

## Aftermath

*This work of fiction is based on Chris Yost's Sabrina: the Online Story, and in particular, on the events chronicled in Chapter 43 of that story. No challenge to the copyright of that work is intended by this work. Rodney, Ellen, and Cindy Lapine, Clarence and Mrs. Skunk, Susan Felin and Debbye Squirrel are copyright Chris Yost. Sabrina Mustildae is copyright Eric Schwartz. Blue Wolf is copyright his player, I believe. Jake Mackelroy is copyright David Adrian. Should any of these attributions be in error, please let me know – I want to see credit given where it is due.*

*The events in this story are not canonical to Chris Yost's work; they are strictly the product of my imagination based on the events of Clarence and Cindy's date in Chapter 43. However, I owe Mr. Yost a great debt of gratitude for the inspiration his work has provided me; this was the spark which motivated me to begin writing again after far too long. Thank you, sir.*

Rodney Lapine yawned as he headed for home. He really hadn't meant to stay so late, but his brother-in-law had been visiting Ellen's mother, and, well, any time the two of them started talking...

He grinned, thinking back through the years. He and Mike had always been that way; start talking and they were gone. It'd be hours before they'd get back to the real world. It didn't matter about what; they shared a wide range of favorite topics. As Cindy kept saying, they seemed to exist just to burn the midnight oil.

Thinking of Cindy... he hoped she was asleep when he and Ellen got home. That new job of hers was wearing her out – nothing she couldn't get used to, Rodney was sure, but she had just started and wasn't accustomed to the hours yet. Plus she was seeing that nice young skunk, Clarence, and that ate into her time as well.

Well, at least with *this* boyfriend, some of Rodney's normal concerns were laid to rest. Clarence was such a change from the typical run of young furs around today. Polite, responsible, ethical... and definitely trustworthy. Even when Clarence had come clean, told Cindy about his new job at ZZ Studios, he'd left Rodney out of it. *And* he'd quietly tipped Rodney off about Cindy's surprise visit to the studio; that could have been a horrible mess! It was only luck – and a bad patch of traffic – that had made Rodney late that day...

Clarence... Rodney trusted him. That was something new with his daughter's boyfriends. But this youngster was different; he reminded Rodney of someone, someone he hadn't been in far too long. Way back when he'd first started noticing his best friend's sister, started courting Ellen...

"Penny for your thoughts, dear?" came the question from the passenger seat. Rodney looked over and smiled at the doe who was still his reason for living after more than twenty years. God, she was still beautiful! He looked at her, then blinked as he remembered she had just asked him something. What was it? Oh...

"I was just thinking about Cindy and Clarence. They remind me of someone..."

"And here I thought romance was dead," she grinned at him. "But I know what you mean. They do look awfully familiar together..." They smiled at each other, both thinking *she could do a lot worse...*

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As their car made the last turn, the headlights swept across a champagne-colored Saturn parked in front of their house. The two exchanged glances again, and Rodney said to his wife, "Asleep on the couch again. This is getting to be a habit." They smiled at each other, remembering their own days of doing that. "Well, it's after midnight. I think we ought to get them bundled off to their beds."

Ellen nodded. "Go ahead and get the door, dear. I need to get those things of Mother's from the back seat. I'll be in in a moment." Rodney nodded and went to unlock the front door.

As he stepped inside, he noticed the lights were dimmed and the stereo was playing something classical and quiet – romantic music. *Hm. I like the boy's taste. And now – yes, there they are.* Cindy was curled up on the couch, leaning against Clarence, who had his arm draped protectively around her. *Ready to stand against the world should his lady need him. Just like I was at that age...*

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The sound of the key in the lock brought Clarence back from his thoughts. It took all of his willpower not to jump, and possibly wake Cindy. He slowly turned his head, so as not to disturb her, and met her father's eyes from across the living room. "I thought it best to let her sleep," he said. "She's had an emotional day." Mr. Lapine's eyebrow went up, questioningly, but he didn't say anything. "Sabrina left today," Clarence continued. "Cindy couldn't get off work early enough to say goodbye, and it kind of upset her."

