

Sisters Still

(c) 2004 by Galadrion. All rights reserved. Sabrina, Amy, Tabitha, and Timothy Woofe-Squirrel (c) Eric Schwartz. Chris Foxx, Alan Foxx, Robin and Jeremy Collie, Susan Felin, and Debbye Squirrel, (c) Chris Yost. Thomas Woolfe (c) Michael Higgs. Based on *Tabitha: The Story* written by Chris Yost and James Bruner, and conceived by Mark White.

It was completely dark when the phone rang, some time well after midnight. Two sleeping forms jolted into a semblance of wakefulness. Mumbling with something faintly resembling coherence, the squirrel femme said, “Thomas, get that before it wakes Timothy up.”

Careful to keep his mutterings about the unfairness of being male from reaching his wife’s ears, Thomas Woolfe climbed out of bed and moved carefully in the blackness, trying to find his way out of the bedroom without stumbling over anything. Amy followed his progress with her ears as she looked at the clock. *Not even five o’clock yet. Probably a wrong number.* Out in the living room, she heard Thomas pick up the instrument. “Hello?”

There was a brief pause. *Okay, it’s not a wrong number,* Amy thought. *He’d have said something by now.* She started to get a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach, one which had nothing to do with the chill which was invading the apartment from the snowstorm outside. Before she could add anything to the thought, she heard her husband’s voice again. “Endora, I...” He choked off momentarily. “Oh, God, I don’t know what to say. Yes, I’ll tell her. I’ll call her friends, too. I’ll... I’ll do everything I can.”

“I’ll call you back when we’ve got something, okay? Geez... Endora, I’m sorry. I’m so terribly, terribly sorry. If there’s anything I can do...”

“Yeah, I’ll be okay. Eventually. I’ll talk to you in a couple of hours, okay? ‘Bye.” Amy heard the sound of the telephone being replaced on its cradle, and Thomas coming back to the room. “Amy... uh...”

She sat up and turned on her bedside lamp, causing them both to blink but at least allowing him to find his way back to the bed. His eyes had a haunted look, one she didn’t like. “What is it, Thomas?” she asked. “Why was Sabrina’s mom calling? What’s wrong?” The chill had hardened into a definite thread of fear, and his shell-shocked expression wasn’t doing anything to dispel it.

Thomas sat heavily on the bed, narrowly missing her feet – she jerked them out of the way at the last instant. “Oh, God,” he said, a lost look on his face. “I... I...” Slowly, but with an unstoppable, implacable energy, his head slumped forward as he began folding at the waist. At the last moment, he brought his paws up and cradled his face, a sob tearing its way from behind clenched teeth.

Without even noticing the intervening split-seconds, Amy found herself seated next to him, her arms draped around his shoulders, pulling him to her chest. He barely noticed, through the heaving, silent cries which were being wrung from him. Her mind felt frozen, unable to imagine – no, *unwilling* – what could have broken him this way. Words just wouldn't come to her.

“Oh, *God*,” he choked out, and she could *feel* the effort it cost him to even say that much. He seemed to take strength from the exclamation, though, and began to force himself to breathe. “Amy... I...” He took another deep breath, forcing himself upright and circling her waist with his arms. “I... I've never had to do anything like this before. I'm... I'm *so* sorry.”

He pulled her in for a tight hug, startling a squeak out of her, and held her for a long time. She could feel tears, dripping from his muzzle onto the top of her head. “What *is* it?” she asked. “You're frightening me, Thomas.”

He inhaled deeply, and she could feel his arms loosen. “That was Endora on the phone,” he said. “There's... there's been an accident.” Once more, Amy felt that chill take a hold on her spine, and she burrowed in closer to his chest. “Sabrina's car was hit last night, by an eighteen-wheeler. I'm sorry, Amy. She's dead.”

She crumpled against him, too shocked to breathe for a moment. “No. No, she *can't* be. No!” It was a tight, pain-filled whisper, rather than the full-powered scream she felt trying to burst forth. “No, no, no. *Why?*”

“Amy, I...” The words tangled up in his mouth, choking off what he needed to say. He pulled her in close for another long, rocking embrace, while she continued her protest. “I know she was like a sister to you – I love her too.”

From against his chest, Amy mumbled. “*Why*, God? Why? Why *her*? Sabrina...” Suddenly, she stiffened, and Thomas relaxed his grip, allowing her to sit up straighter. “*Chris!* What's this going to do to him?” She looked up at her husband. “We're going to have to go to him, Thomas.”

He nodded. “I know. I...” The phone shrilled again, cutting him off in mid-thought.

Before he could even move, his wife was out of his arms and rushing to answer it. “Hello? Yes, Endora just called. No, we haven't thought that far ahead – you're right. Yes, I'm going. He's going to need us – *all* of us. Well, get them over here – we'll leave as soon as possible. Yeah – thanks, Susan.” Hanging up the phone, Amy turned back to where Thomas was standing in the bedroom doorway. “That was Susan,” she said. “The Clique is going to be going to Eau Claire as soon as we can – they're going to be coming by here. Get Timmy up and dressed for me – I'm going to start packing.”

Thomas nodded, his eyes understanding. “You and Timmy ride up with them – I’ll come along later.” Amy paused, preparing to say something, and he continued. “I don’t think it would be a good idea for Tabitha or Endora to be making that drive right now. I’ll take our car and bring them.” Amy nodded and hugged him.

“Thomas; I don’t think it would be wise for Timothy to go with that cold of his,” as she slipped past him into the bedroom. With a sigh, Thomas replied, “Yeah, maybe you’re right. You can leave him at my parent’s house; it’s not much out of your way. I’ll call them and let them know what’s going on.” With that he turned away to go get Timothy awake and dressed.

