

Chapter 30

Nate Santorum entered the room. He did his best to not stare at the roughly three-foot-tall reddish-gray furred squirrel sitting on the bed as the squirrel watched his every move with obvious intelligence. The squirrel nodded at him.

“Hello, Mr. Nate Santorum.” Pistachio said, wigwagging his tail and chittered briefly. “Don’t be afraid to stare.” He slowly spun around on the bed so Nate could see his whole body. “Not too bad a job, right down to the pockets.” He briefly slipped his forepaws into them. “I’m sorry about the fursuit. I know you invested a lot of...” he paused staring blankly briefly, “capital in it. That would be the correct word in this case, right?”

“No apology I could give can make up for what has happened to you, Rick.”

Pistachio sighed. “You haven’t been briefed by Ross, I see. I’m Pistachio. Rick’s not home as you might put it. I’m trying to look for him up here,” Pistachio pointed to his head with his tail as he had done for others previously. “But I’ve had no luck finding him yet, Nate. I’ve got his memories, but I’m not Rick. I’m his squirrel character, Pistachio, brought to life. Whether it’s cause Rick’s gone, in hiding, or as Ross fears, I’ve transformed too far, doesn’t matter. At the moment, Nate, I’m Pistachio and not Rick.”

“So, we’re still on a first name basis?”

“For the moment,” Abigail butted in sternly.

Nate slowly nodded noting the less than friendly tone in her voice. “Okay. I see where this is going. I’ll cut the small talk if you cut the good cop/bad cop routine. So, how much do you need to settle this?”

“How much do I want?” Abigail exclaimed. “Most of Rick is gone or hiding deep in his mind, letting his squirrel character, Pistachio, run the show. I want my husband back, Nate. How do we do that? Money isn’t going to do it.” Abigail fought back the tears. “Time may bring him back, but Pistachio thinks Rick might be gone.”

“You ever hear tales of near-death experiences about a bright white light and being drawn towards it?” Pistachio asked. “It’s true. When Rick/I was electrocuted, we saw that light and were heading towards it while also watching people work on our body. When the paramedics jolted our body jumpstarting Rick’s heart. I’m the one who returned instead of Rick.”

Nate slowly nodded. “So, what can I do?”

“If Rick is gone leaving his squirrel character behind in his place, you can make sure his death wasn’t in vain.” Abigail paused a moment trying to pull her thoughts together around the idea that she had started cooking up during her alone time with Pistachio. “You asked me what I want to settle this? As I can’t get my husband back at the moment, I want a partnership in Second Limb,” she stated. “Rick/Pistachio needs to be included in that partnership.”

Nate stared at her. “This accident has most likely doomed Second Limb. Why would you want a partnership in a company that’s about to go belly up?”

“It might not be a very long partnership, I’ll admit. I won’t be separated from my husband, regardless of what little of his mind remains. If Rick doesn’t surface by spring, you will inject Pistachio with another round of nanobots and shrink him to normal squirrel size per his wishes. If that takes place, I plan to follow him.”

Nate stared at her. “You’ve lost your mind.”

“Rick would say the same thing based on what I see in his memories,” Pistachio added while slowly wigwagging his tail. “And I just finished telling her that. Before you ask, I haven’t a clue what she’s up to, Nate. I’m just a simple squirrel still trying to comprehend the human memories I’ve wound-up with.”

Nate stared for a moment at the giant squirrel and then turned back to Abigail. “Again, why would you want a partnership in a company that may not be around much longer?”

“I’ll give you one freebie in explanation,” Abigail replied. “After that we have to be partners before I make any more suggestions.” She pointed toward Pistachio’s back end. “Where did that come from?”

“Nanobots changed your husband into that giant squirrel.”

Abigail sighed, “Yes, but that’s not what I meant. Pistachio, please turn around and wigwag your tail.”

Pistachio complied, turning his back to Nate and swished his tail in Nate’s face, the tip tickling his nose. Since Nate entered the room, a part of him wanted to flee to the far side of the room away from Nate, but he could smell the confidence in his mate and the fear in Nate. Since his mate wasn’t afraid, he wasn’t either. In addition, this seemed fun to him. He giggled as Nate sneezed.

“Where did Pistachio’s tail come from?”

“Your husband grew it as he changed into a squirrel.”

Abigail nodded. “Exactly!” She gently grabbed onto the base of Pistachio’s tail and shook it at Nate.

Pistachio looked indignantly at her. “Do you mind? Warn me next time, Abbie.”