Wordlessly, Rodney nodded. He *really* liked this kid. He walked across the living room and quietly began helping Clarence disentangle himself from Cindy. As Ellen came in, she heard her husband telling Clarence, "Thanks, lad. I'll get her put to bed. Now, you need to run along to your own bed, and get some sleep." She smiled to herself, thinking *He really does trust the boy. Any of her other boyfriends he'd have run off for this!* As Clarence walked past her toward the door, she stopped him. As he turned to look at her questioningly, she smiled and pulled him into a one-armed hug.

Clarence blushed and began stammering. "Wha... what was that for?" It took almost everything she had for Ellen not to giggle at his expression – which would *not* do in the current situation!

"I wanted to thank you for taking care of Cindy. I'm glad she's got someone like you watching out for her." She released Clarence, but kept a paw on his shoulder as she watched his expression. Something was still bothering him... Quietly, she asked the question. "Sabrina was the one who introduced you to Cindy, wasn't she? She was the one you dated first." Wordlessly, Clarence nodded. Mrs. Lapine pulled him into another hug, and whispered to him, "That makes what you did even more special. If you need someone to talk to, someone who understands, well, I'll listen." She let him go and gave him a gentle push toward the door. "Now, go home and go to bed! It's really late."

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“CLAR-ance!” His mom’s voice penetrated the fog in his head. “Wake up! You’ve got a phone call!” That jolted him back to full consciousness! *Why would Cindy be calling me this early? “It’s long distance!” Long distance? That can’t be Cindy... Maybe it’s Sabrina?*

“Coming, Ma!” He grabbed his robe and headed downstairs. “Hello?” he asked the telephone receiver.

“Hey, buddy, what’s going on?” the voice came back. *Male, definitely not Sabrina. So who...?* Then the voice registered.

“Jake? Is that you?”

“Who else would dare the dragon at this hour, buddy?” Clarence could almost hear the impudent grin on the other end of the line. *This hour? What time is it?* He caught a glimpse of the clock. *Eight-thirty? That’s not all that – OH! I forgot!*

“Jake, it’s five-thirty where you are! What’re you doing calling me this early?”

“Mm, two things. One, it isn’t really all that early by my standards – I’ve changed since college. Two, you know me. I called you because you needed to talk to me.”

“What are you...” The events of the last few weeks crowded back into Clarence’s mind, and he knew exactly what Jake was talking about. “Okay, scratch that question. Here’s the next: *how did you know?* You have spies watching me or something?”

The easy chuckle that came back was as calming as it was infuriating. “Clarence, you’ve known me long enough to know the answer to that one. It’s a talent I have: when a friend needs an ear, I always know. I woke up about an hour ago knowing you were gonna need a friendly voice, so I called. Now, what’s new? Do I gotta ask three times?”

Clarence laughed. Somehow, Jake could always get through his defenses. “No, you don’t have to ask again. Yeah, some pretty important things have happened to me lately.” Suddenly, he had to get it said. “You’ll never guess who I’m dating!”

“Hm. Without more clues, you’re probably right. So lemme ask a question: is she Clique?”

Clarence blinked. And blinked again. “*How did you...*”

“I didn’t – until you just confirmed it. *But* – let me replay what you said. You told me ‘You’ll never guess...’ That meant it was someone *you* still can’t believe wants

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you. That puts the high odds on either one of the Clique or Blue Wolf – and I don't think you've loosened up that much, pal! So which one is it? No, don't tell me, let me try to work it out.

“It can't be Sabrina; I got the word by IRC the other day about her engagement. I doubt it's Susan, she'd probably scare you half to death –“

“Hey!”

