

Final Farewell

BY DAVID NEFF



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Part 1

Half an hour later, Doctor Krank was walking down the hall and spied Chris still sitting in the almost empty waiting room, holding Alan in his arms. Alan had cried himself to sleep and Chris had that thousand-yard stare, oblivious to all that was going on around him. The doctor had seen this more times than he cared to remember, a young husband or wife in shock after being told of the death of their spouse or loved one. He walked up to Chris and gently put a paw on his shoulder.

“Mister Foxx!!” Then he shook it gently, “Mister Foxx!!” Chris blinked and looked around, then looked up at the doctor, “Mister Foxx, would you please come with me to my office? I have some forms I have to give you, and you need to pick up your wife's personal effects as well.”

“Ummm, OK,” said Chris in a small faraway voice. The doctor then took him by the arm and helped him up leading him down the hall to the administration area. Once inside the office he led Chris to a chair near his desk, sat him down, then went to his own side of the desk and sat down, starting to go through papers in a file folder.

Chris just sat there quietly holding his sleeping son and nuzzling the top of his head with his muzzle, the doctor looked up and tried to get Chris' attention, “Mr. Foxx!!! Mr. Foxx!! Can you hear me, Mr. Foxx?!”

The third time sort of brought Chris back to reality, he looked over to the doctor, and tears welling in his eyes, trembling, he could ask the one question that had been running through his mind for the past half hour.

“WHY?!!!! Why doc?! Why did she have to die? Whyyyyy?” His voice trailed away as he lowered his head and started sobbing louder.

Doctor Krank looked down for a moment at the papers on his desk, then stood up, moved his chair over to where Chris was, sat down next to him, put his paw on Chris' shoulder and in his best fatherly manner said, “Chris... four times this week someone sat in that chair, and asked me that same question. “Why did my mother die?” or husband, or son, or brother. And it's a question I can't answer sometimes. Yes, I'm a doctor, I'm trained to save lives and I try to do it as best as I can, but the body is a funny thing, we can have a person come into the ER all torn up and missing body parts; we patch them up and they live. Then someone may come in with a bump on the head and they die.” Doctor Krank paused for a moment as Chris looked at him. He then went on... “As for your wife, the trauma to her body was just too great; like I told you when you came in, she was lucky to have survived the accident for that long; I am so sorry son, but there was nothing we could do.”

Chris just looked at the doctor and still not fully understanding what he was being told said in a whisper, “I want my wife... I want my Sabrina. Alan wants his mommy. We need to take her home.”

Doctor Krank breathed a heavy sigh, reached over, ran a paw over Alan's head and ruffed his hair as he slept, then asked Chris if there was anyone he could call, a friend, a family member, anyone.

Chris thought for a moment before replying, "I don't know anyone here in Grove City but I can call Dexter."

"Give me his number," the doctor said, "I'll call him."

Dexter's head had just hit the pillow, and he gave the clock on the night stand one last look before turning off the light, good!!! 9:15pm, *an early night he thought*, he switched off the lamp, turned to Angel to kiss her goodnight and tried to snuggle into his pillow when...

Ringggggggggg!!! It made them both jump, Dex grumbled to himself and fumbled to turn the lamp back on, and grabbed the phone, "Hello!" he said, not sounding too happy.

"Is this Dexter Collie?" asked the voice at the other end of the line.

"Yes it is." said Dexter, "and who is this calling at this time of night?"

Doctor Krank went on to identify himself and inform Dexter that Chris and Alan were there at the hospital. Dexter's first thought was Chris and Alan were hurt. "What's wrong, are they ok?" Dexter shouted into the phone, Doctor Krank told him they were ok but had come there because Sabrina had been in a bad auto accident, and had been brought there to the ER.

"OH MY GOD!!! Is she ok?"

Angel hearing just one side of the conversation sat up and said, "Dex! Who is it? Who's hurt?"

Dexter raised his free paw to his muzzle and went Shhhhhhhh! Trying to hear what the doctor was saying, Doctor Krank went on to say that Sabrina's injuries were too severe and that she had passed away a little over an hour ago. Dexter's face went white, and he dropped the phone, scrambling to pick it up he said, "Doc, could you hold on for a moment?" and then held the phone to his chest and with tears in his eyes, he turned to Angel and told her what had just transpired on the phone.

"NOOOOOO!" she cried, "that poor boy, and his son, what are they going to do?!!!"

"Well let me finish." Dexter said, as he brought phone, "Sorry Doc, but I had to talk to the wife."

Dexter and the doctor talked for another five minutes, then he hung up the telephone and sat there for a moment to let it all sink in, he then looked over to angel who was sobbing into her pillow and he reached over and brushed the tears off of her cheek.

“Dear” he said, “there’s something we need to do. Go get the boys up and tell them to get dressed. The doctor asked if we would come over to Grove City to get Chris and Alan and drive them home, so while you’re doing that, I need to make another call.”

“To who?” Angel asked.

“I need to call Lester Otter, the doctor asked if I would call a funeral home to help Chris make arrangements for Sabrina.”

Angel reached over to Dexter and took his paw in hers, pulled him over to her and kissed him on the cheek, saying, “Let’s go get Chris and Alan.” With that she got out of bed to get the boys up and ready.

Dexter reached over to the nightstand for the phone book, fanned through the pages till he found the number of the Otter Family Funeral Home and made the call.

Part 2.

The Otter Family Funeral Home had been serving the tri-county area for the past 75 years; it was run by Lester Otter and his brood, Danny, Bob, Ross, Terry, Nancy, eldest son Larry, and wife Ester; all were well trained in serving the needs of grieving families.

Since death waited for no one, the funeral home phones were manned 24/7. Danny Otter was on the desk that night; Terry and Larry were in the prep room working on a recent arrival. Danny had a small television tuned in to the all news channel, and the news was not good. The weather fur was talking about more snow on the way, adding to the problems of the storm that had come through earlier in the day.

The phone beeped once, and Danny was on it, "Otter Family Funeral Home. Danny Otter speaking. How can I help you?" he said in his best professional voice.

"Hi Danny! Dexter Collie here."

"Hi Mister Collie! What can I do for you?"

"Is your brother Larry in? I need to speak to him if I could."

"Yes he is; he's in the prep room. Hang on and I'll page him for you."

"Thanks Danny." He put Dexter on hold and poked a paw at the intercom. "Larry ...you there?"

"Yes", came a voice that sounded like it came from the bottom of a tin can.

"It's Dexter Collie on line one, he wants to talk to you."

"OK, tell him I'll be right out."

Danny punched the hold button and told Dexter that Larry would be out in a moment.

"Say how are the boys doing?" Danny asked.

"Well they're in the local college now so they can still live at home and save some money on the dorm and food." Dex said, "in fact just last week they both said they were going to try for the baseball team. All those years with you as their coach really gave them the bug."

Larry came out of the prep room rolling down his sleeves, walked over to the desk and pulled up a chair to the side and sat down, "Ahh, Mister Collie; here's Larry."

"Dexter! You old dog. What are you doing up at this time of night?" (Dexter and Larry had gone to high school together.)

"How have you been Larry? Not doing bad myself." Dexter said, and then went into the sad events of the evening.

As Dexter talked, Larry picked up a pen and started to jot down information on a fill - in - the - blank type form, “and that name is S.A.B.R.I.N.A?”

“Yes,” said Dex.

“And the last name is F.O.X.X. and she is over at the Grove City Hospital now?”

At that Danny got up, went over to the coat rack, put on his winter coat, picked a set of keys out of the key box by the door and went outside to warm up one of the black SUV's that were parked in the back.

“Is there any thing else, Dex?” Larry asked.

“Nothing that I can think of right now.” Dexter answered.

“OK, I’m going to send Danny and Terry over to Grove City, to bring Mrs. Foxx back here. You’ll need to keep Mr. Foxx there so he can sign the release for us to pick up his wife and start arrangements for her; also make sure he has the papers from the doctor.”

“I don't think that will be a problem.” Dexter said, “The wife and I are on our way out to get him now; thanks Larry, I owe you one!!!!”

“Hey!” Larry said, “That’s what we’re here for. Just bring Mr. Foxx by tomorrow, to get with dad, so we can get plans rolling.”

“Of course I will.” Dex said.

“Oh and Dex!”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t be a stranger.”

“OK.”

“OK!”

“Bye.”

The drive from Eau Clair to Grove City normally takes about 20 minutes in good weather but tonight was a bit different. The roads were already bad from the last snow and it was snowing again at a fair clip. Angel was no help either, grabbing Dexter's arm every time she saw an accident, or warning him about impending doom at every turn of the icy road. Jeremy and Robin, in the back, were subdued by the news of Sabrina’s death and the constant reminders of just how bad driving conditions were, cars stuck in ditches, accidents, and police everywhere.

It was one and a half hours, and 3 pit stops later, when they pulled into the hospital parking lot.

Doctor Krank had moved Chris and Alan to the back of the hospital, to a waiting room by the receiving dock; Alan was awake and sitting with a feline intern who was showing Alan how the stethoscope worked; letting him listen to his own heart beat. Chris was sitting next to them, hunched over with his face in his paws, un-moving, staring at the floor, when Alan looked up, and saw Dexter and Angel coming down the hall.

“Aunt Angel!!!” Alan cried, running pell-mell up the hall; almost knocking Angel over as he hugged her leg.

“Alan! Come’re you!!” Said Angel as she kneeled down and gave him a big kiss; he then threw his arms around her neck, buried his head into her shoulder, and started crying.

“Awwww that’s OK Alan, that’s OK.” as she patted him on the back.

Dexter kneeled down next to them and ran his paw over Alan’s head and asked, “Alan, where's your daddy? Where is he, son?”

Alan pulled back a bit from Angel, with one paw rubbing his eye and the other pointing across the room, “sniff - he's over there - sniff - he won’t talk - sniff - I want to go home - sniff - I want mommy.” He then went back into Angel's shoulder and began crying again.

Dexter stood up and looked over to the end of the waiting room, as the intern made his way over to them, he explained to Dexter that the doctor had moved Chris and Alan there and he was to keep an eye on them till some one came.

“I guess that’s you,” the intern said as he handed Dexter a file folder, showed him the contents; Sabrina's death certificate, police reports, and hospital reports, and if that was everything, then he was going to go.

Dex thanked him and he was gone.

Angel was still on her knees, comforting Alan, when Dexter came back to them; across the room he could see his boys had found vending machines and were busy looking at stuff to eat. He went back to Angel and Alan, pulled some bills from his pocket, and, offering Angel a paw up, said, “Go over and get me two coffees, black nothing in ‘em; oh; and Alan, would you like some hot chocolate?”

“ummmm hmmm.” Alan said, holding tight to Angel's coat

“And get him some hot chocolate too.” Angel took the money in one paw and Alan in the other, leading him away.

Dexter turned and looked over to Chris, thinking to himself; *Chris; now what are we going to do with you?*

Chris sat there with his face in his paws, trying to run the events of the night through his mind, but it wasn’t working; it was like making a phone call, and getting the busy signal. *Who was going to take care of them? There was no one to help; no one cared.*

Then there was a voice, “Hey! Do you come here often?”, and a light thump on his shoulder.

“Go away!!” Chris said.

“Nope, I don’t think I’m going anywhere.” the voice said, followed by another thump on his shoulder.

“LOOK!” Said Chris, still not moving his face from his paws, “If you touch me one more time, I’m gonna knock you into next week!”

“Well, I’ve always wanted to go to next week,” the voice said and there was another thump.

“That’s it!” Chris said as he sat up balling his paws into fists and turning to face his tormenter, “I’m going to ...” and the look of anger in his face melted to surprise, “DEXTER!!!! Jeezzzz! Dexter! When did you get here?”, as he threw his arms around the collie pulling him off his chair. But Dex was a bit heavy, Chris lost his balance and they both fell to the floor, knocking over the magazine table in the process.

“Oh God! Dexter what am I going to do?!” Chris sobbed, hugging Dex tighter.

“Chris!! Hey, Chris! Come on Chris, let me up, your hurting me!!!”

Chris was hearing none of this; he just sobbed into Dexter's coat, babbling on about Sabrina.

“Chris!! Please let me up.” wined Dexter, as he tried to loosen Chris' grip around him.

“Hey! What are you two doing?” Said a voice from above, Dexter squinted and looked up, trying to free himself from the grieving fox's grasp, and there were Angel and the boys watching in amusement.

“Ah, don’t just stand there. Put the coffee down and help me get up, here.”

Angel looked for a place to put the coffee, but had to give it to Jeremy since the table was knocked askew. She reached down and pulled on Chris' arm, to help free Dexter, who got up and dusted himself off. Then he and Angel got Chris to sit up, and with one of them on each arm, helped Chris up and over to a chair. Angel turned to the boys and told them to pick up the table and scattered magazines, then she went over to Chris, pulled a chair in front of him, and sat down. Starting to go through her purse to find tissues, she looked over to Dexter and asked him to take the boys off for a walk.

“Where shall we go?” Dexter asked. He knew the boys didn’t need watching anymore at their age and this was just an excuse to have some time alone with Chris.

“Just take ‘em outside for a while, till I get Chris cleaned up, OK?”

Dexter looked down at Alan, “Say Alan, you wanna go outside and see the snow.”

“Are we going to go home soon?” Alan asked.

“Yes, in a little bit, but Aunt Angel is going to clean up your daddy first.”

“OK,” said Alan and held up a paw for Dexter to take.

“Hey guys, let’s go outside for a while, OK?”

Jeremy and Robin looked at each other, understanding in their eyes, “Sure dad,” they replied.

Dexter turned and smiled at Angel; then leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, “Be back in a few,” he said.

“Take your time,” she said. Angel watched as Dexter went toward the rear exit with Alan in tow, and then turned her attentions to Chris.

“Boy! You’re a mess!” she said. With one paw, Angel reached over, gently raised Chris' chin, and started to wipe the soaked and matted fur around his face and nose.

Chris looked over at her, “I’m sorry Angel,” he whispered.

“Hey! No need to be sorry, it happens to the best of us,” she softly replied.

“But I tried to get here as quick as I could and…”

“Shhhhhh, no talking; let me get this done,” Angel said, she picked up one of the cups of coffee and placed it in Chris' paws.

“Now drink this, and drink it all.” Chris took a sip and made a face. “DRINK IT!” Angel commanded.

Reluctantly, Chris drained the cup, and as soon as he brought it down, Angel snatched it from his paw and gave him the second cup. “Drink this one too.”

“Angel!!! Pleezzzzz!!!!”

“I SAID DRINK!”

So to make her happy, Chris slammed the second cup. “YUCCCKKKK! You could have at least put some cream and sugar in it.” Chris said, making a face again.

“Nothing like black coffee, to bring a fox out of a deep funk,” she then reached over and took both of Chris' paws in hers, and started to massage them.

“Now, I want you to relax,” she said, “close your eyes, and breathe deeply.” Chris gave her a puzzled look. “CHRIS!!!! Close your eyes!” he did and started to breathe with Angel.

