

Chapter 58

Rick entered the hospital through the side visitor entrance having seen the news crews at the main entrance as he drove into the hospital parking lot. As he entered, he spotted his name on an LED information board asking him to dial 22 on any courtesy phone upon arrival. He scampered over to a nearby phone and called. The hospital staff person on the other end directed him to go to Conference Room 2D and provided directions to the room on the second floor.

It didn't take him long to find the room, but he wondered for a moment if he had the right room as he was alone. Soon, Dr. Leona Zebronski and two others entered the room. The two strangers did their best to not stare at him. Rick quickly stood up stretching on his hind legs to offer Dr. Zebronski a hug. She introduced him to the other two, Charles and Mary Gibbs. Rick offered his paw in handshake to each. He then slowly spun around for them so they could have a better look at him.

"Nancy told us about you, Mr. Michaud," Mary stated. "She was very much afraid of you during your meeting earlier this fall. Well she actually didn't so much fear you as what you represented. She feared the same fate would befall her. Now in some ways, she wishes it had."

Rick drooped his tail. "How is she doing?" He asked.

Charles answered "Nancy landed against the bleacher stairs in the absolute worse way. Our daughter is now paralyzed from the waist down."

Rick lost all composure and openly wept, curling up in a ball on his chair. The room fell silent for a few minutes to allow Rick time to pull himself together.

"Neither we nor she blames you, Mr. Michaud," Charles tried to reassure the giant squirrel.

"But I'm the one who convinced her not to quit."

"No," Mary replied, "actually, she decided not to quit on her own. After her meeting with you, she used us as a sounding board and eventually talked herself into sticking it out. But that doesn't matter. If she had quit, you'd be talking to a different set of parents. The accident would have still happened, just to someone else's son or daughter."

"Thank you for coming on short notice," Charles added. "Nancy has been asking to see you."

Rick wigwagged his tail back and forth a few times. "Why? She was so afraid of me last time we met. Why would she want to see me now?"

"You'll have to ask our daughter," Mary replied. "She was very insistent on seeing you."

A few minutes later, Rick scratch-knocked on the door before entering the room. Nancy Gibbs lay propped-up in her bed.

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“Hello Ms. Gibbs.”

She smiled. “Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr. Michaud. Have a seat.”

Rick hopped up into the visitor’s chair to the left of Nancy’s bed. A nurse came in to check on Nancy. She briefly did a double take at Rick. Rick waved back.

“I’m just visiting this time.”

The nurse nodded and went about her business. Rick turned to Nancy.

“I’m not sure what to ask or say. Your folks said you wanted me to visit. They told me how bad it is. I’m so sorry.” Rick drooped his tail.

“They cut Nutty apart, Mr. Michaud,” Nancy informed him with tears in her eyes. “I begged them to just pull me out, I already knew I was paralyzed at that point, but they destroyed the suit.” She pointed to a plastic bag in the corner. “What’s left of Nutty is in that bag.”

“That’s not your fault, Ms. Gibbs. The suit can be remade.”

“And what about me?”

Rick sighed. “You, obviously, have a long road ahead of you to recovery. They’ll put you through physical and adaptive therapy so you’ll be able to live as much of a normal life as possible.”

“But I’ll never walk again.”

Rick drooped his tail. “Probably not, but I’m not a doctor.”

Nancy closed her eyes a moment. “Why couldn’t Nutty have been boobytrapped like your suit?”

Rick stared at her a moment. “A couple months ago, you were so fearful it was boobytrapped that you were considering quitting.”

“Becoming paralyzed changes your perspective, Mr. Michaud. Becoming a squirrel would be a small trade-off for having full mobility again.”

“Do you think this,” he gestured at his body, “has been easy? I had lost my mind for a while. The previous time we met, it wasn’t me. It was my squirrel character, Pistachio, talking to you.”

“You were badly burned. Those burns were quickly healed by the process that changed you into a squirrel. And you can still walk.”

“But I need all four limbs to do so. I’ve learned to adapt. You will too. They’ll help you here.”

“While you may need your hands in addition to your legs to get about, at least you won’t be bound to a chair.” She paused a moment and then looked directly at him. “You wouldn’t happen to be contagious like a werewolf, would you?” There was pleading in her voice.

Rich shed a few tears. “No, Ms. Gibbs, I’m not. They flushed the nanobot things out of me when I first woke up as Pistachio. The only thing that would happen if I bit you would be that you’d have a nasty and painful puncture wound and could press assault charges against me. At least, you wouldn’t need to worry about rabies as I’ve had my booster shot before they discharged me.”

Nancy closed her eyes again and sighed. “That’s too bad.”

“I’m sorry I can’t provide you with a magic bullet to undo yesterday, Ms. Gibbs.”

Rick fell silent a moment in thought. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. She stared at him.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get use to that.”

“Use to what?”

“Your toon-like built-in pockets.”

Rick shrugged. “They are convenient, especially as pants don’t really work with these legs.” He pulled a business card out of the wallet. He tucked the wallet back in his pocket. He looked about and found a pen on a nearby table. He jotted something on the back of the card. He then handed the card to Nancy.

She looked at the card. “Why would I need the contact information for Second Limb Prosthetics? You told me they’re studying the process that changed you to maybe someday be able to use it to regrow lost limbs. I didn’t lose my legs in that accident. I lost control of my legs.”

“I can’t make any promises and it may be years before they’re ready to do medical test trials, Ms. Gibbs. But you’d make a good candidate. Surely, repairing a damaged spinal cord can’t be much harder than regrowing a limb. The code word on the back of the card will enable you to be placed on the waiting list for if/when they’re ready to start medical trials with their nanobot thingies. I don’t want you to get too much hope up. I don’t know if/when they will reach such a point in the research. Hopefully, if they get to that point, you won’t have to worry about sprouting a big bushy tail as a side effect.” He wigwagged his. “Or having a craving for acorns if the process works. In the meantime, you’ll need to continue all the physical therapy the doctors recommend ensuring your leg muscles don’t atrophy.”

Nancy gripped the card tightly. “Thank you, Mr. Michaud.” Tears welled in her eyes for a moment. She brushed them away and quickly changed the subject. “Now what’s this about you replacing Nutty? I saw the news broadcast about my injury and you taking over. Didn’t you tell me previously you didn’t want to do that?”

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“I got ‘voluntold’ by the other attendees to finish the game for you. I have no intentions of replacing Nutty.”