

Chapter 54

Five days later at the post-funeral reception, Rick was handing out business cards to well-wishers asking for details about what happened to him. He'd apologize time and again, that there wasn't enough time to tell his tale over and over again at the reception, but he would give a quick overview once everyone arrived. Full details could be found at the link on the card. The line of well-wishers seemed endless. He started to hand-out yet another card when he suddenly realized it was Liz and George in front of him. He perked-up instantly, stood-up, and hugged both warmly. He introduced them to his wife, siblings, and their spouses.

"I didn't expect to see either of you all the way up here with your wedding only a few days away."

"It's the least we could do for you, Rick," Liz answered and George nodded in agreement. "She must have been well known. I've never seen a church so packed for a funeral."

"I was a little nervous over it," George added. "People were still coming in 15 minutes after the planned start time. It was standing room only in there."

"No kidding," Rick replied. "The family arrived at the designated time at St. Anne's from the funeral home within the funeral vehicle procession as planned. I was shocked and awed by the number of people who had come to attend Mémère's funeral mass. The line went down the block in both directions from the entrances. I guess there are still a lot of people in town who knew her or Pèpère (grandfather) who came to pay their respects."

"Rick, it could also be because of who you are," George replied. "Due to your social media presence."

Rick wigwagged his tail in thought. "That's possible, but very few who have come through this line so far have indicated they follow me. But it wasn't just the attendance numbers at the funeral that surprised me. The procession of vehicles seemed endless heading from the church to the cemetery. Mémère would have been shocked at the number of people who participated. Easily, there had to be a hundred vehicles." He paused a moment in thought. "That's significant." They looked at him with a puzzled look. "We're from different backgrounds. I was raised here in this area of Quebecois descent. In such a place, your status isn't based on wealth. It's based on those you knew or touched with your life and the respect you showed them and vice versa. A direct sign of that is the length of your funeral procession."

"I get it," Liz replied. "The more who know you positively, the higher your status."

"That's it."

They both looked directly at Rick and Liz pointed out, "Which isn't much different than what you experience now on social media is it?"

Rick thought on that a moment wigwagging his tail a bit. "You're right."

They glanced at the growing line behind them of well-wishers. “We’ll touch base again before we leave, Rick.” Liz said for the two of them. “For now, we should move along so as to not hold the line up too much behind us.”

Liz and George wandered over to the buffet. George put squirrel-shaped gingerbread cookies on their plates, pointing to the sign indicating some were part of the last batch Estelle Michaud had made and others were made by Rick practicing the recipe. He then leaned into her and spoke softly, “Good lord, Liz. I know he had been changed, and we had seen him in video. But it hadn’t sunk in just how much he had changed. Poor guy.”

“He seems to be taking it in stride. And remember how much of a natural he was in suit? Never mind how he preferred the suit in squirrel-vision mode. It’s obvious the change was easier for him than it would have been if it had been you or I transformed into our fursonas. Remember our conversations on the way to and at Catamount Con? He considered himself a squirrel-at-heart already.”

“True,” George responded as he added a few finger sandwiches to his plate. “I can still feel awful for him. And now I can see why he was concerned about attending the wedding. Intentional or not, he’s drawing a crowd.”

About thirty minutes passed when the chitchat quickly quieted as people turned to look at the giant tassel-ear greyish red squirrel who was now standing on top of a chair to be better seen.

“On behalf of my family and my siblings and their families, thank you for coming and providing us support and your condolences over our loss.” Rick started. “For those who don’t know me, I’m Richard Pistachio Michaud, Estelle Michaud’s youngest grandson.” He scuffed a footpaw on the chair. “My siblings kind of voluntold me to be spokes-squirrel/person to thank you for coming. They partly did this because of what I’ve become.” His tail wigwagged left to right a few times. “And many of you asked what happened to me as you came up to me to pass your condolences personally. In quick summary, I had been electrocuted and badly burned in a freak accident in late September. This,” he put his forepaws to his chest and indicated all of himself, “was the result of an unauthorized medical experiment. If it weren’t for that experiment, today most likely would have been the family’s second funeral in a 6-week period as my outlook after the electrocution was quit grim. I could spend hours talking about this. The business card I gave you includes my website with a link to the interview I did with Burlington Public Radio/New Hampshire Public Broadcasting, and links to my social media presence and blog. Those links will give you all the details you’d like and then some.

“Mémère was very special to my siblings and I. Locals who have lived here a long time know our family history, but for those of you who don’t, our family experienced a house fire 25 years ago. My siblings and I got out.” He looked down. “Our parents didn’t make it. Their bodies were

found about six ft (1.8m) inside the back hallway.” He paused a moment and then looked back up. “According to some old wives tales/saying, bad news comes in threes.” Rick wiped an eye with the back of one of his forepaws. “Mom and Dad were number two and three as P  p  re had been killed in a freak accident in the mill just a month earlier. A large roll of paper was coming off the Number Four paper machine when a chain snapped. The chain whipped around and broke P  p  re’s neck. The roll then fell, rolled, and crushed his body. It was a closed casket funeral for obvious reasons.”