It was about 20 minutes later when Dexter came in with Terry and Danny Otter. They had just pulled up outside and Dexter greeted them in the parking lot. As they came into the waiting room, Dexter couldn't believe his eyes. There was Chris sitting up, in a conversation with Angel; he was still sad looking but not like before.

"Hey! He's alive!" Dexter said, as he walked up to them.

Chris looked up and cried, "Dexter," as he got up and came toward him. Dexter threw his arms up and backed up a step.

"Whoa! Now!" Dexter exclaimed.

"Dexter, it's OK; it's not going to be like the last time." Chris replied as he put his arms around his friend.

Smiling, Dexter pushed Chris back to arms length, turned his head, cocked an eye and looked at Chris from the side. "What did Angel do to you?" he asked in a suspicious voice.

"Dex, I don't know, she made me drink lots of coffee, rubbed my paws, had me close my eyes, made me breathe a lot, and talked to me; when she was done I felt better." Chris answered.

"Well, she's done that to me a few times too." Dexter said, "Whenever I'm feeling bad, or can't sleep."

"And it works doesn't it!" Angel stated as she walked up to them.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah" said Dexter, as he let go of Chris and put an arm around Angel, giving her a peck on the cheek.

"Where are the boys?" she asked.

"They're outside in the back parking lot, making a snow rabbit and I need you to go out and keep an eye on them. Please?" Dexter said, using the same ploy Angel had earlier, "Oh, and you know the Otter boys, don't you, Terry and Danny?"

"Yes I do." she said as she shook their paws, "Hello boys." She continued, "Sorry I can't stay, got kids to watch." She turned to gather her coat up and came back over to Chris and Dexter, "OK I'm going. How much longer are we staying?" she asked.

"I don't think much longer," Dexter said, "We'll leave as soon as we are done here."

"OK." Angel said. She walked to the door and they watched her leave.

Dexter turned to Chris, "We need to sit down. Do you know Terry and Danny Otter?"

Chris shook their paws, "I know Danny here; he's Alan's T ball coach." Chris said.

“When Doctor Krank called earlier this evening,” Dexter went on as they sat down, “he asked me to come over here to take you home, and if I would call a funeral director. So I called the Otter Family Funeral Home; our family has called on them from time to time and they were always there in our time of need. I hope you don’t mind? They’re right down the street from work.”

“Naa! That’s OK.” Chris replied and turned to Danny, who was sitting on the other side of him, “What do I need to do?”

Danny Otter opened a metal clipboard and looked at a form, then turned to Chris; “Mr. Foxx, Terry and I represent The Otter Family Funeral Home. Mr. Collie called us to come here and help start arrangements for your wife. Now, I know you did not call us and it might not be your wish to use our services. If that’s the case, we will get you in touch with another funeral home that can help with your needs.”

“That’s OK,” Chris said quietly, “go on.”

Danny continued, “Now Mr. Foxx, we at the Otter Family Funeral Home, offer our sincere condolences on the passing of your wife, the arrangements we make for her will be of your own wishes and we will not attempt to sell you anything that you don’t want, in the end all choices will be yours and we never turn any one away because of their inability to pay. Do you understand Mr. Foxx?”

“Yes.” Chris said quietly.

“Now did the doctor or the hospital give you any forms?” Danny asked.

Chris looked up and then pointed to the chair he was sitting in earlier. “They’re under the chair, in the folder.”

Dexter got up, retrieved the folder, and gave it to Danny, who opened it and checked the contents. Pulling out the death certificate, he closed the file.

“OK Mr. Foxx, we will give this back to you in a few days. We need it for our records. Now there’s one more item we need to take care of.” Danny said, “We need you to sign a permission form allowing the hospital to release your wife to us so we can transport her back to our facility in Eau Clair. Then we can begin preparations.” Danny placed the metal clipboard on Chris' lap and a pen in his paw. “All you need to do is sign here by the x.”

Chris looked down, read the form till he came to Sabrina’s name typed there, and froze. Tears started to well up in his eyes again and a single tear rolled down his muzzle to splash on the page he was reading.

Dexter, sensing something wrong, placed his paw on Chris' shoulder and spoke quietly in his ear. “It’s OK Chris, I’m here, go ahead and do it; this needs to be done.”

“I know.” Chris whispered as he looked down at the form. With a deep breath and a sigh, he signed the form, closed the clipboard, and handed it back to Danny Otter.

“Thank you Mr. Foxx,” said Danny as he reached into his coat pocket for a business card and handed it to Chris. “Some time this morning you need to come over to our facility and see my father, Lester Otter, to begin arrangements for your wife's funeral. Now do you have any questions, Mr. Foxx?”

Chris looked at the card, then over to Dexter, “I guess not.” he said. With that, Danny stood up and Chris and Dexter followed. Danny extended his paw to Chris and continued, “Mr. Foxx, once again our condolences on the passing of your wife and if, at any time, you have a question or need, please feel free to give us a call, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.” Chris took his paw, and thanked him.

Danny then turned to Dexter, shook his paw as well, and thanked him for calling. With a wave of his paw, he and Terry were off down the hall.

Chris turned to Dexter, “God, Dex, that was the hardest thing I've ever had to do.” Chris said sadly as he sat back down.

“I don't think so,” Dexter said, “you still have tomorrow with all the funeral arrangements and final choices you have to make for Sabrina. What you did now was easy compared to what's in store for the next few days. Now, I'm going to ask you this; did you call anyone yet? Like friends? Or family? Her mother?”

“No one.” Chris said sadly. “I don't know where to start.”

“Well let's call her mother.” Dexter said, “You know her number?”

“Yes,” said Chris as he looked around, “let's go find a phone.”

There was a bank of pay phones over by the vending machines and there, Chris fed some bills into the change maker and picked up the coins in his paw. He stepped over to the pay phone, took it off the hook, and punched in the number.

He got the automated response that told him how much money to pay, and he fed the coins into the slot. Then got the automated thank you and the phone rang, Dexter moved in close and could hear the ringing, the click, and then the muffled hello.

“Hel - Hello,” Chris Stammered, “Endora?”

“Yes! Who's this?”

“It's Chris.”

“Chris! Why are you calling now?”

Chris let out a heavy sigh, “I'm over at the Grove City Hospital.”

“What's wrong? Are you OK?”

“Oh I’m fine, Alan's OK ...but ...It’s Sabrina,” he paused for a moment, “she's been in an accident.” His voice broke up.

Dexter could now hear Sabrina's mom firing questions at Chris, who was sobbing again; he caught his breath, and as slow as he could, trying to keep his composure, gave her the news, “She's gone mom. She’s dead; the doctors couldn’t save her.” Dexter could hear a wail of grief on the other end of the phone. Chris lost control and was crying again, so Dexter took the phone.

The pebble was thrown into the pond; the ripple effect had begun.

The drive back to Eau Clair was mostly uneventful; the only traffic on the road at this hour was snowplows and cinder trucks while the news on the radio was about the snowstorm and all the closings and cancellations.

Dexter had Angel following in Chris' car with the boys while he had Chris, who was not in much of a talking mood, in his car. After the call to Sabrina's mother, Dexter had needed to go outside and get Angel to sooth Chris all over again.

Chris sat there on the passenger side; his head leaning against the glass, his breath steaming it. From time to time he would look down at the plastic hospital bag on his lap, which held Sabrina's personal effects, and he would touch it with his paws, heave a heavy sigh, and lean his head back on the glass staring into the dark once more.

Dexter looked at the clock on his dash when they pulled into the driveway of Chris' house; 5:40am it read. “Well Chris, we're here,” announced Dexter. Chris had dosed off, so Dexter reached over and shook Chris' leg with his paw, “Hey!! We're here.”

Chris sat up, went into a stretch, yawned, and then looked over to Dexter, “Thanks, Dex” he said, “I know I've been a pain, but I appreciate what you’re doing for me. I really do.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Dexter replied. “I know you would have done the same thing for me if circumstances were reversed.” They sat there in the car, taking in the quiet of the moment, until they heard Angel in the other car rousting the sleeping boys.

“Let’s go in and make some coffee.” Chris suggested.

“Yeah, let’s.” Dexter sighed. Both got out of the car and went over to help Angel with the boys.

Once inside Dexter's boys headed over to the couch while Chris, carrying a sleeping Alan, put him on the sofa next to them where he promptly fell over to the side, still sleeping.

Angel took off her coat and took Dexter's; then hung them on the coat rack by the door and announced she was off to the kitchen to make coffee.

“Coffee’s in the cupboard above the microwave.” Chris called as he went across the room to check the answering machine, Dexter followed him over and they saw the message light was flashing.

Chris pushed the first button with his paw, and got the automated reply, "YOU HAVE 5 MESSAGES. BEEEEPPPP!!!" Chris looked sadly at Dexter and said, "Here goes.", but before he could press the play button, the phone rang, startling both of them, and Chris picked it up.

"Uh, hello." he said quietly

"Chris!! That you?"

Chris sat down in the easy chair that was next to the phone, he knew the voice, but had to think a moment; it was Thomas Woolfe.

"Yeah, Thomas. I just walked in the door."

He heard Thomas sigh as he tried to find the right thing to say. "Well Sabrina's mom called. Then Susan, Cindy and Debbye; then everybody called everybody else here to see if they had heard the news." Thomas said, "But I have to tell you this, Amy is in the bedroom, running around like a chicken with its head cut off, and packing a bag. It looks like the Clique is coming and Amy is going with them as soon as they get here."

Chris was going to say something when he heard Amy start talking to Thomas.

"Is that Chris on the phone? GIMMIE!" There was the noise of the phone being snatched from Thomas. "OH CHRIS I'M SO SORRY! OH GOD! WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO? DON'T DO NOTHING! JUST STAY THERE! WE'RE COMING! IS ALAN OK? HOW ARE YOU GONNA EAT?" Amy cried hysterically while yelling into the phone at the same time.

Chris sorta squinted and held the phone away from his ear; then looked at Dexter, who could hear her as clear as a bell from where he sat. Pointing to the phone he mouthed, "it's Amy."

Dexter just smiled and shook his head.

"AND WHO'S GONNA CLEAN THE HOUSE, AND TAKE CARE OF YOU..."

Ding Dongggg!

"Oh jeezzz! They're here," Amy yelled as she dropped the phone. "Commmingggg!" Chris heard her say; followed by sounds of her running towards the door.

Chris could hear Thomas pick up the phone. "Say Chris! You still there?"

"Yeah, I think so," he replied.

"Hey I'm gonna hang up here before they all get over here to the phone and start a mess. Oh! One more thing; Endora asked me to drive her and Tabitha over later in the day. Alright?"

"Yeah, that's fine Thomas, we'll be here"

“OK, we’ll talk when I get there,” click and the phone went dead.

Chris put the phone down, sat back in the easy chair, and looked up to the ceiling

“What was that all about?” Dexter asked,

“Looks like a batch of femmes are on their way here from Ohio. That was Thomas, Amy's husband; he says Sabrina's friends, Susan, Cindy and Debbye, were on their way over to his house to pick up Amy and then drive here, and they just got there. That’s why Thomas hung up.”

Dexter chuckled, “Gonna check the calls on the machine?” He asked.

“Naaaa! Chris sighed, it’s probably all of them calling and crying and I don’t need that now.”

Chris stood up and stretched, “Dex, I’m going to put Alan to bed. Have Angel save me a cup of coffee, OK?”

“Sure thing, Chris.” replied Dexter as he got up and went into the kitchen to see how the coffee was coming.

Over at the sofa, Chris scooped his sleeping son into his arms and carried him off, down the hall to his room. Once in Alan’s room Chris sat Alan on the edge of the bed and, holding him with one paw, to keep him from falling over, he tried to get Alan out of his coat with the other; successful after several tries. Picking Alan up again he pulled back the bed covers, and laid his son down, covering him up. Chris looked down at his son in the dark, *God! He has his mother’s looks*, he thought, and bent over to kiss him on the forehead. He turned to walk out of the room when he heard a small voice behind him.

“Dad?”

Chris turned and could see a pair of eyes staring back at him.

“Yes, son?” Chris answered.

“Sniff - is momma with the Angels?”

Chris walked back to the bed and got down on his knees, he reached out with a paw and caressed his son’s head, “I hope so, son.”

“Are they gonna take her to the cembtery?” – sniff – “And put her in a box?” – sniff.

“Now who told you that?”

Sniff – “My friends at school.” - sniff – “They say when you die, they come,” - sniff – “they come , and put you in a box , and take you to the cembtery and then put you in the ground.” - sniff – “And then the worms come and get yooouu!” – sniff- Alan let loose with a howl. Chris remained there on his knees for a moment more; then tried to get into the bed with his son.

The bed was almost too small but he succeeded by laying on his side, knees scrunched up. He pulled his weeping son over to him and hugged him tight, as tears started to well up in his own eyes.

"I want mommy!" Alan bawled.

"I know son. I know. I want her too," whispered Chris, now weeping along with Alan. They lay there in the dark, crying; both wishing for something that was gone forever. Sabrina.

But time was merciful, and sleep took them.

"Where's Chris?" asked Angel as she looked up from her coffee.

"He took Alan to bed a little while ago." Dexter said, as he listened to the messages on the answering machine, Chris was right, he thought, the first 4 messages were unintelligible, and all women crying. One was crying and had the hiccups, couldn't talk and then hung up, but the fifth caller, a female as well, sounding sad and tired, spoke calmly and to the point. It was Zig Zag wanting to talk to Chris. She'd left her number and said she would call back.

"Dexter, go check on Chris. OK?" Angel yelled from the kitchen.

"Yes dear," said Dexter as he got up and went down the hall.

A few minutes later he came back into the kitchen, and reached out his paw to Angel, "Come here, and look at this," he said as he helped Angel up and led her down the hall and into Alan's room.

"Awww! The poor boys," whispered Angel as she saw the sleeping pair. "Shhhhhhh, let them sleep." She whispered, "He's gonna need it." Dexter nodded and took Angel by the paw leading her out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Once in the living room he told Angel he was going to take the boys home and try to get a little sleep. Then come back later in the day, to take Chris over to the Otter's.

"Come on boys! Robin, Jeremy, let's get up now. Up, up, up!" Dexter called as he started poking at his sons.

"Mmmuphh, daaad!"

"Stop!"

"Let's go boys! We're going to the house; your mom's staying here to keep an eye on Alan and Chris." He pointed the boys to the door and stopped to give Angel a hug and a kiss, "Be back soon, OK?"

"I'll keep an eye on things here." she promised and kissed him back. Dexter followed the boys out the door and Angel closed it behind them, she watched them go off the porch, and one of

Part 3

The ringing phone startled Angel from her sleep. She sat in Chris' easy chair looking blankly around the room, until she realized the phone was ringing.

"Hello?"

"Hi Hon, it's me," she heard her husband say. "Did I wake you?"

"Yes, you did. I guess I dozed off," Angel said as she looked at her watch; it was about 9:15 am.

"I called work and passed the news about Sabrina."

"How did they take it?"

"Disbelief, shock... (BEEEEEP) Huh? What was that?" asked Dexter.

