Guardian Blue - Who Writes This?!

by Alps_Sarsis

Summary

When Judy finds herself irritated about being placed on low-risk assignments due to some media attention and increased celebrity at the close of a big case, Nick decides to tease her about her unwanted fame, pointing out that there's probably even a fan club online, or even fan fiction. Eager to prove her smug partner wrong, Judy looks online and finds that he's actually right, at least about the stories.

Nick desperately pleads with Judy to leave it alone and not to read any of those stories. The bunny is offended that her partner feels she lacks the emotional maturity to objectively read a story about herself and decides to read them anyway. What could go wrong?

Notes

This takes place about three months after Thanks for the Fox.

I do not own Zootopia, Disney, or the characters in the story. This story is written for my own enjoyment, the enjoyment of others, and because pushing around defenseless electrons on the internet makes me feel like I have some semblance of control in my life.

NOTE! I have the tags for character death on this for thematic reasons, not a specific instance.
Bubbling with energy, Judy accepted her ice cold, blue-hued beverage with both small paws, careful not to let the wind catch the petite umbrella that adorned it. There was slush at the top of the drink that kept it from moving a whole lot as she walked purposefully back to her table with it. The patio bar situated in Savanna Central’s popular Hill Street Dining venue of the beautiful city of Zootopia was a favorite wind-down spot for the bunny cop and her vulpine partner. Judy had been deeply enjoying her partnership with Nick after working out a few of the kinks. Especially where defining the cut-off point for his natural relaxed playfulness was concerned. After a good six months, they had a comfortable understanding of one another’s expectations and were pretty securely adjusted to one another as friends and coworkers. Judy took a sip of her drink and sighed at her companion.
“I don’t know Nick… it just feels like the day is too short when we do these things.” she stated insistently. She took another sip of her blue slush. It was non-alcoholic, so the icy temperature of it was all that moderated her enjoyment of it.

Nick looked down at the much shorter grey bunny and stated casually, “Our paychecks are the same regardless, and I think we actually got through to some of those kids. They asked way more questions than usual.” The russet-furred canid was cheerful. He rested his chin on his palm casually as he inspected his empty mug with a relaxed, thoughtful expression. His ears were back which added to his sleek and angular appearance. His beer certainly was alcoholic so, upon draining it, he appeared to be pondering getting another as Judy watched him in slight frustration. Of course Nick liked public outreach assignments. They were easy and almost never went past five. There was also usually never any kind of paperwork associated with it. He worked so hard when he worked, but dear blighted potatoes he could sure be lazy when he felt the occasion called for it. Judy sipped her sweet virgin blueberry frozen daiquiri. She had ordered it once before to embarrass Nick in front of Finnick, but found it to be genuinely delicious. She made it a favorite for an after work treat.

The bunny regarded Nick silently a moment as he pushed his mug away. He would stay at one beer today, it seemed. He usually didn’t even have the one, but they were both off duty and out of uniform since they were on what the ZPD called ‘fluff assignment’. Nick wore a rather form-fitting black t-shirt and jeans with his badge clipped to his belt, and Judy was clad in navy button up shirt tucked in with matching slacks. Her badge adorned a position matching Nick’s. The assignment that day had been speaking with students at Gus Dromedary Middle School about safety and security in their homes and while out and about. They discussed emergency numbers, who to contact for what kind of problem, all of those sorts of things. Nick obviously never minded doing it, but Judy felt that the school’s resource officers were far better utilized for that, and the efforts of her and her partner would be better employed toward actually confronting the criminal element. The little doe swirled the contents of her melting drink around in the glass and glanced up at her partner beside her at the long patio table.

She said sullenly, “I appreciate the simplicity of the work, Slick, I really do, but I just feel like we are being pulled out of the real fight! We could make a way bigger difference patrolling or investigating. You can’t deny it feels like we spend way more time doing this stuff than real police work,” she grumbled. Nick ran his finger slowly around the heavy glass mug, probably no longer as cold to the touch as it had been when it had been brought out covered in frost. His thick vulpine tail swayed as if under water, slowly and fluidly behind him as he answered his grey-furred partner.

After a short pause, the fox said softly, “I disagree. This is very real police work. We might keep one kid from messing up royally and that saves us or another officer a ton of hassle later.”

Judy didn’t have a very good argument against the value of that, but continued to argue her case anyway. “That’s why they have parents and teachers. It’s why there are counselors, truancy officers, and a half dozen other people dedicated to them not messing up. You know full well why we are doing this. Us and not, say, Wolford or Rinowitz.” She crossed her arms and draped her long black-tipped ears down her back. Nick only smiled more broadly. Judy inwardly winced. She let
him see it was getting to her. She could almost see the switch flip in the taller russet mammal.

“You mean that we are smaller and less intimidating to the kids so they like asking us questions? And then there’s the social media aspect. All of those young bucks just loooovvve you, Carrots!” he fluttered his eyelashes as Judy dropped her small head to the table with a dull thump. Her partner chuckled warmly.

“Please.” Judy growled under her breath, “Those boys love some weird, idealized super-hero version of me the media seems to be trying to chisel out of nothing.” Nick laughed harder and Judy smiled, knowing her expression was, for the moment, not visible. She liked the banter, especially when she was feeling less than useful. Nick perked up suddenly and tapped the table.

“Oh hey, look! Here’s the most recent cause of our alarmingly frequent fluff-duty assignments! Alex, turn it up a bit!” Nick called out. A slender impala in white dress shirt grinned at his familiar patron and grabbed the remote, turning up the flat-screen TV behind the bar. The three other patrons looked up at it and Judy groaned, putting her head back down. Nick leaned in over her. “Oh hey, maybe we will see a different angle.” He then cupped his paws together and sat up straighter to watch as if in class, his eyes wide and his grin wider. His eyes glanced down occasionally at his partner, her long ears laid out over the table.

The TV showed a snow leopard newscaster with an inserted graphic behind her which showed a picture of Judy Hopps, looking much more determined and far less embarrassed than she did at her table at that moment. The newscaster spoke with a refined and careful accent.

“More cellphone video has emerged of the harrowing end of a wild and dangerous police encounter on Agave Avenue on Friday. The chase began when Officers Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde spotted Hugh Roaricksted entering the area. Roaricksted was wanted in connection with the kidnapping of City Councilmammal Lydia Greene’s seven year old daughter, Stacy Greene.” The TV flashed a picture of a young girl deer in a yellow and white sundress with a towel wrapped up in her arms as if heading to a picnic. The feline newscaster continued. “Lydia Greene’s ex-fiancé, Gordon Cervida, is suspected to have ordered the kidnapping and was arrested outside his home Friday afternoon. I must caution sensitive mammals or any viewers with small children, the following video may be … a bit violent.” The newscaster furrowed her brow in such a manner that it made it obvious that she was understating.

Judy groaned again at the tone that the newscaster used. She wasn’t violent, she followed the continuum of force for a mammal her size, and it only made it look… She watched as the video began. She heard her own voice.

“Nick, he’s heading back toward the truck, that’s gotta be it!” She sounded out of breath as the camera spun a little unsteadily toward the actual action. There was a thump and the camera showed
Judy tumbling like a ragdoll over a brick walkway in front of a line of shops. She skidded onto her feet and to a stop. A large brown bear came into the frame and jumped for her. She darted to the side and used a lamp post to help change her direction suddenly. One of the patrons, a somewhat older-looking pig, gasped at the action on the TV.

“Geeze, talk about mismatched! What’s she supposed to do about a bear?!” Judy sighed. At least not everyone in the city had already seen it. This guy had apparently not caught the story until that moment, and Judy kept quiet. She didn’t want her having a drink a couple tables away spoiling the ‘ending’ for him. She returned her gaze to the screen. The impala barkeep laughed to the pink toned patron.

“Oh yeah, you just got back in town! Watch this. It gets good.” The video centered on the bear, who looked back over his shoulder.

“You go right ahead fox!” he called out menacingly in a booming voice. “I’ll take good care of the bunny while you check that out! It’s your choice!” He then took a clawed swipe at Judy, who managed to dodge again. The bear did not seem to care that several onlookers were not only refusing to scatter, but were filming the action. In this age of mobile media, that had become the norm.

Nick’s voice called back from some unknown place, “You’re gonna wish you danced with me instead, buddy!” He sounded a bit more distant, so they had to subtitle it in case viewers were unable to hear the fox. It was captured from a cell phone camera which didn’t have great audio pick up. In the video, Judy wiped the corner of her mouth with the back of a small grey paw. There was some blood clearly visible in the shot. The patron stood up from his seat, fixated on the screen as the tiny bunny squared off with the 800 pound wall of flesh and dark fur.

“Holy crap, Alex. That doe’s about to take on a bear, are you kidding?!” the pig asked in bewilderment. If he turned around and looked down the other side of the L-shaped bar, to the adjoining table, he’d have seen Judy actually smirk. She originally hated being underestimated, but found herself more frequently benefitting from it as time went on. Nick and Judy gave each other a grin at the pig’s reaction. The both savored the irony of sitting behind the unaware patron and watched the scene unfold just as they knew it would.

On the slightly shaky video, Judy gave a tense, cold stare right into the eyes of the bear, then moved slightly to the side, baiting her attacker to commit to an attack. She then used those powerful lapine legs to kick off the pavement so hard a puff of dust plumed outward from her launching point. This left her location vacant as the bear’s paw slammed down over it. The sound that was clearly heard in the video made it clear why later pictured of the bear had him in a cast up to his elbow. He howled in pain and reared back without seeing the angle of the rabbit’s jump. That jump let her hook her paw on the same lamp post she’d already used, flinging herself around it with all her strength. Her weight was not so intimidating, but her speed added a lot of power as she planted her foot hard into
the bear’s temple. The rabbit fell back and landed on her feet squarely in front of her ursine opponent. The pig gave a startled shout.