Some shuddered at the retelling.

“After the death of our parents, M  m  re took us in and became our legal guardian, determined to keep us together. I’m not sure how she pulled it off being a new widow with limited income coming in. Somehow, she found some way to make it work.” Rick sighed. “But for years, people talked about how our family must have been cursed. I’m sure my change has added to that talk among those in that group who are still around.

“Regardless of the ‘family curse,’ my siblings and I have had successful lives. Robert is a prosperous businessman and also serves on the city council in Bangor, Maine. Lynn is a mid-level accountant with a Fortune 500 company outside of Boston. As for me, I work for the Department of Conferences and Meetings at White Mountain State University. Well, at least until my recent accident. WMSU is working on a new position for me. My wife and I are also silent partners in Second Limb Prosthetics, where I had been moonlighting as a performer in a high-tech squirrel mascot costume prior to my accident. As a result of the accident that changed me into the large squirrel you see, I’ve also become a social media star of sorts.” He wigwagged his tail left to right a few times.

“Because of our combined good fortune, we repaid M  m  re Estelle as we could and as she would allow over the years. When she was first diagnosed with cancer five years ago, we bought her house from her to ensure she would have a roof over her head until the end. If any of you have had a family member undergo chemotherapy, you know how expensive those treatments can be even with insurance.”

Rick turned and looked in the direction of Blanche LeClair. “For those of you wondering what will become of the house, it’s not for sale at this time as a family member still lives there and may continue to do so rent-free as long as she wishes as we’ve reassured her privately. Again, thank you all for coming. Please enjoy the food and reminisce as long as you wish. Our family really, really appreciates the outpouring of care and love you’ve provided to us at our time of mourning.”

A young boy worked up his courage and came up to Rick as he hopped down off the chair. “My mom and dad said we’re cousins.”

Rick looked about and spotted the boy’s parents who he recognized as distance cousins, waved to them, and then looked back down at the boy. “Yes, we are distant cousins.”

“I’m Ricky,” the boy said.

Rick's eyes lit-up. "What a coincidence. That's one of my nicknames."

The boy scuffed a foot and looked down briefly and then back at the giant squirrel. "Since we're cousins, can I please pet you?"

Rick gigglechittered which delighted young Ricky. "It's very polite of you to ask. Normally, I'd say no."

Ricky pouted.

"The reason is that it's a little weird to be asked that. As I've explained to others in the past, just think about it for a moment. My fur is like your hair. Wouldn't it seem weird if someone asked to touch your hair?"

Ricky nodded.

Rick looked about. "That said, we are cousins. So, that is different. But, if I let you pet me, Ricky, it would only be fair if I also let all the other kids pet me, right? And my Mémère was like my mom to me as you heard me tell everyone. It hurts a lot in here." He touched over his heart with his right forepaw. "And getting petted might help. My wife would tell you that I especially like it on the back of the neck and upper back. So, I'm going to say yes and let you pet me. But first, how about we go get all the other kids together and we'll have one massive Cousin Pistachio petting session, huh?"

For the next thirty or so minutes, all the kids took turns gently, carefully petting the giant squirrel's soft fur as Rick blissed out chitterpurring. At least that was the best anyone could describe the soft chitter-like noise that rumbled from within Rick as the kids petted him. He was right, the petting did help a bit.

"Heading out?" Rick asked as his tail wigwagged briefly.

"Yes. It's a long drive south and we've got the rehearsal tomorrow," Liz answered.

Rick hugged them both. "I wish you both a safe journey."

George hesitated a moment. "We don't want you to feel obligated to come this weekend. You're more than welcome, of course..." he trailed off.

"But?" Rick prompted.

George sighed. "Look, Rick, we know it's been a rough week for you. That's all. If you find you're not up to it, we won't be offended."

“We’re just worried about you, Rick,” Liz added. “That’s all.”

Rick held one of each of their hands and brought them together. “Abbie and I already have a room booked. We’ll be there. You should have seen the look on the proprietor’s face when I scampered into the formal wear place. He had a hell of a time fitting me. We gave-up on trying to get me fitted with pants. I purchased the suit rather than rent it. Some students in the theater department helped me alter it to properly fit. I just hope your family isn’t too upset if I show-up without pants.” Rick gigglechittered. “I tried some of my cut-off shorts, but they don’t look good with the suit. But I got the suit matched-up with a bow tie as I wouldn’t drag a regular tie on the ground.”

Early that evening, Rick, his siblings, and their spouses went back to Estelle’s house briefly with Rick & Abigail driving Blanche home. Again, he and his siblings reassured Blanche that she would have a roof over her head as long as she wished to live there in thanks for being Estelle’s live-in assistant the last few years. They stayed only briefly after bringing her home. One of the reasons they all came was to retrieve one thing from the meager estate to split among them, Estelle’s cookie cutters. As promised, Rick provided his siblings with a copy of Estelle’s gingerbread cookie recipe. He reassured them that he had it right or there wouldn’t have been enough cookies at the reception as he did a lot of baking that week to supplement the original batch and to ensure he had the recipe down pat.