

Chapter 57

“Good evening and thank you for tuning into Newscenter 9 News at Six. A White Mountain State University student is hospitalized tonight with severe injuries sustained during today’s men’s basketball game versus the Laurence Tech Timberwolves. We turn now to Lois Sanchez who is live at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon. Lois...”

Lois Sanchez is holding a microphone with the Newscenter 9 logo on it with the main entrance to the hospital behind her with its various lights illuminating the darkness. Light snow falls around her.

“This is Lois Sanchez reporting to you live from Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. Though the hospital spokesperson will not confirm the identity of their patient, they have stated they are treating a young woman with severe spinal injuries who was rushed here late afternoon from White Mountain State University. We have footage showing what happened.”

Lois voices over the footage. “White Mountain State University had home court advantage this afternoon in their Division C basketball game verses the Laurence Tech Timberwolves. With roughly 7 minutes to go and down 15 points, the WMSU Squirrels had possession of the ball and were passing it back and forth looking for an opening to put it up. In mid-pass, Laurence Tech Timberwolf #33, Roy Winship, attempted to steal the ball. Instead he tipped it. He gave chase and tossed it back into play just before stepping out of bounds. It was recovered by WMSU’s #12, Bryan Davenport, who threw a three pointer as the throw clock wound down. The basket counted and then play was stopped.”

Footage angle changes and goes into slow motion. “What wasn’t realized at first was as Winship saved the ball and stepped out of bounds, he collided hard with WMSU’s mascot character, Nutty the Squirrel. They both fell in a tumble with Nutty on the bottom, slamming against the bleacher stairs. After play was stopped, Winship gingerly got up and called for a medic as Nutty lay on the floor of the gym. The onsite medic called for a backboard and assistance. The board was carefully slid under the student in the Nutty mascot suit. An ambulance team arrived and the student on the board was hoisted onto a gurney and was wheeled out.”

“It’s our understanding there’s more to this story, Lois.”

“That is correct. In what seemed like a strange turn of events, the crowd had fallen silent while Nutty was attended to. After Nutty was wheeled out, the crowd, quietly at first and then more persistently started chanting, ‘Stash, Stash, Stash.’”

“Stash? Why was that?”

“You might recall the freak lightning strike accident in Canaan we reported on back in mid-September.”

“You mean the one that caused Richard Michaud to change into a giant squirrel?”

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

“Yes, and he goes by Pistachio or Stash these days. He was in the bleachers cheering on the WMSU team when the accident occurred. Obviously, many of those present knew he was there as it’s hard to not notice a giant 3-foot-tall Eurasian red squirrel. The others continued their chant...”

“Stash! Stash! Stash!”

Rick sighed. It was obvious, he had to respond. He stood-up on his bench seat near the top left corner of the home team bleachers. The crowd cheered. He waved before bounding down to the floor. Someone handed him a megaphone. He briefly drooped his tail as he looked up at the filled-to-capacity bleachers. He fought down the fear to flee. The chanting fell silent. Rick sighed a moment before working up the courage to address the crowd.

“I take it you’re drafting me to fill-in for Nutty for the rest of this game?” He shouted through the megaphone.

The roar of yes was near deafening.

“Very well. Just to finish this game and to honor Nutty. As you know, Nutty is mute. But I’m not Nutty! And I’m definitely not mute! What are we?!”

“SQUIRRELS!!!!” the crowd roared back.

“Correct! And as squirrels, we chatter a warning when a predator is near and wigwag our tails,” Rick flicked his about and chattered loudly. “So, for the rest of game, whenever a predator, aka a Timberwolf, has the ball, I want to hear you chatter as loud as you can and wave your tails! Got it?”

The crowd chattered loudly in reply pounding the bleachers with their feet and waving fake red squirrel tails on sticks most already owned that were sold as souvenirs at the refreshment stand.

“FOR NUTTY!!!!!!”

“CHATTER!!!!!!” screamed the crowd as they stomped their feet.

“WMSU’s Fitzpatrick gymnasium is a cozy space with seating for about 2,000 people and it was a sold-out game. The roar of that crowd echoing in that small space every time Laurence Tech had the ball made it difficult for the game announcer to be heard. It also appeared to unnerve some of the Timberwolf players, who failed to make any free throws after the accident. In the final minute of the game, WMSU pulled ahead and won the game. We tried to interview players

from both teams after the game. In an unusual move, both teams declined other than to offer prayers for Nutty. I was able to catch-up briefly with Mr. Michaud....”

“Mr. Michaud! May I have a quick word?”

Rick drooped his tail as he turned to the reporter. “Go ahead, Ms. Sanchez, as long as it only has to do with the game.”

“You did wonderful out there, Mr. Michaud. It seems you saved the game.”

“No, that wasn’t me. I wasn’t the one playing. The players are the ones who saved and won the game.” Rick put a hand to his chest. “Not me.” He then gestured with his hand to the emptying bleacher stand. “I simply led the crowd in cheering in the final few minutes of the game. Those in the stands watching and cheering our team on reminded the players they were supported.”

“Are you taking over as Nutty?”

Rick hesitated for a moment as he fought down some emotions, blinking his eyes a few times, forcing back tears. “No. I only filled in this game at the urging of the crowd. By tradition, Nutty is played by a current student. I’m not a student. I am a WMSU employee. I served on the board that did the fundraising to provide a partial scholarship to the student chosen each year to portray Nutty. It’s a tradition that goes back more than 50 years that a student performs as Nutty.”

“Do you know who was in the Nutty mascot suit today?”

“I do.”

“And his/her name is?”

Rick sighed trying to remain patient and only twitched his tail a little. “I’m sorry, I can’t answer that question, Ms. Sanchez. And before you ask why, I suggest you look-up the Family Education Rights & Privacy Act. In brief summary, certain information on enrolled students such as their name, major and extra-curricular activities are normally public information unless that student has a letter on file requesting that it be kept private. As an employee of WMSU, I must obey that federal law. As I don’t have access to look-up those records while standing here talking to you, I don’t know whether or not I can provide that name to you. Until I can look-up their record, I have to assume Nutty’s performer has such a letter on file. Normally, by tradition Nutty’s performer usually has such a letter on file, partially to protect them from potential harassment from opposing teams. You can contact our enrollment office and they can let you know whether or not they can release that name.”

“Thank you, Mr. Michaud.”

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

Camera view changes back to Lois Sanchez outside the hospital. The flashing lights of an ambulance can be seen behind her as it backs up towards the hospital doors. “That’s where things stand at this time. Calls to the WMSU Enrollment Office were not returned by press time. While we know that Nutty’s performer this season is female per the report from the hospital, we don’t know who she is. Regardless, our thoughts and prayers are with her and her family tonight. This is Lois Sanchez reporting to you live from outside Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon. Back to you in the studio, Bill.”