“Run!” he cried as if the digital rabbit would have, post action, followed that reasonable bit of advice. Judy peered up at her partner as he watched the pig and smirked again. On the screen, the bunny did not run away. As the dazed bear stooped down quickly to snatch her, she flipped backward between his feet, onto her back. She pushed herself upward with her shoulders and into a full pawstand on the pavement. Both of her feet were pushed up for at least four rapid, distressingly loud thumps between the Hugh’s parted thighs. There was a pained shout by every male mammal watching as well as whoever was taking the video. Even Nick groaned from it, and he knew it was coming. The bear’s massive paws, instead of grabbing Judy, slapped defensively over his lap. That left his chin wide open.

Judy reared back with both feet and gave it everything she had. She had done something similar when she was a kit, when a bully was being rough with her. This was different. She wasn’t a kit anymore and her strength and training were on full display as the bear jerked backward hard from the impact. This got another shout from the TV viewers. Still clutching his lower injury, the brown-furred behemoth toppled sideways with an agonized groan. The sound of screeching tires was heard as he hit the pavement, and the camera jerked to see a very large police cruiser having skidded to a stop. It then moved back to Judy, who was backing away to let a polar bear and a wolf officer affect the arrest. She then looked up and back to the direction from which she had been rag-dolled before. The voice of her partner rang out over the radios being carried by the wolf and polar bear. Judy’s own radio appeared to have been knocked off at some point.

The fox called out on the radio, “Truck is clear, I have the girl! 10-24! Responding officers divert to Hopps’ 20, 10-18. Last 20 - Agave and Palm!” Nick sounded out of breath, and a bit worried. He was out of breath because he had difficulty breaking off the lock to get into the back of the truck. As he watched the TV, Judy saw her partner flicked his ear nervously. He was not smiling at that part. She knew he worried about her when things got physical, despite her reputation. He did not like leaving her to handle the bear, but their orders were to secure the child, and Judy knew Nick did exactly what was expected of him. If the girl had to be carried to safety, Nick was the better choice. Had Judy been the one at the truck, she likely would not have had the strength to break the lock. It had been the right choice. The video ended and the newscaster returned. Her serious expression was unchanged from before.

“Officer Wilde located Greene’s daughter in a padlocked moving truck, shaken up but otherwise unharmed. She has been returned to her mother. Several videos of the event have popped up on Ewetube, resulting in renewed interest in the expanded version of the ‘Mammal Inclusion Initiative’ –…”

The volume was turned down again as Alex laughed at the fox. “Your partner got all the screen time this go-round, Nick. You are just never gonna match that bunny’s celebrity.” The impala grinned. The pig stared in confusion down the bar at Nick, and then down to the semi-hiding form of his partner beside him. Judy groaned out again. She liked compliments and positive attention just fine,
but genuinely felt that she belonged on the beat, not in a spotlight.

The doe anxiously grumbled, “I don’t do it for celebrity, Alex! I just try to do my job. Wolfard and Fangmeyer do takedowns all the time and nobody cares,” she explained with a roll of her eyes. After a second or two to actually put the bits together, the pig gasped. He likely recognized the bunny’s black-tipped, swept back ears. She couldn’t really hide them.

He cried out, “Oh dear heavens! They’re right here with me! Oh, bunny, I gotta buy you a drink!” Judy groaned quietly as Nick nudged her. She sat up and prepared her speech for ‘non-acceptance of favors’. Nick interrupted however, as he picked up Alex’s donation bucket. It was for a clothing drive for displaced victims of a multi-block fire that happened a month before. The fox shook it in front of the excited pig with a grin.

“In her name if you must!” Nick piped. Judy smiled quietly at the fox, a little impressed with how elegantly Nick dispelled the offered platitude. The act complimented both of them instead of just her. The pig gladly contributed and slapped Nick on the back, thanking them both for their service. He then returned to his drink and the fox returned to his partner’s side.

“Satisfied, Slick?” Judy asked, sitting up and shaking off the embarrassment of unneeded recognition.

“I’m satisfied that you can clearly see Bogo’s point. We can’t hit the streets while your incident of going savage on a bear is viral on Ewetube and Chitter,” Nick explained. Judy visibly winced at the comment about going savage. Her partner continued, “Think about it, we go into a crowd and you get mobbed by fans, and the perp gets away! Bogo knows what he’s doing. Give it a few weeks, it’ll die down.” The fox stretched a bit and added, “In the meantime, we get to enjoy short days and no detailed report writing. That’s as valuable as our commendations!” Judy finished her drink in silent surrender, the slush having melted while they watched the video.

After a moment of reflection, the bunny said in an insistent tone, “I do not have fans, Nick. I’ve just been in the public eye just a couple of times, that’s all. Sure, there might be a few who are happy to see me, but fans? Please.” She smiled at the idea, rose tinting the inside of her ears. Nick was notorious for teasing her ego. She tried desperately to hide it. It had been kicked down hard during the Nighthowler case, and she made a point to strangle it any time it tried to make itself known. Nick shook his head at his partner again, grinning.

“Oh no, my bunny bestie,” he teased, “it’s not just the few incidents that have made folks notice you… When I was in the academy, especially during Bellwether’s trial, you got a lot of face time with public outreach. You did interviews, you were on the news like… every other day for a while, and you always had something inspirational and uplifting to say.” Judy felt her face heat up.
She half-whispered, “You know good and well what that was about! I had to set the record straight about the stupid press conference. I needed to apologize and let mammals know what was really in my heart.” She was trying to be humble. Nick teased her plenty, but this did not feel like teasing. He was paying her genuine compliments, even if just to make his case. Some part of her felt like she wasn’t really earning them after all that happened. She was just trying to break even.

Nick shook his head slowly, smiling as he said in a relaxed tone, “The point is, the city got to know you, and when their acclaimed bunny saves a darling little doe, drops a bear, and calmly reads him his rights after being obviously roughed up herself… well, there’s gonna be fans.” He leaned in, that smarmy, half-lidded expression in his green eyes. It let Judy know the real teasing was coming.

“Please no,” the bunny whined.

“I bet there’s a fan club,” He said in a blunt half-whisper. Judy gritted her teeth. Nick continued in a smooth, even tone, “I bet you can buy cute little plush bunny toys for the kits with black-tipped ears and violet eyes.” Judy buried her face in her arms, little teardrop tail flittering, face burning, hoping no one else in the patio bar was hearing this. Why did the fox have to do this?

“Please stop.” She groaned, praying silently for it to end.

“I should get one!” Nick gasped with his eyes wide, as if realizing he really did need it. How had he lived his life without it? The teasing vulpine winced as Judy’s little fist impacted his shoulder, and he laughed. “I bet there’s even sordid, scandalous fan-fiction and everything!” he crossed his arms. “I dare you to look. Check your phone. Judy plus ZPD plus Fanfiction.” The bunny rolled her eyes and pulled out her phone.

“Fine, pest. I will show you that it’s not there…” Nick winced at being called pest, but the bunny didn’t really notice it. She began typing on her phone with her tiny, soft fingertips. Nick hopped up and watched over her shoulder. Judy’s ears heated up a little more. She always felt a little self-conscious when the fox was that close. “What did you say, fan-fiction? Is that like … the rumor mill?” she asked.

Nick laughed loudly at her. “You were buried in books and studies and learning everything possible about the law and being a cop, and you utterly missed half the wonderful culture around you!” Judy furrowed a brow, the dark expression daring her partner to drop the dumb bunny tag and get an elbow to the gut. He did not bite, however, and continued, “No, it’s not rumors. It’s stories. Fans like to write stories to fill in the gaps, or even tell their own stories about familiar characters.” Nick tried explaining as simply as he could.
“I’m not a fictional character.” She corrected.

“I know that, but fans create characters based on real people sometimes. You’d be surprised.” Judy held up her phone as it ‘thought’ about the request.

“We will see who is surprised, Nick. There is no way I am interesting enough to anyone but my coworkers to – SEVEN THOUSAND HITS?!” Her eyes bulged at it. Several mammals looked in their direction. Nick visibly winced, gritting his teeth. He sucked a deep breath through them with a soft hiss.

“Oh no. Okay, I really was just being a pain – are you serious?” he asked, leaning in again. Judy showed him the phone. He took the phone from her, scanning some of the entries. His eyes got wider and wider, making the bunny recoil a little in stunned disbelief. Nick winced again suddenly and immediately closed the browser with a stab of his claw tip at her tiny phone screen. Tik.

“Hey! Why did you close it? I need to look at that!” she protested.

“No. No you don’t. I forbid you to read it.” Nick stated flatly, crossing his arms. His expression was dead serious.

“I beg your pardon?” the bunny asked, her nose wiggling.

“I. Forbid. You. To. Read. Those. Stories.” Nick spoke every word clearly as if she had just missed it.

“I heard you, but I don’t know how you think you can just forbid things like that.” She laughed, typing the search on her phone again. Nick sighed and Judy looked up at him, seeing genuine concern in his face. She stopped. What was he hiding?

He spoke up again. “Carrots, listen… these are fictional stories. Maybe they have a character based on you, but she’s not you. She’s their character. She’s gonna do stuff you might not do, say things you’d never say, and some of that will end up being unflattering or even appalling, trust me.” Nick mashed his own ears back with his paws in frustration as Judy let the phone search again. She stared at Nick while it was thinking, wiggling her nose. She could not remember the last time she saw him this tense.
“Nick, I understand that... but I am curious. I mean, what kind of things could these mammals be writing about using my name?” she asked. “People could see that and believe it was true.”

Nick closed his eyes, hanging his head a little. “I am sure you do not want to know, Carrots. Look, I am trying to keep you from getting upset over nothing! Over worse than nothing – pretend nothing!” the fox pleaded. Judy narrowed her eyes a little at her partner.

“What, you think I can’t read these things in an emotionally un-attached and responsible adult fashion? You think I am gonna read an unflattering story and fall apart?” the bunny asked incredulously.

“Do I think that?” he asked in a tone gratingly familiar. She knew what was coming. “Yes. Yes I do.” Judy crossed her arms in bitter indignation.

“Fine, Slick. I am gonna read this no matter what you say. You have to know that by now...” Nick groaned as she spoke. “… So how about this: If I can’t deal with it and I get bent out of shape, I pay for pizza next time we do Trivia Night with Wolford and his pals. If I can handle it just fine, then you get to pay. Need I remind you how much pizza that ‘pack’ puts away?” Nick shook his head rapidly.

