

Chapter 67

Rick entered the same WMSU conference room he had been in the previous December when he was offered and accepted the position of Goodwill Ambassador. Various WMSU admin were present: University president Theo Kraston, Athletic Director Gregory Bechard, HR Director Joseph Reliant, Alumni Relations Director Michelle Carpenter, and a few others. As had been agreed the previous December, this was the follow-up meeting to review how Rick was doing in his new role.

After the exchange of pleasantries, Theo opened it up. “How do you think you’re doing in your role, Rick, or should we call you Pistachio?” She glanced at the embroidered Pistachio on his maroon polo shirt.

Rick wigwagged his tail back and forth a few times. “I’ll respond to both, Theo, but the students prefer Pistachio or Stash, which is why I’ve gone with that name on the shirt. As to how I think I’m doing. Let’s call it mixed.” The others stared at him. “No, seriously, please hear me out as I explain why I feel that way. I *love* my role interacting with students and promoting the university. It was no small feat to land CatamountCon and having it relocate here next summer at the last moment. I got to thank Wynona York and the rest of the conferencing team for pulling that proposal together on such short notice for me to present to their staff during the con once they realized they had outgrown the facility they were using. They had nearly doubled their attendance this year with just over 1,000 people. Hopefully, the younger attendees next year will fall in love with the campus and become future students.”

“But,” he paused while closing his eyes a moment to gather his thoughts. He sighed, opened them, and continued. “I had really hoped the new Nutty mascot suit was going to be ready in time for this fall’s sports season so I could step away from sports and let Nutty retake that role.”

“The crowds at the games love you,” Dr. Bechard stated. He glanced at the others. “You’re already aware about the delay?”

“Remember, Dr. Bechard, as a result of this,” Rick pointed to his chest with his tail, “I’m now a silent partner in Second Limb Prosthetics and its subsidiary, Second Fur Mascot Costumes. That is noted in my employee file as part of the standard ethics review. As you may recall, prior to that accident when I was simply moonlighting as a costume tester for them, I had convinced them to refurbish Nutty. Which they did as a donation, knowing it would be good PR and free advertisement for them. It was a major refurb and upgrade as you’re aware. Now as a silent partner, I’m fully aware of the fursuit/mascot costume construction queue. WMSU is getting the new Nutty at cost. I’d love to just gift it, but financially, Second Fur isn’t at that point yet. I’ve gotten word about a couple of alumni ready to step-up and cover the cost. They just need to be asked. I’ve emailed you who they are, Michelle.” He glanced over at the Alumni Relations Director.

“As for the crowds loving me, that may be so, but it doesn’t feel right to me even after performing throughout the rest of the previous year’s various sports seasons. To be honest, I find the sports mascot aspect extremely exhausting. I’m not a young twenty-something and my body

reminded me of that after every basketball game. I slept on the bus on the return from every away game, even the day ones. The hockey games were easy as I only went out on the ice for the contest shoot. The baseball/softball season was also easier than the basketball games despite the games usually lasting longer. Maybe because they aren't as high energy as basketball. Anyway, I'm not looking forward to the upcoming football season. My medical team deems me a healthy giant squirrel, but I'm definitely not a young one.

"By a fifty-plus year tradition, Nutty should be portrayed by a student and not just someone taking a class or two to barely meet that definition. That continues to weigh on me. There have been a lot of incredibly talented and athletic students who have wanted to wear that suit. As a result, over the last few years, the competitions to be Nutty have been intense. I look forward to the day when I'll be able to step back as a back-up to Nutty and let Nutty be the school sports mascot again. The sooner the new version of Nutty is completed and a full-time student takes over, the better. I'm not even the right species. I've got ear tufts. A North American red doesn't. Unlike a North American red, my pelt changes color with the seasons.

"I've also received a preview of the summary of the evaluation you put out to students this past spring. Many of them express the same sentiment about Nutty. I've made a good substitute, but Nutty is a long-rooted tradition and many of them want Nutty back."

Dr. Bechard, Theo Kraston, and the others glanced at each other. Theo then looked at Rick. "The University Board of Regents are seriously considering cancelling the mascot order and retiring Nutty."

"WHAT?!" Rick's tail whipped back and forth violently.

"It's due to the accident."

"If it had been a basketball player who was injured like that, would the regents eliminate the basketball program?" Rick shook his head. "It would break Nancy Gibbs's heart if Nutty was retired. She was as distraught over the destruction of the suit as she had been at her own injuries, maybe more so. She told me she had pleaded with the paramedics to simply pull her out of it rather than cut it off her. If Nutty is retired, she might believe she's to blame for it."

"We're aware of that."

"Has there been any discussion about this proposal with our alumni donors?"

"Not yet," Michelle Carpenter replied.

Theo jumped back in. "Yes, alumni reaction could be an issue." She turned back to Rick. "One of the reasons for this meeting is to gauge how you feel about filling in as the mascot so far and into the future, especially with the board's proposal in mind."

"I'm very proud of WMSU. As you're aware, I do what I can to help the institution grow. That's also why I've been as honest as I can today. However, if the Board of Regents eliminate Nutty,

Second Fur by Aldin Busheytail

I'm stepping away also. I just can't handle that portion of the job long-term. And as an WMSU graduate, I refuse to become the permanent replacement for Nutty. I will not have a paw...er hand in the elimination of that tradition."

"So, your feelings on this haven't changed since last December at all?" Theo asked.

Rick shook his head negatively while his tail wigwagged left to right in sync with his head. "It's one thing to fill-in short-term. I'm fine doing that. But I refuse to replace Nutty long-term."

"If that is the case, we'd like you to attend the next Board of Regents meeting in two weeks and express your thoughts directly to them."

"Gladly," Rick wigwagged his tail back and forth a few times, "though they may not like what I have to say."