

Chapter 78

“Welcome back to *Granite State*. As promised, we will now air my interview with Rose the squirrel conducted earlier this afternoon here on the campus of White Mountain State University.”

The scene switches to the WMSU campus common in front of the student union building. An area roughly 50ft (15m) on each side is roped-off. There are several trees within the roped-off area. Rick scampers up to Lois and her cameraman. He leads them into the roped-off area.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet here, Ms. Sanchez. This area is roped off so students won’t accidentally walk into our interview. Rose doesn’t want to be overwhelmed by a huge group of humans.”

“Like what happened to you last fall, Mr. Michaud?”

Rick nodded. “And I’ve already forgiven you in the past for accidentally chasing me up a tree at that time. Anyway, according to the medical staff who monitored my change and all the testing they put me through afterward, I’m roughly eighty, maybe eighty-five percent squirrel. Rose is more than ninety-nine percent. She chose to keep her vocal cords and has some of her human memories. However, as I warned you earlier off camera, I shall do so again here on camera. Please remember that, technically, Rose is a wild animal. Make no threatening moves once she joins us.”

“Where is she at this moment?”

“In the oak tree above us,” Rick gestured upwards with his tail. “She is watching us and looking about. She’s probably having an internal debate as to whether or not to come down. She had a difficult time facing the two police officers who met us at the cabin after I coaxed her out of the woods. She only agreed to the police interview if I was there. I think she uses me to build-up her courage, taking her cues from me. If I’m not afraid, she has nothing to fear herself.” Rick pulls his phone out of his pocket. “Now then, on my phone, I have an app to help us understand her. Due to her small size and tiny vocal cords, she’s barely in my hearing range and out of it sometime, especially if she gets excited and talks rapidly. If you’ve had time to review the police interview, you understand how it works already. This app will repeat what she says at a slower, lower pitch. Let me demonstrate.”

Rick held the phone flat in his hand and spoke into it. “The green frog leapt far.” The phone repeated it slower and at a lower pitch.

“Please try it with your own voice, Ms. Sanchez. I want to make sure your audience realizes this isn’t some trick.”

Rick passed the phone over.

“This app makes your voice lower pitched?” The phone repeated her question slower and lower pitched.

“Interesting,” Lois responded as she handed the phone back as it repeated, “Interesting.”

“It looks like she’s chosen to come down and join us. Don’t make any sudden moves or she might flee back up the tree.”

Rick sat down at the base of the tree as a gray squirrel came down the trunk. It leapt onto his head. The gray squirrel’s tail wigwags back and forth.

“Rose, this is Lois Sanchez with Newscenter 9. She wants to ask you a few questions.”

The gray squirrel looks directly at Lois. “Hello, Ms. Sanchez,” it squeaks out, barely audible. It is quickly repeated at a slower, lower pitch by Rick’s phone. “You may call me, Rose. Please hold out a hand and let me sniff it.”

“It’s to help her imprint that you’re not going to harm her, Ms. Sanchez.”

Lois held her hand out. Rose grasps two of her fingers with her forepaws and sniffs. She then releases it.

“I need to sniff the cameraman too.”

Roy, the cameraman reaches forward and does likewise.

“Thank you. Where do you want me to start?”

“Ms. Rose, you were Ross Delling before?”

“Yes.”

There was silence a moment as Lois expected more.

“Little sister, she’ll want more detailed answers, just like Lieutenant Campton.”

“Oh, sorry, big brother. I didn’t know as I never watched the news when I was human.” Rose gave Lois her full attention again. “Yes, when I was human, I was Ross Delling. Now that I’m a squirrel, as I said, you may call me Rose.”

Lois nodded. “Why are you calling each other brother and sister?”

“I used the same DNA template to change myself, Ms. Sanchez, as I had planned to use last year when Pistachio was accidentally transformed in my place. While I couldn’t stop Pistachio’s transformation, I was able to alter the species at his wife’s request. Otherwise, he’d be a gray squirrel like me, though huge. Even though he’s a Eurasian red squirrel now, if you were to run a DNA test, you would find that we’d nearly be twins except for our gender.”

“I’ve seen your interview with the police, Ms. Rose. Are the nanobots still in your body? Could you possibly infect others and turn them into squirrels?”

Rose’s tale started lashing back and forth as she screeched in distress. “Is Dr. Canatori alright?”

Lois looked puzzled at this response as Rick reached up and gently stroked Rose on the back of the neck and tried to reassure her.

“It’s alright, Rose. Dr. Joe Canatori is fine.”

“Of the Squam Lake Science Center?”

