Safe Paws
by midnightopheliac

Summary

Judy learns more about Nick's past and a secret that's holding him back, but she doesn't know when to quit and takes matters into her own paws. When Nick leaves for the police academy both of them are faced with feelings for one another they never thought they'd have. In unchartered waters, during the nine months of Nick's academy training, can they turn their friendship into something more?

Notes

Fill for this prompt: http://disney-kink.livejournal.com/11667.html?thread=7291795
"Take the cynical, tearing-down-hope speech Nick gave to Judy early in the movie, about how she'll try to be what she wanted to be, give up, and end up living under a bridge. Then give me Judy at some point finding out he was 100% projecting his own issues and that is exactly what happened to him. Bonus points if he lied about the $200 a day. (Finnick's share for half the work in their scam is only $40, after all.) Extra bonus points if he's in trouble with some rough criminal types he owes money to, and he's having to spend most of what he makes paying them off. All the bonus points in the world if money's so tight he has trouble feeding himself regularly”

My beta and I tried to catch any errors, but we're sorry in advance if some slipped through the net.
First time writing for this fandom - please be gentle!
Cypress Grove Lane
Safe Paws

A Zootopia FanFiction by: midnight-aphelac
Artwork by: TheWriteBunny
A ladder dropped into the pit, the massive hoof of Officer McHorn coming into view. Nick kept his arm around Judy, helping her hobble over to the ladder. He could still feel bits of stuffing between his teeth, and he was sorely tempted to use his claws as toothpicks: Judy needed him, though. The stuffing could wait. Lifting her, she grasped onto McHorn’s hoof, and the rhino pulled her out of the pit. Climbing the ladder behind her, Nick returned to Judy’s side as she was placed down, his arm wrapping around her, supporting her small body. “You alright, Fluff?” Nick frowned, taking in her deep breaths and shaking frame. The sounds around him were drowned out as he focused on the rabbit at his side.

Judy offered him a small smile, though her ears drooped. “I’m all right, Nick. You don’t have to worry.”

“Carrots…” Nick warned, not believing her for a second. She’d been thrown around violently while on the train, stabbed herself on a tusk, and then he’d stalked her and clamped his jaws around her throat – gently, as they’d been acting, but still.

Huffing out a breath, Judy offered him a wry smile, her eyes meeting his. “I’m tired that’s all, honestly.”

Before Nick could respond, they were interrupted. “Hopps!” Bogo appeared through the crowd of Officers, approaching the pair. Rather than towering over them as he’d done in the rainforest, he crouched down with a small frown on his features. “Dare I count how many laws you’ve broken today?”

Nick bristled. Who cared if they’d broken any laws, they’d captured Bellwether and stopped the darting of innocent predators with the night howler serum!

“Can’t make an omelet without cracking some eggs, Chief,” Judy winced, reaching for her pocket. From it, she produced her carrot pen. “Bellwether confessed everything; we got it on tape.” She offered the item out to Bogo and Nick had a moment of panic. Was his tax evasion confession still on it?

Bogo’s features softened as he took the offered pen. “Good work, Officer Hopps,” Judy’s ears perked up, her eyes widening. “What? Did you think I took your resignation seriously, Miss I-want-to-be-a-real-cop?”

Judy laughed, her small body vibrating next to Nick. He adjusted his hold, keeping most of her weight on him. “Thanks, Chief,” she offered before her paw that wasn’t wrapped around Nick went for Nick’s breast pocket.

“Woah there, Carrots…you haven’t even taken me out for dinner yet,” he jested, laughing as she thumped his ribs. Nick wheezed, having momentarily forgotten how strong she was. From his pocket, she produced the night howler serum.

“Nick swapped out the serum in the gun for some blueberries. Think you can make an antidote?” She asked the Chief, offering him the pellet. Carefully taking it from her, Bogo rolled it in his palm.
“Quick thinking, Mr. Wilde. I’m sure we can make an antidote from it.” Warmth swept through Nick at the compliment, but he brushed it off as merely a side effect of the long and stressful day. He was tired, that was all. Bogo returned to his full height, staring down at the two. “Take the rest of the week off, Hopps. I don’t want to see you in the Bullpen until Monday.”

Judy froze, opening her mouth to protest. “If you protest, I’ll give you parking duty for a month,” Bogo beat her to it, grinning as he turned to walk back into the crowd of Officers. Nick and Judy watched him go, but he paused not too far from them. Looking over his shoulder at the pair, Bogo called out, “I was skeptical about having a rabbit on the force, but you’ve proven yourself, Hopps. Now, if only there were an equally small and irritating mammal for you to partner with…” he shrugged, though the upturn of his lips gave away his true feelings. Facing to the front again, Bogo disappeared into the crowd.

“Think that was a hint?” Judy gave Nick’s side a gentle shove. She smiled at the fox by her side, and Nick forced himself to smile back. True, he’d been contemplating joining the force before the press conference, and the last day or two following new leads had been exhilarating, but he was sure that Judy wouldn’t want him around her all the time. She was her own bunny, after all. He’d only make things more complicated.

“We need to see an EMT,” Nick changed the subject, hoisting Judy ever closer as he led them through the crowd towards the EMT’s out at the front of the museum. Emerging into the bright sunshine, Nick lifted his free paw to shade his face. Sometimes he hated being a nocturnal mammal. The area had been cordoned off, other members of ZPD holding back the growing crowds. Moving quickly to avoid any cameras, Nick helped Judy up into the ambulance before he scrabbled up behind her. The deer EMT spared no time in placing Judy on the bed and tending to her wound. The EMT removed Nick’s makeshift tourniquet, and Judy was quick to snatch the fabric from the deer, holding it to her chest. Quirking an eyebrow Nick watched Judy’s actions, but the rabbit’s focus was on her leg and the deer fussing over her. "Doe’s and their motherly instincts." Nick thought, shaking his head. Lifting a paw, he used his claws to remove the stuffing from between his teeth, wiping the offending material onto his trousers.

Another deer approached, this time focusing on Nick and the splatter on his neck. “I’m fine, I promise. It’s blueberry,” he assured her, refusing to look away from Judy as she tucked his handkerchief into her pocket.

Lost in her own world, wondering whether Nick would reconsider his application for the force, and working on autopilot, the sound of Nick’s voice broke Judy from her thoughts. Offering him a smile, she grimaced as the EMT started to stitch her wound shut. Moving closer, Nick offered up a paw. Without hesitation Judy grabbed it, squeezing as the EMT put another stitch in place. “I hate stitches,” she grumbled, prompting Nick to chuckle. “Don’t laugh, ass.”

Bringing his free hand to his muzzle in mock surprise, Nick gasped. “Officer Hopps, how could you think I would laugh at you when you are in such obvious, excruciating pain? And to mock a donkey…!” He tutted as his paw dropped back to his side.

Judy snorted as a smile crossed her muzzle, giving Nick’s paw another squeeze as the final stitch was put in. “You’re all done, Officer. Try not to exert yourself too much, or you could pop the stitches. Lots of rest, keep weight off it, and try to keep your leg elevated,” the EMT explained as she removed her gloves, tossing them into the trash.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure she doesn’t get into any more trouble,” Nick promised, grinning as Judy dug her blunt claws into his paw, scowling at him.

“Mhm, I’ll believe that when I see it. Now scram, the pair of you,” the EMT dismissed them.
Helping Judy down, Nick took most of her weight again.

“I can stand Nick, I'm all right,” Judy protested, trying to pry herself from his grip.

“Yeah, and I’m Mr. Big. Don’t lie, Carrots. I’m helping you, and that’s final. Let’s get you home,” Nick snorted, helping her move to the doors of the ambulance. Judy grumbled under her breath, something about ‘high-handed foxes.’

“Oh, cheese and crackers!” Judy gasped. “I gave up my apartment when I returned to Bunnyburrow.”

Stopping their movements, Nick looked down at the rabbit tucked against his side, the sunlight from outside breaching the open back doors of the ambulance. “You're kidding me, right?”

Looking up at him in exasperation, Judy sighed. “No, Nick. I wasn’t going to pay rent when I hadn’t planned on coming back. Shoot.” Judy glanced outside, gnawing on her lips. “Mind if I crash on your couch or floor or something for the night, please? I’ll go and see if my apartment is still available in the morning.” Judy looked back up at Nick, seeing him freeze, emerald eyes wide. It was a quick action, his features softening a second later, but the tension in his body was undeniable, especially as Judy stood so close.

“My place is too far away. We’ll get you a hotel or something,” Nick decided, swallowing hard.

Judy frowned, perturbed by Nick’s demeanor. “Nick, you live on Cypress Grove Lane. It’s around the corner.” His address had been on his Income Tax form.

Nick’s eyes widened as he was caught out. “My place is flooded, a water pipe burst…” He tried, scrabbling for an excuse. Judy raised an eyebrow, not believing the hustler for a second. “There’s a louse infestation?” he tried another angle. Judy’s eyebrow fell, her free hand coming to rest on her hip. “My neighbors are loud?” Nick winced; the excuse sounded even lamer now he’d said it out loud.

Judy sighed, realizing she wasn’t going to get Nick to change his mind. A small part of her felt hurt that he wouldn’t let her stay over for the night, but she could understand his apprehension. They’d only just reconciled, and she’d been such a dumb bunny when they’d last parted ways. A mammal’s home was their castle, and Judy had no right to invade Nick’s space. “Don’t worry about it, Slick. I’m sure there’s a hotel nearby.” She threw him a lifeline, feeling his body relax. Hiding her disappointment, Judy went to step out of the ambulance. Her hind paws had other ideas. Judy stumbled, the ground rushing towards her. Screeching, she closed her eyes and threw her paws in front of her, bracing for the impact that never came. Instead, a paw wrapped around her middle, catching her before she hit the ground.

“You’re a pain in the tail, Carrots. Come on.” Nick’s voice caressed her ears as he hauled her upright, holding her close as they left the ambulance and emerged back into the chaos. Judy wrapped a paw around him, staying close.

Nick sighed, knowing he had no choice but to take her to Cypress Grove Lane. He couldn’t leave her in a hotel for the night – she was injured, unable to walk properly, and more than likely had no cash on her.

Approaching the edge of the police cordon, Officer Delgato glanced down to them, the lion towering over them. “Need me to clear a path, Hopps?” He rumbled, offering her a small smile.

Judy looked up, raising her free paw to shield her eyes from the sun. “Please. Thank you, Delgato.”
Nodding, the lion stepped forward, barking orders for the crowd to move back. Officer Higgins helped push back the crowd on the other side, the hippo’s immense size was a huge help. Leading her out of the cordon, Nick lifted his free paw to turn Judy’s head towards his neck, shielding her face in his fur. The news teams were already at the scene, and though it would be obvious whom the small bunny leaving the scene was, Judy didn’t need the cameras flashing in her face. “Thanks, Nick,” she breathed against his neck, wrapping her free arm around him, sticking close.

“Don’t mention it Carrots.” Nick continued moving, trying to keep a quick pace, but at the same time aware of Judy’s injured leg. They emerged from the throng of onlookers and Nick turned them into an alley, giving Judy a moment to catch her breath. Letting her lean against the wall, Nick remained close, paws ready to catch her should she fall.

“I’m good. I think there’s a hotel down the street.” Judy closed her eyes for a moment to compose herself. The events of the day were yet to catch up with her mentally, but her body was ready to give up. That and being held so close to Nick. The fox’s scent was likely ingrained with her own by now, and it would take many showers to get rid of it. "You don’t want to get rid of his scent, no siree," her brain pointed out. However, now was not an appropriate time to be having inappropriate thoughts about the dumb fox standing before her and his dumb, musky, comforting, warm scent.

Shaking her head, Judy opened her eyes: Violet met emerald. “You’re not staying in a hotel, Carrots. You can barely walk. We’ll stay at my place.” Nick offered out his paws, and Judy took them, hauling herself off the wall.

“It’s okay, Nick. You don’t have to.” She soothed, knowing how he’d been so against the idea initially.

“Humour me,” he wrapped an arm around her waist, paw tightening as he pulled her closer, taking her weight once again. “You can barely walk. I’d be an awful friend if I left you in some crappy hotel room with poor food and questionable bedding.”

Judy conceded, letting Nick lead her out of the alleyway and down the street. They walked in companionable silence, but they were each lost in their thoughts.

Nick, for all his bravado, was nervous about taking Judy to Cypress Grove Lane. The web of lies he’d spent years crafting would start to unwind, and she’d no doubt ask a ridiculous amount of questions, pushing until she got an answer. Nick found her determination admirable. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told her that he lived by his ‘never let them see that they get to you’ motto. This bunny, though, with her large violet eyes and larger ears had not only out-hustled him – and didn’t that hurt his pride – but she’d also started to kick down those walls he’d built around himself. Walls that were in place to keep his emotions in check, to stop the world’s shit from bogging him down, to stop people seeing that they got to him. This rabbit, though, this bunny who’d rushed back to Bunnyburrow with her cute fuzzy-wuzzy tail between her legs, had come back to Zootopia for him, to apologize, to fix her mistakes and close the night howler case. “She came back for me.”