“Sorry, buddy, but it's the truth. I *know* her; *if* you ever got up the courage to ask her out, she'd make some move and you'd have a heart attack. That leaves Debbye Squirrel and the quiet one, what's-her-name...”

“Cindy.”

“Thank you. And you just answered my question. Cindy's the one you're seeing, right?”

Clarence sat in stunned silence. “How do you do that?” he finally asked. “From more than twenty-five hundred miles away, you get the feeling you should call me. Then you take the phrasing of *one question* and manage to pull my entire summer out of it. Are you sure you don't have someone spying on me?”

“Nope. I just know my friends, that's all. So, now that I have the broad outline, howsabout you fill in some details?”

“Well, okay. You deserve that much, anyway. It all started in the coffee house...” And Clarence talked for ten minutes straight. Toward the end, he started hesitating and his stammer began to creep into the narrative. When he realized he was starting to get scared, he broke off and asked, “Jake, what do you think I should do?”

There was a long pause, and then a heavy sigh. “Well, looks like my string is unbroken. You *did* need to talk to me. I'm glad I called.

“Okay. First order of business, you definitely need to hang onto that girl. I think you already know this, but you're hopelessly in love. Don't let that slip away, pal; you've got something good there. And don't worry about what happened last night; once she thinks about it this morning, she's not going to hate you. None of the Clique is that petty.

“Next... I really hate to be the one to bring this up, but someone's got to. Clarence, you need to move out of that house. I mean, you're on your last year of college, you've got a good job, you've got a car, you're getting a life...”

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Chuckle. “Sorry, I couldn’t resist. Now, like I was saying, you’ve got a girl that you’re absolutely nuts about. You need to get out into a place of your own. It’s time you spread your wings and took your first flight, little bird.”

Clarence sighed. “I know. I need to do *something*; I just don’t know how to go about it. I mean, it’s such a big step, ya know, and I haven’t even really tried to make any plans... How am I going to tell Mom?”

Jake was silent for a moment, and then said, “Well, do some research first. If you’re going to fight that battle, it’ll help if you have your ammunition lined up beforehand. I didn’t mean you had to go tomorrow; I just needed to get you thinking about the idea.

“Third order of business: you and Cindy need to sit down sometime *soon* and talk over your relationship. You need to find out – explicitly! – what each other feels, what you each want, and what you expect. I don’t think she’s going to bring this up, pal, which means you’re going to have to bite the bullet and open up to her. I know it isn’t going to be easy, but trust me, it’ll help. You may even find you like it...

“Fourth, and this’ll be the last one. When your mom comes in to tell you phone time’s up, you’re gonna put her on the line with me. And then you’re going to leave the room. Got that? Don’t try to listen in; I’ll have her chase you out!”

“Jake, what are you going to do?” Clarence asked suspiciously. “I don’t want you fighting any of my battles for me...”

“Clarence, I’ll leave your fights out of it. I do need to talk to your mom, though. You didn’t think you were my only friend in that house, did you? She’s got things she needs to talk about as well. And don’t ask me what; you *know* I don’t make other people’s confessions for them.”

Just then, Clarence’s mother came into the room. “Clarence, are you still on the phone? It’s time to...”

“Mom, it’s Jake on the line. I’m getting off now, but he wants to talk to you. Here!” He handed the phone to his mother, and started to leave the room as she brought the receiver to her ear.

“Jacob? Is something wrong? Why do you need –“ Clarence closed the door and went in search of breakfast.

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Cindy woke up in her own room, confused. *How did I get here? The last thing I remember is snuggling up to Clare, and him putting his arm around me...* Then she remembered the rest of the evening’s events, and groaned. *Oh, how could I have been so*

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*stupid! I've lost him for sure, now! And Mom and Dad are going to...* At the thought of her parents, her eyes flew open. *What am I gonna tell them? How am I going to tell them?* To her credit, the thought of hiding her actions from her parents never even crossed her mind. But it was a very subdued young doe who got dressed that morning and went down to the living room...