A short time later – but long enough for several more phone calls, including a conference call arranged by Lee between the three remaining Clique members and Amy – the apartment seemed to be full to the bursting point; Susan, Debbye, and Cindy were all there helping Amy to get the last of the necessary packing finished. Glancing at the clock, Thomas made a quick decision. *Six-thirty is late enough, under these circumstances. I can call.* He made his way over to the phone and dialed Sabrina’s mother’s number.

“Endora?” he asked when the connection went through.

The slightly hoarse voice on the other end answered, “No, it’s Tabitha. Thomas?”

“It’s me. Look, Tabitha... I don’t think it’s a good idea for you or your mother to drive to Pennsylvania right now.”

A watery chuckle interrupted him. “It’d definitely be a bad idea for me to drive that far – I don’t have that much practice in bad conditions. And the way Mom is right now... well, you can imagine. I think you’re right.”

Thomas nodded, momentarily forgetting that Tabitha couldn’t see him. “Well, Amy’s taking Timmy and headed over there with the Clique. They’ll also be dropping Timothy off with my parents. If you can wait a little bit, I’ll be over in about half an hour and I can drive you.”

There was a brief snuffle on the other end, and then Tabitha said, “All right. I think I can talk Mom into that – and you’re right: we aren’t in any shape for that trip. Thanks, Thomas.”

“No problem,” he replied. *She’s not in real good shape, herself. It’s not like her to repeat herself that way.* “Give me about half an hour to an hour, and I’ll be by to pick you up. Are you packed yet?”

“Mostly. Mom’s not in any shape to do that, but it’s something to keep me busy. I’ll let her know, and then finish up here. I’ll see you then.” The sound of the connection

breaking echoed in the pawset, and Thomas sighed as he placed the pawset on the receiver.

Amy's voice came from behind him. "We're just about ready," she said, placing her paws on his shoulders and giving them a light squeeze. "I guess I'll see you in about four hours."

"More like five or six," he replied, covering her paw with his own. Turning around, he took in the sight of the four femmes, Cindy leading a half-asleep Timothy, the other three carrying bags. "Be careful, okay? Don't take any chances." The look in his eyes was pleading.

Susan nodded, her own expression reflecting her understanding. "You too," the lioness said. "We'll just get everything packed in Debbye's car and get Timothy settled in." The three friends trooped out of the apartment, and Amy came to Thomas's arms.

"I packed for you, too," she told him, "so you don't have to worry about that. All you need to do is get dressed and go pick them up. Don't forget to let your parents know we're on the way." She hugged him tightly, all too aware of the way fate could strike at any time.

He nodded. "Get going. I'll see you this afternoon." Gently, he wiped away the remains of the tears which still stained the fur around her eyes. "I love you, Amy." She pulled him into another hug, not trusting her voice, but telling him without words how she felt, as well.

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The Crown Victoria was traveling smoothly despite the icy conditions, well into the second shift of driving. After their first pit-stop, Debbye had given up the driver's seat to Susan and opted to share the back seat with Cindy and Amy – all three were feeling the effects of shock and their early morning, and quickly drifted off into various degrees of dozing. Timmy, feeling a little surprised at this development, was riding in the passenger seat next to Susan. She glanced over at him, taking in his subdued manner, and broke the silence. "Hey, kiddo, how're you holding up?"

"I'm okay," he replied. "A bit bored, though. Where are we going?" The somber mood seemed to have transmitted itself to him, and he kept his voice low, not loud enough to disturb the three women in the back of the car.

"We're going to Pennsylvania, to see your Uncle Chris and Alan," she told him, "but with that cold of yours we'll be dropping you off at your Grandpa Woolfe's." still scanning the road ahead for anything that could be treacherous. Fortunately, the early hour and the icy roads had combined to keep anyone who could avoid driving off the roads. Even the big rigs which would normally be the bulk of the traffic were mostly absent, and slow-moving where they *were* present.

“And Aunt Sabrina, too?” Timmy asked, catching the omission with an eleven-year-old’s uncanny knack for detail.

A sudden lump formed in Susan’s throat. “Not this time, kiddo,” she said, sighing heavily to avoid breaking down into tears. “There... there was an accident last night, and... Sabrina was in it.” She couldn’t continue, and the car rolled in silence for a brief time.

“Is... is she hurt bad?” Timmy finally asked. He was old enough now to realize that life wasn’t all like the movies, where people climbed out of wrecked cars unhurt.

Again, Susan sighed. “She died in the hospital, Timmy. That’s why we’re going to Eau Claire. Chris is going to need a lot of help to get through this.”

There was another pause as Timothy took in this information – Susan risked a quick glance away from the road, and saw his sad expression. “Alan’s going to need someone, too,” he said. “I wish I didn’t have it. I could have taken care of him, so you and Mom and the others could help Uncle Chris.”

Susan felt another tear working its way down her muzzle, but she forced herself to smile around the lump in her throat as she reached over and tousled his hair. “Thanks, Timmy,” she said when she felt she could trust her voice again. “There should be plenty of us there.” *Especially since I don’t know what sort of shape we’ll all be in*, she thought. “And hey, he won’t be alone, either. Tabitha’s coming up later with your Dad, and the Collie boys will probably be there too. He’ll have some time to visit with them as well.”

“I guess,” he answered. *Well, that’s fair*, Susan thought. *Tabitha’s seventeen, and the boys are getting up there too – really to old for him to think of them as playmates. Still, they’ll at least be able to talk to each other.*