Judy felt awful. Nick had clearly not wanted her to stay at his home, and now he felt obliged to let her crash on his couch. It had been silly, to bring up how close they were to his home. Judy should’ve let it go, taken Bogo’s words from all those months ago to heart, but she’d never been able to do that. When she wanted something, she went for it, plowing over anyone and anything that got in her way. Staying at Nick’s though, she’d finally get to see a little more of the inner workings of the private fox. He’d probably have a basement apartment given his aversion to the sunshine, along with a ridiculous supply of coffee and a wardrobe full of pawaiian shirts. Judy tried to suppress her smile. His shirts were awful, but she loved them. Pain flared in her leg, and Judy
tightly held her hold on Nick. She hated feeling helpless, unable even to walk 100 yards without help. At least it was Nick helping her: He’d seen her cry, recorded her sobbing… *Chief Bogo has my pen! Cheese and crackers!*

Nick stopped in front of a quaint six-storey house, painted a cheerful yellow. He helped Judy climb the few small steps out front, giving the front door a gentle shove. It opened with ease, and together they ventured inside. Inside was a corridor with two doors off of it, and a staircase sat to the right. “Sorry Carrots, we’re heading to the third floor.” Nick apologized, noting how much Judy had been leaning against him and grabbing his shirt.

Judy grimaced but persevered, using the railings of the stairs to support her as Nick climbed alongside her, keeping a firm hold on her, his free paw ready to dive in and grab Judy should her balance falter. They stopped on the second floor as Judy huffed, panting heavily. “I can carry you?” Nick offered softly, unsure if she would accept such help. Nick in no way thought of her as incapable, she’d proven countless times how capable she was, but she was in pain.

“Thanks, Slick, but we’re nearly there. One more flight of stairs isn’t going to kill me.” Judy let him down gently, but her cheeks warmed at his kind offer.

It took them a few minutes to reach the third floor, and Nick led them to a cherry red door, the number ‘1955’ painted on it. A little welcome mat sat beneath their hind paws, a simple ‘Welcome’ with a set of paws printed on it. Adjusting his hold on Judy, Nick lifted his free hand, rapping his knuckles against the wood several times.

Judy frowned, tipping her head to look up at her fox. “Why’re you knocking on your own front door? Did you forget your key? Some beautiful vixen going to open it and ask why you’ve got an injured bunny with you?” Judy teased, hiding her curiosity with humor.

Nick sighed, his shoulders slumping at his gaze dropped to the rabbit tucked against him. “Something like that.” He muttered, giving Judy’s side a gentle squeeze.

Judy heard movement on the other side of the door and her ears drooped. Of course, Nick had a lovely vixen waiting for him at home. Turning her attention back to the door, Judy’s nose twitched, her already naturally fast heartbeat felt like it was pounding against her ribcage.

The door opened a moment later, and true to Nick’s words a beautiful vixen stood at the threshold. Her red fur had dulled a little with age, a few stray gray hairs visible. The cream linen pants and the pretty purple blouse she wore complimented her fur, and the simple strand of pearls around her neck highlighted the lighter patch of fur running down her throat. Judy noticed her eyes first, though – the same shade of emerald as Nick’s.

“Nicky!” The vixen cooed, her lips quirking into a large smile.

Nick didn't bother to hide his own smile. “Hey, mom.”
Judy’s eyes widened. The beautiful vixen was Nick’s mom? A light brush against the back of her legs alerted Judy to Nick’s tail, which had wrapped around her legs a little, keeping her close.

“Nicky, baby, you haven’t been home in so long,” the vixen’s broad smile was still on her muzzle. Spotting Judy tucked against Nick’s side, the vixen’s attention turned to her. “Oh, and you brought home a girl! A cute one at that!”

Nick sighed, opening his mouth to protest that yes, Judy was a girl, but she wasn’t his girl. Judy offered Nick’s mom a smile, extending her free paw. She let the cute comment go, not wanting to seem rude by pulling up Nick’s mom. She’d probably never interacted with rabbits before, and more than likely didn’t know that bunnies hated being called cute by other mammals. Nick closed his mouth, letting Judy speak. “It’s lovely to meet you, Ma’am, I’m Judy.”

The vixen cooed again, ignoring Judy’s paw to give her a gentle hug. Judy’s grip on Nick loosened as Mrs. Wilde embraced her. “It’s lovely to meet you too, Judy. Ma’am makes me feel a little old, though. Please, call me Marian.” She stepped back, offering a smile to Judy. Marian’s gaze dropped, spotting the rip in Judy’s trousers and the bloodstain, not to mention her son’s tail still curled around the small rabbit protectively. “Oh, you sweet thing! What on earth happened? Nicky, don’t just stand there, help Judy inside and up onto the comfy armchair!” Marian stepped back into her home, holding the door open. Pulling Judy back to his side, Nick helped her inside, crossing to the living room and the plush armchair in the corner.

“Occupational hazard, Ma’a-Marian” Judy corrected herself as Marian shut the door behind them, fussing as Nick helped Judy across the room and into the armchair. Judy sank into the cushions, the soft fabric giving a little under her small weight.

“What is it you do, Judy?” Marian fussed, picking up some pillows from the sofa and fluffing them, arranging them to create a small ottoman for Judy’s injured leg. Judy smiled at her kindness, noting how Nick disappeared for a moment before returning with a soft red blanket.

“I’m an Officer with the ZPD. I was working on a missing mammals case a few months back and dragged Nick into helping me. I thought we’d closed the case, but we hadn’t. I found a new lead and this time Nick and I really did close the case.” Judy smiled fondly at Nick as he draped the blanket over her, tucking it in around her. A smile graced his muzzle in return as he took extra care not to jostle Judy’s injured leg.

“You’re the rabbit from the news, yes?” Marian asked, watching as her son tucked in the smaller mammal. Her Nicky was doting on a bunny. Marian would’ve laughed at the absurdity of it had she been alone. But then, her son seemed a lot happier now than the last time he had visited three months ago; he’d been so sad and moody then. Marian had almost wanted to pull her mother-knows-best card and force him to tell her what was wrong.

Judy’s ears drooped, her gaze falling to the blanket. With a gentle touch, Nick lifted her head up, not liking her guilt. “You came back, Carrots. We fixed it and solved the case. I’m sure Chief Buffalo Butt will release a statement tomorrow, and everything will be fine,” Nick reassured her.

Violet eyes found emerald eyes, again, and Judy sighed softly, giving Nick a small smile. “Couldn’t have done it without you, Slick.”

Nick, uncomfortable with the praise, grinned and took his paw from her chin to gesture at himself.
"I am pretty great; it has to be said."

Judy landed a gentle punch on his shoulder, rolling her eyes. Her features softened as she reached out, grabbing the end of Nick’s tie, using it to keep him from running away from the praise. “Yeah, you are.” Nick’s tail subconsciously wagged a little at the praise.

Marian stood by the sofa, watching her only child and the rabbit cop interact. The blush that swept through Nick as Judy told him that he was great was visible just inside his ears, his red fur hiding most of it, and the happy wag of his tail had Marian smiling at the pair. This little bunny was building him up with her praise, not tearing him down like most did. Foxes were still inherently seen as untrustworthy, a thought that saddened the vixen. She remembered the time Nick had returned from his Junior Ranger Scouts initiation, a whole hour earlier than anticipated, with red-rimmed eyes and tear-stained fur. She hadn’t pushed. Instead, she’d given her boy a hug and told him how much she loved him before he’d shut himself away in his room. A few phone calls later, and an angry tirade at the despicable mother of the bully woodchuck, and Marian found out about the muzzle they had forced on her boy. Marian had taken her concerns to the school and the leader of the Ranger Scouts, only for them to laugh at her. They hadn’t believed her, sticking to their prejudice against foxes.

When Nick had finally emerged from his room, he was different. He fell off the wagon, dropping out of school and hanging with the wrong crowds. He was angry all the time but tried to play it off with humor and sarcasm. Marian saw through his act – it was a mother’s job to understand her children entirely, after all. Now, as her boy interacted with the sweet bunny, Marian could see parts of her baby coming back, parts that had been crushed by the cruel and unnecessary actions of that fateful night. While it was true that this little bunny had incited a whole host of hatred and intolerance with her press conference speech, if what her boy was saying was true, and she’d come back to fix it, Marian would let it go and forgive her.

Marian had tried so hard to raise Nick properly, to instill good values in him. The world saw foxes as sly and untrustworthy, and Marian hadn’t wanted her baby to experience any of their cruelty. The world had other plans. Her husband, Robert, had been a good mammal. Together, they’d loved and raised Nick, until Robert had died.

Marian shook her head, not wanting to think about her husband. The pain of losing him would never go away, especially when she looked at her boy and saw so much of Robert in him. “Let me cook you both some dinner,” Marian gently interrupted them; Judy’s paws quickly letting go of Nick’s tie, the fabric falling back against his chest. The wide eyes of the pair reminded Marian of naughty kits caught with their paws in the cookie jar. So lost in their little bubble, they’d forgotten the presence of the old fox.

“That would be great, thanks, mom,” Nick nodded.

With something to do, Marian turned her attention to Judy. “What would you like sweetheart? I hate to sound like I’m stereotyping, but I do make a mean carrot soup,” she offered.

Judy relaxed, snuggling back into the chair. “I grew up on a carrot farm, so I love them. That would be wonderful, thank you.”

Marian gave a sigh of relief. “I’ll cook up some salmon for you, Nicky?” Eyes widening as she remembered the prey mammal in the room, Marian was quick to offer an alternative. “Or I could just make some more carrot soup?”

Judy chuckled, shaking her head. “It’s okay Marian; I know you and Nick have different dietary requirements. Please, have salmon if you want. It doesn’t bother me,” she reassured them, pulling
the blanket around her a little more as she found the perfect comfy spot.

“Alright. Come on Nicky, leave the poor girl alone to rest.” Marian ushered Nick out of the room, but not before Nick could tell Judy to shout should she need anything.

Entering the small kitchen, Marian set to work, pulling out pans from a cupboard and produce from the fridge. “Will you peel the carrots for me, please?” She asked, setting them to one side. Picking up the peeler, Nick was quick to start peeling them, using a kitchen knife to cut them into small chunks ready for his mother to cook. They worked in companionable silence for a few minutes, but Nick could tell his mother was itching to ask questions. Her ears were pulled back slightly, and her movements were slow and leisurely.

Keeping occupied, Nick knew what was coming next. “Five, four, three, two….”

“She dragged you into helping her with a case, hm?” Marian opened the conversation. Nick shook his head, knowing his mom would take the opportunity to pry. He didn’t mind, not really. She was his mother, after all, and one of only two people he actually trusted. The other was asleep in the living room. Sure, he had Finnick, but the fennec fox was more business associate than confidant.

Nick, not wanting his mom to know anything about his con-mammal ways, took the reins and made sure to omit a few details. “Yeah, I was one of the last few mammals to see an otter before he went missing.”

Having already weighed out the brown rice for the steamed salmon and vegetable rice bowl she was making for her and Nick, Marian started sorting through the green beans, topping and tailing them. “Mhm…and you helped Judy with the whole investigation?”

Continuing to peel the carrots, Nick nodded. “Yeah, it was her first case. She staked her entire career on it. I couldn’t let her lose her job.”

Marian hid her smile. Like hell did her Nicky help out of the goodness of his heart. Marian in no way doubted her boy did have a good heart, he was her son after all, but Nick rarely did anything these days unless it benefitted him, too. “She mentioned that you thought you closed the case?” She prodded a little more.

Nick paused, carrot peeling forgotten for a moment. “We found the mammals. The press conference happened, and I may have overreacted a little afterwards,” he confessed, returning to his task. It was easier to talk to his mom when he wasn’t being forced to look at her. The memory of raising his paws to Judy, claws exposed, made him frown.

Marian pursed her lips. She’d seen the press conference on the TV, but the cameras had cut away quickly afterwards. “Whatever happened, I know it hurt you, baby. You were in such a state when you came back here to visit a few months ago. I’m glad the two of you sorted it out.”

Finishing with his task, Nick transferred the carrot pieces into the pot of water his mom had placed on the stove, letting them simmer on a low heat. “She makes me want to try and be better.”

Marian put down her knife, leaning over to pull her boy into a sideways embrace, and dropping a kiss on the top of his head. Nick grimaced, embarrassed. “It may not matter much, but I like her. I know for a fact you like her, an awful lot. You’re very close,” Marian teased, letting her boy go so she could prepare the salmon.

“Of course we’re close, we’re a good team.” Nick scowled, grabbing a wooden spoon from the drawer so he could stir the carrot pieces.
“Oh yes, your tail was most certainly thinking of teamwork when it wrapped around at the front door,” Marian continued to tease, placing the fish in another pan on the stove. The cold salmon fillets hissed as they came in contact with the warm oil in the pan. Marian was amused that her boy was showing such possessiveness over the bunny.