She stopped at the entrance of the room and took in the scene. Her father was sitting in his recliner, reading the morning paper. Her mother, in the rocking chair by the window, glanced up at her and smiled, then went back to looking at the photo album in her lap. Cindy hesitated, then walked to the couch and sat down.

Rodney looked over the paper at his daughter, unobtrusively he hoped. Something was plainly bothering her; her whole posture showed it. She was huddled in the middle of the couch, staring down at the clasped paws in her lap, and – *oh my! This isn't good; she's actually trembling!*

Ellen realized something was bothering Cindy as the girl sat down. She closed the album and walked to the couch just in time to hear the catch in Cindy's breathing. *The poor girl! she thought. She's right on the verge of crying; what could have gotten her so upset?* Ellen sat beside her daughter and began rubbing her daughter's shoulders. "What's wrong, Cindy dear?"

"Mom, Dad?" Sniff. "I have something I've got to tell you, but it's not going to be easy." *Please let me keep control for long enough; I don't want to have to tell them while I'm crying!* "Please promise me you'll hear me out."

Rodney quickly folded his paper and dropped it on the floor. "Of course I'll listen to you, Cindy. I promise." He sat forward and gave his wife and daughter all of his attention.

"Mom?"

"Need you even ask, dear? You can speak your mind; we trust you."

"Well," sniff, "that's part of what I need to talk to you about. I did something stupid last night, and I'm not sure you can trust me anymore." Cindy hesitated, and snuck a quick peek at her parents. Her mother looked troubled, but was still listening – much as Cindy expected. She was a bit scared to look at her father though –

He was still paying close attention to her, but she was surprised to see his expression. She had been terrified that he would jump to conclusions; she didn't want to see him angry or disappointed with her. She'd even been afraid he would immediately forbid her ever to see Clarence again. Instead, he was listening intently, and had an expression of absolute neutrality on his face. Somehow, she knew he wasn't judging her; he was paying strict attention.

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When neither of them said anything, she realized they were honoring her request; they were waiting to hear her out. “You know Clarence and I had dinner here last night, right?” At their silent nods, she continued. “I lost control of myself last night. I tried to get Clarence to go up to my room with me; I tried to seduce him. Now you know why you can’t trust me.” It was too much; the tears started down Cindy’s cheeks and a sob escaped her.

She felt her mother’s arms pull her into a hug as Ellen crooned, “There, there.” Cindy’s resistance crumbled, and she cried on her mother’s shoulder. When she had gotten herself under control, her mother pulled her into another quick hug and then said, “Well, what happened next?”

A surprised laugh burst from Cindy at the question. “Nothing happened, Mom. As soon as I tried, he panicked and tried to head for the door.”

“But he was here when we got home last night. He didn’t leave, did he?”

“No, I caught him before he left and managed to get him to stay. But I scared him, Mom, I could see it in his eyes. I’ve probably scared him away and now he’ll never want to see me again!” The tears were back, harder than ever, and it was all Ellen could do to support her daughter against the emotion. *What do I say to her? What if she’s right? Oh, my poor, poor girl...*

Rodney’s voice startled them both; they’d been so emotionally wrapped up in what Cindy was saying that they had forgotten he was there. “You haven’t scared him away, Cindy. I know that for a fact.” The two women in his life looked over at him, puzzlement on one face, apprehension on the other. “Your mother didn’t get a look at him when I came in last night; she was busy getting some things. So she didn’t see what I did. You were curled up against him, and he had an arm around you and I can tell you exactly what he was thinking. He was thinking how much he loved you, and how he would face anything or anyone for you. All he wanted at that moment was anything that would make you happy.”

“How... how do you know all that, Poppa?” Rodney smiled as Cindy called him the name she hadn’t used in ten years. “I mean – I want to believe, really, I do, but... How do you know?”

