

Chapter 50

“Well, I’m not hallucinating, after all,’ Estelle muttered quietly.

Blanche was gasping for breath, leaning against the wall as the giant squirrel, slowly came toward her with its tail wigwagging back and forth just as slowly. It spoke again.

“Ma Tante? Are you alright?” There was genuine concern in its, no, his voice.

“Richard?” She also pronounced it just like his Mémère did as she finally recognized his voice.

“You scared me half to death! Your costume is so realistic right down to the wagging tail. But you’re a week late for Halloween.”

The phone rang and Estelle answered it. “Hello?” She paused. “No, everything is alright, David. My Richard is visiting and accidentally scared poor Blanche as she came into the house.”

“I wish this was a costume, Ma Tante,” Rick replied to Blanche while Estelle was on the phone.

“We were waiting for you to come home so I could tell my story once. Do you need help picking-up the groceries?” Richard started to rebag the vegetables and fruit that had rolled out of the bag. Fortunately, there hadn’t been any glass jars in the bag.

“No, David, I’m serious,” Estelle continued on the phone. “We’re alright. Look, I’ll put Richard on to prove I’m not lying.” Estelle turned to her grandson. “You remember David LaRoche, right? He still lives next door and heard Blanche screaming. He’s going to call the police if you can’t convince him you’re you.”

Rick took the phone. “Bonjour, Monsieur LaRoche! How’s it going?”

“How do I know you’re not some hooligan threatening Estelle and Blanche?”

Rick’s tail wigwagged back and forth rapidly in irritation. “Now why would I do that to my Mémère who raised me, Mr. LaRoche? Didn’t you set me straight that time I accidentally broke your window with a baseball? I did chores for you for over a month to pay for it.”

While Rick talked, Blanche carried the grocery bag to the counter, pulled three teacups out of the upper cabinet, rattling them slightly as she set them on the table, just as the tea kettle started to whistle.

“Yes, you did, Richard. Alright. Hand me back to your Mémère.”

Rick handed the phone back to his grandmother. “Convinced?” She paused. “Thank you for your concern, David. Goodbye.” She hung up the phone. “It’s good to have neighbors who watch-out for you.”

“Ma Tante, I can’t drink regular tea. I’m very caffeine sensitive now. I learned that the hard way the first time I had a cup of regular coffee after coming home from the hospital. I literally ran

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circles around the walls of the living room almost like a cartoon character. Do you have any decaf or herbal tea?” Rick wigwagged his tail once.

Blanche swapped the tea bag in one cup with a shaky hand, but somehow didn’t spill any of the hot water as she poured it over the tea bags in the three cups. She set the kettle back on the stove with the lid flipped open so it wouldn’t whistle as it continued to steam on the hot stove element. She then sat down heavily. “Mon dieu,” (my God) she mumbled under her breath.

“So, here is the brief version of my tale...” Nearly an hour zoomed by as Rick finished up explaining legally changing his middle name to Pistachio, which is partly what had brought him to Berlin.

“You never liked Huey,” Estelle stated. “I don’t know what your parents were thinking. I had advised against it. It’s not like any of our relatives had that name. It would have been more traditional to give you one of your great-grandfathers’ or a great uncles’ first name for your middle name.”

“Which was probably why they, meaning Dad, chose it.” Rick replied drooping his tail. “Dad never got along well with you from what I observed as a young child.”

Estelle sighed heavily. “No, he didn’t.” She swirled the last of the cold tea in her cup thinking to herself a moment. “You always were obsessed with squirrels ever since you were five or so. ‘Mémère! I want to be a squirrel when I grow up!’” She looked at him. “And I did my best to deflect that, though I did make you a squirrel costume for Halloween when you were eight.”

“I thought it was when I was seven. Anyway, it was the best costume I ever had for Halloween, Mémère.”

“Now look at you. I don’t know what to say, Richard.”

Rick nodded. “Say you still love me, as I do you, Mémère. Of course, this,” he lifted his forepaw-hands to his chest and also indicated his tail, “was an accident, not my choice. Was there anything in my story that wasn’t clear that you want more details on?”

Blanche looked closely at him. “Are you still male?”

Estelle glared at Blanche. Rick blinked a moment, gigglechittered, and broke-out into full laughter for a moment.

“Of course, Ma Tante. But I’m not about to expose myself to you. Mémère raised me better than that.” He tucked the edge of his forepaws into the edge of the pouch that hid his manhood.

“While they couldn’t stop me changing, they could make some alterations such as giving me pockets like a cartoon character, including tucking my man parts into one. Any other questions?”

“Would you have chosen this if you had been given a choice, Richard?” Estelle asked.

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Rick pondered that one a moment slowly swishing his tail back and forth. “You were always good with the tough questions, Mémère. That would depend. I didn’t want to be a ‘trail blazer’ in this...I guess you could call it extreme body modification. But let’s say it had been perfected and had been around for at least a decade. Then, yeah, I’d probably choose to make the change. Though, to be honest, I’d have preferred to be a little less squirrely.”

“In what way?”

“Well, I’d like to have more humanish legs so I could walk around on two legs if I wanted. It’s tough making my way as a quadruped in a bipedal world, Mémère. I can’t really carry anything any kind of distance with my hands as I need them to walk.” He drooped his tail. “I can’t even bring this glass from the table to the sink. As a result, I can’t do my job anymore. White Mountain State is still trying to figure out where to transfer me to. In the meantime, I’m out on disability leave. Anything else either of you would like to ask?”

Neither of them had any additional questions.

“Well then, if you’ve got no more questions, there are two more things I’d like to do before I head south,” Rick responded as he pushed back his chair and dropped to the floor. “Is Mack’s Diner still open?”

“Oui, but it’s now run by his son.”

“Fred?”

“Oui.”

“Huh! I went to high school with him. He’s the last person I expected to either stay here or return. He was so anxious to flee south as soon as he graduated.” Rick shook his head in surprise. “Well, anyway, I want to take the two of you to lunch. Would Mack’s be alright? Of course, Mémère, I understand if you’re not up to it and would prefer take-out.”

Estelle was silent for a moment in thought. “Yes, Richard, going out to lunch would be fine if you think they’ll let you sit down and order.”

Rick shrugged flicking his tail up and down once, reaching in his pocket and pulling out his phone. Blanche stared again. “I told you and already showed you I have pockets, Ma Tante,” Rick stated as he posted a quick message to social media and then tucked the phone back in his pocket. “I’m sure we’ll come to an agreement if he has any concerns. I keep a change of clothes in my pack and sandals in the car.”

“And the other thing?”

Rick scampered over to his grandmother taking her hands in his forepaws and looking up into her eyes as best he could. “I want to make a batch of your gingerbread cookies with you, Mémère, for old time’s sake.”

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Estelle paused again thinking. “Yes, we can do that, Richard.” Estelle got up, went over to the fridge. She pulled a pound of butter out, opened the package, and set the four sticks within on the counter to warm. “Let me tidy up a little and we’ll go to Mack’s.”

“Great, I’ll bring my car up the driveway so you don’t have to walk so far. I had parked out front only because I didn’t want to block anyone else who might park in it.”