Eyes widening, Nick abandoned the wooden spoon, throwing his paws up in front of him to try and explain, panic etched on his face. “Mom we’re not, I mean, she’s not…”

Marian laughed, throwing her head back as her baby struggled. Reining in her laughter, she chuckled, tipping her head down again to look at Nick. “It’s okay Nicky. Whenever you’re ready to confess, then I’m all ears.”

Nick groaned, paws falling back to his side before he picked up the wooden spoon once more. “We’re not dating,” he clarified.

“Yet,” Marian tacked on, elbowing her son.

Giving up, Nick rolled his eyes, focusing on the task at paw. Marian was silent for a moment, and Nick was sure she’d given up.

Marian waited for a beat or two, letting her son think she’d dropped the subject. “She’s very pretty…”

"Damn it." Nick scowled.

Marian tried to hide her smile at her son's scowl. “I think the pair of you are very sweet together. Though I’m still unsure as to the mechanics of it, y’know? Bunnies are very small, much smaller than a vixen, but I’m sure they make up for it with enthusiasm, which let me tell you is very vital when…”

“Sweet mercy, please stop!” Nick dropped the spoon again, letting it clatter against the pan. Paws going to his face he hid his blush behind them. He didn’t need his mom trying to understand the mechanics of rabbits and foxes mating.

Marian, sensing that she’d perhaps pushed a little too much, took the salmon off the stove so it wouldn’t burn. Gently she pried her son’s paws away from his face, noting his flattened ears and embarrassed gaze. Cupping her son’s face, she smoothed her paws over his cheeks. “I’m sorry Nicky, you know I like to tease. Whatever is or isn’t going on between the pair of you is fine with me. I love you, no matter what. I just want you to be happy, and you look so much happier now with her around.”

“I love you too.” There was no denying how much Nick loved his mom. Everything he did was for her.

Marian smiled, though her smile morphed into a frown as she spotted the blue mark on Nick’s neck. Tipping his head to the side, Marian tried to work out what had marked her son. “Blueberries,” Nick shrugged, not wanting his mom to worry.

Sighing, Marian’s hands slipped from Nick’s face. “I’m not even going to ask. Go and clean up, I can finish up here. By the time you’re done, dinner will be ready,” Marian shooed Nick out of the kitchen, returning to the stove to finish dinner.

Pushed out of the kitchen, and with his mom distracted, Nick’s route to the bathroom involved a detour through the living room to check on Judy. He stopped at the doorway, resting against the wooden frame, watching as she snuffled in her sleep, her uninjured leg twitching along with her
nose. Though she hated being called cute, Nick had to admit to himself that at that moment, curled up in his childhood home with his favorite blanket, she looked ridiculously cute. The fact she was so comfortable with him, with his mom, that she was able to fall asleep around them made him feel warm. Shaking the thought off, Nick left his post by the door and finally made his way to the bathroom.

His childhood home wasn’t much, there wasn’t an abundance of space, the furniture had seen better days, but it was familiar and pleasant and a bolthole for Nick whenever he needed it. His mom was comfortable and happy in the home she had bought with her husband. Nick hoped Judy wouldn’t ask too many questions later on about why his bedroom hadn’t changed much since he’d been a youngster, or why he hadn’t seen his mom in months.

“That’s wishful thinking, Wilde. Of course, she'll ask.”
Dinner with the Wilde's

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the kind comments and kudos so far, as someone new to writing in this fandom it means a lot to me! :)

Taking his time to clean up, Nick tended to the blueberry mess on his neck. Wiping his fur clean, he ran a brush through the damp patch, catching the last remaining chunks of blueberry that had dried and matted his fur. Placing the brush back on the small shelving unit next to the sink, Nick took in his appearance in the bathroom mirror. He looked awful: Felt it too. It had been a long day. The events in the museum pit played over and over again in his mind. If he hadn't swapped the serum out for blueberries, he would have killed Judy. Nick shuddered at the thought, screwing his eyes closed.

His decades as a con-mammal had given him a great knack for acting, and Judy had been pretty convincing herself: she’d scampered back, eyes wide with fear and nose twitching, pleading with him to stop. It had been hard for him to remain in character, to not break form and reassure Judy that everything was fine and that he wouldn’t really hurt her. His jaws around her neck though…he shivered, hackles rising at the thought. His proximity had afforded him the chance to catch her scent more clearly, and even though they were acting there had been a hint of fear in her smell. It had drawn on the fundamental nature of Nick’s very being, to hunt the rabbit, while simultaneously urging his more rational side to protect rather than hurt. It was that which forced him to break character so dramatically after, to distract himself by taunting Bellwether. He never wanted to scent Judy’s fear again.

Running the taps, Nick splashed cool water onto his face, using his mom’s favorite fluffy towel to dry off. Another quick brush to stop any chance of his fur matting and Nick had no further need to hide in the bathroom. Marian caught him as he left the bathroom. “Dinner’s ready, so you might want to wake Judy. I would've done it myself, but I think she'd prefer if it were you. I placed a change of clothes for her on your bed. They'll be a bit too big for her, but she can't keep wearing those torn pants,” Marian explained, returning to the kitchen as Nick entered the living room.

Judy was still curled up in the armchair, long ears smoothed behind her, little paws clutching Nick’s favorite blanket around her, twitching nose buried in the soft fabric. Her good leg had stopped jittering.

Approaching quietly, Nick lifted a paw, cupping Judy’s left cheek. “Carrots, dinners ready,” he whispered, not wanting to startle her. Smoothing a paw over her cheek Nick frowned, feeling raised bumps beneath his pads. Judy stirred, paws flexing as she started to wake. Taking the limited opportunity, Nick used his claws to push Judy’s fur aside, his sharp vision finding the three faint raised scars across her cheek. Dread filled him as he took in their shape.

“They look like claw marks…”

Judy shifted, wide violet eyes opening slowly. Schooling his features, Nick smoothed her fur back, offering her a lazy smile as he withdrew his paw. “I’m sorry to wake you, actually I’m not, you snore like crazy, but mom says dinner’s ready.”

Snorting, Judy shook her head. “Funny. I think you're just projecting though Slick, ‘cause none of
my 311 siblings say I snore,” she teased.

Eyes widening, Nick’s ears flattened as his jaw slackened. “311 siblings? Sweet mercy, how is that even...?” She had to be joking, right?

Judy rolled her eyes, untangling herself from the cozy blanket. “I already told you, Nick, we bunnies are good at multiplying.”

She wasn't joking.

“Your poor mother!” Nick felt sorry for Mrs. Hopps. All those kits. The chaos so many offspring no doubt caused. Nick had nothing against kits, had even contemplated what it would be like to have his own one day, but there was no way in hell he'd have 311 of them.

“I think she's running out of names in all honesty. She’s at the W’s now. I was part of the J litter, obviously. I guess she’ll have to start with the A’s again soon,” Judy mused, scooting to the edge of the armchair. She could smell the most delicious scents from the dining room. Shaking his head, Nick offered Judy a paw, helping her down. Her first few steps were unsure, and she heavily favored her good leg. Knowing that his mom would be disappointed if the food went cold, and feeling a little selfish, Nick scooped Judy up, much to the rabbit’s disdain.

“You’re supposed to be the quicker mammal, Carrots. You’re slower than Flash,” Nick teased, carrying Judy bridal style across the living room and towards the dining room.

Huffing, Judy wrapped her arms around Nick’s neck, hoping the fox wouldn’t drop her. She wouldn’t put it past him to at least pretend to drop her. “Are you saying because he’s a sloth, he can’t be fast?” Judy shot back, her paws giving the nape of Nick’s neck a gentle swat, teasing him with his own words.

Entering the dining room, Nick used one of his hind paws to pull out a chair for Judy, and slid the rabbit onto the seat. Marian had already taken her place; the food spread out on the table. She watched as her son and Judy teased one another. “If I were a betting mammal…” Marian mused.

“Why Carrots, I would never be so speciest!” Nick feigned hurt, placing a paw on his chest. Judy snorted, nose crinkling as she smiled. Nick’s lazy grin returned as he took the seat beside her, thighs dangerously close, and his tail flicked sideways to rest across Judy’s lap. Judy glanced down, watching as Nick’s tail settled across her. She wasn’t sure whether to consider the action rude or not. Where was she supposed to put her napkin? And what happened if she was a klutz and dropped some of her food on his tail? Since she was unfamiliar with fox customs and habits, Judy didn’t understand the meaning behind Nick’s gesture.

Marian understood the significance, though. The vixen suppressed her smile as she caught sight of the end of her son’s tail, lazily flicking across the rabbit’s lap. He had no need to be so possessive, Marian wasn’t going to take the sweet bunny from him, but she could understand his actions given that Judy was injured. Though evolved in many ways, some of their instincts still harkened back to the old days, and protecting one’s mate was one of the strongest urges for any mammal.

Remembering Marian’s presence, Judy turned her attention to the vixen, a blush visible in the tips of her ears. “This looks lovely, Marian. Thank you.” Judy ignored the napkin set next to her bowl, deciding that it would be rude to place it over Nick’s tail. He would probably keep flicking it off to annoy her anyway.

Marian smiled before she placed her paws together in front of her on the table. “I regret that I don’t
know what customs you have back home Judy, but I hope you don’t mind if we say Grace before we eat?”

Judy returned Marian’s smile, lifting her paws to mirror her. “I don’t mind at all Marian, please go ahead.”

Nick rested his hands together on the table, dipping his head and closing his eyes. Marian dropped her head and closed her eyes too. Judy mirrored them in so far as she dipped her head, but she used the opportunity to look at Nick and his mother more closely. Though Judy hadn’t met Nick’s father, and she couldn’t see the presence of another tod in the apartment, she could see that Nick had the same muzzle shape as his mother.

Given the vast number of bunnies in Judy’s family, saying Grace had never been feasible. There were just too many rabbits to try and get everyone to sit silently, and her mom liked to stagger eating times so that the dining room wasn’t too crowded.

“For the meal we are about to eat, for those that made it possible, and for those with whom we are about to share it, we are thankful,” Marian spoke softly, lifting her head and opening her eyes.

Nick raised his own head, opening his eyes and inhaling the smell of the food his mother had prepared. He was starving.

Judy waited for Marian, and once she’d picked up her cutlery and started to eat, so did Judy.

The smell of dinner had Nick salivating. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had such a large meal. Money was tight for him at the best of times, so the fox often went without food in favor of being able to save a little more. He swiped the odd few bits of fruit from street stalls whenever he could, feeling momentarily sorry for stealing. His survival overruled his conscience, though. He needed to stick around to take care of his mother.

Cutting off a large piece of salmon, Nick let out a happy little noise as he chewed it. Judy watched as the fox sitting beside her ate, fascinated with the sounds he was making. The only other fox she had ever spent any time around had been Gideon, and he wasn’t the model mammal. Dunking her spoon in her bowl, Judy blew on the liquid to cool it before she ate. As a family of carrot farmers, carrot soup was a staple in the Hopps household. However, Marian’s carrot soup could very nearly rival Judy’s mother’s.

Nick appeared hungry, and Judy tried to recall when she’d last seen him eat. He’d been sipping on something from Snarlbucks when she’d met him under the bridge, and since then he’d only had a handful of blueberries.

Marian frowned at her son as he ate, concerned by her boy’s enthusiasm when it came to his meal. Nick had always liked his food, he’d always eaten everything Marian had cooked for him, but her boy was eating with much more gusto than usual. He was looking a little thin too…

“This soup is lovely, Marian,” Judy complimented Nick’s mother, offering the vixen a warm smile.

Finishing her mouthful, Marian’s features softened. “Thank you, Judy. My mom taught me to cook when I was just a kit. Unfortunately, Nicky never cared about learning how to cook…” Marian spared a disapproving glance to her son, who looked up from his meal, licking his lips with a meek grin.

“Next time I go home I’ll ask Gideon to make a blueberry pie for you, Nick,” Judy offered, capturing his attention.
Nick had never heard about this Gideon bunny before. He didn’t like the sound of him already. “Blueberries from your family farm, yes?” He double-checked, cutting another piece of salmon.

Judy smiled; remembering how Nick had complimented the blueberries her family grew. “Of course, my parents went into business with Gid after I joined the force. He’s one of the top pastry chefs in the Tri-Burrows,” she explained, blowing on the soup on her spoon.

“I had no idea you bunnies had your paws in pastry making too.” Nick speared the piece of salmon he’d just cut with his fork, popping it into his mouth.

Judy finished her mouthful. “Oh, he’s not a bunny. He’s the one who told me that night howlers are toxic flowers. He’s a fox.”

Nick choked on the salmon he’d just put in his mouth. Marian placed her cutlery down and reached over, thumping her son’s back. “Easy, Nicky,” she cooed, offering him a glass of water with her other paw.

Nick managed to control his choking fit, taking the glass of water his mother offered him. After a sip, he placed it back down on the table. He’d been caught off guard, unaware that Judy knew another fox, unaware that foxes even lived in Bunnyburrow. The name of the area had suggested to him that the place was filled solely with carrot farming bunnies.

