

Chapter 53

As Rick tucked his phone back in his pocket, Estelle indicated she was tired and wanted to nap. He and Blanche helped her to her bed. She again indicated she'd just take a short nap. Rick's ears twitched as he heard the car long before the others would.

"We've got company, Ma Tante. I'll be right back."

A car with Maine plates pulled into Estelle's driveway, blocking Rick's car in. Rick quickly moved to the backdoor and greeted the bearded man, four years his elder. "Long time, no see, brother. We can talk later. Ma Tante Blanche and I just put Mémère in her bed."

Rick's older brother stared at the giant squirrel a moment, before embracing him. "Yes, you've got quite the story to tell, I'm sure, little brother."

"Figurative and literal." Rick flicked his tail up and down briefly.

"This isn't a false alarm, is it?"

"No, I don't think so," Rick replied drooping his tail. "Any chance Lynn will make it? She hasn't responded to my messages."

"Unfortunately, she's at a conference in Atlanta. The message I received from her thirty minutes ago said she'll try to get online as soon as she can." Robert paused a moment. "I smell gingerbread cookies."

"Then, I'll try to video her in if she's available. My laptop is in the kitchen." Rick led his brother down the hallway, throwing his laptop in his pack and onto his back as he passed through the kitchen.

Robert stared at all the cookies taking up every available space on the counters and table.

"We've had a busy afternoon, Rob. I did all the work while she directed from a chair at the table. I was worried I'd make her overdo it, but I couldn't think of any other stalling tactic." They passed through the living room, "Maybe she realized it too. I'm not sure why else she'd have me make a full batch of cookies rather than something more manageable. When I asked that we make some for old time's sake, she pulled out a whole pound of butter rather than a stick or two."

Rick let his older brother go before him. Blanche stepped back to let him get by the bed. Estelle was asleep. Robert held her hand as Rick created a WiFi hotspot with his phone and attempted to connect to Lynn through the laptop. It didn't take long to connect to her. She, too, was surprised at Rick's appearance. Like he had said to his older brother, he reassured his sister he'd give her the details later as this wasn't the time.

Eventually, Estelle stirred, opened her eyes and there was a surprised look on her face.

“Robert, what are you doing here? I’m not daydreaming, am I?”

“No, Mémère. Rick called me at lunch time from the restroom and I headed straight up here.”

“I’m here too, Mémère,” a tinny female voice cried from the laptop, “thanks to Rick. I love you, Mémère. I wish I could be there.” Lynn fought back tears on screen.

Estelle glanced at the screen and smiled at her granddaughter. “Technology is so amazing,” she said in a weakened voice before looking at Richard. “I couldn’t hide it from you, could I, Richard?” she whispered.

Rick held her other hand in his forepaws, and gently squeezed. “No. That was impossible to hide with my heightened sense of smell, Mémère. I knew as soon as you opened the door when I first arrived to visit that you didn’t have long.” The tears started to well up in Rick’s eyes. “I took a risk asking you to go out for lunch. However, I figured the Michaud-stubborn streak would keep you from creating a scene.”

“And the cookies.”

“Call me selfish, Mémère. I really wanted one more batch as I said, for old time’s sake as you never wrote down your recipe. My phone can do a lot of things, Mémère. It recorded your directions you dictated. Between that and how I closely followed what you told me to do, the recipe for the best soft gingerbread cookies will live on.” Rick paused a moment and scuffed a footpaw. “That, and it was a delay tactic to buy Robert the time he needed to make the nearly four-hour drive here from Bangor.”

Estelle smiled slightly. “You were always a sneaky devil, Richard. You better share the recipe with your brother and sister.” She fell silent for a little bit. Then in a softer voice she whispered, “I love all three of you.” Her eyes turned toward the doorway where Blanche stood. “You too, Blanche. You’ve always been like a sister to me.” Richard had to repeat the words louder for Blanche to hear them. Estelle closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

“Hospice had checked in this morning,” Blanche said in an unsteady voice. “The pain had gotten bad for her the past few days. They had offered to set her up with a morphine drip. She didn’t want their assistance. She wanted a clear mind to the very end. Father Thibault (tee-bout) soon after dropped by and gave her the Sacrament for the Sick. I then went to the store at her insistence, though I was half afraid I’d find her dead when I returned. I’m not sure how she rallied the energy and hid the pain enough to do what she did today with you, Richard.”

“She did it because she always made sacrifices for us,” Rick responded. “She took the three of us in after Mom and Dad’s death though she didn’t have much of an income as a widow. She didn’t want to see us split-up among our godparents or other relatives. She found some way to make it work. Today was no different. I showed up as she was probably preparing to make her peace. What choice did she think she have but to put that off a little longer, pull together everything she had left in her in order to give me one last day with her.” Tears rolled down Rick’s muzzle.

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

Blanche shed a few tears, left the room, and returned with kitchen chairs for them. The three of them sat vigil, Robert and Rick holding Estelle's hands. Lynne watching through her phone from her hotel room in Atlanta. Rick gave a brief version of his accident story to them. Blanche got up and brought the two brothers sandwiches, tea, and squirrel-shaped gingerbread cookies. They thanked her. A couple hours passed by before Estelle breathed her last. Blanche shed silent tears as Robert and Rick bawled while embracing each other as Lynne cried through the web connection.