

MR. TUTTLE VERSUS THE WIND

Chapter One

One evening in late summer, Mr. Tuttle, a young raccoon, woke up very suddenly. Something small and hard had hit him on the head.

He had been curled, fast asleep, high up in his favorite tree, an enormous white oak that towered over all the buildings around it, spreading its branches more than fifty feet in every direction. It was by far the biggest and oldest tree in the Backyards, older even than some of the houses it shaded. Everyone called it the Great Tree.

Rubbing his head, Mr. Tuttle sat up and looked around. It was still early—the sun hadn't even set yet. Far out over the buildings to the south he could see the sun glowing on the water of the harbor and giving Ms. Liberty's torch a sparkle at its tip, as if it were an actual flame instead of cast iron. It was way earlier than he was used to getting up. Being a nocturnal animal, he preferred to get up in the dark, when all the humans who lived in the houses below him had gone inside, and it was safe to go down and find some breakfast. He was a firm believer in the benefits of sleeping late.

Just then there was a noise in the branches above him, and another object came hurtling down toward him, missing him by inches. It was a very large acorn.

Standing on his hind legs, Mr. Tuttle peered up through the tangle of branches. After a moment, he spotted a fluffy gray tail swishing back and forth between the leaves. He should've known. It was his neighbor, Simon, the squirrel, who lived with his family in the hollow below Mr. Tuttle's sleeping perch. Leave it to a squirrel to work all day and into the night. They definitely were not animals who believed in sleeping late.

"Simon!" Mr. Tuttle called. "Hey, Simon!"

The tail disappeared. It was replaced a second later by a pointy face and two small black eyes blinking quickly.

“Mr. Tuttle?” Simon replied. “Is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me. What are you doing up there? Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“Oh. Did I wake you?”

“Wake me?” Mr. Tuttle snorted. “You almost killed me. Watch where you’re throwing those things, huh?”

“Sorry! I’ll be right down.” Simon’s face withdrew through the thick curtain of leaves. The branches rustled, and several leaves floated toward the ground. Then Simon reappeared, scampering down the trunk with his cheeks so full of nuts he looked like he was wearing bags on either side of his face. He continued down until his head was level with Mr. Tuttle’s.

“Hrmm ermmm mrrmmm,” he said, his tail twitching.

Mr. Tuttle rolled his eyes. “Simon, I don’t speak acorn.”

“Erm? Mrm.” Opening his mouth, Simon let the nuts fall toward the ground. He shrugged. “Sorry about that. Just the circumstances, though. We’re doubling our efforts to stock the pantry. No time to waste.”

“What are you talking about?” Mr. Tuttle asked. “It’s still summer. You’ve got months before the cold arrives.”

“Haven’t you seen it?” Simon frowned. “Haven’t you felt it?”

“Seen what?” Mr. Tuttle shook his head. “I haven’t felt anything.”

“The wind, Mr. Tuttle. The sky.” Simon aimed his tail upwards.

“The sky?” Mr. Tuttle looked. It was a pretty sky, long thin clouds glowing with the colors of the setting sun, gold and orange and plum. He shrugged. “What about it?”

“Have you ever seen clouds moving like that?” A hint of annoyance had crept into Simon’s voice.

Mr. Tuttle looked harder. Wait a sec, that was weird. The clouds weren’t just moving across the sky, they were streaking across the sky. It was like there was some great cloud race going on and the finish line was in sight.

“Hmm. Why are they doing that?” he said.

“I don’t know. But it’s obvious what it is.” The squirrel nodded importantly.

“It is?”

“Honestly, Mr. Tuttle.” Simon made a disapproving clicking sound at the back of his throat. “It’s as obvious as the stripes on your tail. It’s a sign, of course. A sign that something is coming. Which means we have to prepare, and quickly. Take precautions. Assume the worst.”

“Give me a break.” Mr. Tuttle couldn’t help laughing. He had a very different view of the world than his downstairs neighbor. He could never understand how squirrels could spend all their time working, constantly filling their nests with nuts and chaff until they barely had any room for themselves. Where was the fun? Where was the adventure? Life was too short to work so hard.

“Come on, it’s just a few little clouds.” Mr. Tuttle leaned back against the trunk of the tree and kicked his hind feet up on a branch. “I’m sure there’s a simple explanation.”

“What about the wind?” Simon said, his eyes flashing. “How do you explain that?”

“The wind? Why it’s ... it’s....” Mr. Tuttle held up one paw. Then he licked it and held it up again. Okay, the wind did feel strange. It wasn’t blowing especially hard, but as it moved through his fingers and over his pads, it had a curious weight to it. It was heavy air, and curving upward as it moved. Mr. Tuttle had never felt wind like that before.

“Okay, sure, the wind, the clouds.” He rubbed his nose. “Look, I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about. But tell you what, if I have time later, I’ll go ask Jacoby what’s going on. If anyone knows, it’ll be him.”

Jacoby was the old pit bull who lived in backyard number eleven. He was almost as old as the Great Tree, or so it seemed, and he always had the answer to everything. Right after breakfast, Mr. Tuttle would pay him a visit and ask him about this wind and clouds business.

“In the meantime,” he added, with a grin, “maybe you should try to relax a little. Take a load off, you know?”

“That’s just your problem, Mr. Tuttle,” Simon said. “You never take anything seriously. But I’m telling you now, you can’t shrug this off. Something’s happening—something that’s never happened before. I don’t know what it is, but I know it’s big. You need to prepare. You need to be ready.”

“Let’s talk again after breakfast.” Mr. Tuttle winked. “First things first, pal.”

Simon shook his head in disapproval. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Sure, sure.” The raccoon stifled a yawn. “By the way, if you have too many nuts, I’d be happy to take some off your hands.”

“Too many nuts?” Simon looked at him, aghast. “You can never have too many nuts. Never, never, ever. I—”

“Relax, Simon. It’s a joke.” Mr. Tuttle held up his paws to calm his overexcited friend. “You really do need to lighten up.”

Simon was about to respond when a small voice floated up from below. It was one of Simon’s sons—Timmy, his youngest.

“Dad!” he called out in his tiny voice. “It’s dinner time. Mom says to hurry.”

“I’m coming! Be down in a second.” Simon looked back at Mr. Tuttle. His small dark eyes were probing. “Just be careful, that’s all I’m saying. Sometimes we have to look at the way we live. Every one of us, including you. Always sneaking around in the middle of the night. Gets a little shady, you know.”

“I’m a nocturnal animal,” Mr. Tuttle replied, with a laugh. “That’s how I roll.”

“All I’m saying is, be careful. Something’s happening that’s going to change everything. If ever there was a time to reconsider your ways, it’s now.”

“Thanks for the warning. I appreciate it.” Mr. Tuttle held one paw solemnly over his heart and bowed his head. “We’ll talk after I talk to Jacoby. Have a good night, Simon.”

Simon sniffed sharply, as if trying to think up one last thing to say. But then, with a shake of his head, he shot down the side of the tree and into his hollow. For a moment his tail

remained sticking out, as if there wasn't any room in the house to hold it. Then, with two wiggles, it disappeared inside.

Smiling, Mr. Tuttle went back to sleep.