“Here I was thinking that you figured out what they were all by yourself,” Nick teased, covering up his discomfort at the thought of Judy hanging around another fox.

“Dumb bunny, remember?” Judy gave Nick’s hind paws a gentle prod with the hind paw on her good leg, offering him a smile to show she meant no harm.

“Heh, Chief Buffalo Butt is going to have a field day with that recording.” Nick turned back to his salmon, playfully swatting his tail across Judy’s lap.

Judy groaned, shaking her head. “Please don’t remind me. I’m just praying Clawhauser doesn’t get his paws on it. He can’t keep anything a secret. He’d have that recording around the precinct in no time.”

Marian watched the two interact, silently continuing to eat. All these names the bunny was throwing around meant nothing to her, but her son had fallen into conversation with Judy quickly. Her boy had never really been close to anyone after the Junior Ranger Scouts incident. He spent a lot of time with that little fennec fox, much to Marian’s disapproval, so seeing him getting along with Judy warmed her heart.

Before too long, Judy found her bowl empty, and she put down her spoon, licking her lips. Nick had finished his first portion a few minutes earlier, and Marian had allowed him to go for seconds. Now, as Nick finished up his second helping, he started to feel full. It had been a long time since he’d eaten so much food, especially such good food. He wondered whether his mother would let him take some for later. With a clean plate, Nick put his cutlery down.

Judy yawned, her small paws clamping over her muzzle as she glanced apologetically at Nick and Marian. Night had fallen, and though her earlier nap had helped, Judy was still tired. Her belly was full of good comfort food, and it added to her tiredness. Knowing it would be rude to stay in Nick’s home, now that she knew he lived with his mother, Judy resigned herself to having to call a Zuber to take her to a hotel. Marian stood, gathering the dishes.

“Please, let me help,” Judy made to move before Marian placed a paw on her shoulder, keeping her...
in place.

“You need to rest your leg, sweetheart,” she insisted, picking up the final dish and taking them all into the kitchen. Judy felt bad, leaving Marian to clean up after she’d cooked such an excellent meal. At least Judy now knew where Nick had picked up his penchant for using the word sweetheart.

Without warning, Judy yawned again. Putting her paws over her muzzle to hide her yawn, she glanced apologetically to Nick. “I’m so sorry, the day has finally caught up with me,” Judy apologized, paws falling to her lap as she finished yawning. Her paws met the fluffy softness of Nick’s tail, and she couldn’t resist giving it a stroke. A high-pitched whine came from Nick as Judy stroked his tail. Quickly, Judy let go of his tail, unsure as to whether she’d hurt him or not.

Nick glanced down, embarrassed by the noise he’d just made. He’d never made such a noise before. Then again, he’d never allowed anyone to touch his tail either. Mammals had often stepped on it yes, but never stroked it. It was an intimate action. “Sorry,” Nick apologized, avoiding Judy’s eyes, ashamed of his loud response to her gentle touch. “Not used to people touching it.”

“Did it hurt?” Judy asked quietly, wide violet eyes finding Nick’s face, searching to make sure she hadn’t hurt him.

Nick had to hide his snort, the corners of his lips turning upwards. Trust Judy to immediately think she’d hurt him. “It didn’t hurt, Carrots. It was….nice?” He couldn’t think of a better word. He didn’t want to frighten Judy away by telling her just how nice it was, how the touch of her small paw on his tail made him shudder, how it was such an intimate act usually reserved solely for mates. “Lock it away, Wilde.”

Cautiously, unsure as to how Nick would take it, Judy returned her paws to his tail, running them through the fluffy fur there. Nick made the same noise again, his blush deepening, his tail flicking happily in her lap. Judy didn’t know if stroking his tail was acceptable, in Bunnyburrow it was common for rabbits to grab each other’s tails, there were so many bunnies that boundaries didn’t exist, but Nick’s response was encouraging enough for her to keep doing it. She’d never even thought about stroking a fox’s tail, never thought she’d get close enough, but there was a first time to try everything. If there was one thing Judy was proud to be, it was a trier.

Marian had wanted to give Judy and Nick a moment to themselves, so she’d tried to come up with something for dessert. Unfortunately, as she hadn’t been expecting guests, she didn’t have anything to offer them. On her way back to the dining room to apologize, she overheard her boy’s whine. Remaining out of sight, Marian listened in on their conversation with wide eyes. It wasn’t very noble of her, but she could remember the last time she’d heard such a sound. The rain had soaked her Robert on his way home from work, and Marian had started to brush his fur with his favorite soft paddle brush after toweling him off. Robert had made a similar noise as Marian had brushed his tail. The sound had stirred something in her, had driven her to love her mate, and 52 days later Nick had been born. He’d been an anomaly, the only kit in the litter. Marian and Robert had been relieved to only have one, though, particularly since Nick had been such a demanding kit.

Realizing that an extended period of absence would be suspicious, Marian entered the room, pretending like she hadn’t just listened in on her son and the bunny. “I must apologize, Judy, I have nothing in for dessert.”

Judy had still been stroking Nick’s tail, enjoying the feel of his fur beneath her paw, and the little noises he’d been making. The end of his tail had been flicking happily, and small shudders had been running through him. With the return of his mom, though, Judy pulled her paws away quickly, letting them rest on the table. Smiling, she shrugged. “It’s okay Marian, the soup was
more than enough. Thank you. I should probably call a Zuber and let you carry on with your evening.” Judy glanced to Nick, offering him an out. She was still feeling guilty for cajoling him into letting her come here.

Tutting as she collected the placemats, Marian answered Judy. “Don’t be silly, you’re more than welcome to stay here. You’re in no state to be traveling.”

Nick scratched behind his left ear, one of his few tells. While he didn’t like the idea of Judy staying alone in a hotel, if she stayed with him and his mom she’d start asking questions, and once Judy wanted answers she wouldn’t stop until she had them.

“I’ll take the couch,” Nick offered, knowing it would be rude to take his bed. Plus, it would give him the opportunity to cool down from Judy’s impromptu stroking.

“No Nicky, what if Judy needs your help? I’ll set up the spare mattress in your room.” Marian wanted to keep the pair close to one another, both for Judy’s comfort and to try and encourage them to bond further. Though Marian had always hoped her baby would find himself a nice vixen and settle down, giving her lots of grandkits, she couldn’t deny how sweet Judy was, and how she obviously cared for her son. It was something worth pursuing. Perhaps she could even conspire with Judy’s parents. If they worked with Gideon, then they might be open to working with another fox. Marian disappeared from the room to set up the spare mattress on the floor of Nick’s childhood room.

Left with Nick, Judy smoothed down her ears in discomfort, having noted his uneasiness. “I can get a hotel, Nick. You don’t have to worry,” she offered, preparing to slide down off her chair.

Nick shook his head, tail pressing against her lap to keep her in place. “It’s not that.”

Judy frowned, at a loss as to why Nick wasn’t comfortable with her being around all of a sudden. “What is it, then?” She asked gently, knowing that Nick didn’t like opening up, didn’t like letting others see that they were getting to him.

“Nothing for you to worry about, Carrots.” Nick slipped down from his chair, moving to help Judy down. He knew he was delaying the inevitable, but it didn’t hurt to try and throw Judy off the scent.

Helping Judy down, Nick let her lean heavily against him as he led her towards the back of his family home and his childhood bedroom. Marian came out of his room, having set up the spare bed. “I hope you sleep well, Judy. Just shout if you need anything. Nicky is a heavy sleeper.” Marian pressed a kiss to Nick’s forehead before giving Judy the same treatment, enjoying the way the bunny blushed and appeared flustered at her gesture.

Nick glanced at Judy and his mother. True, his mother had always been affectionate, but Nick had never witnessed her extend that affection to anyone beyond their family circle. It seemed his mom had taken a shine to Judy. It hadn’t taken long for Nick to grow fond of the little bunny, and it hadn’t taken his mother long either.

Leading Judy into his childhood bedroom, Nick spotted the change of clothes his mother had left out on his bed for Judy. “Mom said you could borrow her clothes. You can’t wear those torn pants tomorrow,” he explained, helping Judy across the room. Marian had set up the extra mattress alongside the bed with a simple green sheet and pillow on it. She’d put the bedside light on and drawn the curtains, too.

Judy looked around the room. Nick’s bedroom was the same size as her old room at the Grand
Pangolin Arms, but Nick’s was much brighter and inviting. The walls were painted white, and the floor was wooden, making the room feel larger than it was. Pushed up against the left wall were a small bed, a change of clothes on it and two drawers underneath it for storage. At the far end of the room was a large window, and beneath it, running the width of the room was a storage unit. Numerous children’s books lined the top, propped up by little green tubs filled with what Judy could see were toys. She frowned. Nick was 32, why did he have children’s books and toys in his bedroom? On the right wall, opposite the bed, was a desk with a small chair, the surface clear of clutter. Above the desk sat a corkboard, bolted to the wall, and Nick had pinned movie posters to it - posters for Back to the Furture, Paws, and Honey, I Shrunken the Kits. The room smelt a little musty, and the light layer of dust on everything showed it hadn’t been used for some time. This was Nick’s home, so why did it look like he no longer lived here? Judy frowned. Something wasn’t right.

Nick watched as Judy grabbed the small chair next to his desk, using it to help her stand steady. Sure she wouldn’t fall, he pulled open one of the drawers under his bed, grabbing one of his old shirts for her, having realized that his mother hadn’t laid out any clothes for Judy to sleep in. “I’ll let you change in peace.” He offered, placing the shirt down on his bed for her.

Grabbing a pair of pants to sleep in, Nick left the room, giving Judy the chance to change. Changing in the bathroom, Nick deposited his dirty shirt and pants into the laundry basket: His mom would wash them for him.

Judy dressed quickly, not wanting to risk being caught naked. Folding her clothes, she placed them on the desk. The shirt Nick had lent her was black, ‘Mole Gallagher’ emblazoned on the front. Judy chuckled, having not expected Nick to be a Mole fan. Come to think of it, she wasn’t entirely sure about the music he liked. His movie tastes were good if the posters on his corkboard were anything to go by. It still bothered Judy that the room didn’t look suitable for a 32-year-old.

Nick knocked on the bedroom door, and then slowly entered, grateful to see that Judy had changed. His shirt swamped her, loose on her body and falling to her knees. Seeing her in his clothes stirred something in him, gave him a very pleasant feeling. Shaking away the feeling, Nick picked up Judy’s clothes, taking them into the living room. He’d try and salvage her jeans tomorrow. His temporary absence gave Judy the chance to process the fact that Nick was shirtless, a light blush coloring the inside of her ears. "Cheese and crackers!"

Returning to his bedroom, Nick closed the door behind him. The momentary silence between them made him realize just how awkward the situation was. He was alone in his room, with Judy. “Nick,” she started, eyes roaming around the room before landing on him.

Nick sighed. “Here we go…”

“You have this address on your tax form as your place of residence, but it doesn’t look like you live here permanently.” Judy approached the subject gently, not wanting to back Nick into a corner. The fox had never struck Judy as someone who liked to share personal information with others. Nick momentarily ignored her query to gather his thoughts, crossing the room to the spare mattress. His mom had already spread out his sheet, so he didn’t have much to do. Throwing the sheet back, Nick sat on the bed, head dropping as he tried to come up with a suitable cover story. Usually, he was great at coming up with stories and lies off the cuff, they played an intricate part in his hustles after all, but this was Judy he was dealing with. If his story weren’t properly thought out, she’d cotton on.

“Nick, you don’t live here anymore, do you?” Judy decided to be blunt, ambling slowly towards the fox. Her leg was still giving her grief, but this was important. Standing before Nick, Judy
gently grasped his muzzle, lifting his head, so he was forced to look at her. They locked gazes for a few seconds before Nick’s eyes dropped, finding the floor more interesting. Judy knew the look that crossed his face. Shame. She was well acquainted with the emotion now. She’d felt such shame after her first press conference, for hurting Nick, for causing so much hatred and intolerance to further flourish in Zootopia. Why would Nick be feeling ashamed, though? Surely wherever he lived wasn’t as bad as Judy’s old place at the Grand Pangolin Arms.

Nick continued to look away from Judy, trying to pull away from her. He was uncomfortable, and he didn’t want to talk about his living arrangements: It was a necessity to keep his mother safe. Hoping his silence would cause Judy enough discomfort that she would let the subject drop, Nick bided his time.

He should’ve known better.

Judy’s mind was working overtime, trying to figure out where Nick could be living that would lead to such a strong reaction from him. He hadn’t mentioned any district in particular during their time together; never spoke about one with more fondness than any other. The only time he’d mentioned living anywhere had been after she’d confronted him about his hustling. Something about "sinks into emotional and literal squalor, living in a box under a…"

“Oh, Nick.” Her ears drooped at the realization. It all made sense now. Finnick had sent her to the bridge to find him, and the small amount of furniture suggested he spent time there. Judy let go of his muzzle, sliding her paw up to cup his cheek, smoothing the ruffled fur. “Oh Nick,” Judy soothed gently.