Angel thought for a moment and then exclaimed, "Oh! I guess Chris has call waiting! Hold on and let me check." She clicked the hang up button, and put the phone back up to her ear.

"Hello?" she asked.

"Yes! Mr. Chris Foxx please, this is Lester Otter of the Otter Family Funeral Home calling,"

"Hi Lester, this is Angel Collie. Chris is sleeping now. Can I help you?"

Lester broke from his professional demeanor, to a more personal one. "Hello, Mrs. Collie, and, yes, you can. When it's convenient, Mr. Foxx needs to come over to make arrangements for his wife and sign some papers. Also, if you can, please help him go through his wife's things for a nice dress. Alternatively, he can pick one from the selection we have here."

"Of course, Lester, I'll do that," Angel replied. "Dexter will be here soon; he'll bring Chris over then. OK?"

"That will be fine, Mrs. Collie. I'll talk to him then. Thank you, and goodbye."

"Bye, Lester," she said. She poked the receiver button, and said, "Dexter, are you there?"

"Yes, dear!"

"That was Lester Otter. He says he's ready for Chris." Angel felt a tug on her dress, and looked down to see Alan. "And Alan is awake," she said.

"OK Angel, I'll be over in a few. When I get there, I'll get Chris cleaned up and take him over to the Otter's."

"All right, and I'll get Alan some breakfast," Angel said as she smiled down at Alan.

Angel hung up the phone and arose from the easy chair. She placed both of her paws on Alan's shoulders and fixed him with a cheerful grin. "Now, what can we get you for breakfast young man?"

Alan looked past her, pointed a paw to the kitchen, and said, "I want Captain Wizbang's."

"Huh?" asked Angel. "What's a Captain Wizbang?" He took her by the paw, and padded off to the kitchen. Once there, he pointed up to one of the cabinets and said, "In there."

Opening the cabinet, Angel found three boxes of cereal. She pulled out the first one and showed it to Alan, "Is it this one?" she asked.

"Naaaa! That's Wheat Flakes, Dad's stuff," Alan laughed.

She pulled out the second box. "This one?" she asked.

"Nope! That's Corn Crunchies, and I don't like them," he said, wrinkling his muzzle.

Angel held out the third box. "So I guess this is the one?" she asked, with a grin.

"Yes!" Alan cried. "Gimmee, gimmee!"

Angel read the front of the box. 'Captain Wizbang's Chocopuffs Space Food!' 'Chock Full of Vitamins and Minerals!' 'What Every Growing Fur Needs!'

Hmmmm, and as much sugar as your dentist can deal with, Angel thought. "OK, Alan, lets get a bowl and some milk for you." Looking at the dish rack, she found a clean bowl and spoon and gave them to Alan. As he carried them over to the kitchen table, she searched the refrigerator for milk.

"Would you like some orange juice too, Alan?" Angel asked.

"Uh huh." By now Alan had taken his seat at the table poured his cereal and was awaiting the milk and juice. In just a few moments, Alan was happily crunching away, and reading about the adventures of Captain Wizbang and his Space Fur Rangers.

There was a knock at the door. Angel checked once more to be sure Alan was set for breakfast, and then turned to see who the visitor was. As she crossed the living room, she saw Chris coming down the hall. He was rubbing the sleep from his eyes and looking very unkempt since he had slept in his clothes. She waited by the door, until she had Chris' attention, and motioned to him to sit down on the couch. She opened the door to find a young rabbit with a beautiful bouquet of red carnations.

"Delivery for Mr. Foxx," he said.

"Oh! How lovely," Angel said as she took the flowers. She signed the pad the young rabbit held out to her and brought the flowers over to the coffee table and sat them down in front of Chris.

Chris looked up at Angel. “Who are they from?” he asked.

“Hmmm... let’s see,” she replied, as she looked the bouquet over. She found the card in a plastic holder and gave it to Chris. Opening the envelope, he found a small card with ‘Sympathy’ printed on the cover. Inside he found a paw written message, which he read aloud to Angel.

Dear Chris!
I am so sorry about your wife Sabrina,
Please accept my condolences,
If there is anything I can do,
You know where you can find me.

Wendy Vixen

Chris sighed, and put the card down on the table

“Oh! I nearly forgot!” Angel exclaimed. “You need to go get cleaned up! Dexter is on his way to take you over to Otter’s.” She reached over and took Chris by the paw and helped him get up. “You need to go get a shower, and change clothes now,” she said firmly.

“OK! OK! I’m going,” Chris said as he started toward the hallway. “Could you please make me some coffee, and some of those toaster pastry thingies? You’ll find them in the fridge.”

“Will do,” Angel replied, as she went into the kitchen.

Chris stopped outside his bedroom door and hesitated. He knew what waited inside. Taking a deep breath, he put his paw on the doorknob and opened the door.

There in the dimly lit room, Chris looked over to the bed that Sabrina had made yesterday morning. At the foot of the bed lay her blue nightshirt, folded neatly, just where she had left it. Next to the bed was the vanity where all of Sabrina's combs, brushes, and makeup were kept. Her closet door was open, just how she had left it yesterday.

The whole room screamed of Sabrina. Chris’ eyes bounced from one object to another and could see her touch on everything. He could smell her scent on the curtains, on her clothes, and on the bed they had shared for so many years... Slowly he sat down on the edge of the bed where he reached over, picked up her blue nightshirt, and, with both paws, brought it up to his muzzle. Inhaling deeply, he started to weep into it. *Why? Why her, dear God? Why my Sabrina?*

Chris didn’t know how long he sat there crying. He suddenly realized someone was sitting on the bed next to him when he felt a paw on his shoulder. He looked up to see Dexter.

“Chris! We have to stop meeting like this,” he said.

Chris tried to smile weakly and wiped his eyes with the shirt. “I’m sorry, Dex,” he said. “I just couldn't help it. I walked in here, and it just hit me.”

“No apologies necessary,” Dexter said. “This is going to happen again and again. As this draws out, you’re going to feel bad, you’re going to feel loss, and you’re going to cry. It’s normal, it’s part of the process of grieving.”

Chris was still wiping his eyes with the shirt.

“But now I need you to get cleaned up, because Lester’s waiting. So, go get a shower. Oh, and Sabrina's friends are here now too.”

“Ah jeez! Dex, when did they get here?”

“Just a little while ago,” Dexter said. “All four of them, they’re out in the kitchen now, making a fuss over Alan.”

Chris just looked down at the floor and shook his head slowly. He took a deep breath, and then looked at his friend. “Well, Dex,” he said quietly, “let’s go do this.”

#####

Alan sat in Amy's lap at the kitchen table, enjoying being the center of attention. Just a little while ago, the four femmes appeared at the door and had been talking about him ever since.

“He has his mother’s eyes,” Cindy said.

“He has his mother’s fur,” declared Amy as she fluffed his black and white foxtail.

Susan reached over and touched his muzzle with her paw. “He has Sabrina's face,” she said softly.

“And his mother’s markings,” chimed in Debbye. “He’s almost a duplicate of her, but with his father's ears and muzzle.”

“Yes, he sure is,” said Amy, as she reached up with both paws and tickled Alan's ears, making him wiggle and laugh.

Dexter walked into the kitchen, and all eyes turned on him. Angel got up from the table and went over to him; putting her arm around her husband, she asked how Chris was.

Dexter was quiet for a moment as he looked at all the furs in the kitchen. “He was crying again when I found him,” he said; there was a chorus of ‘awwws’ from around the table, “but now he's in the shower. He should be out soon.”

Dexter looked around the kitchen; he saw more flowers had arrived, and were starting to fill the counters in the kitchen. “Any phone calls, Angel?” he asked.

Cindy picked up a pad and passed it over to Angel. “There were seven calls, so far,” she said, “and Zig Zag called again, says she wants to talk to Chris. She also asked what funeral home she could send flowers too. I told her Otter’s.”

“That’s good,” Dexter said. “Amy, you said your husband was going to bring Sabrina's mother and sister some time today, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Thomas is going to call when he leaves there, and he hasn't called yet.”

Susan stood up, and asked Dexter to take her chair. Chivalry fought, and lost, to exhaustion, so he went over and sat down. He patted her paw gratefully.

“Coffee dear?” asked Angel.

“Thanks, that would be great,” he said. He took the cup she offered and sipped it. He gave an appreciative sigh as he tried to relax.

Debbye, who had been twisting a tear-soaked tissue in her paws, looked up and asked, “Mr. Collie, what happened yesterday?”

Dexter took another sip of coffee, and sat back in his chair; he could feel eight pairs of eyes on him, looking, begging, and pleading for answers.

Taking a slow breath, Dexter started to explain what he knew. “While Sabrina was driving home yesterday, she apparently slowed down when the snow suddenly got heavy; a driver in a truck behind her lost control on the ice and hit Sabrina's car, crushing it. She was rushed to the hospital over in Grove City, and Chris was called. Chris and Alan got to see her for a few minutes, and then she went into cardiac arrest...”

“And the doctors tried to fix mommy!” Alan blurted out.

Amy, who was still holding Alan, turned her head to look at him, “Did you get to see your mommy, Alan?”

“Uh huh,” he said. “Dad took me in where mommy was, she had tubes in her mouth, and couldn’t talk. Dad was talking to her...” He stopped for a moment, and then went on. “Then her heart stopped, and the doctors came, and there was lots of noise, and I was scared.” Amy hugged the young todd tightly, but didn’t say anything.

Alan then looked up. “Hi dad!”

All heads turned to see Chris come into the kitchen. “Hi, son.”

Susan was the first to reach him, since she was standing. She threw her arms around him, buried her head in his shoulder, and started weeping. Between sobs, she kept telling him how sorry she was. Chris just patted her on the back with his paw, quietly telling her it was OK. Debbye and Cindy then got up and came over to join them; Amy just sat there holding Alan, resting her chin on his head.

Chris didn't know what to do, at first, with three crying femmes holding on to him.

“OK, OK now, please, I need to go. Dex, some help here?” he pleaded. Dexter got out of his chair and gently began to peel them off of Chris, one by one.

“I want to thank you all for coming,” Chris stated. “It’s good you’re here to help me get through this, but right now I have to go and do some things for Sabrina. When I get back, we’ll talk,” he finished, fighting back his own tears. They nodded and went back to the table.

“Alan! Son, come here!”

Alan got out of Amy's lap and padded over to his father, who reached down and picked the boy up. “Alan,” he said, “you’re the man of the house until I get back, so make sure everyone behaves here, OK?”

“OK dad!” Alan reached around his dad’s neck and hugged him. Chris kissed him on the cheek and put his son down, who scurried back towards Amy.

Angel started to speak, paused a moment, and then went on. “Chris, when Mr. Otter called a while ago, he asked if we could bring something nice to dress Sabrina in. Is there anything you have in mind?”

Chris thought for a moment, and sighed, “Angel, I just can't go back in...our room right now. I wouldn't know what to pick, honestly I wouldn't.”

“I have something,” Amy said quietly, almost in a whisper. “I brought it just in case.” She lowered Alan to the floor, got up and went into the living room. There was a pile of suitcases, on the top of which was a black garment bag. Picking it up with both paws, she brought it back to Chris. Holding the hanger end up with one paw, she unzipped the bag with the other, revealing a white cotton summer dress. The dress had white lace at the neck and sleeves, and was embroidered all over with white flowers.

“Sabrina used to borrow this all the time, when she would go out,” said Amy, now with tears flowing. “Please take it... for her... please,” she whispered raggedly.

Chris reached out with a paw and touched the dress. *Yes! He had seen it before! Sabrina had worn it on a date from time to time, and had looked stunningly beautiful when he saw her in it for the first time.* The girls gathered closer to examine it; even Angel reached out to touch it.

“Chris, it’s beautiful!” she said softly. “This is perfect, take it.” Not saying a word, Chris zipped up the bag and took it from Amy. He folded it over his arm, gave Amy a silent hug, and stepped back.

“Yes, Sabrina will love this, I know she will. Thank you, Amy,” he said as tears began to flow down his cheeks. He turned to Dexter and, with as much control as he could muster, said, “Let’s go, Dex.” Without waiting, he headed to the door and went outside to the car.

Dexter turned to Angel, and squeezed her paw. “Be back soon, dear,” he said, and trailed Chris outside. The girls followed them as far as the porch and watched them drive away. They hurried back inside where it was warm, in time to hear the phone ringing again.

#####

The Otter Family Funeral Home was just two blocks away from the building where Chris and Sabrina worked. Chris had never given it much thought; had never considered that he might ever go in there. Today, however, he found himself inside the funeral home, sitting across a conference table from Lester Otter. They were discussing what type of service would be held for Sabrina. Chris had decided on an early afternoon viewing, with a three o'clock service, followed by a sunset interment. Just making these decisions had stretched his emotions nearly to the breaking point. It was a relief when a middle-aged fur came into the office with a tray of coffee.

"Gentlefurs, this is my wife, Esther," Mr. Otter said, as Chris and Dexter both stood up.

"Dear, you know Dexter Collie?"

"Yes, I do," she said, as she took Dexter's paw. "And how'er Angel and the boys?" she asked.

"Angel's fine, and the boys are big and still growing – they're going out for their college's baseball team," Dexter replied.

"And this is Mr. Foxx," Lester continued.

Esther turned to face Chris, and took both of his paws into hers. "Mr. Foxx," she said, with genuine sympathy in her voice, "I am so sorry about the passing of your wife. If there is anything you need or want, just let us know, and it's yours."

"Thank you," Chris said. He tried to smile, but the tears in his eyes made it hard to see.

Esther saw the garment bag folded over the back of Chris' chair. Touching it with a paw, she asked, "Is this for your wife?"

"Yes, it is," Chris answered quietly.

Esther reached over, picked it up by the hanger, and, with her free paw, partially unzipped the bag to see the dress inside.

"My! This is lovely," she said. "This will complement your wife beautifully." Esther then reached over to the table for a tissue, and gave it to Chris. "Mr. Foxx, your eyes," she said kindly.

"Sorry," Chris whispered.

"No need to be sorry, Mr. Foxx. If you feel like crying, you just let loose. Lester, I'll page you in a few and let you know when Mr. Foxx can see his wife."

"I... I can see Sabrina?" Chris asked, his eyes lighting up.

“Of course you can, Mr. Foxx. As soon as we can get her dressed, Lester will bring you to the repose room.”

“The repose room, what's that?” Chris asked.

“Well, it’s a room set aside for the immediate members of the family. Where they can view our work, and see if any changes need to be made for their loved one. It’s like a bedroom,” Mrs. Otter explained. “Lester, when you’re done with Mr. Foxx here, bring him to the room, please.”

“Fine, Dear, I will,” he said,

“Mr. Foxx, I’ll see you in a bit.” As she turned to leave, she smiled at Dexter, and said, “And please say ‘hi’ to Angel for me, would you?”

“I will,” Dexter promised, and she left the room.

The three furs sat back down, and Lester waited for Chris to regain his composure. Then he continued where he left off. “Now Mr. Foxx, we were talking about a place of internment.” He opened a three-ring binder and pushed it toward Chris. “This is Wood Lawn Cemetery, and it’s just a few minutes outside of town. It has easy access to all the cemetery sections, gardens and the new chapel as well.”

