

Chapter 71

“Good evening and welcome to Newscenter 9 News at Six. Our top news story on this Monday evening: suicide or foul play? The state police aren’t giving us many details tonight after they found the body of missing Nashua man, Ross Delling, in a hunting cabin outside of Colebrook in northern New Hampshire just after noon today.” An animated map of New Hampshire zooms into Colebrook with a marker indicating where the cabin is. The map fades and is replaced with still photos of the cabin roped off in police tape and several state police vehicles. “A passerby spotted a car matching the description of Mr. Delling’s and called it into the state police. Mr. Delling had vanished from his home nearly a week ago. We’ll provide updates to this developing story as details become available.”

Rick sat down at a table in the WMSU police office across from a state trooper. “Here is a print-out of my work schedule from the past two weeks, Lieutenant Campton, along with various people and students you can contact who can vouch for my whereabouts for the time period in question.” Rick wigwagged his tail as he slid the paperwork across the table to the state trooper.

The officer looked over the schedule. “Thank you. Please understand, you’re not considered a suspect at this time, Mr. Michaud. I just need to dot all the I’s and cross all the T’s.”

Rick nodded in understanding. “I had no hard feelings for Mr. Delling, Lieutenant. He saved my life. Provided these,” he waved at his squirrely body, “side effects are bit much, but better than being buried six feet under.”

Lieutenant Campton nodded. “Yes, as Mr. Santorum informed my colleague this morning.”

“Can you disclose how he died?”

“Do you have a weak stomach?”

Rick shook his head negatively. The state trooper placed a photograph face down on the table and slid it across. “It’s graphic. Don’t say you weren’t forewarned.”

Rick glanced at the photo and seemed to pale through his fur. Lieutenant Campton watched him carefully. “Holy shit!” Rick exclaimed under his breath as his tail lashed back and forth. “Pardon my cussing, Lieutenant. It’s like someone shoved a pole through his gut based on that exit wound. Or he got ripped-up in that one spot.”

“Getting ‘ripped-up’ as you put it was one of our thoughts, Mr. Michaud. It’s also why I needed to question you.”

Rick drooped his tail. “Because of my claws. I understand. Do you have a close-up of this wound?”

Campton raised an eyebrow as he opened a folder and pulled out a few more photos and laid them before the large squirrel. Rick studied them slowly swishing his tail back and forth. He started to slowly shake his head sideways.

“Unbelievable. He foolishly tried it on his own. And he may have pulled it off.”

“Pulled what off, Mr. Michaud?”

“I was his accidental victim, Lieutenant Campton. You indicated your colleague interviewed Mr. Santorum this morning. He probably told your colleague that Ross had intended to do this to himself,” Rick put a hand to his furry chest, “except go all the way to a normal-size squirrel.”

“What?”

“Maybe you need to trade notes with your colleague, Lieutenant. Nate Santorum should be able to collaborate this. Ross didn’t like being human and had figured out how to manipulate human DNA. His process is like something straight out of science fiction. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, so I’m the one who wound-up like this last year instead of him. If he hadn’t stopped the process when he had, I’d be a normal-size squirrel. My wife and I had cut a deal with him and Second Limb Prosthetics to not sue him and the company into the stone age if in return he shared his knowledge with others. If he cooperated, when the time was right, we’d oversee his transformation in a safe environment.”

Lieutenant Campton stared at him. “Why?”

“I was severely burned, Lieutenant. You can find all the public details linked on my website. If you want, I can sign a medical release form so you can go question the medical staff who treated me at Dartmouth-Hitchcock. His process healed my severe third degree burns in a matter of days.” Rick leaned forward. “Imagine what that could do for medical science if we could replicate it without the squirrely side-effects.” Rick wigwagged his tail for emphasis and sat back again. “It took me about ten days to change from human to the large squirrel talking to you now. It took me nearly a month after that for my mind to recover from the shock of the change. As I already said, the side effects are a bit extreme, but I owe Ross Delling my very life. I was so severely burned they weren’t sure if I’d survive a flight to the burn center in Boston.”

Lieutenant Campton thumbed through some notes in the file folder in his hands. “Yes, I see here that you put some of my men and the warden service on a merry chase last year.”