Nick flinched at Judy's tone. He didn’t need or want her sympathy. He was doing fine, his mom was none the wiser and was comfortable, and he didn’t have to put up with other mammals. “Leave it, Judy.” He pulled away from her grasp. Laying down quickly, he buried himself under the sheets, turning so his back faced her. He knew it was a little cowardly, turning his back on her and the conversation, but he didn’t want to go there right now. He was aware that his living situation wasn't ideal, but it was the hand he’d been dealt, and he was making the most of it.

Judy wavered for a moment, torn between wanting to soothe Nick and letting it go. He’d used her full name, not one of his usual pet names, so Judy knew he was serious. She couldn’t help but feel like smoothing things over, though. Yes, she felt sorry for him, Nick deserved so much more than living under a bridge in a box, but she knew he wouldn’t want her sympathy. He still had his pride. Deciding to let it go for now, as pushing further wouldn’t get her any more answers, Judy shuffled slowly to the bed, hauling herself up and then under the covers. Reaching over, she flicked the bedside lamp off and lay on her back.

The silence was deafening, and Judy found sleep evading her.
Thank you for all the wonderful reviews, kudos, and bookmarks so far, they mean the world to me <3

Judy stared at the ceiling, hoping that sleep would take her soon. Her body was exhausted, but her mind was working overtime, trying to make sense of the new information. Nick didn’t have a proper home. The thought made Judy’s gut twist. The idea of him sleeping in a box under the bridge she’d found him at made her want to cry. He deserved better than that. He deserved four walls and a roof, a proper bed, somewhere he could truly call home.

“I was seven, when my dad died,” Nick whispered, his voice filling the silence. Judy froze, not daring to move or say anything for fear Nick would clam up and stop talking, stop sharing something important. “He was late home from work, and mom was worried. She paced around the living room while I played with my toys on the couch. When there was a knock at the door mom thought dad had forgotten his keys, he’d done that a few times, but rather than seeing my dad on the other side of the door she found two officers. I remember her crying; pleading with them.” Nick took a deep breath, and Judy glanced sideways, down to the fox on the spare mattress. He’d turned to face her and was curled up tight, sheet pulled taut around him and, though it was dark, Judy could see his emerald eyes focused on an empty spot on the floor. Judy longed to reach out and comfort him, but she restrained herself, wanting him to carry on. She had a feeling Nick had never spoken this openly to another mammal before.

“Mom shooed me in here so she could talk to them. I can remember the tear tracks on her fur, the way her whole body shook as she led me out of the room. I didn’t know what was going on, but mom came to see me once the officers had left and told me dad was gone. For a while, I thought he’d abandoned us, but the neighbors started talking, and they would look at me with pity. Eventually, I overheard them saying that dad had been murdered, simply because he was a fox,” Nick huffed in disgust as his jaw clenched. Judy could feel tears burning her eyes.

“We struggled financially, dad had been the breadwinner. Mom worked at a diner a few blocks away and took double shifts to try and make ends meet. There was still a mortgage on this place, and we needed to eat. My mom worked twice as hard as anyone in that diner but received hardly any tips from customers. Some even outright asked for a different server. Sometimes she’d come home and try to act cheerful like work had been great, but I could see how hard it was for her. We were only just scraping by. It took mom months to save for my Junior Ranger Scouts uniform,” Nick’s paw clenched around the sheet covering him, and Judy, unable to stop herself any longer, rolled over to face him, leaning down a little to rest her smaller paw atop his.

Nick startled, so lost in his own memories that he’d temporarily forgotten about Judy’s presence. The warmth of her paw comforted him. “I was twelve when I left home.” He still avoided her gaze. “Mom had had her double shifts taken from her, but given to other mammals instead, and her tips were dwindling even further. She didn’t need the stress of feeding another mouth. I dropped out of school, started spending time with other mammals that were seen as low on the totem pole too. We worked a few hustles, my age making it easy to con animals out of their cash, even though I’m a fox.” Nick’s self-deprecation made Judy want to scream out at the injustice of it all. Nick was no
different than any other mammal in the world. “I sent my mom whatever money I made, but it wasn’t enough, it was never enough.” Nick pulled his paw out from under Judy’s, hugging it to him.

Judy could feel the dampness on her fur, but she couldn’t bring herself to stop silently crying. Nick had been vulnerable once before with her, on the sky tram after her altercation with the Chief. She was honored he felt comfortable enough to open up again: She had a feeling he had so few people he could confide in.

“What happened next?” Judy asked softly, not liking Nick’s sudden silence.

The fox inhaled sharply, his eyes lifting to meet hers. “Quid pro quo, Carrots.” He slapped on a smile, but Judy saw right through it. Nick was deflecting. Judy indulged him, knowing it was a miracle she’d been given any answers at all.

“Go on, I’m all ears,” she teased, hoping to lighten the mood a little. She sat up, preparing for whatever questions Nick had. It worked for all of a few seconds, Nick’s lazy grin returning before his eyes moved to her left cheek, his smile dropping as he too sat up, pulling the sheet around him.

“What happened next?” Judy asked softly, not liking Nick’s sudden silence.

The fox inhaled sharply, his eyes lifting to meet hers. “Quid pro quo, Carrots.” He slapped on a smile, but Judy saw right through it. Nick was deflecting. Judy indulged him, knowing it was a miracle she’d been given any answers at all.

“Go on, I’m all ears,” she teased, hoping to lighten the mood a little. She sat up, preparing for whatever questions Nick had. It worked for all of a few seconds, Nick’s lazy grin returning before his eyes moved to her left cheek, his smile dropping as he too sat up, pulling the sheet around him.

“Your cheek,” He started.

Judy sighed, “No, we don’t have cheek pouches to hoard food. Yes, we need to…” she started to rattle off the list of answers to the usual questions she received, but Nick chuckled lowly.

“Not what I meant, Carrots, but thanks for the interesting info.” Nick’s paw left the safety of his sheet, and he reached forward, across the gap between their beds, to cup Judy’s left cheek. He noted how she didn’t flinch at his touch, though he was certain she’d never willingly allowed a predator this close before. His tone slipped into something more serious. “Your scars,” he asked, smoothing his paw over her cheek. Nick had been angry when he’d first seen the three marks running across her cheek. He wanted to hunt down whatever mammal thought it was okay to hurt his sweet bunny, rip off one of their limbs and then beat them senseless with it. “Hey protective instincts, could you leave me alone, just for tonight?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, they’re nothing. I was nine and confronted the school bully as he’d stolen my friend’s tickets for the Carrot Day Festival and I demanded that he gave them back. He pushed me to the ground, I kicked him, he got mad, and then he clawed me,” Judy shrugged. It was so long ago now that Judy gave no importance to it, and Gideon had come a long way since then, even sincerely apologizing to her when she’d last been home.

“Who knew bunnies could be so vicious?” Nick tried to play it off, feeling irrationally angry that someone had hurt Judy. It wasn’t his place to get mad, and Judy’s response suggested it no longer bothered her. It didn’t stop him from frowning, though.

Judy looked uncomfortable as she played with her paws in her lap. “It wasn’t another bunny. It’s okay, though, Gideon apologized when I went home.”

Gideon…wasn’t that? Nick’s frown morphed into the start of a snarl, but he pushed it down, stopping before he could let out a noise of displeasure. Gideon. The fox Judy had mentioned at dinner. Why did a fox have to be the one who clawed Judy? No wonder she’d been apprehensive, carrying around that little bottle of repellent, reaching for it in a blind panic when he’d…

Nick paused, eyes widening and ears flattening as comprehension dawned on him. It all made sense now. After the press conference, when he’d confronted her, how Judy had reacted when he’d asked her if she thought he’d go savage, raising his paws to intimidate her. The last time a fox had
raised a paw at her she’d been thrown around and scarred. Pain blossomed in his chest as he closed his eyes, angry with himself for not sticking around and hearing her out when she’d chased after him. Up until that moment, Nick hadn’t raised a paw at her, hadn’t seemed threatening at all. By mimicking the actions of her childhood bully, albeit unintentionally and unaware of what he was doing, Nick had made her feel like her nine-year-old self and forced her instincts to kick in and try to defend herself from being hurt again. He felt like a jerk. “My actions after your press conference speech. I’m so sorry.”

Judy slid from the bed, wincing a little as she put some weight on her bad leg. She ignored it, though, using both of her paws to cup Nick’s muzzle. “It’s okay,” She soothed, rubbing his fur. His scent transferred onto her paws with the rubbing action. “You didn’t know. It was my fault. I should’ve chosen my words more carefully, I should’ve explained everything to you.” She scritched under his muzzle and noted how he tipped his head back slightly, offering her a little more access. Judy felt awful for how she’d reacted when she’d spotted Nick in the ice-cream shop, preparing herself to possibly use her fox repellent. She’d contributed to the problem of discrimination against foxes. She’d been condescending, had spoken down to Nick and Finnick as they’d left the shop. Nick had changed her attitude towards foxes through his actions during the night howler case.

“I shouldn’t have left as I did,” Nick tried to argue, knowing that a miscommunication between them had led to their extended separation.

“You were hurting, Nick. I said some truly awful things that I’ll always be sorry for. It’s okay, I understand.” Judy stopped stritching long enough to smooth his ruffled fur down.

Nick huffed. “You were hurting too, Judy, reliving memories of being hurt by my kind.”

“Gideon was just a jerk who happened to be a fox. I know a lot of bunnies that are jerks too. I shouldn’t have let it get to me, and I didn’t even know that somewhere deep down it still did. Please let it go, Nick. We both made mistakes.”

Did Nick want to let it go? No, not really. Would he let it go, for Judy’s sake? Yes, yes, he would. Sighing, Nick’s shoulders sagged. “I’ll let it go if you do,” he bargained, knowing how emotional the small bunny was and how she would forever blame herself for the events following the press conference.

“Deal.” Judy pulled her paws away from Nick’s muzzle, offering her right paw out. Nick snorted at the gesture but shook on it anyway.

Nick braced himself. It was Judy’s turn once again to ask a question. “I’m not going to ask anything. You tell me whatever you want, whenever you’re ready to,” Judy offered, knowing it had taken a lot for him to open up as much as he already had.

Nick was grateful for Judy’s offer. There was plenty in his colorful past that he would never share, even with Judy. They were secrets that he would take to the grave. However, this little rabbit, with her big violet eyes and big ears, deserved some more answers. “When I was sixteen, I decided to put my hustling skills to good use, to start up a business, try to be an honest mammal. I figured I’d make more money for my mom that way,” Nick picked up his story where he had left off.

Judy’s injured leg ached, so she slid back onto the bed to sit once more, to listen to Nick and give him some space.

“I dreamt of a theme park, just for predators. It was to be a place where we could go and be ourselves, without fear or any repercussions. I taught myself the ins and outs of operating a
business, made a business plan and cash flow forecasts, and then I went to every bank in the city and pitched my idea to them. Unfortunately, prey mammals owned all the banks. None of them wanted to lend money to a predator, let alone a fox,” Nick snorted, sighing as he recalled all of the rejections he’d faced. His idea had been solid, his business plan and cash flow forecast perfect, but his species worked against him.

Judy felt tears gathering in her eyes again at the injustice of it all. Nick was smart, she had no doubt his dream would’ve worked out, but small-minded mammals had crushed it.

“In the end, I went to a loan caracal in the Nocturnal district,” Nick explained. Judy’s paws went to her muzzle. She’d heard about the Nocturnal district, located deep under the city, and home to all sorts of creatures who partook in shifty business. She’d never been herself, but the thought of a sixteen-year-old Nick down there, striking a deal, made her pulse race. “It took a lot of negotiating, but I finally got him to agree to a 70/30 split of the business, in his favor of course. He lent me $400,000 and stipulated that he and his gang have access to the park whenever they wanted. I was so desperate for the investment that I agreed. It was going to be in the warehouse next to the bridge where you found me. I was going to call it Wilde Times,” Nick chuckled, finding humor even now in the name he’d chosen.

Judy appreciated the pun and couldn’t stop her small laugh, her paws falling to rest in her lap. She couldn’t hide her sadness, though, that Nick had been forced to sign a dodgy deal just to make his dream a reality. “They gave me half the money upfront. I left with a small briefcase of cash, ready to go and buy the warehouse. I stopped here first, to tell my mom that I was going to pursue my dream and that she wouldn’t have to worry about money once the park was operational,” Nick wrung his paws, emerald eyes glassy for a moment as he recalled the memory. Though it was dark and Judy’s night vision was nowhere near as good as Nick’s, she’d adjusted to the minimal light.

“She was crying when I got here. She’d just been fired from her job at the diner. The owner, an old deer, was receiving too many complaints about having a fox for a waitress. The bills were stacking up, debtors threatening her. I couldn’t leave her. I took the $200,000 I’d been given and paid off the $150,000 mortgage remaining on this place, so she’d always have a roof over her head. I invested the remaining $50,000 and hired a lawyer to tell mom that dad had some stocks and shares and that he’d left them to her in his will. It makes her some money each month, tops up her income. It’s not a lot, but it’s something.”