Chris turned the pages slowly, looking at the photos. Then a picture at the top of the page caught his eye, and the memories came flooding back. This looked just like the spot where he had proposed to Sabrina! Tapping the photo with his paw, he looked up at Lester and asked, “This place here, where is it?”

Lester reached over and turned the binder so he could see, “Hmmm! That looks like one of the memorial gardens there at Wood Lawn,” Lester replied. “Would you like a plot at that site?”

“I want that spot,” Chris said. “Right there in front of the benches, in the trees.”

“OK Mr. Foxx, I’ll call over there now, and see if it’s available.” Lester got up with the binder and went over to his desk to place the call, while Chris and Dexter watched from across the office.

“Walt? Hi, Lester Otter here. I have a client who has a question about Wood Lawn. Do you have your binder there? Good, go to page twelve... see the one with the benches? Yes, that one, do you have plots there? Sure, I’ll hold on.” Lester took a sip of his coffee, which reminded Chris of the cooling cup before him. He took a gulp, as the elder otter began speaking again. “OK! You do! Now, Walt, my client wants to know if the plot in front of the benches is open? Yes, among the trees...yes...yes...hold a twin plot... Sure! Thanks, Walt, I’ll get back to you... bye!”

Lester hung up the phone and came back over to the table. “Mr. Foxx, the plot is yours if you want it. Would you like a single or twin plot?” Chris looked over to Dexter for help.

“I would get the twin plot,” Dexter advised softly, “because when your time comes, you can be put beside Sabrina forever.”

Chris did not need to think long before making a decision. “Yes,” he said. “The twin plot and at that spot. Right?”

“Yes,” Lester replied, as he scribbled on his pad. When he finished, he looked up, took off his glasses and laid them on the table. “Mr. Foxx,” he said gently, “we are now going to go to the casket selection room, where you will pick out a casket for your wife. Once there, I will make no recommendations on any casket. Whatever you choose will be your choice and yours alone. You are doing this for your wife. Do you have any questions?”

Seeing there were none, he stood up and said, “Please follow me.”

Chris and Dexter stood and began to follow the otter out of the office. At the doorway, Chris stopped, frozen in his tracks. He had a ‘deer in the headlights’ look on his face.

Dexter eyed him with concern. “Chris, you OK?”

“Dex, I don’t know. I don’t want to go in there. I’ve never done this before,” said Chris, sounding frightened. “NO! I can’t!” He covered his face with his paws, crying again.

Lester, who had opened the door to the other room, turned to see Dexter trying to comfort Chris. With a sympathetic sigh, he crossed over to a water cooler by his desk, and filled a paper cup. He brought it over to where Chris was. “Here, Mr. Foxx, take this.”

“No! I don’t want to go in there!” he cried, still holding his paws over his eyes.

“It’s OK, Mr. Foxx. Please take the water.” With a trembling paw, Chris took the proffered cup.

“(Sniff) Thank you,” he whispered.

“Now drink,” ordered Lester. Chris took a tiny sip. “Drink it all, now,” Lester said in a fatherly manner. Chris tipped the cup and finished the water. It was cold, and in a way it did make him feel better, but he still did not want to go into the casket selection room.

“I wanna see Sabrina... (sniff)... I want to see her now... Please! Take me to her,” Chris pleaded. He reached out and took Lester by the paw. “Please!”

“Of course, Mr. Foxx, let me check with my wife first,” Lester said as he tried to pry Chris' paw from his. *The fox has a good grip*, he thought, as he went over to his desk. Lester picked up the phone, and punched in a number.

“Hi dear, is everything ready with Mrs. Foxx? Um hmmm, yes, we’re on our way now. Is that all right? Good.” He hung up, and came back over to Chris and Dexter.

“Esther says she’s ready for you now, Mr. Foxx. Just come with me, please.”

They walked down the hall; Lester Otter stopped at a door labeled “Repose Room,” and knocked lightly. “Come in,” they heard a female voice say. Lester opened the door, and stepped aside to allow Chris and Dexter inside.

Inside, the room was dark except the center, which was lit from the ceiling by tracked lighting. It was focused on an elegant four-poster bed. Chris let his eyes adjust to the dark, and then saw Sabrina resting on the bed. Mrs. Otter stood next to her, smoothing out Sabrina's dress. On the other side of the bed was another female otter, who was brushing Sabrina's tail and fluffing her fur.

Chris froze at the door, and sucked in his breath. He didn't know if he could get any closer. Esther straightened up and turned to face them.

“Hello, Mr. Foxx. Please come over here.” She motioned for him to come over by the bed.

Chris didn't move, couldn't move. Esther Otter came over to him, took him by the paw, and began to lead him over to the bed. “No, please...” he whimpered.

“Sssshhhhhh, that's all right, come with me,” she said gently.

“But...”

Esther nodded to her husband, and he left, closing the door behind him. “Now, Mr. Foxx, I want you to come with me,” and again she gently tried to get Chris to come over to the bed. Slowly he followed, step by step, until he was right by the bed.

The other female otter had just lain Sabrina's tail down and to the side and then left the room without saying a word. Esther then patted the bed with her paw. “You can sit here, Mr. Foxx.”

“On the bed?” he asked in a choked voice.

“Yes, you can sit there. It won't hurt her.”

Chris sat down on the edge of the bed, afraid to touch his beloved Sabrina. Esther started to lead Dexter out of the room, to allow Chris a few moments of privacy. The terrified look Chris shot them made Dexter pause.

“Do you want me to stay, buddy?” he asked. Chris nodded wordlessly, his eyes wide.

Esther didn't even blink at his request. “Mr. Collie,” she said, “why don't you take one of those chairs by the wall? They are nice and comfy and out-of-the-way.”

Dexter looked around and saw several chairs in the area that Mrs. Otter indicated. He sat down in the one closest to Chris, but out of his direct line-of-sight.

Esther then went over to the dresser in the back of the room and picked up a tissue box. She brought it over and set it by Chris, who would not take his eyes off of Sabrina. “Now, Mr. Foxx,

I'm going to leave you alone in here for a while," she said quietly. "When you're done, you need to go back to Lester's office, OK?"

Chris didn't appear to hear her, so she turned to Dexter and whispered in his ear, "Give him about fifteen minutes, then take him back to the office, please." Dexter nodded in acknowledgement, and Esther left the room.

She looks beautiful, Chris thought, trying to look at her through teary eyes. *Amy was right! The dress is perfect for Sabrina.* It looked like she was sleeping, and that at any moment would just sit up and give him that smile of hers, but he knew it was not to be.

He reached over and took Sabrina's right paw into his and held it up to the side of his face.

"(Sniff)... Hello kitten," he whispered. "I... had to come see you... (sniff)... Alan is OK... I guess he's taking this better than I am. All your friends are here, and your mom is coming soon..." Chris stopped and put Sabrina's paw down. He bent closer and stroked the hair around her left ear. He began to weep silently, his tears falling on her face.

Dexter, now getting caught up with emotion, pulled a pawkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his eyes. *God!* he thought, *what would happen if I lost Angel?* He shuddered, closed his eyes, and shook his head to drive the thought from his mind. The two friends sat quietly, lost in their private thoughts.

After a while, Dexter checked his watch. *Better get Chris back to Lester's office*, he thought, and got up with a sigh. He walked over to Chris, and stood behind him for a moment. Finally, he put a paw on Chris' shoulder.

"Chris... we better go."

Chris sat unmoving; he just stared into the face of his beloved, still stroking her hair.

"Chris!" he said again, this time gently shaking him.

Chris straightened up, and looked up at his friend. "I know, Dex," he said, sniffing. Chris turned to look at his wife once more. Reaching over, he ran his paw through the soft fur of her tail.

"She's beautiful. Isn't she?" Chris asked, his voice trembling.

"Yes, she is," Dex replied softly. Chris then picked up Sabrina's tail, brought it up to his chest, and hugged it tightly. Then, ever so gently, he laid it back down at her side. Bending over, he kissed Sabrina on the forehead, and then whispered into her ear.

"I love you Kitten, forever and always. I'll be back." He stood up and turned to face Dexter. "Dex, I need to go outside and get some air."

"Yeah, me too," said Dexter, dabbing at his eyes again.

As Chris got to the door, he turned for one last look at Sabrina. He sighed sadly, and went out into the hall. Dexter closed the door and the two friends went outside.

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A while later, they were back in the hallway outside the Casket Selection Room; Chris still faced with the problem of selecting a coffin for Sabrina. Lester opened the door, and bid them to enter. The room was well lit and very wide, with many caskets arranged tastefully in the room. Mr. Otter stood in the middle of the room, and then turned to Chris. “To the right side of the room are the metal caskets; to the left, wooden ones; and across on the center wall are urns if one wished cremation. In each casket there is a card on a pillow. Once you choose a casket, bring its card to me, and I’ll take care of the rest.” Lester then left the room, leaving Chris and Dexter alone.

The two friends stood uncomfortably in the middle of the room. Finally, Dexter cleared his throat. “Ahem... Whadaya think Chris?”

“I don’t know Dex. How will I know which one to choose?”

Dexter reached out with his paw, and touched Chris on the chest. “Your choice should come from here. What would Sabrina want? What would please her?”

“Yeah, I know Dex,” Chris sighed heavily. At that, Chris and Dexter split up. Chris went to the right, and Dexter to the left.

Chris stopped at each casket, sometimes to touch the outside, or to reach in to feel the silk liner. He came almost all the way back to the center of the room when he paused. He went back several caskets, stopping at a simple white one with gold trim and a pink interior. He reached for the card that was on the pillow. ‘Forever at Rest’ was the name printed on it. *So sad*, he thought. *Here is something I have to buy, use once, and then bury forever.* His eyes grew misty again.

Rubbing his eyes to clear them, he looked down the room to see Dexter talking to Lester by the door. He looked down at the card, then at the casket again. Sighing, he went over to where Lester and Dexter were.

“Ah, Mr. Foxx! Have you made a choice?”

“Yes,” said Chris, sadly, and passed Lester the card. The otter looked at it, nodded to himself, and asked Chris if there was anything else he needed. Unable to trust his voice, he shook his head no. They silently followed Lester back into his office, where he bid them to sit down.

After glancing at the accumulated forms, Lester looked up. “Mr. Foxx, let’s go over this list one more time, shall we? Visitation will begin at 2 o’clock pm, with services starting one hour later. Correct?”

Chris nodded his head in acknowledgement.

“At 5:00 pm we will retire to Wood Lawn for final interment with the Reverend Al Bear giving the eulogy.”

Chris nodded his head again. Suddenly, the phone rang.

“One moment, please,” Lester said as he reached for the phone. “Yes dear... Un hum... very good. Thank you dear!” He hung up, and then turned back to Chris.

“My wife says Mrs. Collie just called. Sabrina’s mother arrived at your house, and she’s on her way here now. She should be here in a few minutes,” he explained.

“That’s OK,” said Chris, dully.

Lester passed a typewritten paper to Chris. “This is for the local paper. If you and Sabrina’s mother approve it, we’ll send it over to their office today.”

Chris read the obituary. It contained a short history of Sabrina’s life, where she worked, and listed the surviving members of her family. When he was done reading it, Chris passed the page, now sporting a few wet spots from fallen tears, back over to the director, “It’s OK,” he said, after drawing a ragged breath.

Lester took the obituary back without comment. He passed several large forms over to Chris, and indicated where he needed to sign.

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Otter popped her head in. Lester waved a paw for her to come in. She opened the door and behind her was Endora, Sabrina’s mom. Chris stood up when he saw her, and walked woodenly over to her.

“Oh, Chris!” were the only words she could say as he embraced her.

“It’s OK, Mom,” he whispered hoarsely back to her.

She looked up at him. “Can I see her?” she asked, her voice wavering.

Chris looked over to Esther. “Can she go see Sabrina?”

Esther smiled and nodded, and took Endora by the arm. “Yes, of course you can. Please come with me.” She guided the grieving mother back to the hallway. Chris followed them to the door and watched them go down the hall to the Repose Room.

“Chris?” he heard a quiet voice from behind him. He turned, and there in the hall was Amy, Thomas, and the remaining members of the Clique.

Chris turned back and called to Mrs. Otter. When she looked back at him, Chris waved a paw and pointed to the group of femmes behind him. “Can they come, too?”

Esther smiled, and waved her paw for everyone to join her and Sabrina’s mom. “Certainly! Everybody come on in,” she said.

As Amy passed Chris, she took both of Chris' paws in hers. "Thank you," she whispered.

Chris sadly smiled and nodded. Amy went down the hall. As they each passed, Cindy, Debbye, and Susan stopped and hugged Chris. Esther waited till all were there, and then let them into the Repose Room.

Thomas had stayed back with Chris, and waited until they had gone inside. He turned to Chris. "How are you holding up?" he asked.

"Not good! Not good at all... I just... I just never thought this would ever happen." Thomas could see the pain in his eyes. "I mean... it's so unfair... One minute she's here, and then..." Chris looked longingly down to the room where Sabrina was. "And the next... she's gone!"

Thomas could see Chris was trying hard to fight the tears, but was losing the battle.

"I need to go back in to see Mr. Otter. You wanna come inside?" he asked.

"Nah! I'll just wait for the girls out in the lobby. By the way the insurance carrier of the trucking company, the one whose truck hit Sabrina's car, called. They want you to give them a call as soon as you can. I wrote the number on the pad by your phone."

"OK, thanks. I'll be out soon." Chris turned and went back into the office.

Back in with Mr. Otter, Chris went over a few more details about the service. Once done, Mr. Otter put the papers in a folder and looked up at Chris.

"Mr. Foxx... Once again my condolences on the passing of your wife. I know the next few days are going to be quite hard on you. If you need anything, don't hesitate to call me." He reached into his vest pocket, and pulled out a business card, which he gave to Chris. "It has my home, office and pager numbers. Call me anytime."

He stood up and came around his desk. Chris and Dexter rose as well. Taking Chris's paw into his own, Lester thanked him for choosing his facility for his needs.

"Now, if you will come with me, I have one more thing you need to see." Lester led Chris and Dexter out to the lobby area. They passed where Thomas was waiting, and then walked down another hall. Lester stopped before a room with a large double door, then entered and turned on the lights.

"This is the visitation room," he began. "On the day after tomorrow, everyone will come here for the visitation, followed by the final service. From here, we'll go to Wood Lawn for the interment." Chris looked around, to see many chairs arranged nicely into rows. "As you can see, flowers have already started to arrive. My daughter Nancy has started to arrange them."

Chris could see there were about 10 bouquets of flowers along the wall, and one large blanket of white roses on a special tripod. Chris went over to inspect it.

“What is this?” he asked the funeral director.

Mr. Otter came over to where Chris was standing. “This is a casket spray,” he replied. “It will be placed on the casket when we move to the cemetery. Let’s see who it’s from.” Lester searched the arrangement for a card; once he found it, he gave it to Chris.

‘Sabrina Foxx’ was written on the envelope. Chris opened it; the card read simply, “With sympathy, Zig Zag and James.”

