

Chapter 34

There was a knock at the door. “Enter,” Pistachio answered.

A dark-skinned woman pushing fifty came through the door. She gasped when she saw Pistachio. She couldn’t help but stare at the large tassel-eared reddish-gray squirrel.

The squirrel smiled back at her. “Hello, Wynona, thank you for coming.” His tail wigwagged in greeting.

“Sweet Mary, Mother of God! Rick?!” Wynona York trembled as she moved over and sat down heavily in an available chair. “Abigail warned me, but I didn’t believe her.”

Pistachio’s tail wigwagged again. “Well, do you believe now? Rick remains my legal name in the human world as I’ve quickly learned, but I go by Pistachio now. I think Rick has described me to you many times.” He hopped down off the bed and came over to her chair. He reached out for her right hand with both his forepaws and gently grasped it. “Please don’t be alarmed. I need to sniff you to ingrain into my mind that you’re a friend.” He sniffed briefly and then let it go. “Thank you, Wynona. I’ve got Rick’s human memories and a squirrel’s instincts that I’m constantly needing to fight against. Part of those instincts were screaming at me to flee as you came over and sat down. Every time I encounter someone Rick knows and trusts, I’ve got to do this to calm the instincts. I’m hoping in time I can more easily ignore the urge to flee.”

Wynona continued to stare. Pistachio slowly turned around in a circle so she could see him from all sides. This was something else he had gotten used to quickly here in the hospital with the staff and the various specialists that had come to see him. She finally broke her gaze. “I’m sorry for staring. How...” she shook her head. “I’m not sure how to ask.”

Pistachio shrugged. “It’s as difficult to explain as it is for someone to ask. We could probably spend an hour or more over the long explanation. The short version, you could call it Divine intervention mixed with sabotage if you wish. Rick/I was not the intended test subject for this, um, let’s call it an ‘unauthorized medical experiment.’ I had been severely burned as you probably heard. However, if it weren’t for that experiment, I’d probably be dead. Rick/I was in very bad shape when we first arrived here. If I had somehow pulled through without this happening, I’d have been out for many months and probably would have had many skin graft operations ahead of me. But thanks to what happened, I healed quickly, but there were some serious ‘side effects’ as you can see.” Pistachio added a chitter to the end of the last sentence.

He stretched a moment waiting to see if Wynona would say anything. When she didn’t, he continued before the silence could become awkwardly long. “I said it before, I’ll say it again. Thank you for coming. I really appreciate it. As you know, Rick always tried his best to go through the proper channels.”

“You keep referring to yourself in the third person.”

“Well, I’m not Rick. I’m his squirrel character, Pistachio.”

“I...see...” Wynona responded with hesitation and doubt in her voice.

Pistachio sighed and drooped his tail. “I have Rick’s memories, but it’s like he was someone else. I know it sounds weird, but this is the best I can do to explain it. I’m a human-size squirrel with the memories of a human. I’m trying to navigate the human world when all I’d prefer to do is go live in the woods and do normal squirrel things like gather nuts and seeds for the winter.

“But that’s wandering off topic from why I asked you here. As you’re his/my supervisor I need to discuss this with you first.” His tail wigwagged sideways again. “And I think it’s better you know now before this becomes public, which it probably will shortly, if it hasn’t already, despite HIPAA regulations,” Pistachio paused a moment. “Yes, I think that’s what it’s called. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, HIPAA.” He wigwagged his tail again. “Anyway, despite what it says within those regulations about patient privacy, I doubt everyone in this hospital can remain tightlipped about what happened to Rick/me.”

“One of the reasons I’ve asked to see you, Wynona, is that obviously, due to how much my body,” he paused, “and obviously my mind have changed, I won’t be able to resume all my/Rick’s duties with Conferencing after I’m discharged.” He stood-up the best he could on just his hind legs, raising himself up to about five feet tall (one-and-a-half meters) and sort of hobble-walked a few steps. “I can’t easily walk as a human can. I’ve been through a lot of tests here. Maybe with a lot of therapy and practice, I could do it for short distances, but it hurts to do this. To properly move around, I need to use all four paws like any other squirrel.” He proceeded to scamper about the room on all four quickly and nimbly.

“Which means you can’t easily haul equipment, chairs, or tables.”

Pistachio drooped his tail. “Or even carry a pitcher of water to a table.” He scampered over to a walker a nurse had brought in for him at his request. He semi-stood-up again and grabbed the walker’s handles with his forepaws. He pushed it over to Wynona using it to balance and walk on just his hind paws as he had practiced many times in preparation to demonstrate this to Wynona. “As you can see, I can move about on just my rear paws easily using a medical walker to hold myself up. Using one, I don’t have to balance all my weight on my back legs and it doesn’t hurt as much. However, carrying stuff off it,” he drooped his tail, “isn’t so easy.” He jumped back up on the bed so he could be closer to her eye level. “Rick has enjoyed his job.” He sighed and chittered at the same time. “And if he ever resurfaces up here,” Pistachio pointed to his head with his tail, “I’m not sure how he’ll react to this. But, obviously, I’m no longer physically capable to do all the tasks assigned to him.”

Wynona nodded slowly. “Whenever we had an early morning shift preparing for a conference, you were always wide awake, and you always joked about being a squirrel-at-heart. I just never expected to see you become a...” she trailed off as she was still in a bit of shock over what she was looking at.

“A squirrel physically to match my heart?” Pistachio gigglechittered. “You have permission to touch me if you wish to make sure you aren’t seeing things. It won’t bother me. I’ve been poked

and prodded a lot here. You don't have to, of course, if you don't want to." He could smell she was a bit afraid.

