

Chapter 49

“I know I don’t come up to visit much anymore, Mom, Dad,” Rick drooped his tail. “I know it’s only just over an hour to come up here. But you know how it is. I get busy. I wonder how you’d react to the new me if you could see me now. God, I miss both of you. I’m sorry I can’t stay long. I’ve got someone else I need to visit while I’m in town.” Rick lay a single red rose on the black granite stone marker with MICHAUD carved into it. He turned to head back to his vehicle, stepping over the two headstones of his parents with the same deceased date twenty-five years previous.

Prior to swinging by the cemetery, Rick had already delivered a copy of his legal name change paperwork to city hall and paid the necessary fee to amend his birth certificate. He spent longer there than he originally planned as those in the clerk’s office, both employees and customers wanted pictures with him. He sighed heavily as he got back into his vehicle. It was always hard coming back to Berlin in northern New Hampshire. The city was slowly recovering, though it remained a shell of itself since the paper mills closed and were bulldozed for redevelopment.

He drove back over to the west side of the Androscoggin River which once provided hydropower for those mills. He proceeded south a little way until he passed St. Anne’s Roman Catholic Church, turning right on the next street with the long-since shuttered It’s A Good Pizza shop on the corner. *It’s a shame no one had ever tried to revive it,* Rick thought to himself as he proceeded uphill a couple blocks before pulling over in front of a two-story apartment house that looked like a lot of the other mill housing stock in the city, having a tired and slightly run-down appearance. Rick pulled his phone out of his pocket and debated a moment about putting his shirt back on. Deciding against it, he made a call. It rang three times before the other party picked-up.

“Hello?”

“Bonjour, Mémère!” (Meh-may--grandmother)

There was a pause for a moment. “Richard?” The female voice pronounced it Ri-shard with a short I.

“Oui, Mémère, it’s Richard. And as you know, that’s about the extent of my French.”

“You don’t sound the same, Richard.”

“Well, that’s not all that’s changed for me, Mémère. I’m out front but I wanted to call before I get out of the car. I didn’t want to scare you when you see how much I’ve changed. I’m stepping out of the car now.”

There was a gasp on the phone. “Richard, what kind of joke is this? Halloween was a week ago.”

Rick sighed as he looked up at the window and waved to her while also wigwagging his tail a couple times. “This isn’t a joke, Mémère. I’ll be right in and I’ll explain the best I can. But I need to hang-up as I need my hands to walk up to the door. Back door, still, right?”

“Oui.”

Rick hung-up, tucked the phone in his pocket, put on his backpack, and quickly scampered up the driveway and to the back door. His grandmother was waiting in the doorway holding onto a walker. She was shaking slightly. He carefully stood up on his hind legs and offered her a gentle hug. She hesitated for only a moment before embracing him. His tail started to whip back and forth in concern as he took in her scent. What he smelled wasn't healthy.

“Mémère?! You're not well, are you?”

He grandmother sighed. “No. It looks like we both have catching-up to do. Come in, Richard. Blanche should be home soon. Wait for her and you can tell your story once.” She looked him up and down. “And I'd like to wait for her to ensure I'm not hallucinating.” She turned her walker around and led him through the back hallway into the kitchen with its small dining table. “Can I get you anything?”

“A glass of water will be fine for now, Mémère. Thanks. So, Blanche lives with you now?”

She started a kettle of water on the stove and then brought a glass of water to the table and sat down across from him.

“She moved down here six months ago as she was having a hard time with the stairs. I haven't bothered to rent out the upstairs since. As for me. it's come back, Richard, and it's metastasized this time. There is little they can do.”

Rick's tail drooped as he bowed his head and shed tears. “How long, Mémère?”

“A couple months at most. I've opted not to seek treatment this time. It will do little good at this point. I'd rather have a clear mind as long as I can despite the pain rather than get doped up on the drugs.” She looked at him again. “Though I wouldn't have put it past them to have slipped me something this morning based on what I'm seeing.”

“How long have you known?”

“I haven't felt great for months. I got confirmation it had come back the day of your accident, Richard.” She looked at him closely. “But I didn't know much more about what happened to you other than what had been in the news when you got electrocuted. Your wife promised to update the family, but never got back to me nor to your brother and sister.”

“This and work have kept her occupied. I wasn't recovered enough to update anyone myself until recently. I'm so sorry, Mémère. I didn't know she hadn't passed the word on. There was a follow-up news story after I was discharged from the hospital, which you must have missed.”

The back door opened and closed. “Estelle!” An elderly female voice loudly cried-out. “Do you know whose car is parked out front?”

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“It’s Richard, Blanche!” Richard’s grandmother cried back to the other women, who was a little hard of hearing. “He’s here in the kitchen with me.”

The elderly woman walked into the kitchen from the hallway carrying a homemade reusable grocery bag. She stopped, staring at the giant reddish-gray squirrel.

Rick stood up in respect. “Hello, Ma Tante (my aunt) Blanche!” Rick said loudly, wigwagging his tail in greeting. She wasn’t really his blood-relation aunt, but that didn’t matter. In his upbringing, in a Quebecois neighborhood in an American mill town, all your female elders who weren’t your mother or grandmother were called your aunt out of respect.

Blanche dropped the grocery bag, raising her hands to sides of her head, screaming.