“She shouldn’t have,” Chris said quietly. He returned the card to Lester to read. After reading it, he thought for a moment, then turned to Chris.

“Isn’t she the…”

“Yes, the one and the same.” Chris interrupted him. “Sabrina designed her web site.”

“I see,” Lester replied.

Dexter wandered over to where they were. “From Zig, huh?” he asked. Chris nodded wordlessly. “Nice!” he said awkwardly.

Danny Otter appeared in the doorway, looking for his father. Seeing the elder otter, he went over, whispered in his ear, and then he left.

“Gentlefurs, I have some other matters I must attend to at this time,” Lester said. “When you are finished here, you can see your way out.” Lester then shook paws with Chris and Dexter and followed his son out.

Chris sighed. “Dex, let’s go home. I have a ton of stuff I need to do.”

Back in the lobby, they found Thomas, who was still waiting for the girls. He told Chris that he would stay and bring them back to the house. Chris thanked him and then stepped outside. Out in the parking lot, Chris looked about for a moment. The sky was overcast, and looking like snow again.

“You OK?” asked Dexter.

“Yeah, I guess so, Dex. But you were right.”

“How’s that?”

“The longer this goes on, the harder it gets,” he sighed.

“And today is just the first day,” Dexter replied. “We still have the rest of the week to get through.”

Chris was quiet for the rest of the way to the car. Once there, he turned and put both of his paws on Dexter's shoulders. "Dex, I want to thank you for putting up with me, and helping me through this. You've been a true friend. I just don't know where I'd be without you."

Dexter smiled back at him. "I'd save that thanks 'til later," he said. "This is far from over."

"I know Dex... I know!"

Part 4.

Dexter pulled into Chris' driveway and was suddenly caught in the middle of a snowball fight. Robin and Jeremy had come over to the house and had persuaded Alan to come out as well. The three furs had been amusing themselves by throwing snowballs at each other until the car pulled up; then the missiles were directed at the car.

"Hey!" Dexter yelped as he climbed out of the car. Chris stayed hidden inside, grinning, but it was too late for Dexter. A snowball skittered across the roof of the car and hit him square in the back of the head, spilling snow down the inside of his coat.

"That's it!" Dexter barked as he dove for a pawful of snow. Robin and Jeremy tore off down the street, laughing like maniacs. Dexter chased them to the end of the driveway and stopped, watching the boys high tail it down the street. He heaved his snowball as far as he could, but missed them by a country mile. Dexter stood there for a moment, breathing hard, as the boys capered beyond his apparent range, wagging their tails at him and heckling. He threw his paws in the air, turned and came back up the driveway grumbling to himself, "In college and they still act like a couple of school pups!"

Chris got out of the car, and, even though he was still feeling wrung out from the visit to the funeral home, he had to hold his paw over his muzzle to stifle a chuckle. He felt something cold and wet wrap tightly around his leg. He looked down to see Alan, dressed for outside, but soaking wet.

Chris reached down and picked him up. "Come here, boy!" he laughed. "Look at you!" He ran a paw over the fur on his son's head, wiping off a pawful of snow.

Alan tried to duck from his father's ministrations, but Chris was too fast. "Aw, Dad," he grumbled, but then started grinning. "Didja see our snowball fight?"

Chris chuckled. "No way I could have missed that, bucko." He finished brushing off the young fox, just as Alan wriggled out of his grasp.

Now a safe distance away, Alan remembered something. "Oh, Daddy, Grandma is here," he exclaimed. "Did you see her?"

"Yes, I did. She was just getting to Otter's, as your Uncle Dex and I were leaving."

Alan got quiet, and gave his father a sad look. "Did you see mommy?" he asked.

Chris looked back at his son. Reading his eyes, he knew the todd had many questions, but didn't know how to ask them.

"Yes, I did son," he replied somberly.

"Is... is she OK?"

“I think so. You’ll get to see her soon.”

Dexter stomped up to the two foxes, still trying to get the last of the snow out from under his neck. “Well, now, HERE’S a well-behaved young fur!” he said loudly, glancing down the block where his two still cavorted. “What are you doing out here, Alan?”

“Robin and Jeremy came here, and Aunt Angel made them go out because the video game was making too much noise, ‘n ‘cause Aunt Tab is sleeping, ‘n I came out too, ‘cause I wanted to play...” the young fox explained in one breath.

“And now he’s all wet,” added Chris. Alan giggled.

“Well, son, let’s get you inside and out of those wet clothes.”

“Aww dad! I wanna stay out! Please?”

“No, son, you’ve had enough outside time for now, and I... want... you... IN!” he said as he scooped Alan up in his arms. He carried the giggling and protesting fox up the steps to the porch. Angel opened the door, and let in the three wet furs.

“Thanks, Angel!” Chris said gratefully. He put Alan down, and then started to help his son out of his wet clothes.

Angel went over to Dexter and helped him out of his coat. “Where are the boys?” she asked.

Dexter started laughing. “I think they’re in the next county by now.”

“What?!!”

“One of them hit Dex with a snowball, and he chased after them. Fortunately, he’s slower than they are,” Chris said with a chuckle.

Angel scowled, and pointed a finger at her husband. “Dexter!” she scolded.

“Hon! I just yelled at them, and off they ran.”

Her face changed to a slight smile. “So you got hit, huh?”

“Yeah! And I got snow all down my back,” Dexter said miserably, but with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“You poor baby! Come here and let me warm you up!” she said to him, and she hugged her husband.

Chris was hanging Alan's wet coat and gloves on the rack by the door, when he felt his son tug on his pants leg. He looked down, and saw his son motioning him closer, a sly look on his muzzle. Cautiously, Chris stooped down to eye level.

Alan tiptoed over and, after a mischievous glance at the hugging Collies, whispered in his father's furry ear, "It wasn't Jeremy or Robin that hit Uncle Dexter with the snowball. It was me!"

Chris glanced over at his friends and started chuckling softly. He leaned over and whispered into his son's pointed ear, "I think this better be our little secret, OK?"

Letting her husband go, Angel went into the kitchen. She came back a moment later with a pad of messages for Chris.

"Where's Tab?" he asked.

Angel pointed down the hall. "She's in Alan's room, fast asleep. The poor dear, she was up all night with her mother after you called," she said, and then handed the pad to Chris. "This is a list of those you need to call back. And more flowers arrived while you were gone," she said, gesturing toward the kitchen.

Chris could see there were about 10 vases full of flowers on the counter. He took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly. The playful mood he'd been sharing with his son just moments ago had vanished. He looked down at his son and said, "Alan, please go over to my easy chair and sit there, because we're going to make some calls. OK?"

"Yes, dad," he replied dutifully, and padded off to the living room. Chris then turned to Angel and Dexter.

"Dex, why don't you and Angel go home now and get some rest. I need to use this time to make some calls. If you could, I'd like you to call over to work, and pass on what time services will be."

He walked over to Angel, and gave her a hug. "Angel, you have been a blessing," he told her. "If it hadn't been for you and Dex, I'd still be over in Grove City, acting like a babbling idiot."

Angel blushed. "Now Chris, you and Sabrina are just like family to us."

"I know, Angel. But I still want to let you know how much I appreciate the two of you."

"Are you sure there isn't anything else we can do?" Angel asked as she walked to the rack by the door for her coat.

“No. That’s it for now,” he replied. “I want to have some quiet time with Alan; because when Sabrina’s mother and the crew get back here, it’s going to be a madhouse. So you two should get some rest.”

Chris reached for Angel’s coat to help her put it on. As she turned to button it, Chris kissed her on the side of her muzzle. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you both.” He reached for the door and opened it to let them out.

Angel turned quickly, and waved to Alan. “Bye, Alan.”

He looked up and waved back. “Bye, Aunt Angel!” he yelled as he waved back.

Chris followed them out onto the porch, where he thanked them again. He stood in the cold air and watched them drive off, only to stop after half a block and let two snow-covered pups into the back seat. With a frosty sigh, he went back inside.

In the house, he saw Alan had found the TV remote and was running the gauntlet of channels, trying to find something to watch. Chris padded past him and down the hall to Alan’s room to check on Tabitha. Opening the door quietly, he could see her sleeping soundly on Alan’s bed.

Chris smiled when he thought back to when he first met her. She had been an obnoxious voice on the telephone, listening in and making embarrassing comments on the extension. He remembered winning Tabitha over with a giant plushy at her 6th birthday party. Now she had grown into a rather beautiful young skunkette, but she still had a love for plushies. In fact, she had one in her arms now as she slept.

Chris closed the door, and went back to join his son in the living room. He was avidly watching something noisy on the television. He scooped the young fox out of his easy chair, plopped himself down, and then sat Alan in his lap.

“Hey, sport, what on Earth are you watching?” he asked.

Alan giggled, “Kung Fu Theater, dad!”

Chris took the remote from his son’s paw and turned the volume down. “Let’s keep this at a dull roar for a while,” he said. “I need to make some calls.” Dropping the remote, he reached for the cordless phone that was on the coffee table.

“Who should we call first?” he asked his son. Alan shrugged. “How bout we call Aunt Zig?” asked Chris.

“Yeah!” said Alan happily. “She’s nice, she brings me toys when she comes by.”

Chris punched in the numbers with his left paw, and brought it up to his ear... 1 ring ... 2 rings... Click... “ZZ Studios, how may I help you?” answered a pleasant voice.

“Yes! Is Zig Zag in, please? This is Chris Foxx.”

“One moment, Mr. Foxx. She’s expecting your call.” The hold music came on, but it went off just as fast.

“Chris! Is that you?” an anxious female voice asked.

“Hi Zig! Yeah, it’s me.”

“Are you ok? Is Alan all right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Chris scritchd Alan behind his ears, but the todd ignored him, paying full attention to the badly dubbed action flick. He heard Zig Zag talking to someone in her office, and then she was back on.

“I just cleared my office. Now, I want to know what happened!” So Chris went through the whole story, from the first call, through the drive over to Grove City and the events at the ER, to Dexter coming to get him, and through what occurred today at the Otter’s. When he finished he thought he could hear her crying. Knowing how proud she was, he didn’t comment on it.

“When are the services?” she asked after a moment, her voice still trembling a little.

“The day after tomorrow, visitation is at 2 pm, the service is at 3, and the burial will be at 5 pm.” It was quiet on the phone for a few moments, then he heard her sigh.

“James and I will be there sometime tomorrow. We’ll get a hotel close by.”

“Thanks, Zig. You and James are more than welcome to come.”

“Now, Chris, is there anything I can do for you?”

“Could you call some folks out there, and pass on the time of the services?”

“OK, I can do that. Anything else?”

“Hmm... Not that I can think of. Oh, by the way! Thanks for the flowers; I saw them this morning over at Otter’s. They were so beautiful...you shouldn’t have!”

“Chris! It was the least I could do. Sabrina did a lot for this company, with the web site and her designs on the video boxes. Plus, I really loved her...like a little sister.”

“I know, Zig,” Chris replied warmly.

“So! What are you going to do now?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Zig. This is all happening so fast, I just don’t know. Sabrina’s mom and friends are here now, but that’s just for a few days. After that, it’s just Alan and me.”

“I’m so sorry Chris, I just wish there was more I could do for you. We’ll talk when I get there.”

“OK Zig, I’ll see you and James tomorrow.” He broke the connection, and then turned his attention to Alan. “Aunt Zig will be here tomorrow,” he said. Alan flicked an ear at his father; he was still engrossed with watching furs chopping and kicking at each other.

Chris turned the phone on again and punched in another number. This time it was to Sabrina’s long-time friend and boss, Eric.

Eric took the call with shock and disbelief, and made Chris fill him in on all the details. He jotted down the time and place of the service, and informed Chris that he would try to be there as well.

After returning the call from the insurance company, Chris punched the off button on the cordless and gave an exhausted sigh. Ruffling the fur on his son’s head he scooted out from underneath him, then stood up. “OK son, you can turn the TV back up.”

Alan searched around until he found the remote, and hit the volume.

Chris looked down the hall. Looking at the door to Sabrina’s computer room, he remembered that he had to go online and inform her chat friends. Padding down the hall, he hesitated outside the door to the computer room. Placing his paw on the doorknob, he let out a sad sigh. After a moment to gather his courage, he opened the door and flicked on the light. There in the small room was Sabrina’s computer and her collection of Transformers that lined the walls on shelves. Chris pulled Sabrina’s chair over to the desk and sat down. On her desk, by the keyboard, was a pad and pen; on the pad were notes and doodles, in Sabrina’s pawwriting. This was her inner sanctum; after Chris set up her computer for her, he’d never come in here, until today. Reaching under the desk, he found the power switch and turned the CPU on.

While waiting for the computer to boot up, he sat back in the chair. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply; her scent was strong in here. When he opened his eyes, the screen told him it was ready for use. Pawing the mouse, he clicked on the IRC icon; then chose the chat button. Once that opened, he searched the menu to find the room where Sabrina usually hung out. Finding no one there, he posted a message about her death on the room bulletin board. Then he clicked out of chat and shut the computer down.

In the quiet of the computer room, Chris sat motionlessly. He looked up at the Transformers, his eyes starting to burn with tears again; they stared back down at him, but they never replied to his unspoken questions.

Chris heard a noise from the living room, followed by several voices. Then Alan shouted, “Grandma’s back, Daddy! Grandma’s here!” Wiping his eyes on his shirtsleeve, Chris stood up, and took a last look around at Sabrina’s things. He took a deep breath, to get himself back under control, and walked out to the living room closing the door behind him.

The room was full of furs, all talking, hanging up coats, and hugging Alan. Thomas was the last one to enter, his arms filled with several bags of fast food chicken. “Hey Chris, it ain’t Atomic Chicken Wings and beer but a fox’s gotta eat,” he said with a grin. Motioning towards his car with his head, he added, “There’s one more bag in the back seat.”

Not bothering with a coat, Chris went out to the car to find the last bag of food. The cold air felt good on his fur, and helped brush the cobwebs out of his mind. Back in the house, everyone was in the kitchen, helping set the table. Amy came over to Chris and took the last bag from him.

“Where’s Endora?” he asked.

“Oh, she went to wake Tabitha,” Amy said as he followed her into the kitchen.

Thomas pointed to a chair next to him with a half-eaten chicken wing. “Hey, you better sit now before all the chairs are gone.”

Chris started moving toward the proffered chair when someone grabbed him from behind. He turned to find Tabitha, who had wrapped her arms around him. “Well, hi, sleepy head! You feeling better?” he asked as he returned her hug.

“Hi, Chris,” she said in a tired voice as she leaned on his chest.

Endora, who had followed her in, said, “She stayed up with me the whole time after the call last night, and it’s catching up with her.”

Chris turned Tabitha towards the kitchen. “Come on, Tab, I haven’t had anything to eat all day and my stomach is calling.” Chris slid her into an empty seat, and sat down next to Thomas as the Clique broke out the chicken and mashed potatoes.

Amy reached across the table, and took Chris by the paw. “She was beautiful, Chris!”

