

Chapter 73

Rick's sense of direction was good enough that he didn't need to scent his way back. He emerged from the woods near the cabin in roughly half the time he had spent heading out.

Rose clung tightly, almost painfully, to Rick's back just above his pack, keeping the larger squirrel between her and the two state troopers. If she could have burrowed between the pack and his back, she would have.

"As I let you know by text, I've found Rose, but she's very scared, Lieutenant. I'm sure the wild squirrel instincts are very overwhelming to her."

"Keep them away from me!" Rose called out in her high-pitched voice.

"Did he just squeak 'Keep them away from me'?"

Rick looked up at the state trooper. "She, Lieutenant. She did more than become a squirrel. She swapped genders. I'm glad she chose to keep the vocal cords. It would be a pain to need her to type out what she wants to say on my phone or scratch it in the dirt with a stick. Her voice is very high-pitched, which is understandable considering her size. I can barely understand her at times. Give me a moment to restart the app on my phone. It will repeat what she says in a way we can understand it." Rick pulled his phone out, carefully swiped it and started the app. "I turned it off for the journey back as I'm going to need to recharge this soon. Either running this app or the poor reception up here seems to be draining the battery." The phone beeped.

"How are you doing, Rose," Rick asked the gray squirrel.

Rose chattered nervously and squeaked something off. The phone then repeated it, "No, please! Don't let them trap me!"

"Rose, you're safe. I promised I would protect you. Are you hungry, again? I've got a few more grapes."

"Hungry. Grapes. Yes, please!"

"How is that possible?" Lieutenant Campton asked. He glanced at the other officer. "Corporeal, please tell me I'm not hearing things."

The other officer shook his head. "Sir, if you're hearing things, I am too. The small squirrel can talk."

Rick pulled his pack off, pulled out the container of grapes and popped it open again for Rose. She dropped down quickly dug in, putting Rick between herself and the humans. Rick pulled out a granola bar for himself.

"As I said, I don't have many grapes left, Rose, but you're welcome to them."

“Grapes are good,” Rose exclaimed quickly in her high-pitched, tiny voice.

“Grapes are good,” Rick’s phone repeated at a slower, lower pitch.

“I understood that without the phone,” Lieutenant Campton stated and started to come closer.

“Please keep your distance, Lieutenant. At least until Rose feels a little more comfortable around people.” Rick turned to Rose who was digging into the last grape. “Rose, would you please repeat for Lieutenant Campton what you said when I first found you?”

Rose rattled something off that sounded like a series of squeaks to him and Campton. The phone again repeated it at a slower, lower pitch. “I was so scared, tired, and hungry. I couldn’t find territory not claimed by other squirrels. I kept getting chased off. Being a squirrel is harder than I thought. I don’t think I would have lasted much longer if you hadn’t found me, Pistachio.”

“Are you Ross Delling?” Campton called over.

“I was once Ross Delling back when I was a human,” came from Pistachio’s phone after Rose’s squeaky reply. “As I said to Pistachio, wild squirrels don’t normally need a name, but you may call me Rose.” She looked up at Rick. “I’m still hungry. May I have a nut?”

Rick pulled out a walnut in the shell and Rose happily dug into it, cracking it loudly.

Rick waited for her to finish the nut. “You need to trust Lieutenant Campton, Rose, so that he can transport us to a veterinarian to check you over.”

Rose nervously wigwagged her tail. “I’ll...I’ll try.”

“Lieutenant, please approach us slowly, crouch down, and hold out your hand for Rose.”

Campton complied. Rose scrambled up onto Rick’s back and cowered with her tail held over her back chittering nervously.

“I’m sorry. I’m so scared. Pistachio isn’t scared, so I’m trying, but it’s so hard. He says you want to help, but my mind is saying I need to flee before you can grab me!”

“You’re scared for a very good reason, Rose.” Rick coaxed the gray squirrel. “Yes, Lieutenant Campton looks like a big scary predator. But he’s here to help you. I went through the same thing you’re feeling when I first woke-up like this. You’ll be alright. Take a good sniff of his hand and think in your mind he’s a friend. I had to do the same thing at first after my transformation last year, Rose. I’m here. I’ll protect you if he tries to hurt you. But he won’t, will you, Lieutenant?”

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

“No, not at all,” Campton replied quietly crouching. He stretched-out his hand and held still. “Though, I’ll admit I can’t believe I’m talking to a small gray squirrel and she is talking back to me.”

Rose worked-up the courage, reached out and touched Campton’s hand, grasping two of his fingers with her forepaws and carefully sniffed. Her tail kept flicking around in a circle over her body.

“Remember, think in your head he’s a friend as you sniff, Rose. It’ll help,” Rick coaxed the new squirrel.

She sniffed some more as her tail wigwagging slowed down and then ceased. She then let go.

“You may touch me if you’re slow and careful.”

Campton looked at Rick.

“She gave you permission. Just take it really slow and gently. Remember, she’s a wild animal now with human memories. This is to help her trust you, by proving you aren’t going to grab her. And I suggest you don’t try and grab her or she may bite you. You saw how easily she cracked that walnut. Imagine what she could do to your hand.”

Campton nodded and slowly, gently reached out and stroked Rose’s head, neck, and back with two fingers. She quivered under his touch. He repeated the stroking a couple times.

“That’s enough,” she said.

Campton drew his hand back slowly. “Your fur is very soft, Ms. Rose.”

“Thank you. Pistachio said you’ll take us to a veterinarian. Please do so.”

“I’ll get in back with her, Lieutenant, to help her feel safe.”

“Where am I going, Mr. Michaud?”

“The Squam Lake Science Center. I’ll call Dr. Joe Canatori as soon as we’re settled in the backseat. Rose, apparently, isn’t ready to live in the wild. I can’t think of a better place for her to spend the winter. After the call, I’ll need to plug my phone in to charge”

“This is going to make for a very ‘fun’ report.”

“I agree this is going to be a ‘fun’ report for you. I’m also not looking forward to facing the media on this one.” Rick drooped his tail. “Given time, we should be able to get the full story out of her, provided enough of her humanity remains at that point.”

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

Rick tried to call Dr. Canatori, but he didn't pick-up, so Rick sent a text message and then one to his wife. He quickly received replies from both.

"We're all set, Lieutenant, Dr. Canatori will be ready for us. He apologized for not picking up on my call."

Rick powered down his phone, passed a cable into the front seat for Campton to plug in. Thanking him, Rick settled down on the back seat with Rose. Campton pulled out onto the road and headed south, shaking his head in disbelief. It wasn't long before both squirrels were fast asleep in the back of his cruiser, with the larger one curled protectively around the smaller one.