Judy smiled sadly at Nick. She’d guessed from his interactions with his mother that he was a momma’s boy, but knowing now the depths he’d gone to keep her safe, to keep a roof over her head and food in her belly, it made Judy’s heart ache. All the nasty things mammals said about foxes, all the cruel taunts they made, foxes deserved none of them. Nick deserved none of them. He was a good mammal.

The darkness comforted Nick, afforded him the chance to bear his soul to Judy without fear of seeing her pity him. He hated being vulnerable, hated it almost as much as he hated being discriminated against simply because he was a fox. Judy though, something about her made him want to bare his soul, made him want to share parts of himself he’d never shared with anyone else before. Maybe it was the way she was happy to share parts of herself with him, maybe it was the way she inspired him to be better. Nick didn’t know, and he didn’t want to examine it too closely. Instead, he simply let his emotions guide him.

“I hustle because I have to. The loan caracal wasn’t happy that I’d spent his money on something other than Wilde Times. He and his gang roughed me up a little, but I managed to sweet talk him into a payment plan of sorts. He keeps adding interest to the amount I took, though. I make just enough each month to meet the terms of the payment plan. If I don’t keep up, he’ll hurt her.” Nick
glanced towards the bedroom door before he sighed, head dropping as his ears flattened. “So yeah, can’t afford a nice apartment,” he teased, offering Judy a wry grin, trying to force his vulnerability back into its box.

Judy inhaled sharply. The thought of Marian being hurt made her paws clench. The loan caracal had backed Nick into a corner, threatened the only mammal that mattered to him to get his compliance. The fact Nick couldn’t even afford a roof over his head made her sniffle. She wanted to fix it. Maybe her old landlady, Dharma, would let Nick stay with her in her old apartment. At least he’d have somewhere safe to sleep. Then again, her fox would probably hate the idea, would probably refuse her charity. “Oh, Nick.”

Nick was on a roll. While sharing his story wasn’t pleasant, he could feel the weight that had long ago settled in his chest lighten. At least someone would understand why he did what he did; at least someone would know that he was only trying to help. “I met Finnick in a bar in the Nocturnal district, and we decided to team up. The dad and son con was his idea, the elephant suit was mine,” Nick spared a rueful grin, remembering the way the fennec had threatened to castrate him the first time he’d suggested it. After swiping the elephant suit from a baby shop, Nick had managed to talk him into it, and the fennec actually seemed to enjoy it now. It was effective, to say the least.

“You split everything you make, right?” Judy broke into Nick’s story. Nick needed as much money as possible to keep the loan caracal off his back and away from Marian. Did Finnick know of his predicament?

Nick raised a paw. “Quid pro quo, Carrots.”

Judy sighed but conceded with a nod. Nick had spoken at great length, giving her more information than she’d ever expected, shared much more of himself than she’d hoped for. It was only fair he had the chance to ask his questions now.

Nick thought about his question. Not because he was concerned he would never have the opportunity to ask Judy anything again, but because Nick had so many questions he wanted to ask her. “Why did you want to become an officer?” He settled for a relatively easy one.

“I want to make the world a better place,” Judy responded with her usual line, offering Nick a smile.

Nick shook his head, saddened by her party line answer. “I don’t doubt that, Carrots. What I meant was why do you want to make the world a better place, why did you decide to be an officer rather than a carrot farmer?”

Judy thought about it for a moment, paws going to her thighs as she gently scratched. “When I was eight, I had hundreds of siblings. Mom and dad did their best, tried to give us all the same amount of attention, took care of us all the same way, but I felt different. While my siblings were fine with things staying the same, with helping to work on the farm, I wanted to do something bigger, to make a name for myself. I was one of hundreds, and others saw me as just another Hopps kit.”

Nick listened as Judy spoke, unable to relate due to his own lack of siblings. He could imagine, though, how hard it would be with so many siblings, how hard it would be trying to stand out amongst the crowd. Judy had always been different, it seemed.

“We only had a few other species in Bunnyburrow, and they were all predators. They were treated differently; most feared and shunned them. I remember Mrs. Veasel trying to buy groceries, and none of the assistants in the supermarket would serve her because she was a ferret. She was just a kind old lady; she didn’t deserve to be shunned. Seeing how she was treated upset me, I couldn’t
see the problem with serving her. I decided that I wanted to change how mammals saw one another, but that change had to start with me. I wanted to be the first bunny officer, to prove that any mammal could be anything. If a bunny could be a cop, something unheard of before, then maybe other preconceptions could change too. Maybe prey animals could start trusting predators, something else relatively unheard of. I wanted to start challenging ideas, to encourage everyone to get along. After all, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Nick shook his head. “You were carrying fox repellent when we first met,” He pointed out. He couldn’t fault her for carrying it, seeing that it was her first time in the city and given her incident with Gideon when she’d been a kit. She’d continued to carry it even after they’d formed the start of a friendship though, even once they were back at the precinct before the press conference.

Judy leant forward, paws shooting out to rest on Nick's chest, violet eyes finding emerald ones as she felt the pounding of his heart beneath her paws. Feeling his bare chest beneath her paws made her blush, eyes widening momentarily before she forced herself back on track. “That’s going in the trash as soon as I get my belt back. I don’t want to carry it around you.”

“It doesn’t bother me, Fluff.” Nick shrugged. Judy could do what she liked. She was a grown mammal. If she felt she needed to carry it then so be it. He didn’t like the idea, but it was her choice. The weight of her paws on his chest brought back the warm and pleasant feelings he'd experienced when he'd caught sight of her in his shirt.

“Yes it does, Nick, or you wouldn’t have mentioned it. I don’t need it anyway. I know I’ll never need to use it against you. I trust you. I know you'll never hurt me.” She held his gaze for a moment longer than necessary, needing him to understand that she meant it. Nick offered her a warm smile. Pulling her paws back, Judy settled them in her lap. “Besides, if any other foxes come skulking around I’m sure you’ll scare them off for me.”

His smile disappeared. “Like Gideon.”

“Gid is harmless, Nick. Besides, my parents are friends with him now. They’ve come a long way. When I first moved here, my dad tried to give me fox deterrent and a fox taser. I only took the repellent to make him shut up.”

Nick would need to make his own assessment about whether Gideon was harmless or not before he left him alone with Judy, but he snorted, offering Judy a small smile. “Remind me to never meet your father.

Judy brought a paw to her chin, looking at Nick as she made her assessment. “Nah, I think he’d like you.”

“Before or after he taser me?” Nick deadpanned.

“Nick!” Judy’s paw fell from her chin, and she laughed. Nick’s laughter joined hers moments later.

As their laughter died down, Nick fell back on his old defense mechanism. “I understand now that your experience with foxes wasn’t great until you met me of course.”

“Careful Slick, someone might think we’re friends,” she teased, gently kicking out her good hind paw so she could prod Nick’s shoulder across the gap between their mattresses.

Feigning injury, Nick dramatically fell back onto his bed, his paws going to his shoulder as he made wounded noises. “Assault, Officer, assault!” He gasped, earning a giggle from the bunny, which made his heart clench. “Stop it, Wilde.”
Laying on his back, Nick stared up at the ceiling of his childhood bedroom, his night vision enabling him to pick out the faint marks on his ceiling from the time he’d stuck glow in the dark stars up there. The silence between them was comfortable and allowed him to think over Judy’s words. If he was honest, her reasoning didn’t really surprise him. Since the moment they met, when Judy had stood up for him in front of the elephant ice-cream shop owner, he’d noticed how she always wanted to help mammals. Sure, she’d blackmailed him a little, led him on some wild otter chase, but she’d been doing it because she wanted to help, she genuinely wanted to make the world a better place for all mammals. Nick found her drive inspiring. It was why he’d happily filled in the application form to be her partner. In hindsight, it had been a horrible idea. Police training took months, months in which he’d have no income to pay Catstro and keep him away from his mother.

Knowing it was now her turn to ask a question, Judy opted for something she thought would be a bit easier on him, phrasing it as a statement more than a question so as not to push her luck. “You were pretty hungry at dinner, Slick.”

Comfortable on his back, Nick focused on the outline of Jupiter on his ceiling. The glow in the dark paint had long since faded, but the outline his mom had drawn in marker pen was still visible. “I told a lie when I said that I make $200 a day. Most days Finnick and I only make around $80 bucks, but after we split it, I have $40 in my pocket. Pretty pathetic, I know.” He shrugged, raising his paws to put them behind his head, using them as a makeshift pillow. It was getting increasingly easier to open up to the small bunny. She trusted him, and Nick trusted her in return. It was a new feeling, but one he was growing to like.

“Sometimes I can spare a few bucks for some fruit or a Snarlbucks, most of the time I need every cent for my payment.” Nick had long ago come to terms with hunger, especially as it meant that he was meeting payments and his mother was safe. Her comfort and safety were paramount to him. He’d go hungry, cold, and lonely if it meant she was safe. She’d brought him into the world, loved him unconditionally, and had gone without when he was a kit so that he would have a few nice things and a full belly. It was the least he could do.

Tears clung to Judy’s cheeks as she slipped from the bed again, padding across the small distance between their mattresses. Lying down beside Nick, she stared up at the ceiling with him. There was little she could say to comfort him, little she could offer. Nick would brush off her verbal attempts at soothing him. He didn’t want sympathy. This was the life he’d been dealt, and though Judy could hear from his tone that it wasn’t the one he had planned on, she sensed that he’d come to terms with his lot. Instead, she offered her physical presence as comfort. Rolling onto her side, Judy brought her paws up together under her head to form a cushion as she watched Nick quietly.

Tentatively, and after a short period of silence, she extended a paw, resting it on the cream fur of his belly. The contact spooked Nick, who startled at the touch, having been lost in his own thoughts. Glancing down, emerald and violet met. “Thank you, Nick, for forgiving me, for helping me close the case, for bringing me here, and for confiding in me,” she whispered, not wanting to shatter the comfortable feeling encompassing them.

Nick held her gaze and Judy could see hundreds of emotions in his expressive emerald eyes. He turned back, looking up at the ceiling; his voice was soft as he spoke. “Thanks for coming back for me Judy, for giving me a chance.”

“That’s what friends are for.” Judy had to stop herself from scritching Nick’s exposed belly; the temptation to stroke the surprisingly soft fur there was overwhelming.

Eyes now closed, Nick stretched, moving one of his arms to sling it around Judy, pulling her tight
to his side. She made a small noise of surprise though she settled quickly, burrowing against him and sliding her paw along his belly to wrap around him. She too closed her eyes, enjoying the contact. Nick’s paw rested respectfully on her waist, the thudding of her fast heartbeat amplified by their close contact. Judy nuzzled closer, pink nose buried in reddish-orange fur, at ease with Nick and comforted by his musky scent.

“Hey, Carrots?” Nick whispered after a moment of silence, removing his other paw from behind his head to throw it lazily over his stomach, claws gently brushing against Judy.

“Mhm?” Judy mumbled, finally feeling tired.

“When’s your birthday?” Nick’s tail flicked lazily, wedged between his side and Judy. When he’d been a kit he’d been comfortable sleeping on, now he was a bit heavier it hurt to lie down on it. He’d taken to moving it aside, finding it more comfortable.

Judy’s sleep-fogged brain wondered why Nick wanted to know about her birthday now of all times. Her mind worked on autopilot. “May 18th.”

Nick made a small noise, smiling. “Makes sense. May kits are smart and loyal, hardworking and emotional.”

Judy made a half-hearted attempt at swatting him with her paw that was wrapped around him. “When’s your birthday?” Her words started to slur.

“March 27th.” Birthdays held no real significance to Nick; it wasn’t like he had many mammals to celebrate with. His mom usually took him out for dinner as a treat and bought him a new shirt or tie, but it was a low-key occasion.

“What’re March babies?” Judy smacked her lips together, tightening her hold on Nick.

“They’re sleepy.” He freed his tail from between them, flicking it over her small frame. It covered most of her body, and Nick cracked an eye open to glance sideways, looking at Judy curled up against him, under his tail. The tip of his tail flicked happily at the sight. Using the paw that he’d thrown over his stomach, Nick grabbed at the discarded bed sheet, pulling it over them.

“Night, Nick.” Judy shuffled, tightening her hold on him.

“Night, Carrots,” Nick whispered back, his paw on her waist gently stroking her side through his shirt.

Comfortable and warm, safely tucked up against Nick, Judy fell asleep.
Warm. It was so warm. Judy was suffocating in the warmth. Swimming to consciousness, Judy found herself locked inside Nick’s arms, his body curled around her. His fur was ridiculously warm and soft, and his tail had curled around her, the tip resting just under her chin. His scent enveloped her, and while the scent of fox would’ve probably sent her running in the past, it comforted her now. Judy lounged against Nick, not in any hurry to leave the warmth of his embrace. At some point in the night, they’d shifted, and Judy found that she didn’t mind being cuddled by Nick. Gently, so as not to disturb him, Judy lightly rubbed the underside of her chin along the tip of his tail, enjoying the tickly feeling. Settling back against him, she closed her eyes and relaxed. She’d been surprised when Nick had pulled her close last night, letting her snuggle up against him. She had a feeling he wasn’t a very physical mammal, wasn’t used to having anyone other than Marian hug him. Growing up in such a large family meant physical contact was important for Judy; it was a way to show her care. It was second nature for her to show her affection for Nick last night by reaching out to him. The fact he’d encouraged her cuddling made her smile. She was slowly peeling away that the vast amount of layers that made up Nicholas P. Wilde, and the things she was learning about him surprised her.