“I know,” he replied as he reached into the bucket of chicken. “The dress was perfect. But what kept you all so long?”

Amy smiled sadly. “Well, we went in, and we all looked at Sabrina. We had a good, long cry. As we were coming out, we decided we had to go back in to have one more look, and started crying again. We finally made it to the lobby, and found Thomas asleep. So we woke him up, to drive us home. Then we decided to take Thomas in for a

look.” Chris looked to Thomas, who had a mouth full of chicken. He just nodded his head in agreement. “So we took Thomas back in, and the crying started again. Then Mrs. Otter came in, and saw us all still there. She made us some tea, and we all sat there, talking about Sabrina’s life.”

“And when it was time to go,” Thomas broke in, “the crying started again! I had to herd them all down the hall and into the lobby. All of them wanted to go back in again, but I got them out and packed in the cars. We were driving back here when Endora suggested that we stop for chicken, and here we are,” he explained as he eyed the next piece of chicken he had in his paw.

“So where’s Cousin Timmy?” Alan asked around a mouthful of chicken.

“He’s at my parents’ house,” Thomas replied. “He has a bit of a cold, and we didn’t want to spread it.”

In less than a half hour all the chicken was consumed and Endora took charge by ordering the table cleaned off and paws washed. She supervised the flurry of activity for a moment; then said, “There’s something I need to do.” She went into the living room and searched for her suitcase among the stack piled there. She found hers, popped it open, and grabbed several objects off the top. She returned to the kitchen, carrying an old shoebox and two photo albums. Sitting back down at the table, she opened the shoebox, which was full of old photos. The rest of the group quickly gathered around.

Pulling the first photo out, she looked at it for a moment. “Ahh!” she said as she held it up, “This is Sarge and I just before we were married.”

“I can see where Sabrina got her looks,” Susan said as she took the picture from her.

Pulling out another, “And this is the day we brought Sabrina home from the hospital.”

Amy, seeing the photo of the couple with the tiny skunk baby said, “Aww! She’s so cute.”

The next one was of a tiny Sabrina, peeking over the edge of a bassinet at baby Tabitha. Another was of Sabrina, about 6 years old, standing in a wading pool. Next were photos of elementary school, high school, Sabrina with the Clique, and past boyfriends (Chris tried to quell a feeling of jealousy). More pictures followed: Sabrina at college; more shots with the Clique; graduation; Amy’s wedding; Chris and Sabrina’s wedding, and the birth of Alan.

It went on that way, late into the night, a celebration of Sabrina’s life, with “awww’s”, laughter and tears.

The next day was a whirlwind of events, as Sabrina’s obituary appeared in the morning paper. All day, Chris dealt with phone calls and the arrival of cards and flowers, as well

as neighbors and friends stopping by to pay their condolences. Around noon, Zig Zag and James showed up. They spent about two hours with Chris before going off to their hotel.

Endora dispatched the Clique off to the store to get cookies, cake mix, and refreshments. When the girls returned, the kitchen was transformed into a bakery. The oven heated up, baking pans were filled with batter, and of course Alan supervised the cleaning of the mixing bowls and spoons. Dexter and Angel stopped in, and the cake was sampled. Alan's fur was a sticky mess from helping clean up the batter, so Endora decided to give him a bath. He was last seen being led down the hall, protesting.

"Well Chris, what are your plans for tomorrow?" Dexter asked.

"I guess I'm gonna have to play it by ear, Dex. I know I'm going to go early and take Alan to spend some time with his mom. After things get started, I won't have much time to spend with him."

Angel came in from the kitchen; where she had been helping the girls ice the cake.

"You ready to go?" she asked.

Dexter stood up. "Yeah, I guess so."

Chris helped them with their coats, and walked outside with them. Bidding them a good night he watched them drive off. A light snow was falling. Standing there in the cold he knew he had something to do. Going back in, he stuck his head into the kitchen and told Thomas and the girls he was going for a drive, and would be back soon.

Five minutes later, Chris found himself pulling into the driveway of the Otter Family Funeral Home. Looking at the clock on the dash, it read 9:30 pm. It looked like they were closed, but Chris drove around to the back. The back door was lit and all the office lights were on. Parking his car, he got out, and went up to the door. There was a sign by the door that read, 'For Assistance, Please Ring The Bell.' Chris pushed the button.

The door was opened almost immediately, and Larry Otter greeted Chris. "Mr. Foxx!" he exclaimed. "Please come in, get out of the cold." Chris came in, and Larry closed the door behind them. "What can I do for you?"

Chris stood there with his paws in his pockets. He looked down at the floor first, and then looked up at Larry. "Can I see her, please?" he asked, his voice choking.

"Of course you can!" Larry assured him.

"You may think this is strange, but ..."

Larry cut him off on mid-sentence. “Mr. Foxx,” he said kindly, “you’re not the first; this is almost a nightly occurrence here.”

“It is?”

“Yes, it is. Here, just follow me.” Larry took him down the hall, past the repose room and Lester’s office, and through the main lobby. Turning left, they came to the first viewing room. “It happens all the time,” Larry continued, “Parents coming to see a child, or friends wanting to spend last moments with a chum. Like you, wanting to see their wife, because time is precious and, after what goes on here, they’re gone forever.”

Larry reached his paw out to a rheostat, and turned the lights up in the room. “There you go, Mr. Foxx. You’re welcome to stay the night but if you decide to leave after a bit, just come back to the rear office and I’ll let you out.”

“Thank you, Larry,” Chris said gratefully.

“No problem.” he said, and he turned and left.

Chris slowly walked in and looked to the right. The room had changed since he had been there the day before. There were more flowers, lots more, all arranged beautifully. In the center, up front, was the casket. Chris took in the sight for a moment, and then walked up the center aisle to the coffin. There was his Sabrina, now lying peacefully in the pink silk interior of the casket. Placing his paws on the edge of the casket, he looked down at her. He ran the back of his paw over her cheek. Bending over, he kissed the tip of her nose, and then whispered in her ear.

“I had to come back, Kitten. I had to see you.”

With a heavy sigh, he stood up, and took a look around the room. He drifted over to the row of flowers that lined the wall, pausing to read the small card with each bunch. Most of the bouquets were from friends and co-workers. Chris worked his way along the wall until he came to the last arrangement of flowers, the casket spray from Zig Zag. It was a glorious mass of white roses, with one red rose in the center. Reaching out with his paw, Chris tried to remove it, but it held fast. He bent the stem till it broke at the base, and bringing it up to his nose, inhaled its fragrance. He walked back to Sabrina, and took her paw into his own. Larry Otter’s words ran through his mind: “Time is precious.”

“Yes, it is,” he whispered. Putting her paw down, Chris placed the rose in Sabrina’s paws, making it look like she was holding it.

“And tomorrow you will be gone forever,” he said, his voice choking. Turning away, he saw the row of chairs there, and sat down. Remembering the breathing exercise Angel taught him the other night; he took slow and deliberate breaths. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his thoughts. In about ten minutes he felt better, much more relaxed.

Looking at his watch, he decided it was time to go. He rose and padded back over to Sabrina. Looking down on her one last time, he ran his paw through her hair. He kissed her again and said, "Good night, Kitten." With a sigh he turned and walked out of the room.

He made his way back to the rear office, where he found Larry Otter. The young fur looked up from some paperwork as Chris entered the door. "Is there any thing else I can do for you, Mr. Foxx?" he asked.

"No, I guess that's it. I'm going home now. Thanks for letting me in."

"It was no problem, Mr. Foxx." Larry opened the door to let Chris out. "It's still snowing outside, so you drive carefully!"

"Yeah! I will, Larry. Thank you, and good night."

Chris walked slowly out into the snow. His right ear twitched backwards as he heard the soft *snick* of the door as it closed behind him. Stopping beyond the glow of the back entrance's single light, he turned his face up into the falling snow, and scanned the dark sky.

"Good night, Sabrina," he whispered, as if she was listening. "Good night."

Chris drove slowly through the snowy streets, lost in thought. He felt momentarily surprised and disoriented when he found himself pulling up to his house. All the lights were off, but he could see the glow of the TV in the living room. He climbed out of the car and stepped carefully across the snowy sidewalk, fumbling for his house keys. He quietly let himself in and was not surprised to find Endora wrapped in a warm robe and sitting on the couch. The television was on, but she appeared not to be paying it much attention.

Seeing Chris come in, she fumbled for the remote in her lap, and lowered the volume. "You went to see her again, didn't you?"

"Yes Mom, I had to," Chris said quietly as he took off his coat and hung it by the door.

Sabrina's mother gestured for Chris to sit next to her. As he sat down beside her, she looked into his eyes. "How did she look?"

"She was radiant, Mom. Like an angel."

Endora nodded, and then looked at her paws. "Tabitha had a talk with me after you left. She wants to stay here to help take care of things."

Chris smiled, and took her paws into his.

“Now, how can she do that? She has school, her friends, and you.”

“Now, I’m a grown skunk, Chris. I can take care of myself,” she said as she patted Chris’s paws. They sat in silence for a few minutes, and then Endora looked up at Chris. “Why don’t you and Alan move to Ohio? You can live with us.”

Chris looked away sadly; then returned his gaze to Endora. “I just don’t know, Mom. I really don’t know. My job is here, all my friends, and...and Sabrina...” he said, his voice dropping to a whisper.

“That’s OK, Chris,” She looked lovingly at the fox that had been such an important part of her daughter’s life. “We’ll talk about this later, after this all settles down. But now, it’s time for bed.” She tried to rise from the couch, but stopped with a groan. “Oh, ouch! I guess I got stiff from sitting here too long!”

Chris leapt to his feet, and with a flourish, offered his arm to Endora. “May I provide some assistance, my dear lady?” he asked, his eyes twinkling.

“Why, thank you, kind sir,” she replied with a small smile. Using Chris’s arm for leverage, she pulled herself upright, her spine crackling slightly as she straightened. “Oof! Can’t nap on the couch the way I used to anymore; I better get ready for tomorrow, and get some sleep.”

She paused, still holding Chris’s arm. “You know...” she said, her voice becoming choked, “I’m not ready for tomorrow. Up ‘til yesterday, the worst day of my life was the day Sarge passed away.” Chris could see her tears starting, and put his arms around her. She put her head on his chest and began to weep. “But tomorrow... I thought I’d never see tomorrow happen. It’s not fair that I have to see one of my children go before me. It’s just not fair!” she sobbed as she buried her face in Chris’ shirt.

“I know, Mom.” Chris tried to keep his composure as he patted her back, but he could feel hot tears running down his cheek fur.

After a few moments, Endora took a deep breath, and stepped out of Chris’ embrace. She wiped the tears from her eyes, and then looked up at the fox. She reached a paw out and touched the wet fur on his face. “You know she loved you the most. She did,” Endora said. “Many furs chased after her, but it was you she chose. And I’m glad she did. You were good to her Chris. She never said a bad thing about you. I could see the love you shared when you two were together...the way she looked at you, and the way you treated her.” Endora took her paw away, then stood on her toes and kissed Chris on the cheek. “Now, get some sleep. We have a long day coming.”

Endora turned and padded down the hall and turned into Chris’ room. Hearing the door close, Chris located the remote for the television, and turned it off. He sat back down on what was to be his bed for the night, a stack of pillows and blankets were beside the couch. Tabitha was with Alan, Mom had his room, and the Clique was camped out in the

guest room. Amy and Thomas were staying in a nearby hotel, as were Zig Zag and James.

Sitting in the dark he reached over for a pillow, and hugged it tightly with both arms. He longed for Sabrina, to feel her touch, to hear her voice. He thought of what tomorrow would bring, and tears welled in his eyes again. He buried his head in the pillow and cried himself to sleep.

###

The sound of talking, then the smell of cooking food, wakened Chris from a fretful and restless slumber. He had spent the night battling demons for some unremembered prize, only to jerk himself awake and into remembrance. Realizing where he was, he would cry himself to sleep again, only to begin the battles again. He was about to doze off again when there was a loud whisper in his ear.

“Dad?”

“... murphhhhh!”

“Dad!!”

“...Hmmmmmm?”

Chris half-opened one eye and found Alan standing there in his pajamas. Chris reached out, grabbed the young fox with one paw, and pulled him onto the couch with him.

“And what are you doing, waking me up?” he asked in a gruff voice, tickling his son at the same time.

“I came to get you up,” Alan said, giggling and trying to wriggle out of his father’s grip. “Grandma’s making pancakes.”

“She is?”

“Uh huh!”

“Well, we better get to the kitchen before they’re all gone.” Chris released Alan, who scampered out of reach, still giggling. With a groan, Chris levered himself off the couch and slowly began to make his way to the kitchen. Impatient and hungry, Alan ran ahead, announcing the imminent arrival of his father.

Dawdling over breakfast, Chris found himself staring out the front door window. The snowfall from last night had covered the sidewalk and driveway again. Eager for something to do to keep his mind off the remnants of his nightmares, he got dressed for some outdoor work.

Endora looked out from the kitchen as she heard Chris by the door. “Are you going out?” she asked, as she wiped her paws on a towel.

“Yeah, Mom. I need to go shovel the walk and the driveway. If we’re going to have folks over, I don’t want them slipping and falling.” He put on his coat and went outside. The air was crisp and fresh, and the first icy breaths he took brushed the cobwebs out of his mind. Finding the snow shovel on the porch, he started cleaning off the steps; then moved to the walkway. He worked steadily down the driveway, reaching the street before he decided to take a break. He leaned on the shovel and watched the frosty air hover around his muzzle for a moment, and then disappear. He glanced up at the sky: the sun was trying to break through, but the clouds were too thick.

He had been plenty warm while he was working, but had begun to feel chilled as he rested. Chris changed his grip on the snow shovel and started clearing the sidewalk in front of the house. He stopped when he reached the end of his property and stood there, looking back at the house.

He spotted a pile of leaves under the big maple. Only two weeks ago he’d been out here, raking those leaves. Alan and Sabrina had come out and jumped in the pile, scattering the leaves across half the yard again. Chris remembered throwing down the rake and joining in on the fun, burying Alan in what was left of the pile, and trying to force pawfuls of leaves down Sabrina’s shirt.

Chris walked through the snow and up to the tree. It was here that he had sat with Sabrina, as their son piled leaves on top of them. They had played and rolled in the yard until it got dark, and then went inside for hot chocolate. The leaves never did get raked. He looked down at what remained of the pile. He thought he would never touch the leaves again. His vision became blurry, and he shook the thought from his mind. With a shuddering sigh, he crossed the yard and headed back to the house.

Chris opened the door and carefully wiped his foot paws before going inside. He was met by Susan, who told him that her husband, Josh, Debbye’s husband, Lee, and Cindy’s husband, Clarence, were driving in and would meet them at the Funeral Home. He was also to call Mr. Otter. Chris thanked her warmly, and she gracefully glided back down the hall to the back bedrooms, where he could hear the other women getting ready.

The call to Otter’s took only a few minutes. Lester had just wanted to let Chris know that all was ready. He asked if Chris had any changes to make; there were none he could think of, so he thanked Lester and hung up.