“No, not gonna work fluff. I’m not turning this into one of our bets! You could offer to wear a fox-tail to work for six months and I would not take the bet. It’s not worth your sanity, Carrots. I don’t want you to mess with that stuff. I’m gonna be the one who has to deal with the fallout!” His expression appeared genuinely fearful. While that normally made Judy feel a bit more understanding with Nick, since he was rarely so serious, this was insulting to her. She could not help but be offended that he was trying to protect her from her own emotions. She thumped her foot rapidly a moment.

“Fine. No bet. You might as well have, since I am still going to read them anyway, but I suppose know you stand to tarnish your perfect bet-winning record.” She grinned at the fox smugly. Nick flailed a bit, groaning. Judy smirked at his reaction. Nick’s motto was never let them see they get to you, but she had a knack for doing that to him occasionally. He placed his paws on the table and looked grumpy. Judy leaned closer, making his ears drop back. He gazed back to Judy and said, with a pitiful tone,

“Judy... This is not an ‘I told you so’ I am looking forward to giving. I’m being honest here.” She blinked at that. He usually only used her real name when he really needed her to listen to him. This was not breaking her curiosity at all. It was making it worse. He continued, “I will give you 80 bucks for the pizza on Trivia Night right now if you promise not to read a single one of those
stories.” She gave him the doe eyes which usually broke him out of a funk when he lost a heated debate. He kept his stressed expression.

Judy smiled and purred, “Does the angry fox want some cheesy fries?” Nick sighed with irritation and stated flatly.

“Yes.” The bunny chuckled and ordered. After a few minutes of silence, they resumed normal topics of discussion and Nick mellowed, letting Judy feel a little better. It helped that she didn’t bring up fan-fiction again, and she didn’t intend to. She would remind Nick about the discussion after she had completed her task of reading one of these inexplicably taboo things. She would succeed without suffering the ‘damage’ that Nick seemed to think she could not avoid. Silly fox, thinking that a rabbit like her, who could go through the things she and Nick had gone through, could not handle an unflattering representation of a character based on her. It was preposterous! She would show her partner she was not just an emotional bunny. She indexed the site on her phone and made a mental note to dedicate a little time to reading later that night.
Mistakes Were Made

The grey-toned bunny grunted as she dropped the medium-sized basket of laundry by her bed, neatly folded and warm. That was all finished for the day and nothing lie ahead of her but a quiet evening. A rumble of distant thunder shook the tiny, sound-sieve of an apartment. Ah. Better yet, it was a quiet and rainy evening. She was glad she got the laundry done already. It was a full two blocks between the laundromat and her apartment building and a storm soaking her fresh-washed clothes would have been less than amusing. She flopped onto her bed, pulling the covers up to her tummy and wedging her extra ‘reading’ pillow under her shoulders to prop her up more. She pulled out her phone and looked at the indexed tab.

Nick had been so serious about her not doing this. She felt a pang of guilt in going against his wishes but she felt that he was completely off base, and frankly it was downright insulting to insinuate that she was not emotionally stable enough to handle … this. It was something that had come up before between them. Yes, bunnies were emotionally sensitive because they were naturally altruistic due to their highly communal nature. But she was not like other bunnies. The video with the bear showed that just fine. She shook her head. Nick was wrong about it. Nothing someone she didn’t even know could write could be bad enough to shake her. Disgust, surprise and appall perhaps, but not genuinely upset. She would get over any of the other stuff.

Judy smiled and started looking through the list of stories. She flinched immediately.

“Oh sweet cheese and c- woah! No, no, no… Filters, there’s gotta be filters… I don’t have to start with a brain full of a teenaged buck’s deepest fantasies,” she laughed to herself. She found a filter element on the site she was on and employed it against the tag “Intercourse”. The count dropped from 7210 to about 1630. Judy dropped her ears back limply and blanched at that. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. “At least I can say I’m a little bit attractive, right? They are strangers, but heck, I’ve got needs too, so I will… forgive,” she stated with a small paw over her chest, nodding proudly. This, she felt, was what Nick had been so worried about. No need to worry, she had no intention of peeking at a strangers’ secret and deeply intimate thoughts like that. They had a right to feel, and like Nick said, it was not really her, just based off her. It should be… flattering, right? She looked at some of the other tags and filters. “Mulch piles… I don’t know what half this stuff even means. What the hell are rules? Sixty Three? What’s AU? Self insert? Do I wanna know?”

She shook her head and just thumbed down slowly through titles, looking for something interesting that did not have a hundred chapters. She wanted something short in case it was interesting and might cause her to stay up all night. She and her partner were visiting a primary school in the morning and those kids did not want a cranky, sleepy, zombie bunny.

She finally located a story that gave a rose tint to her ears, but not in the genuinely embarrassed way from before. She murmured the name of the story out loud.
“The Unbreakable Judy Hopps. Story by HareScribe111.” She looked at the details. “Three chapters, eight thousand words… so that’s pretty short, I could do that. Summary…” She read quietly.

Judy Hopps stands against seemingly unbeatable foes as par for the course in her everyday job, but deep down, she’s a bunny like any other. What more can she give? What more will Zootopia take?

The grey doe tilted her head at that summary. It seemed interesting, and she didn’t recognize any tags that rubbed her the wrong way. They had hardly bothered with any tags at all, aside from just her and her partner’s names. As best she could tell, the story was about a very ordinary bunny having to do extraordinary things for her city, and that was very much what she was. She opened it and began to read.

The story opened up with a somewhat jovial exchange between Judy and her partner, Nick. She was immediately unnerved by how dead-on the writer had her mannerisms and those of the fox. She dismissed the chill that ran up her spine because she realized that Nick never, ever turned off his playful, smug attitude, and they did banter occasionally in interviews. They definitely joked back and forth in the classroom from time to time when doing outreach. This writer may well have been there for one of those encounters, as humor softened their audience and often made them more willing to engage. The only real problem that she had with the story early on is that a few of the things that the writer had Nick say were far more harsh and judgmental of Judy than she knew Nick would ever use. Then again, it might be harder for a rabbit who doesn’t know Nick to see that he’s just being playful with Judy. They might not know that they were actually very close friends. She overlooked that.

The next scene was something rather domestic. It had Judy grocery shopping and getting a call from an unnamed family member. The scene felt organic enough, but the doe could not for the life of her explain why the writer wanted to put it in there. It felt disjointed and unneeded, but she supposed he was selling the ‘ordinary rabbit’ part of the story hard early on. Judy did in fact shop for groceries and talk to her family on the phone like anyone else.

What she became irritated with is near the end of the conversation, her character told the mysterious family member that the chief still would not allow her to get a better partner. No one else wanted to work with a fox. Worse yet, the writer had her character say that she didn’t trust Nick. She calmed herself again. She would not let Nick be right about this. This was not going to get to her. Lots of people didn’t trust foxes, and this mammal appeared to just be burdening her, as a character of course, with his personal bias.

The chapter ended there and she got a drink from the small fridge of her tiny apartment and returned. The scene opened with some action and she was a lot more pleased with that. The writer, she
suspected a bunny buck, had obviously researched a little in order to drop some radio lingo and tens codes into the story to make it feel more real. That helped Judy get into the spirit of the story and forget the speciest slant from earlier. There was a foot chase and she was happy to see that Nick was helpful and brave in that part, and they caught up to the suspect with a bit of quick thinking and bunny agility. Judy felt that maybe Nick was too rough with the suspect, but again, the writer likely felt that was what the fox was there for. After the chase the scene moved to the partners driving along in their cruiser patrolling rather randomly in Tundra Town, as slow and steady as one does on those more difficult icy streets.

Nick in the story confronted Judy about her attempts to switch partners. He asked the bunny why she didn’t want to work with him. This struck the doe reading the story as odd, since it was actually kind of defending Nick, who was justifiably hurt by the fact. Maybe the buck didn’t hate foxes after all. She leaned forward and read carefully, since it felt tense, and she would certainly feel emotional in such a situation. The story-bunny told her partner that she didn’t like being the butt of his jokes. She was very serious about her job, and she did not like feeling demeaned in public by her partner. The reading Judy rubbed her chin thoughtfully. Did the public actually feel that way about the fox’s teasing? She might actually have to tell him to tone it down. At least the story Judy had a real reason to feel like she did. It wasn’t just… doesn’t like foxes. She continued to read.

The fox in the story agreed to be more sensitive. He knew he was not very popular, but he wasn’t good at interacting with a bunch of new people. Laughter was kind of his umbrella to hide under when it came to breaking the ice with people he did not know. He had not been aware that it was causing his partner real trouble. The reading lapine smiled at this. The story had Nick’s reason for his constant banter down pretty solid, she felt. She was rather impressed. The interaction felt responsible and warm, and it made Judy happy to read someone describing two responsible mammals working out a disagreement like adults. The world could use more of that. She felt she might just leave a kind comment about that. That wouldn’t be creepy, would it? The poor writer would probably not believe the real Judy Hopps read it. Would that be frightening to him? if she commented, she would just stay anonymous.

Judy stretched a bit and leaned back into her pillows again, feeling rather satisfied. She was actually kind of enjoying the story. She continued. The pair spotted a grey fox yelling angrily at the passenger window of a big blue van. It was something medium-mammal-sized. The pair pulled up behind it and the grey fox turned and left abruptly, anger still in his eyes. There was no license plate on the van, so Nick asked Judy, who was driving, to radio it in while he spoke with the driver to ask if their plate had been reported stolen. They had to have a temporary if they wanted to keep driving. Again, Judy was impressed as she read. The writer chose to display some of the very normal, everyday, low-action police work that she performed every single day. It was not super interesting to read but it felt real and organic and set the mood for her character nicely.

Nick approached the van with his notebook and a pen, but just before he finished walking to the door of the vehicle, the side door of the van slid open suddenly and there was a deafening boom. Her partner flew backwards like a toy. Tattered fabric, chunks of fur and crimson spray went easily
five times as far over the bright virgin snow. Judy’s throat contracted as she could not stop reading the words fast enough. She put the phone down, mouth gaping.