“Sorry, hon.” She gently shook Pistachio’s tail at Nate a second time. “He ***GREW*** it.” She released Pistachio’s tail and he immediately began grooming it to put the rumpled fur back in place. “A human doesn’t have one, while a squirrel does. The nanobots looked at their

programming. That programing said he wasn't supposed to be human, but a squirrel. When they saw he didn't have a tail like a squirrel should have, they said, 'hey there's supposed to be a tail here!' and they grew him one."

Nate nodded. "Yes, the nanobots grew Rick.."

"Pistachio, please" Pistachio interrupted.

Nate looked at the squirrel. "Sorry. The nanobots grew Pistachio a tail. But I don't see what this can do..."

Abigail interrupted him. "Think about it for a moment, Nate. The nanobots grew him a tail! If they can grow a squirrel's tail where there wasn't one before, why can't they regrow a severed limb? Instead of telling them, 'Hey, this human should be a squirrel and needs a tail to be one.' Why can't they be programmed to look at the human's DNA and say, 'Hey, this human has only one leg. According to his DNA blueprint, he should have two. We need to fix that!'" Abigail paused a moment to let the idea sink in and then continued. "This is how you can help. This is how you can ensure this accident and Rick's possible death not be in vain. You can use what has happened to him to help others."

"Please understand, I have Rick's memories," Pistachio said. "But it's like he's someone else as I explained to the others earlier. His memories are like remembering a novel you've read, and Rick is the main character." Pistachio shrugged in a very human-like way. "Anyway, I'm calling up some of those memories, now. When Rick first met you, you said you do what you do to help service men and women. I like this idea Abbie is proposing. Rather than giving them the best," he paused searching for the word he wanted and then continued. "Prosthetic science can make, as Abbie has suggested, why not give them the real deal?" Pistachio swirled his tail. "Wouldn't that give a new meaning to the company's name, *Second Limb*?"

Nate's eyes grew wide at the possibility. "It would take a lot of research and testing."

"Of course, it will," Abigail replied, "never mind the PR that will be needed to ensure Pistachio's accident doesn't harm the company. However, as long as we get Ross Delling to cooperate and teach others everything he knows, we'll have a good head start on that research, wouldn't we? It couldn't be that difficult, could it? He changed Pistachio into a giant squirrel and obviously, it wasn't that costly, or you would have found him out long before it got to this point due to the cost overruns, right? I may only be a history professor, so, what do I know about biology and robotics. However, changing a human into a different species with an *extra* limb has got to be more difficult than regrowing a severed limb." She paused another moment before holding out her right hand. "So, partners?"

Nate didn't hesitate as he took it to seal the deal. Pistachio held out his slightly smaller paw and Nate shook it also. Pistachio had a firm grasp. It was a little unsettling to Nate due to the claws and the feel of the furless pads vs. the furry back of the paw and fingers.

"So, what's the next steps?" Nate asked.

“As much as I hate to get lawyers involved, we should have them work on something a little more formal than our handshake deal that we all can sign. In the meantime, I think we can get Ross Delling to cooperate when I offer him the option to avoid charges being pressed against him for what he did to my husband in exchange for his cooperation and sharing his knowledge.”

“And how will we know if he’s taught our staff correctly?”

This time, Pistachio responded, “Well, based on his brief conversation here earlier today, he intended to do this to himself,” Pistachio pointed to himself with his tail. “Considering I have been in a hospital room for ten days and he estimated it would have been another three to four to complete the process, that means a complete change from human to normal squirrel would be two weeks. Most likely, that two-week squirrel metamorphosis,” Pistachio semi-tongue tripped pronouncing that word. “period would mean dehydration would do him in if he tried to do this on his own. He’s not stupid. I suspect he now realizes he probably wouldn’t survive this if he were to attempt it on his own. As such, if he still wants to become a normal squirrel, he’ll need to depend on others monitoring the process. Those others will need to understand the process. So, he’ll want to make sure those who experiment on him get it correct, right?” His tail wigwagged briefly while his eyes narrowed, chittering in a way that sounded somewhat like a growl. “As I think Rick would say in this case, I’m sure he wouldn’t want there to be an ‘accident’ during the process.”

“No, he won’t,” Abigail added, “And so, he’ll make sure those he teaches understand the process thoroughly as his life will depend on it.”

Nate stared briefly at the giant reddish-gray squirrel and Abigail Michaud and nodded while wondered what he just got himself into.