When Endora came into the living room she found Chris on his paws and knees, looking for something under the couch. “Nice view?” Endora asked. Chris merely grunted at her. “What are you looking for?”

Chris got up from the floor and sighed. “When I came home from the hospital, the other night, I had a plastic bag. It had all of Sabrina’s things from the accident. Have you seen it?”

“Of course I have!” Endora replied. “I took it into the bedroom. It’s on top of the dresser.” Feeling relieved, Chris went back to his bedroom, checking first for any dressing females before entering. He found the bag next to Sabrina’s jewelry box, right where Endora said he would. He picked it up and sat down on the edge of the bed looking at the contents inside. After several minutes went by, Sabrina’s mom came into the room and sat down next to him. “What are you going to do with it?” she asked.

“I need to get her rings out,” he replied. “I’m going to put them on her when I get there today.” Breaking the seal, he reached in and pulled the rings out, laying them on the dresser. He closed the bag back up, and looked at the contents one more time; the smashed glasses, her wallet, and some bills and loose change. Then he placed it aside on the bed.

“Well!” he said, “I need to get ready.” He turned to Endora and asked, “Could you get Alan ready while I get showered and dressed?”

“I think I can handle that.” Endora squeezed his shoulder, and then left to find her grandson and get him dressed.

Going to his closet Chris picked out a suit, dress shirt, and tie, and laid them out on the bed. Showering quickly and using the fur dryer, he brushed himself down and then dressed. Finding the rings where he left them, he put them in his pocket. Checking himself one more time in the mirror, he left the bedroom.

In the living room he found Alan waiting for him. He was dressed very neatly and was sitting like a little gentlefur with Amy and Thomas, who had just gotten there.

Amy stood up to greet Chris. “You’re going now?” she asked after she gave him a quick hug.

“Yes, I am. I’m taking Alan in now to spend some time with his mother. So I’ll see you there around three.” Chris looked around. “Where’s everyone else?” he asked.

“They’re all in the guest room getting ready.” Amy said.

“Still?” he asked with a trace of amusement. Looking down at his son, Chris asked, “Alan, are you ready to go son?” Alan nodded his head yes.

“Let’s get your coat on.” Alan followed his dad over to the coat rack. Chris knelt down to help his son put on and button his coat. Thomas and Amy joined them.

Finished, Chris straightened up and put his own coat on. Taking Alan by the paw, they all went out on the porch. “You gonna be OK?” Thomas asked as he put a paw on Chris’ shoulder.

“I think so, for now anyway,” he said. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Amy and Thomas stood on the porch and watched as Chris backed out of the driveway, and drove off. Thomas put his arm around Amy as they stood there. “I feel so bad for Chris,” he said softly. He turned to look at his wife, and touched the side of her face with his paw.

“Me too,” she replied. She looked into his eyes, and then shivered. “Hey it’s cold out here! Inside, mister!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

#####

Once again, Chris found himself in the parking lot of Otter’s. He helped Alan out of the car, and walked with him, paw in paw, up to the main entrance.

“I know this place,” Alan said. “Danny works here. Is Mommy here, too?”

“Yes, she is, and we’re going to see her now.”

Mrs. Otter met them in the lobby. “Good afternoon, Mr. Foxx! You’re early.”

“I know,” Chris replied. “I brought Alan in to see Sabrina, before things got too busy.”

“That’s a good idea,” she said, “but let me take your coats.” After hanging the coats, Esther came back. “And now, if you’ll come this way?” She led them to the first viewing room.

Outside the double door was a podium. On it was a book of remembrance, for those who came to the service to sign. “Oh, it looks like your wife has a visitor already.”

Looking at the book, Chris saw whose name was in the first space at the top of the page. Smiling sadly, he thanked Mrs. Otter, took Alan by the paw, and led him inside. Looking across the room, Chris could see a fur standing in front of the casket, paying his respects to Sabrina.

“Daddy, who is that?”

“It’s a long-time friend of your mother,” his father said as he led his son up the aisle. The fox’s sensitive ears could detect the sound of the fur weeping. He stopped several paces

away, and knelt down to his son. “Alan, please stay here a moment, until I finish talking to that fur.” He smiled as his son dutifully nodded.

Chris walked quietly up behind the mourning fur. “Hi, Eric,” he said in a low voice.

Eric turned, startled. “Chris!” he exclaimed when he saw who it was. He reached out and took Chris by the arms. His facial fur was wet from crying and his suit coat was stained with tears. “God, Chris, I’m so sorry,” he said in a choked voice. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Just you being here is good enough. You were her friend long before I met her.”

Eric released his grip on Chris and placed his paws back on the edge of the coffin. Looking down at Sabrina, he whispered hoarsely, “Chris, I don’t know how you can do it. I mean, if this was my wife here, I’d be going crazy, screaming and yelling.”

“I’ve felt the urge for two days, but where would it get me? Besides, it wouldn’t change matters, anyway.”

“I know; you would get hurt and look stupid.” Eric then reached in and patted Sabrina’s paw. Straightening up, he turned and saw the small figure standing behind them. His eyes widened, and he looked at Chris. “Is this Alan?”

“Yes, this is my...our son, Alan.”

Eric padded over to where Alan was patiently waiting, with Chris following. Kneeling, he ruffled the fur on Alan’s head, then looked up at Chris and smiled.

“He has his mother’s looks,” he said, and then added, “and I think he’s going to be quite the femme killer when he gets older.” Alan just smiled back shyly.

Getting up, Eric extended his paw to Chris, who took it.

“I have to go, Chris. I had almost convinced myself not to come, but changed my mind at the last minute. I had to come and say my goodbyes.”

“You’re more than welcome to stay, Eric. All her friends are here, and Endora too. Please stay.”

“I wish I could Chris, but I just couldn’t handle this. Tell Endora ‘hi’ for me, will you?” Without saying another word, Eric turned and sadly left the room.

Chris sighed, and then looked down at his son. “Are you ready to see your mother?”

Alan nodded his head yes.

Taking his son by the paw, he led him up to the front of the room, where the casket was. He thought about picking his son up and holding him so he could see Sabrina, but got a better idea. Chris pulled a chair from the front row and slid it over next to the coffin. He picked Alan up and stood him on it so he could get a better view. Chris was quiet for a while, letting Alan take in what was before him.

“Well, son, what do you think?”

“She’s pretty, dad. Mom looks like she’s sleeping,” Alan whispered.

“Yes, she does, and she *is* beautiful,” his dad replied as he reached in a paw and placed it on Sabrina’s. As he did, Chris started to lose control, and his tears flowed again.

Alan looked up to see his father crying, and tried to brush a tear from the side of his dad’s muzzle.

“Why are you crying, Dad?”

“Because I miss her son,” Chris choked out, not taking his eyes off of his wife.

“But she’s right here,” Alan pointed at his mother.

“I know, son.” Chris moved closer and put his arm around his son. Trying to find the right words, he went on. “In a sense, she is here; what you see is what is left of her. Do you remember a while back when you were helping her in the kitchen with the eggs?”

“Uh huh!”

“And you dropped the egg on the floor, what happened?”

“It broke, and all the stuff came out.”

“And what was left?”

“The shell. And mom threw it away.”

“That’s right. What we see here is the shell, what is left of your mother. When she was in the accident, that shell broke, and her soul, her life, her being, left. What we see here is what remains. In the next few hours, everyone will come here to say goodbye to her, and then we will take her to a special place.”

“The cembertery?”

“Yes son, the ‘cemetery,’” Chris corrected gently. “And we can go there to visit her any time.” The two foxes lapsed into silence, as they made their silent farewells to the most important femme in their lives.

#####

It was the paw of Lester Otter on Chris' shoulder that brought him back to reality. Whispering in his ear the funeral director said, "Mr. Foxx, it is almost 3 o'clock, and visitors will be arriving soon." Chris nodded, and Lester left.

Chris looked down at his son. He asked him "Do you want to say goodbye to your mother?"

As calm as can be, Alan brought his paw up and kissed it, then reached in and touched Sabrina's nose. "Goodbye, Mommy," he said, the beginnings of a sob in his voice. "Goodbye!" He turned and buried his face in his father's chest, and began crying as if his little heart would break. Chris held his son tightly, his own body shaking in reaction to Alan's grief.

At exactly 3 o'clock, the crew from the house showed up at Otter's parking lot. Making their way inside, they found Chris in the lobby trying to comfort Alan. Dexter and Angel soon followed. Angel gathered the femmes and directed them into the viewing room, while Dexter stayed outside with Chris.

"So! How you doing?"

"Not good, Dex. I thought I could make it through this day, but I don't think so now. I brought Alan down early, to be with his mom... sniff... and it just hit him, and me, a little while ago."

Dexter reached a paw over to ruffle the fur of Alan's head.

"Say! Alan, you OK?"

Alan, with his head still buried in Chris' chest, just shook it no.

Endora joined them, holding a tissue to her muzzle. She quickly dried her tears and, pulling herself together, led Alan by the paw for a walk to calm him down.

A half hour later, there were about a hundred furs gathered at the funeral home. Zig Zag and James, with some staffers from the studio in tow, suddenly made a grand entrance. She could have been wearing a coal sack and still turned the heads of every fur in the room. She made a straight line to Chris, and embraced him. She and James offered their condolences, and again asked if there was anything they could do to help, but Chris politely declined. Leaving James with Chris, Zig Zag proceeded to the casket to view Sabrina.

Damn!! She thought to herself, *she looks good even in death.* Feeling a tear forming, Zig reached into her purse for a tissue. Dabbing the tear away, she brought her paw down on

the edge of the casket, and let slip something that was hidden within it. A small disk dropped inside and was enveloped by the inside silk liner.

Bending over, she whispered in Sabrina's ear. "That was from the camera. I thought you might like it." And then she thought, "What the hell?" and gave Sabrina a great, slurping kiss.

At fifteen minutes to the hour, the Reverend Al Bear came into the viewing room and talked to Chris and Endora. Josh, Lee, and Clarence arrived as well, much to the happiness of their wives.

At five to the hour, Lester Otter announced that it was time for everyone to take their seats, and that the service was about to begin. Terry, Danny, and Larry helped direct the mourners to their chairs. In the front row sat Chris and Alan, then Endora with Tabitha. The following three rows were reserved for friends of the family.

At exactly four o'clock, the organ music on the speaker system was lowered but still audible. Wearing no vestments but a black shirt with white collar, the Reverend Al walked up the center aisle. He carried no books, no notes or cards. Stopping at the casket, he paid his respects to Sabrina, and then turned to face the room. He could have moved to the podium that was set up for him at the foot of the coffin, but he chose not to. He surveyed the room, then fixed his gaze on the grief-stricken Chris.

"Brothers and Sisters," he began with a warm gentle voice that was heard clearly by every fur in the room. "We are not here to mourn the life of Sabrina Foxx, but to celebrate it! For the past thirty-six years, she has graced this earth, as a loving daughter, sister, friend, and confidant. And for the last ten years, as the loving wife to Chris, and mother to Alan, and friend to almost everyone here in this room."

He looked to Sabrina, then back to Chris. "Just by looking at Chris, I can see the love he has for his wife, for his face speaks volumes about the love he has for her. Years ago I knew of a young fur couple just like these two, a couple in love. It was one of those cold snowy crystal nights...when the young furs took a walk... the black sky stretched over them like an eternity...When a car came by...they playfully jumped into a snow bank to hide, so that their private wonder would not be disturbed... Arriving home they stopped in the backyard to clear his car of snow...and the young fur knew the time had come. With his finger, he wrote in the snow on the windshield of his car, the words he wanted to say all night... I...Love ...You! Forty years later he lay unconscious in a hospital bed in intensive care... just hours after open heart surgery...His wife watched him ...tired and tense, worried for his safety...The monitors on the wall marked his vital signs, a machine helped him breathe.... And then his eyes opened, and she held out her paw to him. Unable to speak because of the tube coming out of his mouth, with his finger he wrote in the palm of her paw...I...Love...You! He would be healed... not because he loved her...but because she loved him, too.

“For you see, love is the most magnificent healing power on earth. No wound is so deep, no disappointment so intense, no failure so devastating, that love can not heal!” He paused and stepped forward to where Chris was sitting. Reaching down, he took the fox’s paw into his own two and continued on.

“In this journey we call life...through the birth of children, and the meals cooked, the days of work, and the nights of worry, it is love that gives us strength to carry on. It is love that gives it meaning. It is love that heals the broken heart.”

“And even in that journey we call death, love leaps across that obstacle. And we remain tied to each other in the power of that bond, for death can not conquer those who truly love.” Smiling down at Chris, he released the hold of his paw.

“So when worry works away at us, and we can not think about tomorrow without fear... when grief tears at our heart, we need to remember, and cherish. For we still have one emotion stronger than all of those...it is love. Fear and grief and worry must wither away before the healing power of love.”

“As you leave here today, remember, rejoice for Sabrina’s life! Don’t mourn her, for she would not have wanted it that way. She is not dead, for we all carry her here...” and he placed both paws over his heart, “...here in our hearts, and in our memories. And if we keep her there, she will be with us always.”

Reverend Bear paused, and looked out at the sea of faces before him. Several furs were openly sobbing; even stolid Thomas was wiping tears from his eyes while holding Amy with his other paw. The minister took a deep breath to begin a final benediction, when a clear, soft voice began to sing from somewhere in the roomful of mourners.

*“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!”*

The sweet contralto voice caught Chris’ attention. A sob caught in his throat as he twisted an ear backwards, drawn to the sound of the lone femme’s voice.

*“I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.”*

Tears continued to roll down Chris’ cheeks, but they were no longer tears of sorrow. The beauty in the voice he heard seemed to fill him with peace, and he could concentrate on his love for Sabrina, and not the pain he felt at her absence.

*“’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.”*

Chris craned his neck around, to see where the glorious music was coming from. He gazed with surprise as he saw Zig Zag sitting straight in her chair, tears flowing from her

closed eyes. She was singing in a voice that could only be described as...heavenly. Chris thought he remembered James having said something about Zig's singing voice, but he was amazed to hear her now.

*"How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed."*

Chris felt his spirits begin to soar, and he felt a joy that he hadn't known since he first received that fateful phone call. The pain was still there, and the sorrow, but they were being buried by feelings of love and peace. The Reverend's words seemed to echo in Chris' mind: "Fear and grief and worry must wither away before the healing power of love." Could this be what he meant?

Other furs began to join in, their voices blending with that of the tiger-striped skunk. Chris watched, awestruck, as one by one the entire room joined in the hymn. Though tears dampened every fur's face, their voices were strong and steady.

*"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see."*

As the hymn concluded, Zig Zag dropped her head into her paws. Her shoulders heaved soundlessly for a few moments. James reached his arm around her and cradled her close to his body. She visibly drew strength from the contact, and with a shuddering sigh, was able to look up into his face. The love shining in his eyes calmed her; she gave him a brief smile to indicate she was all right, and then turned to face the front of the room again.

Reverend Bear wiped his own eyes with a pawkerchief, and then looked out over the congregation. "May we have a moment of silence, please?"