Wynona slowly nodded and reached out to lightly grasped his forepaw. She gently turned it over to look at the pad and claws. She carefully stroked the fur on the back of it for a moment before releasing his paw.

"It's so soft. Oh, God, Rick, I'm so sorry."

Pistachio shrugged. "As Rick would say, if life throws you lemons, make lemonade or a lemon pie."

Wynona nodded. "Yes, that's exactly what you'd say."

"Rick has tossed that same advice to students and summer camp attendees many times in the past. Now I keep repeating it to myself. Practice what he's preached. As I'm a giant squirrel thrust into the human world." Pistachio paused again before continuing. "If Rick ever comes back to reclaim his life, I don't know if he'd forgive me for causing him to lose his job. Spirit, there are so many things I fear I'm going to screw-up while trying to hold it together for him should he return up here." Pistachio pointed to his head with his tail. "I feel like this body is on loan to me and sooner or later, he will return.

"I would like to continue working for WMSU in some capacity if a position can be found for me. I really don't want to go out on permanent disability leave. While there are things I can do now that I could before, there are aspects of Rick's job this body can't handle. I've got medical documentation to back it up. I've been through a huge number of physical tests these past few days by both the staff here and one of the wildlife veterinarians over at Squam Lakes Science Center."

"A veterinarian?"

"Well, I am squirrel now," Pistachio paused. "Sort of. Best they can tell I'm more squirrel than human, as I do still have some human traces such as vocal cords. Also, there are human foods I can eat that a squirrel shouldn't be able to handle." He pointed to a metal bar and chain rigging above the bed. "They use that to help hoist extremely heavy patients. Let me show you something."

Wynona was startled as Pistachio easily leapt up and grabbed the bar with both forepaws. He swayed for a moment, and then quickly started doing pull-ups with ease and swapped out doing them with just one paw and then the other. Finally doing some with just two clawed fingers. He then pulled himself up and grabbed the bar with his rear paws and dangled a moment, before dropping nimbly back on the bed.

"I've got great body strength for my size, but it's useless for Rick's job due to my mobility issue." Pistachio lowered his head and sighed. "I'm perfectly healthy and fit for a squirrel, a giant one no less. Unfortunately, that doesn't help me to be able to do what human Rick did."

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

Pistachio paused a moment before continuing. “Regardless of what ideas you, HR or whomever come-up with for me, the one offer I would absolutely refuse is to replace Nutty, as I know Rick would never want it.”

Wynona nodded. “I remember how hard you worked on that fundraising campaign, Rick... Pistachio and understand why you wouldn’t want to become WMSU’s new mascot. I, also, would hate to lose you as you’ve been one of the most reliable members of our team, despite the extra time off you’ve asked for these past few months while testing that fursuit.” She sighed.

“It was destroyed, by the way.”

“What?”

“The squirrel fursuit Rick was demonstrating. He was doing that work for the company that made it in payment for the suit, which would have been his free and clear by next summer. He enjoyed wearing it and pretending to be me, even though the suit was a different species. Rick was wearing it when we were electrocuted. It was destroyed as a result.”

Wynona nodded.

“I hate to say it, Rick...”

“Pistachio, please.”

“Sorry. Pistachio, as you no longer can do most of the physical requirements of the position, I will probably have to cut your hours back as I’ll need to hire someone else to fulfill the portions of your job you can’t do anymore. As you know we have a tight budget within the university. I can’t hire someone else without cutting somewhere. I’ll talk to HR and see what we can do to find somewhere else to make-up the difference.”

“Cutting my hours doesn’t bother me at this time, Wynona. But, I agree, please discuss it with HR first. I don’t want you getting in trouble over this as I’m sure the American Disabilities Act will play into it somehow, provided it applies to someone who has experienced accidental extreme body modification/species change. Like many things I’m encountering that were important to him, I don’t think Rick would forgive me if you got into trouble due to this. You’ve been the best supervisor he’s ever had, whether he’s ever admitted that to you or not. If I need to sign something indicating I have agreed to the time reduction, that’s fine. I have a feeling I’m going to need the freed-up time to deal with the other issues this will bring-up.”

“Such as?”

“Well, for starters, I’m going to need to get my/Rick’s license and eventually our passport photos updated as I no longer look like Rick did prior to this accident. That’s provided I can still operate a vehicle. Obviously, I haven’t had a chance to try yet. Can you picture the reaction when I scamper into the DMV to redo my license? As for the passport, I’ll probably have to go down to the regional Federal Office in Portsmouth and do it in person. They’d never believe the request if

I just submit it through the local post office with new photos. I'm sure that'll take a whole day in itself. And that's just the very tip of the iceberg." He paused a moment. "I think that's the phrase I want. I'm still trying to sort through Rick's human memories and comprehend all the nuances of human language. Of course, that's provided that when I scamper into the Fed building, they don't suddenly lock me in a cage and make me disappear." Pistachio twitched his tail. "Anyway, other things I need to deal with include, what's my legal status? Is extreme body modification covered under anti-discrimination laws? And what can be more extreme than this?" He held his forepaws against his chest fur briefly.

Pistachio's eyes went wide a moment. "On a tangential subject, would it be possible for you to arrange for someone in WMSU's Public Relations Office to talk to me as soon as possible. As I said earlier, I'm sure it won't take long after my discharge for word to get out about my condition if it isn't already out. I suspect they'll soon be receiving calls from the media. It would probably be best if they have a proper heads-up before that happens."

"Of course, any way I can help. I'll contact them right now." Wynona pulled out her phone. "Mind if I take a picture or two for documentation?"

Pistachio agreed and sort of smiled for the camera as squirrel facial muscles aren't the same as a human's. She then also did a selfie of the two of them before placing the call.