How could someone write that about a real mammal?! Nick was someone they could just happen across on the street. Heck, they might have really seen him… talked to him in a class room or during an event. Judy put her paw over her chest. Her heart was racing and her velveteen palms felt ice cold. She flattened her ears down her back tightly and sucked in a deep breath. Nick would tease her mercilessly if she let on that this had actually triggered an adrenaline response from her! It was a story. This was about real and familiar police work, but it was still a story. She slapped either side of her face to snap herself out of the shock of the sudden violence. She would finish reading this and be done with it, but this buck just lost his favorable anonymous comment!

She read about her character calling in the shooting and jumping out of the car as the van sped away, her legs buckling from the emotional shock of it. She half ran, half crawled over the hard-packed road ice and slid to a stop. She didn’t even need to check his vitals. Enough of the fox was physically absent that it was completely pointless. Judy gritted her teeth as she read that, her fingers tightening on her phone so much that she felt one of her knuckles pop.

“What, he’s just freaking dead?! Why?!” she cried out loudly in exasperation.

“Who’s dead?” called a low-pitched voice from next door. That was Bucky, she was pretty sure. Pronk had a little higher pitched voice.

“A bear, maybe?” Yeah that one was Pronk. She was actually thankful for their loud interruption this time. It shook her from her building rage.

She called out to the pair. “Sorry guys, I’m reading a story.”

“Is it any good?” called Bucky.

“Not really,” Judy deadpanned.

“It sounds good, if it made you yell,” Bucky replied again.

“Sometimes we yell at the things we love!” the other added. Judy smirked at that and shook her head. Thankfully they did not continue to try to talk to her through her wall. She regarded the story
again. *I should just stop reading this,* she thought.

“Wait, there’s like… a whole other chapter, what else would he bother writing about if there’s another chapter?” she asked herself more softly. She thought back to the old soap operas that her mother used to watch when she was a kit, and the smaller siblings were down for their naps. It seemed like no one stayed dead in those things. It was a little unlikely, but Judy decided to just scan through the remaining chapter and find out where the heck this story was supposed to be going. What was the point, even?

Judy would spend a lot of time wishing she had not.

The rest of the chapter kept pretty true to an accurate portrayal. Story-Judy got violently sick in the snow and was pretty much useless until help arrived. She was simply picked up and removed from the scene by another officer. She was placed in a heated cruiser to wait while the investigators did their thing. Firearms were not legal in the city, so it was a pretty high level crime even before it had been used on the officer, so it was suspected the shooting occurred because the mammal or mammals involved did not want to be caught with the weapon.

There was no hospital scene, no cliché CPR scene, no ‘shocky-paddles’ as Nick liked to call them. Story-Judy’s partner was dead. Skimming, Judy was aware that she dropped some of the detail, but she didn’t really care. It was all about *pain.* It was all about how bad it affected her that in a flash, half her partner was scattered over a snow-covered sidewalk and he was just… gone. The more she read the angrier she got about that. There was no reason for it! The chapter ended with Judy’s character falling into a fitful sleep at her own quiet, lonely, under-described home.

Angrily, Judy opened the third and final chapter. She rifled through it like someone rummaging through an odds and ends drawer, looking for a battery for the remote control. It was with the level of frustration present in someone also missing the beginning of their favorite show while the TV was stuck tauntingly on another channel. So frustrated they can’t remember to just push the buttons right on the cable box. As the story continued, story-Judy attended a stereotypically rainy funeral and was further emotionally poisoned by the sad trickle of people who came to say goodbye. Like foxes just didn’t have friends or something! *Half the city would turn out for Nick,* Judy grumbled inwardly. Story-Judy lamented not being more kind to Nick, and not trusting him more. There was a scene with her getting put on desk duty because she needed time to mentally recover from that. Finally, the chapter went to Judy patrolling the streets *alone,* because that made *perfect* sense for any reason other than just sounding depressing. The story finally left off with some kind of half-assed narration by the author, stating that the city gave to Judy her joy and her pain, but she would still serve Zootopia until her name joined his in stone, just like anyone else.

Judy dropped her phone on her pillow.
“What the heck was all of that supposed to accomplish?!” Judy fairly shouted and then slapped her paw over her small muzzle.

“What happened?” called Bucky helpfully.

“Sorry guys. This story is infuriating. They killed off one of the main characters for no good reason. He just… gets killed.” Talking about it would help, maybe. She could not still be riled up when Nick saw her tomorrow. He would rib her forever for it.

“What’s a GOOD reason to get killed?” asked Pronk.

“Shut up, she’s talking about the story!” Bucky shouted.

“I don’t know. Not that though,” Judy answered, not feeling any better yet.

“Oh, you read police stories. That makes sense. Still, it’s kinda dumb to just go out writing a ticket though, yeah.” Bucky called out in support.

“Like how?” the lower voice asked.

“He just gets shot walking up to a car to write a ticket or something.” Judy stated flatly.

Pronk countered, “I mean, it sucks, but that stuff actually happens. I mean, it’s not that unrealistic.” Judy’s paws both came to her muzzle and her heart dropped into her stomach.

“Don’t say that to her! She’s a cop, that’s insensitive!” Bucky shouted at his mate. The two began to loudly bicker but Judy could not focus on a thing they were saying. Their voices almost echoed in her mind as her body tensed and she felt ill. Pronk was absolutely right, that could happen. It had happened before. They had to read about it when she was in the academy. But it was not even just that. Anything could happen. Nick could walk out to help a cub who slipped on the ice and get flattened by a truck. He could be helping to assist a lemming off a ledge and go headfirst to the pavement. He could be flattened in a panicked stampede at a Gazelle concert while they assisted with security. Nick could go so quick that Judy didn’t even get to say goodbye. And worst of all, there absolutely, positively did NOT have to be a reason. It could be for nothing. All the suffering and anguish story-Judy went through was a real and tangible future for her, and the writer didn’t even scratch the surface of how the rabbit would really feel if it happened. She paced a while. She
went to the bathroom, splashed water in her face, returned to her bedside and paced again.

Judy put her paws up and sighed deeply. “Okay, calm down. It’s a story. You read a story. Nick was maybe a tiny bit right about bunny emotional attachment, but it’s still a story. Okay. It’s fine,” She whispered to herself, too soft for her neighbors to hear. She sat on her bed and took a deep breath. “It’s a story. You read stories that scare you, or make you sad, and you get over them in a bit. Scary movies are nothing to you! This is no different.” She leaned forward. It wasn’t so bad when it was anger she was feeling. It really was about the story then. However, it had just become about something real. And there was no escaping how much that bothered her. Worst of all, her mind kept making up its own little scenarios where Nick didn’t make it. Sometimes she wasn’t even there and she just heard about it from the news, or she got a call from Bogo telling her to come in, that they need to talk. Judy found herself literally shaking after a bit of this misery tumbling around in her mind. She jumped up finally and walked to her window. It was still pouring outside, so no walk to clear her head. She looked at her phone on her pillow. There, that would be the source of her relief.

She spent nearly an hour on Ewetube, watching funny videos which brought her to almost midnight and only managed to distract her a little while. She felt fine while she watched them, but as soon as she looked away she thought about the description the writer gave of an innocuous and dutiful red fox strolling up to a van to find out where its license plate was. Then suddenly story-Judy’s tale had almost nothing to do with foxes anymore.

She punched her pillow angrily. She was so dumb for getting herself into this, and Nick called it! He knew she was too invested in the real mammals in her life to separate herself from the story. She couldn’t insulate herself from getting upset. This probably wasn’t even as bad as it could be, or it wasn’t even the kind of upset he meant. At least she didn’t have to buy 80 bucks worth of pizza over this. She looked at her phone again and sighed softly, stroking her ears back down her back with both paws. There was only one way out of this. She didn’t have to tell him why she was calling. She could just say she wanted to make sure they were both clear on where they were going tomorrow. She needed to hear her partner’s voice. It was just a story. The real Nick was safe and warm in his bed and he would be there tomorrow. Her subconscious just needed to hear his voice.

Judy picked up her phone and selected Nick from her contact list as “Shifty Fox”, which is how he had actually entered it the day Bellwether had been caught.

Disastrously, it went straight to voice mail.


“Did it get worse?” Pronk asked.
“Leave her alone!” Bucky snapped.

“Yeah, it did!” Judy whimpered.

Bucky offered meekly, “I don’t want to read it anymore. it sounds super sad.” Judy dialed again in case it was a glitch. Voice mail. She inwardly cried out. Not tonight! *Did you forget to charge your phone again you lazy fox!?* *Pick up!* She texted him and asked him to call when he got the text, no matter what time it was. She decided not to leave an actual voice mail because she felt she would sound too stressed and did not want Nick to think she was actually panicking over this.

Why was this even bothering her so much? She had seen sadder movies and read sadder stories and she knew without a doubt that her partner was probably fine. It wasn’t like that awful thing had happened to him. It could have though. That, to Judy, was where it became a problem.

She had repressed her fears. There was *always* the chance Nick could get hurt on the job. It was dangerous. Judy had been injured just running from Bellwether’s goons. Sacrifice was part of the job, and she dismissed it from her mind while the real and enormous fear of what it meant had been so vividly gripped in her subconscious. So long had she buried the worry of it that the story had provoked her coiled spring of a subconscious into flinging the bunny through despair even though Nick was still probably fine.

Most likely.

*Damnit, pick up the phone.*

Judy flopped onto her bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to think about anything but that stupid carefully written scene, her careless partner, or how completely exhausted she was already going to be when she got to work tomorrow, even if she went to sleep right then.

And right then was certainly *not* when Judy was going to sleep.
Fifteen minutes before her morning alarm was supposed to sound, Judy just turned it off. She did not want to hear its accusatory beeping. She went to the public showers of her apartment building and took a nice cold one to break her from her melancholy exhaustion. She got out, shivering. At least she was completely lucid about this misery. She had taken turns through the night being angry at Nick for telling her about fanfics, then herself for being exactly what Nick thought she was: an emotional bunny. Then she would go back to being angry at her partner for not answering his phone the entire night. She had finally chased the darker thoughts away by about four in the morning. Unfortunately, she was then fearful of falling asleep for the kind of dreams that awaited her. She had a few nightmares after the Nighthowler case, understandably, and did not want to revisit those unpleasant nights. She also felt that if she went to sleep at 4, the alarm would not stand a chance waking her, even with her sensitive ears. She got dressed in her uniform. That impressed the smaller kits and cubs, rather than intimidated them. They dressed down for the older crowd, as it relaxed them. Judy felt a little better being in uniform however, because it always made her feel a little stronger.