Judy’s bladder soon complained. Slowly and reluctantly Judy wiggled her way out of Nick’s grasp, watching as he shuffled in his sleep, curling up into the fluffiest ball she’d ever seen once she was free of his grasp. Judy’s ears drooped, and she had to clamp a paw over her muzzle to stop herself from cooing at how adorable he looked.

Keeping her steps light Judy left the room, letting the door close quietly behind her. Spotting the open door of the bathroom across the hallway she darted in, locking the door behind her. Judy winced as pain flared in her leg, her sudden quick movements pulling on the wound. She would probably need to change the bandage soon. Judy gave her appearance a once over in the mirror above the sink, smoothing down patches of her fur that had ruffled up in her sleep, before attending to her bladder. Satisfied that she was somewhat presentable, Judy opened the bathroom door ready to return to Nick’s room to grab the clothes Marian had left out for her.

Judy didn’t get far. Marian was just coming out of her bedroom as Judy opened the bathroom door, and the vixen greeted her with a smile. “Good morning Judy. Did you sleep well?” She asked, fastening a pearl necklace around her throat as she approached. She was dressed in a smart white blouse and a dark orange pencil skirt. Judy thought she looked fantastic.

“Yes, thank you, I’m really grateful for you letting me stay over,” Judy thanked Marian; knowing her mom would whack her tail with her wooden cooking spoon if Judy forgot her manners.

As Judy stepped out of the bathroom and closer to Marian, the vixen’s nostrils flared, confusion clouding her features for a moment before a sly smile crossed her muzzle. When Judy frowned, concerned she smelt bad, Marian slapped on a broad smile, soothing the bunny. Marian’s nose didn’t lie – her boy’s scent was all over Judy. “Did you sleep well? I know Nicky likes his mattress a little hard.”

Not wanting to lie to Marian, Judy settled on the truth. “I slept very well thanks. I didn’t sleep in Nick’s bed, I slept on the spare mattress, and it was really comfy.”

Marian quirked an eyebrow, one of her paws coming to rest on her waist as she frowned. “Nicky kicked you out of his bed and onto the extra mattress? I thought I taught that boy better than that.”

Smoothing down her ears, Judy shook her head. “No, he let me take the bed. We were up late
though, so I moved, we were together on the spare mattress.”

Marian’s other eyebrow rose, eyes widening as her paw slipped from her waist. Had her son and Judy…? “I don’t smell a coupling, and my nose isn’t that decrepit yet.”

“Oh gosh, no no! Not like that! We didn’t…there was nothing…” Judy stumbled, a deep blush coloring the inside of her ears as she realized how her comment could’ve been perceived.

Marian smiled, enjoying Judy’s momentary embarrassment. Seeing the honesty in Judy’s face, she took pity on the sweet rabbit. “It’s okay Judy, you’re both grown mammals, what the pair of you get up to is none of my business.” Marian shrugged. She wouldn’t have minded if her boy and Judy had been intimate, it was about time that Nicky finally found himself a mate, and he got on well with Judy. “I’ll make some breakfast. What would you like?” Marian gave Judy an out, fishing in her pocket. She pulled out her matching bracelet and clasped it around her left wrist, eyes lifting from her task to take in Judy wearing one of her son’s shirts. She had to hide her smile.

Judy blushed again, remembering that she stood before Nick’s mom wearing only her panties and one of Nick’s oversized shirts. Wait. She’d fallen asleep curled up with Nick, in just her panties and his shirt. “Sweet cheese and crackers!”

“I’ll, um, go change,” Judy stuttered; pink coloring the inside of her ears for what felt like the hundredth time.

Marian wafted a hand through the air, not at all fussed by Judy’s state of undress. “Nicky is still sleeping, that boy hardly rests, and you wouldn’t want to risk waking him, would you? It doesn’t matter, we’re both girls.” Marian started to walk towards the kitchen. Judy, though embarrassed, followed after the vixen.

She did have a point. Nick deserved to enjoy his rest on a comfy mattress. Judy had no idea how often he slept in his childhood home. “How do you feel about pancakes?” Marian asked as Judy followed her into the kitchen. Judy walked with a slight limp to her step, though she could put a bit more weight on her leg now. Spotting some barstools at the small island counter, Judy used her good leg to push herself up and off the ground, scrabbling onto the seat. It wasn’t her most graceful mount, but it did the job.

“Pancakes sound yummy. Is there anything I can help with?” Judy offered, not used to sitting by idly. Back in Bunnyburrow, the older Hopps children had been expected to pitch in and help with the cooking and cleaning. There was only so much their mom could do.

“No, no, sweetheart, you just sit there and continue looking pretty.” Marian grabbed a frying pan, placing it on the stove, then moved to the fridge to gather ingredients. Judy blushed at her compliment, unused to such flattery.

Marian spent her time gathering ingredients, wondering just how many questions she could ask the bunny before her son woke for the day. She had half an hour before work, and Nicky would more than likely wake at the smell of pancakes. Settling on her first question, Marian closed the fridge, laying out the ingredients on the counter. “I hope my boy didn’t cause you too much trouble when he was helping you crack your big case.” Marian started to sift the flour into a large bowl.

Judy chuckled, the sound causing Marian’s ears to twist towards the bunny. “He wasn’t very cooperative at first, but as time went on, he pulled through for me. I’d made a deal with the Chief. I had two days to crack the case, or I would resign. He didn’t want a bunny on the force, let alone as part of his team, but I was determined to prove myself. I accepted his deal, and Nick was my first lead. He did throw a few roadblocks at me, but in truth, I hadn’t told him about how much I’d
staked on the case. After a particularly,” Judy searched for the right word “intense situation, the Chief wanted my badge. I still had ten hours left to solve the case, but I felt like I’d failed. I was about to hand my badge over when Nick shut the Chief down and ensured I got to keep my badge and the last ten hours to crack the case. He really came through for me,” Judy glanced down at her lap, her paws playing with the hem of Nick’s shirt.

Pleasantly surprised with the rabbit’s willingness to share, Marian smiled. Hearing about her boy’s actions didn’t surprise the vixen. Her Nicky could be difficult when it suited, but he was inherently good. He was so much like her Robert. Marian’s smile dropped as she remembered her late husband. “I’m glad he has you, Judy. He wasn’t the same after his father passed.”

Judy’s ears drooped. She was still processing all the information Nick had given her the night before, but she knew the passing of his dad had had a significant impact on the fox. “Nick told me, last night. I’m so sorry Marian, truly.”

Marian paused in her sifting, having added the baking powder, salt, and sugar to the mixing bowl. Turning from her spot at the counter to look at the rabbit sat in her kitchen, Marian offered her a small smile. “It was a long time ago, dear. No need to worry.” Marian turned back, using a wooden spoon to create a well in the middle of the dry ingredients, ready for the wet ones. If Nicky had told Judy about his father, then it stood to reason he really did trust her. Marian mulled over the thought for a moment. Her Nicky, her baby, finally trusting someone. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, Marian!”

“I’ve never seen him quite so invested in someone else’s wellbeing. He really cares about you, Judy.” Marian started to dig, curious as to how the bunny felt about her son. She could read her Nicky like a book, and she could tell that he was starting to develop feelings for Judy, but Marian wanted to be sure about where Judy stood before she began to push them together any further.

Judy smiled, warmth spreading through her at the thought of Nick caring so much for her. He really was a good mammal. “I care about him too, Marian, so much. I’ve never had a close friend as I was always too preoccupied with becoming a cop, but I really enjoy Nick’s company.” Her smile dropped to a frown as she recalled running home with her fuzzy-wuzzy tail between her legs. “Just like Nick predicted.”

There was one more question Marian needed answering before she could start planning ways to get the rabbit and her boy together. Her nose gave her a rough indication of the answer, but she wanted it from Judy’s mouth. “Your boyfriend doesn’t mind you spending so much time with Nicky, does he?”

Pulling back from her memories, Judy laughed nervously, wringing her paws together. She silently prayed that Marian wouldn’t be like her mother when it came to boyfriends. Her mom was so keen for her to settle down and have kits, but Judy had bigger plans. “Oh, I’m not seeing anyone.”

Marian was grateful that she was turned away from Judy so that she didn’t have to hide her grin. “Perfect!” Continuing with her prep work, Marian glanced at Judy over her shoulder. “That’s a shame, sweetheart. I would’ve thought a lovely girl like you would’ve been snapped up by now.” She turned back to her cooking.

“I think differently than other rabbits, especially those back at home. I want to work my way up the ladder, make the world a better place. That seems to be a bit too much for most bucks.” Judy shrugged. She’d tried dating in the past, but every time the topic of work came up her dates would make their displeasure known. They wanted Judy to stay at home, barefoot and pregnant. That wasn’t Judy at all.
Marian paused, putting down her utensils. Turning to face Judy her features softened as she adopted her mom-voice. “Thinking differently isn’t a bad thing, Judy. Those bucks are missing out on someone so great because they can’t think past their preconceptions. You gave my boy a chance when so few would, the world needs more mammals who think like you.”

Judy glanced up, finding Marian’s eyes. It still struck her how similar they were to Nick’s. “Thank you, Marian.”

Offering Judy a warm smile, Marian turned back to her cooking. She wasn’t sure if Judy had tried dating outside of her own species, or how Judy felt about the matter, but Marian hoped she would be open to it. “I couldn’t help but overhear last night that you have 311 siblings, Judy. I bet your home is a hive of activity. Must be nice to have some peace here in the city.” Marian poured in the milk, stirring as she went to mix it in properly.

Truthfully, while Judy did enjoy the peace that the city offered her, she missed the craziness of her family home. There was always something to do, someone to help, some sibling that needed her attention. She’d thought city life would be fast and exciting, but compared to the chaos in Bunnyburrow it was slow, almost monotonous. “It’s nice to have some peace, but I do miss home,” Judy settled on answering honestly, shoulders sagging as she remembered all the stuffed bunnies she’d slept with when she’d first moved to the city.

Marian, with her mother’s intuition, sensed that the young rabbit seemed to miss her family. She wasn’t an expert on rabbits, but given that the species had a whole entire district dedicated to them she figured they liked to stick close to one another, that few rarely left the warren.

“I’m sure my Nicky will no doubt enjoy disrupting your peace,” Marian settled for a lighter topic, bringing the conversation back to her son. It was safe territory for her, and Judy gave the impression of being a hive of knowledge when it came to her boy. Perhaps Marian would finally be able to get some gossip about her boy and his antics.

Judy snorted. “I think I disrupted his peace when I roped him into helping me. He was a good sport though, even if he did confuse me at times.”

Marian cracked a few eggs on the side of the bowl, adding them to the mixture before she stirred them in “Confused you?”

Judy absentmindedly watched as Marian mixed the ingredients together. “Yeah, we had to sneak past some wolves, and he was making all these strange hand gestures before he disappeared. I think he was trying to tell me something, but I haven’t a clue what it was.” Judy frowned, remembering now how Nick’s tail had curled around her at the front door, how he’d thrown it across her lap at dinner, and how he’d wrapped it around her last night before she fell asleep. She hadn’t seen him use his tail in such a manner before. “Come to think of it, he’s full of strange gestures…” she mused, lost in her thoughts. “I mean, what’s with the tail?” She questioned herself quietly. She didn’t really know anything about foxes, but she was pretty smart, she could figure it out herself. Right?

With the mixture now smooth, Marian put off adding a drop of butter to the hot pan for it to melt, focusing instead on the conversation. A secret smile crossed her muzzle at the bunny’s ramblings. “Tails are vital for foxes. We use them to express how we’re feeling. We wag them when happy, wrap them around items or mammals that we’re protective of or love, drop them when we feel submissive…” Marian rattled off a list, hoping Judy would catch her explanation. Having confirmation now that Judy didn’t have a mate allowed Marian to start planning ways to get her son and the sweet bunny together, and the first step was educating Judy in fox customs.
It only took a few seconds for Judy’s head to tip sideways, violet eyes widening as comprehension dawned on her face. Nick’s tail had wrapped around her legs at the door, he’d purposefully flicked it over her lap at dinner, and she’d woken to find it wrapped around her tightly. Did Nick…?

“No, don’t be silly.”

Marian, satisfied she’d planted a little seed in Judy’s mind, turned her attention back to the pancake mix. Dropping a small amount of butter into the pan, she watched as it melted. “I apologize for forgetting to lift out some sleep clothes for you, dear. I’m sorry you’ve been forced to wear one of Nicky’s old band shirts. Gosh, he loved going to concerts when he was a kit. He liked going to the cinema too. You know, one summer his father took him to see Fur Wars, and he loved it so much that he went twice a week to see it for the whole six weeks he had off school. Paw on my heart, that boy could repeat every line word for word,” Marian shook her head, fondly recalling how Nick would come home and act out scenes, using his Grandma’s walking stick as a lightsaber.