As the organ music softly began to play again, the minister knelt before Chris and offered words of comfort. He listened and nodded, but his mind was focused on the still form of his beloved, who lay just a few feet away, the haunting melody of the hymn still filling him.

The minister then moved to Endora and Tabitha. Sabrina's mother, her cheekfur still wet with freshly shed tears, thanked him for a most moving sermon. Tabitha tried to say something to him, but was too choked up to form words.

His duties over for the moment, Reverend Al Bear retreated down the aisle and left the room. He would soon be on his way to Wood Lawn, to officiate at Sabrina's interment.

Lester then came up to the front and announced, "If anyone wishes, they may come up front and pay their final respects to Sabrina and her family. The family will then retire to

Wood Lawn Cemetery for a private burial.” Terry and Danny Otter moved to stand on either side of the last row, directing its occupants either back toward the exit, or forward to pay their final respects. Lester guided Chris, Alan, and Endora toward the casket, to receive final condolences.

Almost every fur went forward, offering the family a final goodbye, a hug, or a pawshake.

Zig Zag made it a point to be the last in line along with James. After talking to Endora for a moment, she embraced Chris again, and gave him a stern look. “You call us if there is anything you need, you hear?”

Chris looked deeply into her blue eyes. “Thank you,” he said huskily, “for...everything.”

Zig Zag held his gaze for a moment. She suddenly wondered what had possessed her to start singing before all these furs. Slowly, the fur on the back of her neck began to rise, as she pondered the choice of words...was “possessed” really that far off? She shook her head to clear her thoughts, and then reached down and picked up Alan.

“And when you come to Ohio, Chris, you bring this handsome young fur with you.” She shifted her gaze to the young fox squirming in her arms. She tilted her head forward until she was nearly touching noses with him. “And are you gonna come and see aunt Zig?” she asked.

Alan nodded, and then gave her a half smile. Zig gave him a kiss and put him down; then gave his father a peck on the cheek. She turned to James, who wordlessly put his arm around her and guided her toward the door.

Lester closed the double doors after Zig stepped out to give those left some privacy, and then he came forward. Moving to the side of the room, he pulled the curtain open to reveal a double glass door. Parked outside was a hearse. Terry and Danny Otter started to remove the flowers and take them outside for transport to the cemetery. Lester stepped softly over to Chris. “Mr. Foxx, if you like, your friends can pay their final respects to your wife now.”

Looking around, Chris saw Dexter and Angel. He briefly clasped their paws, and tenderly told them to go ahead. Angel’s resolve vanished, and she began crying as she stepped up to the casket. Dexter held strong, but he was obviously having trouble fighting tears. After a few minutes, he led Angel away, supporting most of her weight as he escorted her outside and to their car.

Amy had gone over to the casket spray, and pulled four of the white roses off. She handed one each to Susan, Cindy, and Debbye, and kept one for herself. She led the women up to say good-bye to their friend. Each in turn placed their rose in the casket with Sabrina, and then stood silently with their thoughts. The minutes stretched on, as none of them wished to leave the side of the skunk who had meant so much to them.

Thomas eventually stepped up and gently led Amy away, taking her to the open side door. Josh, Lee, and Clarence, tears in their eyes as well, gently pulled their respective wives away from the casket. They all stood just outside the door and waited for the family to finish.

Endora walked slowly and heavily over to say goodbye to her daughter. At the casket she ran her paw through the fur of Sabrina's head. Bending over, she kissed her on the forehead, and whispered she loved her.

Tabitha hesitated, then stepped beside her mother. She held her sister's paw for a few moments, and then leaned over and quickly whispered something in Sabrina's ear. Even as close as she was, Endora couldn't make out what Tabitha had said. But she noted that when Tabitha stood back up, a fierce and determined look had replaced the abject sorrow on her face. With a much firmer step, Tabitha practically stalked out the side door to join the rest.

Endora then turned and held a paw out to Chris, who was standing with Alan. He picked Alan up, and went to join her. "Do you want to say goodbye to Mommy again?" he asked. Alan shook his head no.

"Here. I'll take him," Endora offered. Chris put his son down, who scampered over to his grandmother and hugged her leg.

Reaching into his pocket, Chris pulled out Sabrina's engagement and wedding bands. He gently lifted her paw and slipped them onto her finger, to where they had been since the day he'd originally placed them there, so many years ago.



He lifted her paw to the side of his muzzle, which was still wet from his tears. He held it lovingly to the side of his face for several moments, and then placed it back on top of her other paw. Sighing heavily, he turned to Lester.

“What’s next?” he asked in a quiet tone. In reply, the otter reached into the casket, and removed a pink silk quilt that lay at Sabrina’s feet.

“Mr. Foxx...if you wish, please take this quilt and pull it up to your wife’s chin, and then tuck her in, as if you were putting her to bed for the night.”

Chris froze. There was no way he wanted to do this! Not now! Not ever!

Endora, seeing he was having trouble, stepped over to her son-in-law, and pulled him slightly away from the coffin. Then, taking the top of the quilt, she pulled it gently up to her daughter’s chin, like she had done so many times before when Sabrina was little. She tucked her in for the last time, for her eternal sleep. Her job done, she turned to Chris. Taking him by the paw, she brought him back over to the casket.

“It’s time to say goodbye,” she told him.

Not saying a word, Chris bent over and kissed Sabrina for the final time. Fighting to say the words, he whispered, “Goodbye, Kitten. I’ll love you forever.” He turned away and buried his head in Endora’s shoulder, sobbing.

Mr. Otter then motioned to his sons to come forward. They stationed themselves on each side of the casket, with Lester in the center. At his nod, the younger otters undid a latch at each end of the coffin that held the lid open. Endora watched as the lid slowly closed. The soft *click* of the locking mechanism was the loudest noise she had ever heard, and she unconsciously held Chris even tighter.

Terry and Danny then took the spray of flowers off of its special holder and placed it on the casket. Unlocking the wheels of the bier, they directed it to the side door and out to the rear of the waiting hearse. Once there, they unlocked the rollers under the casket, and slid it inside the vehicle. The young furs returned the bier inside, closed the rear door, and flashed a signal to their father.

Lester walked over to Chris and Endora, who were still embraced and weeping together. “It’s time,” he told them gently.

Releasing Chris from her embrace, Endora took the paw of her grandson, then the paw of her son-in-law, and led them through the side door and out to their waiting car. It was time to make their last journey with Sabrina, to her final resting place at Wood Lawn.

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It was only after talking with friends that Chris could piece together the events of the next couple of days: The funeral, the burial, the reception afterwards at his house, and the

signing of thank you cards. By the second day after the funeral, he was beginning to come out of the haze that haunted him. He found himself standing out in the driveway, saying goodbye to Josh, Lee, Clarence and the Clique. This was a lengthy process, with pawshakes, hugs, and tears all around. Thomas and Amy joined the throng as they waited their turn to leave.

Endora and Tabitha were also leaving, since they were riding with the Wolfe-Squirrels back to Ohio. The previous day, they had decided that Tabitha would spend the upcoming summer with the Foxx males, so that she could keep an eye on Alan once school was out.

After several rounds of hugs, kisses and teary goodbyes, Chris and Alan watched everybody drive off. The sudden silence was almost overwhelming.

Back in the house, Chris sat in his easy chair and tried to reflect on what had gone on during the past five days. He was barely aware when there was a knock at the door.

“I’ll get it!” yelled Alan as he ran down the hall from his room. He was missing all of the attention and excitement of the last few days and hoped there were more visitors coming to play with him. Opening the door, he found Danny Otter standing there.

“Hi, Danny!” he squealed happily.

“Hey, Alan, is your dad in?”

“Yes, he is. Da-a-a-d! Danny Otter is here!” Chris was already up, and to the door, when his son yelled. He made a show of folding his ears down in mock pain as he gave Alan a stern look. He held the glare for only a few moments before he smiled at the little fox. He then looked up at the visitor.

“Hi, Danny! Why don’t you come in?”

“Sorry Mr. Foxx, I can’t. I’m on a run, and Dad asked me to drop this off.” He handed Chris a white envelope with his name written on it.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Umm... I think it’s an invoice,” Danny said awkwardly. Although he hoped to take over the business someday, he still felt uncomfortable collecting from people still in the process of grieving.

“Well, tell your dad I said thank you for all your family has done. I’ll take care of this as soon as I can,” he said as he held the envelope up.

“OK, I will. And Alan, I’ll see you at T-ball this summer.” He held out his paw for Alan to slap, then shook paws with Chris before he turned away and hurried back to his car.

Chris started to close the door, when he saw another car pull up into his driveway. He could see it was Dexter and Angel. He waited for them to exchange words with Danny Otter, and then welcomed them into the warm house.

“What was Danny doing here?” Dexter asked as he held out a chair at the kitchen table for Angel.

“He brought this. I guess it’s the bill,” Chris replied, holding up the invoice for them to see. With his other paw he ran his thumb claw over it to open it up. He pulled the paper out and unfolded it. He stared at it for a moment; then his jaw dropped in shock.

“Eight thousand dollars!” he exclaimed.

Dexter whistled.

“Oh my!” Angel cried as she raised a paw to her muzzle.

“Eight thousand dollars... paid in full,” Chris went on, his voice full of wonder.

“What!?” Dexter exclaimed, nearly falling out of his own chair. Chris passed the invoice over for him to read.

“But... who?”

Chris looked down at his paws and thought. Who among Sabrina’s friends and family would have the resources? With sudden realization, he looked up at his two friends, giving them a sad smile.

“Zig Zag! She’s the only one who would do this. It had to be her, I know it.” He looked at his watch. “I’ll call her later,” he said. “She and James are still on the road.”

Angel’s eyes glistened. “How sweet of her!”

Dexter pushed the paper back toward Chris. “What to you have planned now?” he asked.

Chris sat there and thought for a moment. Then he got up, and moved over to the coat rack and pulled on his coat.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do,” he said. “I’m going to take all these flowers over to the cemetery, and put them with Sabrina. Angel, could you please stay here and watch Alan ‘til I get back?” She agreed readily. Dexter helped him load all the flowers into his car. After several trips, the front and back seats were packed; even the trunk was full.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to go along?” Dex asked.

“No, I’ll be fine, thanks.” Chris looked at his two friends and smiled warmly. He never could have survived this past week without Dexter and Angel. He was the most fortunate fox in the world to have such loyal friends.

It took Chris about ten minutes to drive to Wood Lawn, and another five to find Sabrina’s grave. He then began the task of transferring the flowers from his car, placing them around the flowers that were already there. When he was done, he paused to look at his handiwork. He noticed that the flowers he had helped place there the day before yesterday were wilted; the winter cold had done its damage.

He recalled staying after the service, watching the workers close the grave. He had helped put the roses on the mound, staying after everyone else had gone. Dexter and Thomas had had to go back in the dark to bring him home. They found him standing by her grave, cold and shivering, tears frozen in his fur.

Kneeling down, Chris tried to brush the new fallen snow off the roses, when grief overtook him again. He placed both paws over his eyes and began sobbing.

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“He still looks so sad!”

“He’s thinking about you.”

“How can you tell?”

“I can read his mind!”

“You can?”

“Mmmm hmmm!”

Sabrina and her escort were just a few feet away from the grieving fox.

“Now how can you do that?” she said looking up at him.

“Simple! You just focus your mind on his thoughts. Try it!”

Sabrina closed her eyes and thought about what Chris might be thinking. “Arghh!” she exclaimed, making a face.

“Well!”

Yuck! “It was like reading a bowl of alphabet soup, it was all jumbled up.”

The angel chuckled, “After you have been here for a while it will be no problem.”

“And what do you mean by, ‘for a while?’” she asked.

“Ah, it looks like you are going to be here for some time, or so I have been told.”

“And doing what?” she asked in a curious tone.

“Let’s just say, you are going to be with me for a while; my assistant, if you will.”

“So I won’t be moving on?”

“No not for a while.”

Then, Sabrina had an idea, motioning to the angel, to come closer, he bent down, and she whispered in his ear.

“I can do that.” he said, as he smiled at her, he was gone, and back in a flash, and he handed Sabrina the rose, taking it into her paws, she brought it up to her nose, and inhaled its fragrance.

“It was nice of him, to give me this.”

“It’s because he loves you, and he will love you always.” the angel replied.

“I know, he’s my fox,” she said happily.

Placing his paw on her shoulder, he said “It’s time to go, there are other things to do.”

“Can I give him a kiss?” she asked.

“You can but he won’t feel it.”

Going over to her crying love, she knelt down by the left side of Chris, and kissed him on the cheek, and unseen by the angel, she laid the rose at Chris’ knees, as she stood up and went back to where she was, her tail brushed Chris’ back. Feeling there was a presence, like something was moving, he looked up.

Taking his glasses off, he rubbed his eyes with his paw to clear his vision. He put them back on and looked around; there was nothing. *It was just the wind blowing*, he thought. Looking back down, he spied the rose, the rose that hadn’t been there just a few moments before.

Picking it up, he noticed it was fresh, not damaged by the cold or snow, and he knew he’d brought no roses to the grave; getting up quickly he called out, “Hello!” While looking around, he called out again, but all he heard was the wind through the trees, and a crow calling far away.

It was then the angel realized what Sabrina had done.

“Sabrina!!!! How did you do that? HmMMMM!”

She just laughed, and held her paws to her face.

Chris then looked around the gravesite again this time looking for footprints in the snow, but there were only his, in the new fallen snow. The sun was almost gone and the snow was falling heavier, the appearance of the rose, was now driving him crazy. He was standing there at the grave holding the flower when the wind picked up and blew the rose out of his paw, back on the grave, in the middle of the white roses; he knelt down to retrieve it, as he did, he saw a broken stem sticking out of the mass of white roses, and then he remembered. There was only one red rose in the spray, and he had to break it off to remove it; that rose he'd placed in Sabrina's paws and it was with her when he put her rings on. He saw it there, and he was with the casket the whole time 'til it was buried. Picking up the rose, and on a hunch, he placed it against the broken stem, and to his shock, the stems matched. *How!!!* He thought, but then calmness over came him, and he knew.

He knows, the angel said, he figured it out.

Sabrina just stood there and smiled

“We better go,” taking Sabrina by the paw, they turned away and walked through the rows of markers, “I'm going to have to keep my eye on you,” he told her chuckling.

But before they faded away, she turned and yelled at the top of her voice, “**CHRIS...I... LOVE... YOUUUUUU!**”

“Hey! You are not supposed to do that!!”

“I know.” she giggled, and they were gone.

Chris's ears perked up, he knew he heard something. He thought it was “Chris I Love You,” but it could have been the wind.

“I Love You Kitten!” Chris yelled back, hoping for a reply, all he got was the wind, and the snow falling all around.

Going back to the grave he stood there, pausing for a final look, as the rays of the sun slowly faded in the west. Chris held the rose, gingerly in his paws, so the cold would not damage it. He gave the rose to her, because he loved her, and she returned it because of her love for him.

Sadly turning away, he walked to his car through the snow; getting in, he placed the flower on the seat beside him, fired up his car, and began the drive home...

Fade to black

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