

Chapter 39

“The Nutty mascot suit is perfectly safe.”

“Dr. Bechard, I’m sure they said the same thing about the squirrel mascot suit Mr. Michaud was wearing. Now look at him. He calls himself after his squirrel character, Pistachio. I don’t want to wind-up like that. I don’t want to turn into Nutty!”

“You saw the broadcast of his interview the other night, Nancy. It was sabotage. I hope you’ll reconsider.”

“And the company that made his suit refurbished Nutty. How do you know they didn’t sabotage it too?”

There was a light knock combined with scratching on the office door.

“Come in.”

Pistachio opened the door. On it was the name plate: Dr. Greg Bechard, WMSW Athletic Director. He scampered in, closing it behind himself. “You asked me to drop by, Dr. Bechard? My apologies, I’m a little late. I kept getting pulled aside by students wanting to express well wished and asking for selfies.”

“Yes, Mr. Michaud.” Greg Bechard did his best not to stare at the large reddish-gray squirrel.

“I prefer to go by Pistachio, sir.”

Greg Bechard nodded. He gestured to the female student sitting in the other chair. “This is Nancy Gibbs. She’s this year’s Nutty scholarship recipient.”

Pistachio eyes lit up as he bowed to the student who didn’t budge from her chair. He drooped his tail as he could smell her fear. “I’m glad to meet you, Ms. Gibbs. Congratulations on the scholarship. I hope my appearance isn’t what’s bothering you. I can pull a shirt out of my fanny pack and put it on if that helps.”

“I’m quitting and returning the money, Mr. Michaud,” Nancy blurted out, ignoring his offer to cover his fur. “I don’t want to get turned into a squirrel!”

“That’s why I asked you to drop by, Pistachio,” Dr. Bechard added.

Pistachio sighchittered while closing his eyes a moment. “I was afraid this might happen. You’re afraid that because Second Fur refurbished and retrofitted Nutty, that it will malfunction just as the Mal fursuit did to Rick/me, right? It’s not like that, Ms. Gibbs. All they did to Nutty was add a camera, microphone, speaker, and VR goggles to the head. They added robotics to the tail, which can be controlled through the goggles. They also did some minor repairs to the faux fur in a few places, reinforced the seams, that sort of thing. Nutty needed to be refurbished and they did

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it as a donation to the university. You already tested the electronics out prior to my accident and have worn the mascot suit to multiple football games. You still look human to me. Besides, the Mal suit had been sabotaged and it took a lightning strike to set-off the transformation. It's not like you'll be recharging Nutty's batteries while in suit during a thunderstorm as I/Rick had tried to do."

Pistachio pulled his phone out of his pocket as Nancy remained silent. "Look, I'll put a call into Second Fur and make sure the individual who sabotaged Mal didn't go anywhere near Nutty. I'll set it on speakerphone, and we'll check together. Alright?"

Pistachio dialed Nate Santorum's direct office number.

"Nate Santorum. What is it?"

"Hello Nate!" Pistachio added a chitter.

"Pistachio! What's up? Got another idea or suggestion and didn't want to just text it?"

"No, different task this time, Nate. I'm not alone. I'm in Dr. Greg Bechard's office with him and a student, Nancy Gibbs."

"Hello," Dr. Bechard stated.

"Hi," Nancy added indifferently.

"Dr. Bechard..." Nate trailed off a moment. "Oh, wait. You're the Athletic Director at White Mountain State. So, how is the retrofit to the Nutty mascot suit working out?"

"That's why we have you on conference call, Mr. Santorum," Dr. Bechard replied. "The suit works wonderfully and has been well received by students and alumni at football games so far. However, our student performer, Nancy, is afraid to put it on now because of Pistachio."

"I don't want to turn into a squirrel!" Nancy blurted out.

"What?"

"Nate, it's because of what happened to me and the Mal fursuit. And my interview that was broadcast the other night. She's afraid Nutty was also sabotaged. Did Ross go anywhere near the Nutty mascot suit?"