She hopped on a bus and rode to the terminal. She checked her phone once she got there. There was still no call from Nick. There was not even a message. She could not lie to herself, she was actually a little unnerved - worried even - by that. He might have forgotten to charge his phone, but surely he’d have charged it before he left for the school. Maybe he used his phone for his primary alarm instead of a backup. If it died, he might have overslept. If he was not there, the already slightly rattled bunny was not sure what she would do.

She could talk to the kids on her own, but she really needed to see her partner to get out from under that dark, ominous funk. She got onto the next bus and took that to the elementary school. The classes were already full upon her arrival, and she stopped outside the main entrance. A few of the faculty greeted her very warmly, including the bear vice-principle who made a playful show of flinching when Judy cheerfully reached out to shake his paw. She nervously laughed at that and continued to wait. Fifteen minutes passed. Twenty. No Nick. Her phone buzzed in its belt-pouch. Judy sighed with frustration. Finally.

“Yeeeees?” she growled expectantly, having not even looked to check the caller. It would surely be her sleepy, late fox partner. Chief Bogo’s voice was the one who greeted her, making her breath skip.

“Yes, Officer Hopps. We need to talk.” His tone was dark and serious. It was always dark and serious, but Judy’s entire body went into complete disaster mode. Her breathing shortened and her chest tightened. Her paws felt suddenly ice cold, and her feet felt wet and heavy. She felt immediately like she was going to be sick. No. Not this. Anything but this.

“I… I’m h-here,” Judy croaked softly into the phone.
“Yes, I can hear.” Bogo grunted. “Look, I am really sorry I didn’t contact you sooner concerning this but… I was unaware of how serious it was until I checked this morning. Now it might actually be too late, so I do apologize for that, Officer Hopps.” His voice was full of regret. Judy dropped back onto her tail on a brick-lined planter in front of the school. It was a dream. It had to be a dream. It couldn’t really happen. Not now. Not like this. She didn’t even get to stay with him. Had he wanted her? Did he look for her? Was he scared? She started breathing faster. Her chest hurt. She felt like her uniform’s custom body armor was physically crushing her. She felt light-headed.

“It’s alright, I understand.” Judy stated in a calm, low tone, even if she did not understand at all. How could she understand? She was never going to understand. What was she supposed to do without him? How in the hell was she going to go in there and talk to those kits and cubs?!

Bogo’s voice cut into her panicked train of thought. “You have eleven days of unused vacation, Hopps. You are nearing your reinstatement date and those days do not carry over.” Bogo stated flatly. Judy’s ears shot up, her body loosening again, her eyes becoming wet.

“What?” she asked in a cracking tone, as if he’d mumbled or spoken another language entirely. She thought she knew what his next words were going to be and those were so far from them that they were barely recognizable as language. Having not slept at all the previous night was not helping.

“You had fourteen days of paid leave, Hopps.” Bogo said clearly. “You have only taken three in nearly a year. You are terrible at taking time off, and now you might lose some of that time. I did not realize how many days you had left until I was checking for another officer yesterday afternoon. I don’t know that you will want to take that much time off all at once with Wilde still learning the ropes.” To his credit, the massive, dark Cape buffalo was being very nice about the explanation. He deeply hated repeating himself to an officer, but he apparently felt responsible for not telling the bunny sooner.

“Oh, it’s okay, Chief.” Judy said, gritting her teeth as her voice very obviously strained from her relieved stress concerning what she thought the call was about initially. Bogo unfortunately caught the crack in her voice.

“Hopps, it’s alright, it’s not the end of the world. They don’t carry over, but I can see about some kind of leave compensation. Don’t worry yourself too much about it. In the future though, please be more cognizant of your time off. It evaporates.” He stated, obviously uncomfortable dealing with an unexpectedly emotional rabbit.

“Thank you Chief.” Judy stated more solidly, wiping her eyes with her arm.
“Have a good day.” Bogo said staunchly. He hung up. Judy lowered the phone and just looked at her feet. The sting of that story and everything it forced her to consider was back in her just as cold and heavy as it had been at midnight. She sucked in a deep breath. A voice jerked her from her exhausted musing.

“Is, everything alright? Do we need a minute before we go in?”

It was Nick. Judy’s gaze snapped up to him and she was absolutely ashamed at how her heart flooded with gladness at seeing him. It was a just a dumb story. Nick was fine. He was never in danger. He was never missing. He wasn’t hurt and alone or any of those other terrible things her traumatized bunny heart told her he was. He was just late.

He was half an hour late.

And he never returned her calls. He couldn’t send her a single message?

And he had the audacity to just stand there and act like she was the one who needed a moment?! She bolted, tiny fist connecting with his arm and making him yelp.

“You are late!” Judy snapped, unable to hide the tears in her eyes. “Do you even look at your phone any other time than while we're supposed to be watching the streets, Nick?!”

“Ow, holy geeze, Carrots! Too hard!” Nick complained to her, rubbing the spot heavily. “Sorry, okay? I was on the train yesterday coming back from visiting my mom and I forgot that I didn’t have my phone pouch. I slipped my phone to my side into nothing. It dropped on the floor of the train and an elk stepped back and turned it into recycling.” The fox pleaded. “I went to the shop first thing this morning to see if anything was salvageable, but the only thing that they could save was my sim card. And that was too old for the new phones, so I had to wait for them to transfer my contact list with their computer.” Nick looked at Judy quietly a moment as she stared at him in disbelief.

It was so simple. It was awful for her, but Nick had nothing to do with how she was reacting. She sucked in a deep breath and then sighed slowly.

“Sorry Nick. I had a long night.” she stated.
“Did it have anything to do with whoever was making you cry on the phone?” he asked. The way he asked it sounded fearful. He was genuinely alarmed at the state her found her in. Judy shook her head as they walked into the school together, her mind starting to recover from Bogo’s call. The bunny was feeling immensely better to see Nick and hear his voice. She suddenly felt so silly to worry like she had. When Bogo called, it hit her so hard. “Carrots?” Nick asked again, shaking her from her thoughts. She was so out of it. This was going to be a very long day.

“Yes,” Judy answered without thinking. Then after a second of reflecting on what he actually said she corrected, “No. I mean, a little, but not specifically. It’s under control, let’s get to work, we’ve got twelve classrooms to visit,” she grumbled.

Nick let it go. He appeared to genuinely know when to do so. Today was fortunately no different. He focused instead on dealing with most of the questions that were tossed at the pair. When dealing with younger mammals, most of them asked questions about speeding around in a police car, catching the bad guys, and sometimes what subjects they need to be good at to be a police officer. That day was not much different, and the questions were pretty reliably repeated for the first five classes that they visited. They were spiced occasionally with a rude or silly, immature question that resulted in someone having to stand in the hall. Kits didn’t come with filters usually, and Nick always inwardly laughed at it even if Judy felt cross about it. Despite having no siblings like she did, the fox was certainly more patiently forgiving of kits and cubs. By their fifth class, Judy was barely keeping on her feet and hoping so much that Nick and the teacher did not notice as her ears could not stay up and she had to rub her eyes more than once and pinch her own arm to stay awake. A question from a small cheetah girl shook her from her stupor, however.

“I saw tha video on tha news about tha bear, Officer Judy.” The little girl was likely about eight or nine. The rabbit gave her the attention that topic deserved, ears perked.

“Wait, did – did your parents let you watch that?” she asked nervously. That kind of violence was not something she wanted to justify to a child her age.

“No, they were in tha other room.” The girl answered, whipping her tail up and down casually. “How come Mr. Nick made you fight the bear alone? Is it ‘cause bunnies more expensable, since there’s so many of ‘em? Dad says we’re never gonna run out of bunnies.” Judy’s eyes widened and her mind went blank. It was not because of the answer to her question, a simple yes or no answer. The rabbit officer was reeling from the fact that the girl was under the impression that bunnies were some kind of disposable resource to the ZPD. In an instant, Judy was fully awake. Seeing his partner’s mind gum up, Nick helpfully moved up to the desk in front of the class. The teacher, a kind old badger, covered her mouth in shock. Of course the little girl did not mean anything ill by it, but that idea definitely had to be corrected. Nick got onto his knee by the desk, looking the girl in the eyes and smiling kindly as Judy watched, speechless for the moment.

“Your name’s Fleck, right?” he asked. The girl widened her eyes at that.
“Felicity,” she corrected, going a little stiff, “…but my friends call me Fleck.”

“Judy and I are your pals, though, right? We’d always help you out of a jam.” Nick nodded at that. The girl softened and then nodded. Judy was always impressed at how good Nick was with names. He would glance over the roster for the class and so long as everyone was where they were supposed to be, he answered them by name. It always made the students feel like he was really paying attention to them. Judy had previously felt that maybe Nick was only serious about getting to enjoy a few easy days with these assignments, but she found herself beginning to realize at that moment that he was possibly even more serious at this aspect of the job than she was.

Nick began to speak again, and Judy listened along with Fleck. “See, this job can be really hard and really scary sometimes.” He said it in a soft and serious tone, not at all like his usual bantering. “We trained very hard for a whole year just to wear this badge, so we can face the scary stuff. But fortunately, we don’t have to face it all alone. We each have our partners. However, we have to trust our partner. Judy got trained just like I did, and she has just as good a chance against that bear as a wolf or a rhino, believe it or not. You saw the video. She did great, right?”

Fleck nodded at that. “She did awesome!” the little cheetah chimed.

