

Chapter 72

The following morning Lieutenant Campton was at Rick's door.

"Hello, Lieutenant."

"One of my partners followed-up some more with Nate Santorum yesterday evening. Your story about Mr. Delling wanting to change himself into a squirrel match's his story. You still want to look for him?"

"Of course. Give me a couple minutes to pack some things."

A little over two hours later, the state trooper guarding the cabin let Lieutenant Campton and Rick pass through the taped-off barrier. Rick headed straight towards the open window. The trooper only stared at Rick for a moment.

"You don't need to go inside?" Campton asked.

Rick sat-up. "No. Not if my theory is correct." He dropped back down on all four and started sniffing around the open windowsill and then the ground. He made his way over towards a nearby pine tree. "The scent is faint, maybe five or so days old, but a squirrel definitely came through that window and went-up this tree."

"It could have been the other way around."

Rick shook his head in the negative while his tail whipped back and forth left-to-right. "I only smell one trail. No wild squirrel would spend long in a human dwelling with a dead body in there. If one had gone in, there'd be two scent trails as it would have departed long before your team arrived to find Ross' body. In addition, a wild squirrel instinctually would look for some way in from higher-up the building than a first floor window unless you put a bunch of food near that open window." Rick sighed. "But five days. He could be many miles from here and in any direction." He closed his eyes a moment in thought. "I know it'll be like searching for a needle in a haystack. Will you please wait here? It may be futile, but I need to try and go look. I'll check-in every hour by phone if you like, but I'll need your number."

Campton handed a business card to Rick. "You won't get lost, will you?"

"I've got my phone, which has a GPS app. I can probably scent my way back if necessary, too. I'll return no later than this evening. Promise."

Rick threw his backpack on and darted off through the woods without waiting for Campton's response. He tried to recall Pistachio's trip fleeing from the hospital in his memories. Something inside him had driven Pistachio to flee northeast. So, Rick turned in that direction, pausing every now and then to sniff around the base of this tree and that one. Now and then, he smelled a faint scent similar to the one from outside the cabin. He would then chatter loudly and pause listening

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

for a response before proceeding onward. He continued to do this for about an hour. Then, as promised, he sent a text to the number on Lieutenant Campton's business card.

Nothing yet, except a faint scent.

Rick continued to repeat this process for the next few of hours. He called-up an area map on his phone. It took a moment to load as he didn't have a strong signal. It looked like he'd covered almost 3 miles (4.8km), more or less in a northeast direction. He nodded to himself, happy his sense of direction was as good as he suspected and continued on. Noon quickly came and went with still little luck. He thought he had picked-up the scent a few more times, but there were many others over it. A few times, squirrels chattered warning at him from the trees, but they fled when he chattered back at them.

He took a snack break knowing he'd have to turn back shortly in order to return before dusk. After nibbling on some grapes and a granola bar, he let out one last loud chatter before preparing to turn back. His ears perked up. Was that a faint reply? He chattered again. This time, he was sure of it and picked-up his pace, still towards the northeast, letting out a chatter now and then. Yes, the response back was getting louder/closer.

He skidded to a halt at the base of a huge old white pine. The scent he was searching for was strong and recent here. He looked-upward. "Ross?" He called out. "Are you up there?"

A nervous chatter replied to him and then a gray squirrel came into view slowly making its way down the trunk. Its tail wigwagged fearfully.

A high-pitched voice barely in his hearing range called down. "Pistachio?"

"Yes, Ross. Are you alright?"

Ross darted down the rest of the distance. He leapt onto Pistachio's shoulder, did a couple circuits around him and then threw his small body around the larger squirrel's right arm and hugged him tightly. He rattled off too quickly for Pistachio to understand him as he went in and out of Pistachio's hearing range.

"Hold on, Ross. You're too high pitched and chattering way too fast for me to keep up. I can't make out half of what you're saying."

Ross chattered fearfully and looked at Rick with pleading in his eyes as his tail whirled around in a circle over his body and head. He slowly replied in his high-pitched voice, "Please take me away from here."

"Alright, I understood you that time. We'll get going shortly. I need to send a message off to the police back at the cabin."

(nervouschatter) "No." Ross' tail wigwagged fearfully as he moved from Pistachio's arm to his shoulder glancing at the tree.

“Ross, they won’t hurt you. I’ll be with you,” Rick tried to reassure the feral gray squirrel. He sent off a quick text. “Are you hungry?”

Ross rattled off again too quickly and high pitched for Rick to catch most of it.

Rick sighed. “This is going to be difficult, Ross if you can’t go a little slower and lower pitched. You keep going out of my hearing range. Maybe I can find something to help. You’ll have to be patient. I’m only getting one bar way out here.”

“Yes, hungry,” Ross squeaked.

Rick got a search started on his phone. He pulled his backpack off. “I’ve got grapes, another granola bar, and some nuts. What would you like?” Rick’s phone pinged. He glanced at it. “Yes, I think that will help. But it may be a little while for the app to download.” He tapped the icon to download the app suggested by his search.

“Grapes.”

“Alright.” Rick pulled a plastic container out of his pack, opened it, and set it down on the ground in front of him. Ross jumped down and picked up a red grape with both forepaws and started nibbling on it. When he finished it, he picked up a second and nibbled on that one.

Again, Rick’s phone pinged. “Well, that didn’t take as long as I feared.” He started the app. “Alright, Ross, say something so I can test this.”

“This grape is tasty,” he exclaimed quickly in his high-pitched, tiny voice. Rick barely made it out.

“This grape is tasty,” Rick’s phone repeated at a slower, lower effeminate pitch.

“Excellent. It works. Wait.” He glanced more closely at Ross. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t notice before. Would you prefer I call you something else?”

The gray squirrel rattled something off too quick and high pitched for Pistachio to understand, but the phone app was still able to capture it as it repeated: “Yes, I chose to become a female squirrel. I got the idea from you at our meeting in the hospital. I don’t need to lecture you that normal squirrels don’t need a name. As you need to call me something, you may call me Rose.”

Rose dug into a third grape before the app could repeat what she said next. “I am very hungry and tired.” She drooped her tail a moment. “I’ve tried for days to find a territory to call my own, but I kept getting chased off by other squirrels.” Rose drooped her tail again pausing between nibbles, sighed, and added. “This is harder than I thought it would be.” She quickly finished the third grape.

“If you’re ready, I’ll take you back to the cabin.”

Rose wigwagged her tale fearfully.

“They won’t hurt you, Rose. I trust them and I’ll be there to protect you. We should get you to a veterinarian to make sure you’re physically alright.”

Rose hesitated for a moment, nibbling on a forth grape. As she finished it, she nodded. Rick put the grapes away, slipped his backpack back on, and sent off one more text.

“Get on my back above my pack and you can ride back. However, I need to turn the phone off for now. When I stop for breaks, I can turn it back on if you want to talk.”