with only the occasional bite of her banana nut muffin.

Once there was a lull in the conversation Susan glanced at her watch, then held it over so Sabrina could see.

“Oh geez,” Sabrina exclaimed, “We'd better get going.”

“Aw, already?” Endora asked, actually disappointed at having to leave. She looked at her own watch and sat up straight. “Where *did* the time go?” She drank the last of her coffee as The Clique all stood and put on their coats. Cindy held Tabitha's coat and she wriggled her little arms into it, grabbing the last marshmallow and forcing it down, fighting her body's attempts to tell her it was one too many.

Endora buttoned her coat. “Are you ready to go, Tabitha?”

“Mmm-hmmmp!” Tabitha nodded her head, her mouth still full of the sticky sugar treat.

Endora pulled up Tabitha's hood and tied it tight. The adults all left a tip on the table and headed out the door and down the street.