"No. When we went through the security footage to see who had sabotaged the Mal fursuit, we only saw Ross mess with Mal. And that footage is from after we had shipped refurbished Nutty mascot suite back to White Mountain State University."

"Is Ross in? Let's just go to the source if he is and nip this now if you don't mind."

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“Alright. I’m going to mute and go check. This should be no more than a minute or two. He should be in.”

About a minute later, the line unmuted. “I’ve switched to speakerphone at my end. I’ve got Ross Delling in my office with me. Are you still there?”

“Yes, we’re still here, Nate. Hello, Ross.”

“Hello, Pistachio.” There was a bit of hesitation in Ross’ voice.

“I don’t know if Nate’s filled you in. I have with me Dr. Greg Bechard, Athletic Director at White Mountain State University and Nancy Gibbs, the current Nutty Mascot student performer. Ross, when you altered the Mal fursuit, did you do likewise to Nutty?”

“Did something happen?” Ross replied with sheer panic in his voice. “Is Ms. Gibbs alright?”

“She’s perfectly fine except she’s afraid she’ll turn into a squirrel. That’s why I asked about the Nutty mascot costume.”

“I didn’t go anywhere near it, Pistachio. In fact, I didn’t make any alterations to the Mal fursuit until after Nutty was shipped back to White Mountain State University. I had no interest in Nutty. There wasn’t enough electronics or robotics in it to do what I needed it to do, and it wasn’t our suit to begin with.”

“Thank you, Ross.” Pistachio turned to the other two in the room. “Do either of you have any further questions for Mr. Delling?” They shook their heads in the negative. “Nate, we’re all set at this end. Thank you to you and Ross for your assistance.”

The call disconnected and Pistachio tucked his phone back in his pocket. Nancy stared as the phone seemed to vanish into his fur.

Pistachio noted this. “Ms. Gibbs, I apologize if that startled you. While they couldn’t stop the process, they were able to make a few alterations. I’ve got built-in pockets and shorts.” He briefly stuck his forepaws in his pockets. “Sort of like a cartoon character. I’m sure you’ve seen this on various cartoons over the years.”

She slowly nodded but didn’t say anything. Pistachio drooped his tail again.

“I hope you’ll reconsider now that you have heard from Second Fur that Nutty is safe. But I’ll leave that up to you. I’m sure one of the runner ups will gladly take it over if you still wish to withdraw from portraying Nutty.”

“Why don’t you take the mascot job? Who better to portray Nutty than an actual squirrel?” she asked.

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Pistachio sighchittered. “For one thing, I/Rick helped establish the endowment that provides the scholarship, Ms. Gibbs. How would those donors react if it’s not handed out? Also, it’s been a fifty plus year WMSU tradition that a student performs as Nutty. Rick would never be willing to break that tradition. As such, nor would I. Please, just think about it, okay.”

“Just one more question. If this Ross Delling person caused you to turn into a squirrel, why is he still working for the company?”

“That’s a fair question and one that was intentionally not brought up in my interview with Melissa Sagenthrope. I’ll answer it, but you must not share this about.” He paused a moment until she nodded. “Second Fur is a subsidiary of Second Limb Prosthetics. Thanks to this,” Pistachio pointed to himself, “I’m now a partner in the company. Ross’ sabotage unintentionally changed me into the squirrel you see. As a squirrel needs a tail, the process that changed me also made me grow one. Ross’ atonement for this is to help the company find a way to use that for good. It may take several years of research to make it happen, but some day we hope to drop ‘Prosthetics’ from the company’s name and to do so without the fur and tail side-effect.”

Nancy’s eyes widened. “Regrow a severed limb?”

Pistachio nodded as he opened the door. “Do you understand the need to keep that under wraps as we don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up too soon?”

Nancy nodded again.

“Do please reconsider remaining as Nutty for the rest of the school year, Ms. Gibbs.” Pistachio added as he glanced back from the doorway.

“Thank you for dropping by, Mr. Michaud, er, Pistachio,” Dr. Bechard waved to the departing giant squirrel.