

Chapter 1

The Rescue



“RUFF! RUFF! RUFF!”

Three big barks changed my life.

Bruno the Brute was on the hunt. We didn't call him the Brute for nothing. He was a monster of a boxer dog. Even the mailman was afraid of him. He would not walk down our side of the street because of that dog and always left our mail at Mrs. Chu's.

I covered Tyler's ears with my front paws to block the barking noise.

Too late. Tyler woke up.

I dove back down beside Tyler's feet.

“Bruno's cornered something, Amos!” he yelled, bolting out of bed and flinging the covers off.

I had been stretched out in my favourite spot on top of his feet, white belly up to the sky, deep in dreamland. Clouds of dim sum steamed above my head. I was creeping into a nest of mice in Cat Heaven, ready to crunch their tiny bones when me and my blubber went flying to the floor.

Tyler raced to the wide-open window. I dragged myself behind. I'd follow him anywhere. He's my best friend, though he's just eleven.

Down below in the neighbour's yard, Bruno paced around the one tree left in our neighbour-

hood. That dog has a reputation. I remember when the junkyard down the block borrowed Bruno because their old German shepherd guard dog, Motor Mouth, got a three-day bellyache from licking rusty cans. Bruno ended up getting a bonus bone for biting a robber on his behind. That's all Bruno cares about now—bones!

Bruno clawed at a hole in the tree. He stuck his big black nose inside like a bear after honey. Suddenly the Brute howled. I hate when he does that. The Persian hairs on my back stick straight up like electricity hit me. All my grey stripes shiver. Actually I'm not one hundred percent Persian. I'm just Persian on my mother's side. The rest of me is pure alley cat.

Not if a hundred mice awaited me would I plant a single paw in Bruno's yard. Only the brave would go anywhere near there. Maybe if our mother, Francesca, were home, she'd go.

So I pointed to the clock with my tail, reminding Tyler that he was way late for school. He ignored me. He does that sometimes. He rushed downstairs and out the door in bare feet and pyjamas. From my spot by the window, I saw Bruno leap in mid-air with his shark jaw wide open.

WOOF!

Bruno made a muffled sound like something being sucked down a vacuum cleaner. The chain-link fence rattled as Tyler climbed over.

“STOP that, Bruno!” Tyler demanded.

He planted his skinny long legs a few feet away from the dog. Bruno outweighed him big time. Bruno stood still but couldn’t say one word. Something was stuffed between his rubbery lips.

Tyler pointed to the dirt. “Sit down, Bruno!”

Bruno plopped on his haunches, stretched out flat, and whined a baritone tune so loud I worried it’d shatter the cracked glass in our windows.

“Let go of it right now!” Tyler ordered him.

The Brute did not let go.

Tyler stepped up so close to the boxer, his bare toes touched the Brute’s claws. I sucked in my breath. Nobody gets that close to Bruno. Not if they want to live a nice long life. But Tyler knew what to do. That boy has instincts. He tapped Bruno on his black nose. That was his soft spot. The rest of him, even his short stub of a tail, was pure beef.

Bruno’s eyes rolled up into the top of his head. He pleaded. He begged. Big crocodile tears dripped down his face.

“Drop it NOW!” Tyler’s teeth were clenched. “Or you know what will happen.”

That was his last word. There would be no more bones from our house if the Brute didn’t listen now.

Bruno gave Tyler his sorry big-eyed look and spat out a dark blob. Then he ran off in a swirl of tail and blubber, burrowing beneath an old shed.

Tyler knelt in the dirt, grabbed a newspaper and lifted the blob up. By the time our back door opened, I was in the kitchen waiting for Tyler.

He spread the newspaper on the floor. “It didn’t move, and I couldn’t leave it outside. Bruno will be back for it.”

A creature half the size of Tyler’s palm lay on the chipped linoleum floor. It was black as midnight, except for the drops of blood. Startled eyes poked out of a furry face. Tiny hairs on its skin stuck up like bean sprouts.

Tyler gasped. “A baby squirrel! It’s been hurt. Let’s hope it doesn’t die of fright.”