“I know because I saw his face, Cindy. I saw the expression on his face, and,” Rodney broke off just long enough to capture Ellen’s eyes with his own, “it was the same one I’ve worn for twenty-five years.”

Cindy looked at her father, then at her mother, and tears came to her eyes once more. But this time, they were happy tears. “Thank you, Poppa. You don’t know how much better that makes me feel.” The frown came back to her face. “But that still leaves me with a problem.” She felt both of her parents looking at her, as she studied her hands.

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“I’ve broken your trust. I was ready to do something I knew was wrong, I was ready to throw away your trust and respect, for my own pleasure. I can’t trust myself anymore.”

Again both women were startled when Rodney spoke. “I think we can trust you, Cindy. Yes, you were overwhelmed by your emotions; it was the first time you’d ever felt anything like that. But *nothing happened!* You two did nothing wrong!”

“But Dad, that was Clarence! I would have, in a heartbeat!”

“True, and you were lucky he had that strength. But I trust him. And now that you have the measure of temptation, I trust you, too. You’ll be more careful in the future, and you won’t let it get the better of you again. I love you, Cindy, and I trust you.”

Ellen cleared her throat. “And that goes for me, too.” She looked at her husband. “Dear, I wouldn’t have expected that from you. You managed to surprise me.” She smiled.

“I’m afraid that’s not the only surprise I have for you, Ellen. I have my own confession to make, and it scares me.” Rodney had a troubled look on his face. *Well, I’m not sure this is the right time, but it may be my only chance!*

With a startled expression, Cindy started to rise. “I think maybe I’d better leave you two alone for this.”

“No, Cindy, you can stay. It also concerns you, and Clarence is involved as well.” He took a deep breath. “I owe you an apology, Cindy. I’ve known Clarence could be trusted from the first day we met, and I couldn’t tell you because it involved my own dirty little secret. I could have laid your doubts to rest a long time ago, but I was too much of a coward to do so.

“Ellen, Cindy, I’ve known Clarence could be trusted because he had a secret he could have used to blackmail me, and he didn’t. Instead, he kept my secret, even when he had no personal reason to keep hiding it. Indeed, he helped me keep hiding it, when I was almost discovered. Well, I’m done hiding.

“Cindy, I met Clarence that first day when he got that job.” Cindy’s eyes opened wide at this, and she risked a quick glance at her mother. She was startled to see only amusement in her mother’s expression. “That’s right; I work at ZZ Studios. I’ve been doing their repair work for four or five years now. I’ve been scared to tell you this, Ellen, because I didn’t want to risk losing you. Can you forgive me? Can either of you forgive me?”

Cindy wordlessly reached out and took her father’s paw, telling him through her grip that she loved him. She felt him flinch as her mother started speaking, and silently reassured him with a squeeze of her paw. “Rodney, there’s no need to ask my

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forgiveness. I've known almost from the start where you were getting extra work, and I trust you, too."

"What? How did... When... How?"

Ellen's laugh drew a startled glance from her daughter. "Dear, when you brought those cameras home to be fixed, did it ever occur to you that the serial number plates *have the studio's address on them?* That, and a phone book, and I knew exactly where those cameras came from!"

Rodney's smile had a distinctly sheepish quality to it. "Guess I never was smart enough to fool you for long, huh? Do you want me to quit?"

Ellen smiled warmly at her husband. "Not unless you want to. Like I said, I trust you. I will want to come by and see where you work sometime, though. Just out of curiosity... *and* to let those actresses know you're already taken!" She grinned at his indignant expression. "Besides which, I know they aren't bad people. I mean, you work there, Sabrina works – *worked!* – there, Clarence works there... I'm curious how many other people work there that may turn out to be good people to know."

"Well," said Rodney, "give me a little bit to make arrangements. I'll have to let them know it's okay to contact me by phone, now, too. Hm... It's a little early to tell, but we may have a Christmas party invitation this year..."