Nick continued. “But see, the thing I want you to understand, more than that,” Nick leaned in closer, his voice going softer, “is that Judy is my family on the force.” The bunny’s ears felt hot suddenly. “She’s not an extra mammal. She’s not any less than I am. I did not make her take that bear alone. I did not want her to have to do that alone, but Fleck, we were after the missing child. Saving the child was the most important thing right then. It could have been you…” Nick looked up around the class, “It could have been any one of you in that truck, scared and alone. Judy and I would give our lives if we had to in order to save you. My partner needed to keep the bear away so I could make sure the little doe was safe. And she did great, right?” Nick asked, smiling. The kids all answered in the enthusiastic affirmative, making it appear some of the others had also seen the video. Judy remained silent, her heart pounding. The subject was not making her feel better. She wished one of the cubs in the back would ask if they had to wipe their feet before coming into the class because they were on doody all day.

“I understand, Officer Nick!” The girl stated happily. “You weren’t scared at all about the bear fighting your partner, she had him down!” Fleck smiled broadly. Nick frowned however and shook his head.

“I didn’t say that, Fleck,” the fox stated softly. He looked to Judy and then back to the cheetah. “See… I meant it when I said the job was dangerous. Even after our training, the police are still mammals just like you. I was scared. I was afraid for Judy. I always am. It’s not because she’s a bunny though. Mistakes are made. Bad things can happen. I know that one day we might have to
say goodbye. It’s a part of the job. You learn that in the academy, but we can’t let being afraid prevent us from doing what needs to be done, right? It’s okay to be scared.” He addressed the whole class with this. “But even if you’re scared, you still always do what is right, okay?” he stated, smiling. The class smiled back and Judy pivoted hard on her heel and strode purposefully right out the door.

Judy sighed, disgusted with herself as she sat in a bathroom stall on a toilet that felt, for a change, a little too small for her. She put her chin on her paws. What a fun thing for Nick to get to explain to the class. She was sure he’d dismiss it casually and take everyone’s minds off the weird bunny leaving in the middle of the discussion so rudely, but he should not have to. Why did the discussion have to go there? In all the time they had been doing these things they never talked about officers dying on the job. These were just little kids. Nick dealt with it so responsibly broached the painful and mature subject so neatly. There was not a flaw in how he handled it, but it was not what Judy needed to hear right then.

She sighed and finished up. She washed her paws and walked back toward the class. The anxious bunny stopped outside of it, feeling like she did not want to look at the class after she bolted so rudely. Judy stood outside the door a moment, and finally moved her paw to the doorknob. It opened at that point and Nick stepped out as the class applauded him politely. Nick closed the door and looked at Judy with some concern.

“You… okay, fluff?” he asked with genuine care. She nodded.

“Sorry. Not… myself today,” she explained.

“We can stop and eat if you like, maybe talk about it?” he offered. Judy shook her head vigorously.

“No, no… It’s… a personal thing. I will be okay. Just… had to hit the restroom suddenly is all. You know how it is.” She tried to sound more jovial and normal, realizing that she was forcing it and Nick, a master of reading people, would see through it like an open window.

“Do you need to head home to rest? You seem exhausted,” Nick said calmly. “I can do the rest of the classes, it’s really okay. You never take a day off. Bogo’s gonna be fine about it.” Judy could not help but flinch when Nick mentioned Bogo because it reminded her of that terrifying call. All she could think of was his dark, heavy voice. ‘Hopps, we need to talk.’, ‘Too Late.’, ‘I’m Sorry.’ She sucked in a breath and looked at Nick who suddenly looked a lot more concerned. “Did you… Did you get in trouble with Bogo?” her partner asked cautiously.

“N-no!” huffed Judy. “I told you, this is personal. It’s not work related, and I will be fine. I just…
Let’s get back to helping the kids, okay? The day will go by quick and we can take a late lunch when we’re done. I’m okay now.” She sounded more confident even though her heart was hammering. Nick regarded the bunny with his wide-eyed, concerned expression softening. He nodded to her.

“You can talk to me you know. Later if you want,” he stated in gentle encouragement. “Let’s go see Charlie in the next class. He drew a picture of his wolf teacher eating the city and posted it with the art outside the classroom. I want to know all about that,” the fox chuckled.

“Nick, don’t encourage that!” Judy stated, running after her partner.

The remaining classes were a little more standard in terms of their experience. Nick seemed to have learned his lesson and avoided the topic of the danger of their jobs entirely, even when asked about it by one young wolf cub who wanted to know if Nick had ever killed anyone. Normally Nick would explain everything about how responsible the officers had to be about something so permanent and harsh, but in that case, Nick dismissed it with a simple and curt ‘no’. Judy realized that Nick had read the trigger for her display earlier better than she assumed and she felt guilty about it. She didn’t want it to affect his ability to teach these cubs and kits about their job, that was what he was there to do.

Having skipped lunch, by the time they finished with the final applauding class Judy was positively famished and the light, more playful facade Nick kept on helped her mood. She went with him to a local mall as they had lighter traffic in the middle of a school day. The place offered an assortment for them in the food court so they did not have to decide on a place they both wanted. Judy got her usual from a sandwich shop, a veggie-wrap with vinegar dressing. Nick got a bowl of what Judy assumed was shrimp. She blanched a bit. The bugs of the sea. She tolerated Nick’s dietary needs for the most part, but those fat little pink grubs were just a bit much for her. Why couldn’t he at least get the fried ones? She could at least pretend those were bread crumbs. Fortunately he was done with them very quickly, and she was able to enjoy most of her sandwich without looking at them. Usually, Nick avoided eating anything Judy would not eat, but he sometimes really craved those. Unfortunately, finishing quickly meant Nick was free to talk. And he chose an obvious course of conversation.

“Is it a family problem? Are your mom and dad okay?” he asked. Nick knew how important family was to Judy.

“No, Nick. it’s okay. It’s just a thing. I’m better now, honest. Just drama.” She sighed, taking another bite.

“Usually you are the one telling me not to deal with stuff alone all the time,” the fox said with his cheek on his paw. “I should not have to tell you the same thing.” He gazed at her as she looked back.
quietly. Judy was a little more aggravated because he usually joked and teased so much more. She wasn’t sure that she preferred serious, caring Nick. He'd been like this since the thing with his mom. She might actually enjoy this if it were not for the uncomfortable nature of her issue and the admission that he was completely right about the stories.

“It's a mood thing Nick. Just let me get over it.” She shook her head a bit, and finished her wrap, using her napkin to catch any of the remaining vinegar.

The fox sighed quietly and looked back over to his smaller partner. “Okay, well, we're both off tomorrow. If you're still feeling moody, we can go do something. You know, kind of take your mind off it,” Nick offered. Judy looked warily to her partner. It hurt that he was being so kind and understanding when she caused this whole mess by not listening to him in the first place.

She murmured softly, “Maybe. We’ll see. I’m sorry I’ve been so out of it.” She owed him an apology for that, at least. “It’s mostly that I didn’t sleep at all. I don’t … function well on zero sleep. I will be better after a good rest.” Nick looked at his partner, and Judy looked back quietly. He seemed to be really thinking about what she had said, as if trying to decode it. Judy watched her partner do this a lot when they were interviewing suspects or getting information from accident victims. He didn’t believe her. She knew he didn’t believe her, but she could not tell him that she’d screwed things up. Not when she made him think that she was not going to read those dumb stories. Nick quietly dropped his empty paper container in the recycle bin and less elegantly wiped his claw tips on his dark trousers, something Judy chastised him for frequently. It was habit and it was not going down easy.

He nodded to Judy and then spoke quietly, with a slightly disappointed tone, “Okay, well, I am gonna… go ahead and head out then. I have the same number on my new phone, so if you need anything, just shoot me a text or call me. I promise not to drop it again. I’m sorry I wasn’t… You know… There for you last night. Judy, I really am sorry about that.” His ears fell back. The bunny’s ears shot up at her name being used. Nick thought she was upset because of him. She slammed into her like a hard tackle. She shook her head vigorously.

“Oh, no! No it’s okay, you couldn’t help that! I…” She tried to think back to exactly what she said in her message to him. She hadn’t sounded cross, had she?

Nick shook his muzzle despondently. “You tried to call. You wanted me to call back. If you had someone to talk to about this when it happened…” he waved a paw to illustrate that he had no idea what ‘it’ was, “… maybe you at least could have slept. So I am sorry I wasn’t there. I’ll make sure I'm available later if you need me. Don’t hesitate to call, okay?” He smiled at her encouragingly to show he was genuine about it and not just feeling guilty. Judy laid her ears flat down her back as she watched his thick, fluffy tail bob and sway as he walked to leave the food court. Her chest tightened anxiously. Suddenly, she dreaded not being near him. She knew it was more crap from that story. Story Judy made Nick sad before he was taken away from her. Her dumb sudden anxiety and lack
of sleep were in full force, but she got up anyway.

“Wait, Nick!” she called after him. He looked over his shoulder, his emerald eyes peering back at her and paw going to his phone pouch as if he forgot it on the table. Judy chucked the paper for her wrap into the recycle bin and caught up with her partner. “Hey… It’s only three, up for a bit of Howlu bingeing? They just added all of Season 12 of Lupinatural. It’s a lot more fun watching that stuff with you.” Nick usually ragged on the subtext of that series so hard. She offered a genuine grin. A little more time goofing off with Nick and she’d be able to sleep just fine that night. She was sure of it. The fox looked at her curiously a moment, his ears still back as if uncertain what he should do. They then slipped back upward and he gave a warm smile.

“Okay Fluff, sure. That sounds like a plan. We will swing by the station and I’ll change. Then, we will head on over to Casa Del Shoebox.” Judy winced a bit at the title, but her apartment was kind of deserving of it. Still, she did not feel like complaining about his criticism if he was going to hang out a bit. Surely after a good night’s sleep she could dismiss this dumb story fiasco forever. He fell into step behind her. Hopefully, Judy thought, not noticing how much more life there was in her stride.

This miserable day could at least end on a positive note.
A Fist Full of Foxy Fluff

Judy had never been one for watching TV when she lived in Bunnyburrow. She had it drilled into her, if unintentionally, by her parents that it might be impossible for her to be a police officer because she was a bunny. That meant she forced herself to forgo a lot of the normal side-activities to focus instead on training, reading, and preparing. She did not fall in love with any kind of media programming until she met Nick. When she was preparing him for the academy, he began to burn out and suggested a movie night. He was initially shocked to find out that he could have chosen nearly any movie and she had never seen it. They stayed up so long at Nick’s place that Judy ended up sleeping on the couch because it was just too late to go home.