“Yes,” Rick replied. “He is on my medical team as he’s a wildlife veterinarian. After I found Rose in the woods and coaxed her to come back to the cabin, the state police took us to the Science Center. That was so Dr. Canatori could examine her. She accidentally nipped him during the exam. It was a very light nip. He didn’t bleed at all.”

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to!” Rose, tears running from her eyes, fled back up the tree chittering in panicked flight.

Rick shrugged. “She was jumpy like that back when she was human. I’ve lost track of the number of times then Ross Delling apologized to me for changing me into a giant squirrel. I tried to reassure him every time that I had accepted his apology and he didn’t need to apologize again. I even thanked him a few times pointing out that if the accident hadn’t happened, I’d probably be dead.”

“Is Dr. Joe Canatori still human, Mr. Michaud?”

Rick (gigglechittered). “He was when we left the Science Center today as Rose had been staying there since he examined her. As that’s been several days and Dr. Canatori is still very much human, I would guess that there aren’t any nanobots left in Rose. You can always drop by and check on him.”

A distressed scree came faintly from up in the oak tree. Rick sighed and drooped his tail. “I don’t think you’ll be able to ask any more questions, Ms. Sanchez. It took my wife thirty minutes to coax me back down last fall after I had fled up the tree outside Dartmouth-Hitchcock. My little sister may be up there a while.” Rick glanced at his phone. “As it is, you’re going to be hard-pressed to make deadline for tonight’s newscast, considering we’re about an hour from Manchester and you’ll still need time to edit what you’ve got. Anticipating that, I’ve made arrangements with our student broadcast studio to help you edit together what you’ve got. Just be sure to provide the university credit, of course.”

“Thank you, Mr. Michaud. So, she is staying at the Science Center?”

“She was staying at the Science Center, Ms. Sanchez. She will be staying with a wildlife rehabber through the winter. For her safety and that of the rehabber, I’m not going to disclose

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

which one. Let's face it. There are probably those out there who would love to cage her up as their exotic talking pet. After wintering with a rehabber, come spring, she'll again attempt to go establish her own territory and live out her life as the wild gray squirrel she's chosen to become."

The scene fades and again, Lois Sanchez is on screen in front of Robert Frost Hall.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Michaud was correct. I wouldn't get to ask any more questions with Ms. Rose. I was able to reach Dr. Joe Canatori at the Squam Lake Science Center, who reassured me he is very much still human." She pauses a moment. "Roy, turn the camera around."

The camera pans around and focuses on Rick Michaud. Rick scampers by and sits up next to Ms. Sanchez. A gray squirrel is perched on his back.

"I know you're live. Ms. Sanchez. I was able to coax her into taking a few more questions. Try to make them easy ones." Rick started the app on his phone.

"Thank you for agreeing to more questions, Ms Rose." The gray squirrel looked at her and wigwagged her tail. "I'm sorry I caused you distress earlier today. Can we pick-up where we left off. Do you still have nanites in you?"

"I'm sorry I panicked and fled earlier, Ms. Sanchez. I was already fighting the fear of being so close to you. The fear of what I might have done to Dr. Canatori overwhelmed me. I couldn't help myself. I had to flee. No. There are no nanites in me. They remained in my former human body."

"Are you happy as a squirrel?"

Rose wigwagged her tail a few times thinking for a bit. "I hated being a human. I hope I'll be happy as a squirrel. Time will tell."

"Thank you, Ms. Rose. I'd love to ask more questions, but," she turned from the gray squirrel to face the camera, "unfortunately, we're just about out of time here on *Granite State*. Thank you to the New Hampshire State Police, White Mountain State University, and their Goodwill Ambassador, Richard Pistachio Michaud for their assistance in tonight's program. And a very special thank you to Rose the squirrel for agreeing to be interviewed. Next week on *Granite State* we'll have an interview with Nate Santorum of Second Limb Prosthetics to discuss the research his company is doing based on Ms. Rose's nanobots. I am Liz Sanchez. Goodnight from Groton."

The light on the camera turned off indicating they were no longer on the air. Ms. Sanchez turned back to Rick and Rose. "Thank you."

"No, we need to thank you for getting this out to the public," Rick replied. "However, we can't hang around. It's getting dark and we're both very diurnal."

"May I ask one more question?"

Rick paused.

“Ms. Rose, may I have a follow-up interview in the future once you have a better idea if you’re happy as a squirrel or not?”

Rose wigwagged her tail in thought. “Maybe. When the time comes, contact my brother and he’ll ask me.”

Before Ms. Sanchez could say anything else, the giant squirrel scampered away from her across campus with the gray squirrel riding his back.