Rick drooped his tail. “And I apologized personally to every one of them once I had recovered mentally, thanking them for helping me to return to the hospital. Anyway, look here in this photo.” Rick turned it around and pointed. “It’s like a gunshot exit wound, a rather nasty one, like a close-range shot. I’ve seen that sort of thing in one of those urban myth debunker reality science series where they shoot-up ballistics gel to show exactly what a gunshot wound would look like compared to what you see in the movies. This opening is what? Three inches across?”

Campton looked at the photo. “Yes. But there is no entrance wound in his back and no gunpowder residue. So, our forensics team ruled that out. And look here,” he pointed to just inside the edges of the wound. “It looks like claw marks.”

Rick nodded. “I’ve also seen this sort of thing in horror movies where the victim is impregnated by a monster and the monster’s spawn rips its way out of the victim’s stomach or chest.” Rick shrugged. “Obviously, I’m no expert. And that’s just Hollywood make-believe.”

Campton stared some more at the photo. “Our forensics lab guys described it that way, like something out of Hollywood.”

Rick slid the photos back to Campton and was quiet a moment in thought. “My transformation took about ten days or so as I said before, Lieutenant. The nanobot thingies in me needed something to power them. As it was explained to me by Ross afterward, they consumed the portions of my body I wouldn’t need in my new form. If you question the medical staff that treated me, they’ll tell you I was very feverish on and off throughout my transformation. That was probably those nanobot thingies converting my excess mass into energy and heat. I lost over 100 pounds (45.4kg) in the process.

“I’m guessing that Ross got impatient. He took his attempt at transformation into his own hands, sped-up the timeline, and may have succeeded. As crazy as that may sound, it would explain the wound. A normal-size grey squirrel weighs about a pound (454g). He couldn’t just shrink down that fast. He would have baked himself to death trying to burn off all that mass. So, instead, he somehow simply transformed just enough mass into his new body, and shed his old shell, sort of like a caterpillar changing into a butterfly.”

Campton stared at Rick and shook his head in disbelief. “You’re trying to tell me that Mr. Delling transformed himself into a squirrel, then his new squirrel body ripped out of his old body like in a Hollywood horror movie, and fled into the woods?”

Rich shrugged while his tail wigwagged left to right and back a few times. “Why not, Lieutenant? Is it any crazier a theory than any others you’re looking at? Or that you’re spending time right now interviewing a giant talking squirrel?” Rick paused a moment before continuing. “When his body was found, was the door or perhaps a window cracked open?”

Campton thumbed through the photos. “Why, yes. There was a window open about 3 inches (7.5cm) in the front room of the cabin where the body was found.” Campton stared at Rick. “The same height as the diameter of that exit wound.”

Rick nodded. “So, maybe my crazy theory isn’t so crazy. Ross could have propped it open in preparation so that he wasn’t trapped inside the cabin once his transformation was complete.” Rick fell silent a moment. “It’s getting late today, but I can free up my schedule for the next couple of days if you’d be willing to escort me to that cabin, which I’m sure is still taped off. That’s provided you haven’t got further questions to ask me.”

“For what purpose do you wish to go up to the cabin, Mr. Michaud?”

“To see if I can find Dell.”

Lieutenant Campton stared at the giant squirrel. “Are you nuts? You really believe he’s now a squirrel and you can find him?”

Rick shrugged while wigwagging his tail some more. “On the first question, Lieutenant, the shrink on staff at Dartmouth-Hitchcock might say yes, but I’ve come a long way from how I was right after I woke-up like this. I acted and behaved like a normal squirrel, which is why I fled the hospital and gave your men and the warden service a merry chase as you put it. On the second, it’s worth a shot. And who better to track down a recently transformed squirrel than someone who has first paw...er hand experience becoming a squirrel? While my sense of smell probably isn’t as powerful as your drug-sniffing dogs, a normal size squirrel can sniff-out an acorn buried under six inches (15cm) of topsoil and a foot (30cm) of snow. I’m sure my sense of smell is just as good if not a bit better than that. His trail will be faint, but if I can find a hint of it at the cabin, I might be able to track him down.”

“Let me check a few things and I’ll get back to you in the morning.”

“Thank you.”