After that, movie night or show-watching became something of a no-work-tomorrow kind of event. Nick felt safer going home late given his better vision in the dark, so they took to having the movie nights at Judy’s tiny apartment. Since Nick had become an officer they had done movie night three times. Judy pushed her thick, wide reading pillow up against the wall to make her bed feel at least a little more like a couch.

Nick sat at the edge of the bed while she got it set up and asked, “Where did they leave off last season? Can you remember? I don’t think I can remember.” He then moved back to sit against the big pillow beside his partner.

“Zootopia was deserted except for one wolf pup, and the brothers couldn’t figure out what happened,” Judy reminded him.

“Oh right. It was the deserted city scenario. That’s literally my worst fear. How could I forget?” Nick sighed. Judy had made Nick watch a zombie movie and had discovered then that his two biggest fears were deserted towns and cities and ironically, hospitals that were no longer being used. She had teased him occasionally about it during early morning patrols when parts of the city did seem deserted.

“Calm down, you know these things get resolved,” Judy laughed, pushing her back against the pillow. She intentionally sat a little closer to the middle of it than usual, which made Nick scoot a little closer to have something to lean on as well. Judy flattened her ears back as she considered her own selfishness. She wanted to feel better. He was safe and nearby so she could relax. She did feel better. The bunny stared down at her feet a moment as Nick got the show started on Judy’s laptop which sat on the desk across from the bed. The russet mammal got comfortable beside her and her eyes locked on the screen as the show opened. It spent the next fifteen minutes recapping the previous season and setting up the new one. Judy did not glance at Nick at all during this, as she began to feel a little guilty about tying him up over her sudden weird insecurity. Had he already had plans today? Did he cancel them because of her?
“I wonder if the Reaper will finally tell them what happened to their doubles from season eight,” Nick asked. Judy glanced up at him finally as he grinned at that. He was never going to let that plot hole go. She chuckled at him. Her worries that he didn’t want to be there were extinguished. She sat back more fully into her pillow, feeling suddenly very heavy, warm and comfortable. 

In fact, she could not remember a time since she had arrived in Zootopia where she felt this completely content. That felt, in some way, a little off. That uniqueness alone was able to keep her attention even as the beginning scene of the new season unfolded. What was she feeling? Why was she suddenly so content when a moment ago she was embarrassed and ashamed for how she was acting? She peered up at Nick. That relaxed smirk that was always on his muzzle was predictably there. She could not really focus on one single feeling as she watched him, but she began to feel less and less in general. Everything became slowly muted. It was so comfortable, and he seemed so relaxed too. She had worried him so much just a couple hours before. Seeing him not worry made her feel even better. She smiled and turned to look at the screen again…

“Carrots, are you coming?” Nick asked. The bunny blinked and looked around. They were in the mall. Judy held the tray from the sandwich place in her paws, and she was standing in front of the recycle bin like an idiot. What just happened? Where was she? She shook her head. Had she really just dozed off during lunch with her partner? He didn’t seem to really notice.

“Huh? Yeah, hold on, I was trying to remember something, but I forgot it again,” She stated, tossing her paper and putting up the tray. She moved over beside Nick as he started to leave the food court. She felt a sense of déjà vu and shook her head a bit. Nick gazed at her with some concern.

“You okay? You’ve been a flake all morning, fluff. I thought you were gonna walk right out the window at the courthouse.” He grinned at her. Judy rubbed her eyes. When were they in court? Did they stop there? Yeah. They had to have stopped there.

“I didn’t sleep well last night,” She explained.

“Why not? Dreaming about meeeeee?” the fox asked teasingly. Judy punched his arm and laughed. She suddenly could not remember why she couldn’t sleep though. She walked with him through the lower floor of the mall, heading for the entrance.

“Hey Nick. Do you want to do a movie night tonight?” the bunny asked.

“No can do, Fluff,” the fox answered with a show of disappointment. “Mom and I are gonna replace her fridge today. She cannot do that on her own,” He insisted. Judy was crestfallen. Why she had wanted to do that so badly right then she could not figure out. Had it just popped into her head?
Was that what she was thinking about in front of the recycle bin? It felt really fresh in her mind, so she bet that was it. She followed Nick out of the mall to find that outside everything was unusually quiet.

The parking lot appeared to be absolutely empty except for a medium-sized blue van parked sideways right on the sidewalk. In the driver’s seat was a goat with headphones on drumming on his steering wheel. Judy was perplexed by that, but even more in that it was the only vehicle outside at all. She was certain she had never seen the van before, but it appeared somehow familiar at the same time. Had they ticketed this guy before? She gazed back out beyond the van. The parking lot really was completely empty. She wondered if Nick was unnerved by that. He hated the whole deserted place concept, she remembered. She tried to remember if she had even seen anyone else actually in the mall. Judy walked around slowly to the back of the van and then peered out over the empty lot curiously, then back to Nick who had turned around and began to walk toward the driver’s side door.

“Nick wait…” Judy felt fear roll through her, she struggled to think of why.

“Hold on Judy, I’m just gonna ask him to move his van, he can’t be parked on the sidewalk,” Nick said calmly. That made sense. Besides, why would he park on the sidewalk if there was literally no one else in the lot? The rabbit studied the back of the van. Its license plate was completely blank. Her eyes shot open as she heard the side door of the van slide open.

“NICK!” she screamed but it was too late. She saw his eyes go wide and then an explosion from inside the van so hard the whole vehicle listed to one side. Her partner was instantly shredded, literally becoming red confetti. The paper squares of it rose beautifully into the wind. Nick actually screamed when it happened. It was an awful sound Judy had never heard from him, and that was followed by complete silence. She dropped to the sidewalk on her paws and knees staring down as a tide of blood washed over her clutching fingers. It was like a bucket or washtub of crimson had been sloshed onto the ground. She screamed again. Then again, and again. “No! No! NO! NO! NO!”

“Judy, stop, c’mon, JUDY!” Nick yelled. She was shaken hard and her eyes bolted wide open, staring forward at Nick’s face. She was shaking. Her heart was racing. Her eyes were wet. Her chest hurt. She held perfectly still, her nose wiggling like mad. “Judy!” Nick said again, as if trying to talk to her through a block of ice. She couldn’t talk for a moment more, but she at least managed to figure out where she was. She was on her bed. Nick was sitting beside her. There was noise, what was the noise? It was a gunshot. She heard a gunshot. Her entire body jerked from it. “Judy, stop! It’s okay! It was a dream!” Nick barked loudly. She focused in the direction of the gunshot. The heroes of the show they were watching were fighting some kind of monster with shotgun shells full of rock salt.

It was a dream. She was in her apartment. She had fallen asleep while they watched the show. Her
breathing began to slow and she sank back down against the pillow. The fear flooded out of her and the embarrassment flooded in, her heart still hammering either way. She gritted her teeth, struggling not to cry. There was a mix of embarrassment, fear, and gladness. She was so messed up now. Why hadn’t she listened?

She began speaking, emotionally unfiltered. “I’m sorry Nick. I’m so sorry. It was terrible. You got k-k…” She leaned forward, trying to just look away from him, not wanting to let him see how upset she was.

“It’s okay Judy, I’m okay, you’re okay, everybody’s okay,” Nick said insistently, out of breath himself. Judy cringed at that. Had she scared him too? She looked back to him.

“You screamed when you died, Nick, it was so horrible. I’ve never heard anything like that.” The bunny whimpered, trying hard to justify how bad she reacted.

“Yeah, no, the scream was real. That part was real,” Nick stated flatly.

“What?” Judy asked, terror suddenly boiling up inside her. It was over, right? The bad dream was over. Her eyes searched him, half expecting him to just be covered in blood. Nick stared down at Judy’s little grey paw, which she was still clutching into a fist so tight her fingers hurt. She lifted her paw and gasped in surprise. Jutting out from in between all of her fingers she found a very ample amount of cream-colored fur. Nick frowned with more than a little scorn at Judy as she glanced back at him. He rubbed his tummy through his Pawaiian-print shirt. Judy squeaked in immediate revulsion and shook her opening paw. A snowfall of fox fluff rained down around them on her bed.

“Oh Nick! I’m so sorry! Oh my gosh - are you okay!?” she cried in near panic. She hurt him. He was there to help her, whether he realized that or not, and she actually caused him physical pain for it. She felt awful. Nick waved his paw at her, his expression softening, no longer harsh and displaying his pain. He then leaned forward, claw-tips on her shoulder as he pushed her slowly back to the pillow against the wall. Judy gasped slightly.

“It’s alright Judy…” he stated in a tender-sounding voice, skipping her usual nicknames to add weight to the genuine nature of his forgiveness. “It’s fine, really. But… you know what might make me feel better?” he asked as he leaned in closer. He had a warm, compassionate smile on his muzzle, then only an inch from hers. Judy’s ears were scorching hot as he held himself nearly nose to nose with her. Her eyes lowered a bit, taking in his shirt pattern because she was unable to meet his gaze. Her heart fluttered in her chest.

What was he doing? She didn’t want that. Did she? Still not looking up for fear of what he’d do
when their eyes met, she answered in the meekest tone she could.

“What… what would help?” Nick leaned back so suddenly that she felt a breeze on her face from how quickly he snapped away from her.

The fox exclaimed, “…telling me what the heck is going on with you, Fluff!” he barked loudly as he held his arms out in exasperation. Judy groaned a bit, trying to think of anything to smooth this disaster over. She heard a familiar voice through the wall.

“Leave her alone, fox, she had a scary dream about a scary story she read! There’s nothing wrong with that.” It was Pronk’s voice. Oh no. No, they were doing the opposite of helping her! Judy inwardly whimpered. Bucky, tell him to shut up like you always do!