Tyler did his thing, the same trick he used when he first brought me home two years ago. All I’d known before then was the streets. How my heart pounded when he had picked me up! Now Tyler spread out his hands and gently, like a brush of wind, laid them over the squirrel’s pumping heart.

The squirrel’s eyes widened. They shone like glass, unblinking.

The tips of two front teeth gleamed, small as pencil points.

Minutes passed.

Twenty tiny claws uncurled. Just like lights dimming one by one, the squirrel's breath slowed, its eyes shut, and its black head plopped to one side. For the first time in history, another animal besides Amos was snoring on our kitchen floor.

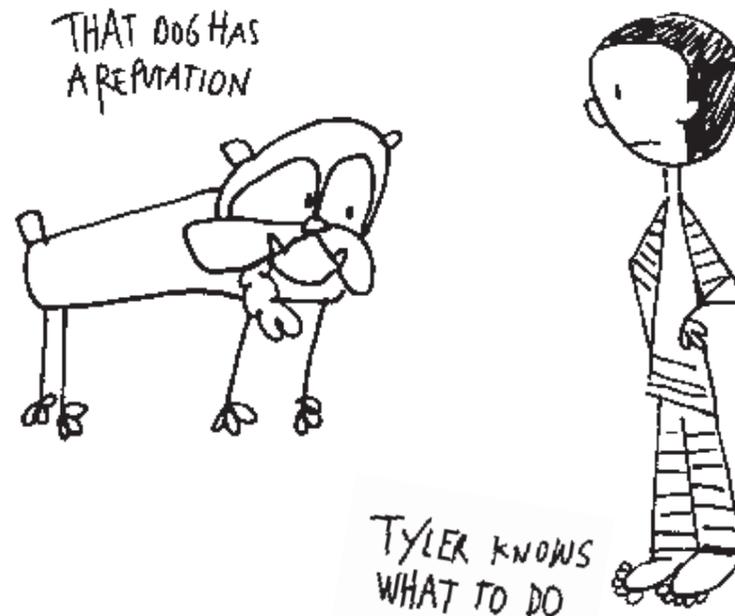
The baby squirrel was a sound sleeper. I crept up close to study it. It looked too young to leave its nest. It was smaller than Tyler's baby finger, so small that a coffee mug could have been its whole apartment. Its hair was see-through, like the first grass that pops up in spring.

"I'd better operate while this baby is asleep," Tyler said.

He set out a bowl of warm water, paper towels, peroxide, gauze and a shoebox. I clenched my teeth.

"Take a deep breath, Amos," Tyler said. "This won't hurt you a bit."

I tried purring to quiet myself but I wasn't in the mood to meditate. So I covered one eye with my paw and watched with my other eye while Tyler bathed the squirrel's tail where all the dog drool was. Teeth marks cut clear through it. Then



Tyler wrapped gauze around its spiky black tail. After the operation, Tyler put the creature inside the shoebox and spread a paper towel on top. You'd never know we had a squirrel in the house.

Then Tyler jumped into jeans and a sweatshirt and stuffed a muffin into his mouth.

"I'd better run to school, Amos. It's nine thirty already," he said between munches. "I'm way late... again!"

I shot my tail straight up with a curve at the end like a question mark.

"Be on the lookout, Amos. Make sure the squirrel doesn't escape. I'll tell Mum about it later. She's going to be in for a big surprise, isn't she?"

Tyler bent down so I could give him the Head Bonk. The tops of our heads smacked hard against each other.

I sat on the windowsill watching Tyler run down the street in his soccer sneakers. My heart rose in my furry chest. Tyler still hoped for an after-school soccer game even though he was late for school again. Between rescuing animals and getting detentions for lateness, that boy was so busy.

Out in the backyard, there was no sign of Bruno. It was the kind of crisp spring morning with wind rustling the bamboo out back. An aroma blew

from across the Boulevard. There must be a hundred Chinese restaurants over there cooking dim sum chock-full of shrimp, carp and whitefish. Ever since Mrs. Chu brought home a steamed fish ball just for me, I've been a Chinese food addict. My belly grumbled, but my food bowl was empty. Tyler had forgotten to feed me.

I was left all alone in the house with something in the shoebox and nothing in my belly. But Francesca was due home from the night shift soon. She would feed me. I crossed my paws and sure hoped so.