“Yeah, you should be more sensitive, it’s wrong to yell!” Bucky yelled. Judy whined to herself. Noooo! Nick stared at the shouting wall with a blank, wide-eyed expression as he stood beside Judy’s bed. His eyes then slowly closed and he brought his paw up as if in slow motion to the bridge of his muzzle, cupping it as he stood completely still and silent. Judy grinned as innocently as she could at her partner.

“You read a scary story,” Nick stated slowly, as if more to give her the option to say that her neighbors were mistaken. The bunny knew better than to attempt to mislead the former con artist.

“Um… did I? Yes. Yes I did,” Judy offered meekly, pulling her legs up to her chest, hugging them as she smiled helplessly to Nick. When she was in trouble with her parents, growing up, she curled up into a little ball like this to seem smaller and less guilty, she supposed.

Her partner paced slowly, paws behind his back. “If I walked into a Barks and Nobles, would I be correct in assuming I would never find this scary story?” Judy was quiet a moment, trying to read her partner. Was he mad? He should be mad. She gazed sullenly at the fur laying all over her bed. He should be very, very mad. He didn’t look mad. She drew a deep breath.

“It would… It would not be there, no,” she answered honestly.

“Carrots, why? Why would you do that? I didn’t want you to do that.” Nick’s tone was surprisingly gentle. Maybe a little bit sad. Her heart skipped a beat. He wasn’t angry, he was disappointed. She felt way worse about that. Mad was better. She deserved mad. She visibly wilted.
“I’m a dumb bunny,” she bluntly replied, frowning. “So go ahead and give it to me. The big I told you so. I read the story and it messed me up. Oh, it messed me up good.” Nick sighed softly and sat down on the edge of the bed, looking down at the floor. Judy wilted further. Please not sadness.

“Judy, this isn’t funny to me. It was never a bet, it was never a challenge.” He spoke in a hushed tone, perhaps trying to leave Bucky and Pronk out of this conversation. Not that it would work. The fox pulled his own ears back tightly, forcing his eyes wide just from the pull of his angular canid face. That was a big sign of stress in her partner. Judy watched him intently, wishing she could just hide under the bed from her embarrassment. She ripped out a patch of his fur. Of all the graceless things she had ever done in all her life…

“Nick… I’m sorry…” Judy began.

Nick put his paws up to silence her. “Let’s just… Let’s fast forward past all of the ‘I was right and you didn’t trust me, then went and traumatized yourself anyway,’” he took a deep breath, obviously trying to calm himself down. He was upset. The bunny felt miserable. “…so, let’s talk about it, okay? Let’s try to get around it, do a little brain bleaching. I need you firing on all cylinders, Carrots,” her partner said earnestly. Judy looked at him blankly. What, no snarky comment? No smug? No teasing? Was this still a dream? Nick blinked at his partner, looking at her curiously a moment as she just stared at him wordlessly. What did he want? How would it even help to hear that she was torn up because he died in a dumb story and left a fictional version of her all alone? Her expression must have been as blank as she felt, since he finally asked, “What was the story? Did you… get killed in it?”

“Huh?” Judy shook herself out of her stunned silence, and then bit her lip slightly. “Nick, I really don’t want to think about that awful… thing.”

“Trust me Judy, it will help to get it out, discuss it, and have someone other than you dismiss it. Out with it,” he stated with authority. The bunny lowered her ears and turned away. She owed him at least what he was asking for. She tore out his fur, for crying out loud.

“I didn’t die,” Judy spoke with a lot of weight in her heart. She didn’t even want to say it. She sucked in a deep breath. Nick stared at her expectantly. “My partner did.” She opened her eyes and looked up at Nick and a tear rolled down her cheek the moment she did, for all the fighting she did. She looked down shamefully, trying and failing to hide that emotional self-betrayal. Nick remained quiet a moment, not reacting if indeed he had actually seen it. She was grateful for that.

“How?” he finally asked, in a near whisper. Judy was quiet a moment, and then carefully and anxiously relayed the details of the moment in the story that had played itself in her mind again and
again, then finally in her dream. She found herself feeling a little more secure as she told him. As she spoke she realized it was because she was telling it to Nick, and by telling him about it, it made the story more and more defined as a work of fiction, and not something that was happening to her partner who was right there listening to it. She finished explaining that, and then the dream afterward as best she could remember it. He remained quiet the entire time, not pushing, not dismissing anything, and not asking questions of his own. He just listened, obviously trying to reflect on it.

Having finished explaining the story and subsequent dream, Judy finally grumbled out bitterly, “Why?” Her partner regarded her curiously. She sucked in a deep breath and felt her anger from the previous night return. “Why did he write that? Why did he need to kill you? Who the heck is that even for?” Nick moved closer to Judy, and she felt that strange contentment wash over her again. He sat beside her as they had been earlier that afternoon and her anger ran out of her like she was a colander. What was that even about? She dismissed it again as her partner spoke.

“Carrots, first I need to explain why I even know about this stuff so you can understand why I am able to answer that question.” The bunny paid close attention, nodding. “Doing what I did before I became an officer left me with plenty of free time. I really liked a science fiction show that came on TV back then, but it got cancelled in its first season. It was great, and they washed their paws of it eight episodes in! I was bummed about that, but I felt like there was so much more story to tell. I started looking to see if maybe extended scripts that were supposed to be done were out there and maybe I could read about the story that never got a chance to be filmed. In doing so, I found out a bunch of mammals thought the same way, and they loved it as much as I did. There was no secret material or unaired episode, so they wrote it themselves. Some of it was great. Some of it not so great, but everyone had their own story. And it belonged to each mammal,” Nick carefully explained.

“Did they kill your favorite character?” Judy asked, then flattened her ears at what she had just insinuated. She glanced anxiously at Nick, but thankfully he did not seem to fixate on that.

“Oh my goodness, yes!” Nick laughed, “… and even worse than that, trust me! It was brutal! Like I said, not every story was a story I would have wanted to read.” The bunny lowered her head.

“It still doesn’t explain why. Why kill the characters at all? Why did he want you to…” she asked, unable to even complete the disgusting thought.

“I am not really sure, Fluff,” Nick said with a sigh. He went back to that soft, soothing voice like he’d used on the gondola the day they became friends, something she so rarely heard from him. “A bunch of different reasons, I bet. I’m sure there’s a few of those writers who are legitimately kinda messed up, but a lot of it is just mammals working through real stuff, you know? Real pain, real loss, real anger. They don’t know any other way that feels safe to work it all out, so they work it out on paper and anonymously send it out into the darkness. In the end, it’s their feelings, their thoughts, their fears and wants. It gets said and they can feel better to have said it even if it’s not what they
really mean, and even if no one reads it at all. It’s like telling me what was hurting you took the pain away from you a moment ago. It’s not always about wanting to cause pain in the story. And it’s not like they want to cause pain with the story either. Sometimes we just have to acknowledge that the pain is there.” Judy stared up at the fox, her eyes a bit wider with wonder. She could not recall hearing him open up so completely and candidly about anything like this. She then reflected back to one of her first memories of him.

“So… When you hurt, sometimes the best healing you can hope for is that another mammal out there can know about it…” She watched as Nicks features softened a little, and he smiled genuinely at her. She felt like she actually understood. She understood not just why the mammal wrote the story that had upset her, but something a lot deeper about Nick than he might have intended to share right then.

“Something like that, yeah. It’s not about wanting to hurt others. It’s just about rubbing the spot that hurts till you can handle the pain.” He rubbed his tummy and pouted playfully at the bunny. She thumped the fox with a small pillow.

“Oh stop crying about it, Nick, it’ll grow back. I said I was sorry!” She looked at the laptop, still playing the show they had been watching. She tilted her head a little. How long had she been asleep? Did Nick try to wake her up? How long was he going to let her sleep while he stayed at her side? Her face heated up. Was Nick watching over her as she slept? Wait… How did she get a pawful of tummy fur in the first place, what was she doing with her paws while she was sleeping? Under his shirt? Her nose revved up in a storm of wiggling. She immediately looked down to hide her blush if it was visible. She must have really freaked out during the dream and started just grabbing anything she could hold. She looked up again and watched as Nick got back onto the bed and situated the back-pillow again, backing up the program to near the first part from before. It seemed like she had missed the rest of the first episode and almost all of the next. She glanced over at Nick with her ears still burning. He smiled and patted the spot she had previously occupied. He did not seem at all offended by her actions at least. She sighed softly.

He spoke more cheerfully, “C’mon, it’s not even seven o’clock yet, we are gonna do some brain bleach and you can forget all about the story.” Judy sighed and nodded to the fox, crawling back into her spot. She felt that wash of contentment again and just forcefully ignored it. She had every right to feel content with a friend as good as this fox was to her. She gazed up at him again, replaying his words in her head. Sometimes what we do is merely rub the spot that hurts until we can bear the pain. She whispered softly,

“I forgot to say earlier, Nick… and I want to say before I forget again…” She looked up into his eyes. “The kids seem to like you a lot.” Nick tilted his head curiously at his partner, smiling at the compliment paid to him. She continued, “You are right about the fluff assignments. It’s just as important. Those kids deserve even more time and attention than the guys we haul off the streets any other day. I will take it more seriously too.” Nick appeared a little puzzled by that sudden admission from his partner, eyes wide, and then like a switch the smug settled back on his face. Judy laid her ears back, bracing for impact.
“Oh good. And that reminds me Carrots, since we got back to the start of the episode… we can get back to the start of me telling you I told you so, and I can listen to the part about you being a dumb bunny again.” Nick grinned asininely at her partner grumpily crossed her arms.

“I knew it!” she hissed, looking away to hide her grin. She knew he was doing it to dodge the compliments. He almost always diffused real praise with humor and sass.

“That was my favorite part too!” Pronk yelled from the other room.

“Shut up, they were having a moment!” Bucky shouted.

“The fox ruined it first!” Pronk countered loudly, and Nick laughed heartily, ears back, tongue out. Judy groaned and leaned in against her partner with her arms over her knees and buried her face. She prepared to enjoy her loud, frustrating evening in the company of her annoying, smug, shifty, clever, forgiving, wonderful fox. Her face hidden completely, she smiled in continued nearly inexplicable utter contentment.

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