Judy let out a giggle, picturing a young Nick in love with the Fur Wars films. One of her older brothers had bought a copy of the movie once it has been released, and all the older Hopps kits had piled into one of the warrens many living rooms to watch it. “Speaking of little Nicky…” Marian darted from the kitchen, returning a moment later with a photo frame. She handed it to Judy and returned to the pan now that the butter had melted, and she poured some batter, forming the first of many pancakes.

Frame in her paws, Judy looked down at the photograph. Nick, when he was only a kit, stood between Marian and Robert. It looked to be a formal occasion if their attire was anything to go by, but Nick’s loose tie made her smile. Some things never changed. “He was six; it was my sister’s wedding. Nicky didn’t want to go; he didn’t like being forced to wear a suit. You should’ve seen the tantrum he threw when I tried to get him to wear it. His tie was his rebellious streak coming through,” Marian spoke fondly as the pancake was finally done, the smell of it wafting through the air and making Judy’s mouth salivate. Marian transferred it to a plate, starting on the next one quickly.

Judy found herself looking between the three foxes in the photograph. Nick had inherited his mother’s eyes and muzzle shape; that much she already knew, but now that she could see his father she spotted that they both carried the same easy smile. “His dress sense was awful. I tell you, I tried to get him to wear anything other than plaid shirts and scruffy jeans, but it was futile,” Marian tutted, finishing another pancake and moving onto the third.

“Where did the pawaiian shirts come from?” Judy asked, paw absentmindedly tracing over the photo of Nick as a kit. He looked so adorable, mischief in his eyes, tie askew, and pride in his posture, as he stood tall with his parents.

Marian laughed, adding another pancake to the pile. “Oh goodness, I don’t know. They’re awful though, aren’t they?” She grinned at Judy over her shoulder. Truthfully, Marian had no idea why her son had started to wear the shirts, or where he even got them from, but she wasn’t fond of them. If her son liked them though…

“They’re not exactly my taste, but they suit him. He looks good in them,” Judy mused, paws clutching the photo frame as she looked up at Marian.

“My ears are burning. Please stop talking about me,” Nick grumbled, shuffling into the room, tail dragging on the floor as he clamped a paw over his muzzle, trying to hide his yawn.

“Good morning Nicky,” Marian cooed, leaving her post by the stove to drop a quick kiss on Nick’s head. Judy’s scent flooded her nostrils. Marian had to hide her excitement at the realization that they already carried each other’s scents. She returned to her task, sliding another pancake onto the
“Hey Slick. Sleep well?” Judy asked, setting the photo frame aside. She didn’t want to risk it getting damaged.

“Mhm,” Nick mumbled, glancing around the kitchen sleepily as he hauled himself up onto the stool next to Judy’s.

“No coffee sweetheart, you know I can’t stand the stuff,” Marian apologized, placing the stack of pancakes in the middle of the island counter, along with two plates and two sets of cutlery.

“Urgh,” Nick’s head met the counter as he face-planted. Judy reached across, scritching behind his ears. Nick’s tail wagged happily, and he made a little noise of contentment at the contact.

“Did the smell wake you, or the burning ears?” Judy teased, giving his left ear a playful flick, watching as it tried to swat at her.

“The missing bunny did, Carrots,” Nick grumbled, lifting his head from the counter. He hadn’t felt Judy get up and leave the safety of his grip. When he’d woken without her, he’d panicked, but even in his sleepy state, his nose had been able to track her movements through the apartment and into the kitchen.

“Sorry Slick, my bladder complained and then I bumped into your mom. If it’s any consolation though I really didn’t want to leave you,” Judy shrugged, the inside of her ears turning a light pink at the memory of snuggling Nick. The only mammals she’d snuggled with before had been her siblings, and that was only due to lack of space in her family home when she’d been a kit. Nick had been the first male she’d fallen asleep cuddled up with now she was an adult.

“I am a great cuddler.” Nick’s brain to mouth filter hadn’t kicked in yet, his lack of coffee to blame. He really wasn’t a morning mammal. Nick had never spent the night curled up with another mammal before, it wasn’t his usual style, but something had felt so right about keeping Judy close to him, locked in his arms while they slept.

“I’ll give you that.” Judy laughed, though the inside of her ears burned as she felt Marian’s gaze on them, silently cursing Nick for letting it slip that they’d been cuddling. Judy wasn’t ashamed of it, she was a physical mammal after all, but having Nick’s mom know they were cuddling last night made her flush with embarrassment.

The vixen couldn’t believe what she was hearing. While Judy had confessed to her that the pair of them had shared a bed, she hadn’t told her they’d been cuddling. Perhaps it had been naive of Marian to assume they hadn’t been snuggled together, but Nick had never been very physically affection since his father’s passing. Marian knew her boy had indulged in the occasional one night stand, he’d come home smelling like strange vixens a few times, and each time it had disappointed her that he hadn’t found the one, but he’d never stayed the night with them, never actually slept beside them. Marian almost wished she could’ve seen her son and the rabbit curled up together. “Next time Marian, next time.”

Nick reached for a pancake, putting it onto his plate. Marian set out some sugar, lemon, and blueberries. Nick licked his lips, grabbing a handful of blueberries and placing them onto his pancake. Judy grabbed a pancake too but sprinkled some sugar and lemon on hers. The blush that had colored the inside of her ears started to fade.

“Aren’t you going to join us, Marian?” Judy noted how there were only two plates set out, even though Marian had made a massive stack of pancakes.
“I ate before I got ready, Judy,” Marian gestured to the toaster, where a lightly used dish sat next to it. “Don’t worry,” She offered the rabbit a smile.

“Where are you off to?” Judy asked, starting to cut up her pancake. Nick was already halfway through his, tail wagging happily as he popped blueberries into his mouth.

“Work. I look after the records at a doctor’s clinic a few blocks away,” Marian explained. She didn’t feel it was the best use of her talent, she’d applied to be the accountant as maths was her strongest subject. However, the owner hadn’t trusted a fox with the company’s bank accounts, but being the record keeper was better than being run off her feet all day at the diner.

Judy was surprised by the news. Nick hadn’t mentioned this his mom had got another job. Her surprise showed with a smile. “That’s pretty cool, Marian,” She complimented, genuinely enjoying the fact that Nick’s mom worked in healthcare. With so many species in Zootopia, being a part of the medical profession was hard work, even for receptionists and record keepers. Every mammal had different needs, and every member of staff had to understand that to provide the best care. Judy popped a piece of pancake into her mouth.

“Thank you, Judy,” Marian took the compliment, happy to see nothing condescending about the rabbit’s excitement. “What’re your plans for the day?” She started to stack the dirty dishes in the sink to wash after work.

Finishing her mouthful, Judy began to cut off another bit of pancake as Nick reached for his second one. “I need to find somewhere to live. I gave up my apartment a few months back when I left the city. I didn’t think I was coming back. I might speak to my old landlady; see if my old place is still empty. If not, I’ll have to look for somewhere else,” Judy shrugged; suddenly realizing she had an opportunity to help. “Hey, I could look for a two-bedroom apartment! Fancy being my roomie, Slick?” She leaned over, nudging Nick. Nick looked up from his pancakes, eyes hardening as his jaw clenched.

“Ohh that sounds like such an excellent idea! Imagine, Nicky, having a roomie. Judy would be able to keep you in line, and you’d always have someone to come home to,” Marian grinned. She loved the idea. She had no idea where her son lived, but she knew he lived alone. Nick had been a loner since the Junior Ranger Scouts incident. Part of her feared he had a home in the Nocturnal district, but a home with Judy would be good for him, and the little rabbit wouldn’t want to live in the area beneath the city. She’d keep him in line, and it would keep them together, help build their bond. Their scents would mingle a little more too; maybe it’d help them become mates quicker. Marian loved the idea even more.

Judy noticed Nick’s jaw clenching, the hardening of his eyes. Her shoulders dropped as her ears drooped, wide violet eyes searching emerald to try and figure out why he’d reacted in such a way.

As the door shut behind Marian, Nick rose from his seat, taking his dirty dish to the sink. “Nick…” Judy started.

The fox turned sharply, lip curled up. “We both know I can’t afford to rent somewhere, and I don’t need handouts. I’m not a charity case, Judy.” Judy’s nose twitched at the anger in Nick’s voice, at the sudden 180 of his emotions and the use of her proper name. “I didn’t tell you everything last
night so you could feel sorry for me.” Nick didn’t want to lash out at Judy, but he was feeling especially vulnerable in the cold light of day. He’d told her more than he’d anticipated he would last night, and though Nick couldn’t bring himself to regret opening up to her, he didn’t want her interfering. His life was dangerous with Catstro looming around every corner, and his mom was already a bargaining chip. He didn’t need Catstro finding out about his feelings for Judy and using her against him too. He needed to protect her, keep her safe. If that meant pushing her away a little, then so be it.

Judy wasn’t stupid. She wouldn’t have made the force if she weren’t smart. Nick was scared and rather than telling her that, he was lashing out. Freddie, one of Judy’s older brothers, had acted the same way after their mom had found out he was seeing a buck called Lukas, from band class. Lukas had been so frightened that their parents would disown him for liking bucks over does. He’d had nothing to worry about, though. Their mom and dad had been okay with it, and both had been relieved he wasn’t acting out for bad reasons.

Remembering that Nick had moved her clothes the night before, Judy hopped down from the barstool, letting her nose guide her towards her jeans, which had been placed on the arm of the couch in the living room. From the back pocket, she fished out the folded piece of paper she’d carried with her everywhere, every day she’d been in Bunnyburrow.

Judy limped back into the kitchen. Nick had moved to sit on his barstool, head bowed in his paws. Judy wasn’t sure whether he was simply still tired, or sad. He looked up as she walked in, and once again she saw an assortment of emotions in his emerald eyes. Playing with the paper in her paws, Judy finally unfolded it, careful not to damage the well-loved document further. Sliding it across the counter, she let Nick look at it. “Who said anything about charity, Nick?”

Nick looked down at the paper Judy had slid under his snout - his ZPD application form. She still had it. Nick swallowed. The document looked worn like it had been folded and unfolded countless times, some light dirt streaks covered parts of the page, and a few watery smudges made Nick’s chest tighten. His sharp nose picked up the slightly salty scent of tears. “Emotional bunny.”

“You kept it?” Nick questioned, paws falling to touch the worn paper.

Judy shrugged, shuffling, wincing as she put a bit more weight on her hurt leg. “I guess I always kind of hoped you’d reconsider, y’know?” Her eyes dropped to the floor. She didn’t want Nick to feel forced into the decision, but she honestly couldn’t think of anyone else she wanted to be partnered with. They worked well together, understood one another.

Nick sighed. The temptation was real. It was a chance to do something better with his life, to make a difference, to spend every day at Judy’s side and keep her safe, watch her back. He couldn’t though, not with the debt he had to pay off. Sure, a cop’s salary was more than he earned hustling, but he would have to train for months to get the job, months where he wouldn’t be making any money to pay back Catstro and keep him away from his mom. It had been impulsive, filling in the form, thinking he could be anything more. His past had dictated his future.

“I can’t, Carrots,” he started to apologize, looking up at the bunny as she took the stool next to him once more. “I would have to train for months without any income. After that, even with a cop salary, I wouldn’t be able to cover my half of the rent and keep paying Catstro: It’s pointless,” Nick sighed, paws smoothing over the document before him.

“You should try, Nick.” Judy reached out, placing a paw on Nick’s arm. “I’m here to help you. I know you don’t want charity,” Judy lifted her paw, instead sliding it under his muzzle, forcing the tod to look at her, “But I can help you carry this. We can fix it, together. While you’re away at the academy, I can help with your payments. I’ll take a few extra shifts; do some evening work,
anything that needs to be done. I have some savings from when I was a kit, and if I get really stuck, I’m sure my parents would help.” Judy slid her paw from under his muzzle to cup his cheek, stroking his fur.

Judy had worked a few jobs over the summers when she’d been a kit, helping out at local shops or other farms if her parents had no need for her assistance, and she’d put the money away for rainy days. She hadn’t touched it in years. Her parents had paid for her first month’s rent on her place in Zootopia as a graduation present, and Judy hadn’t lasted much longer than that in the city before running back home. Granted, she didn’t have a lot of money saved, but if Nick needed it, then he was welcome to it. She had her job to fall back on. Nick had nothing.

“I can’t ask that of you. I won’t. This is my mess, and I need to deal with it.” Nick’s eyes found Judy’s as his tail drooped. Did he want to join the academy, become a cop? Yes, very much so. It was impossible, though, just another dream he wouldn’t get to fulfill.

Judy’s resolve hardened. While she hadn’t been the most stubborn bunny in the Hopps warren, that award went to her sister Beatrix, Judy was happy to put her hind paw down whenever it was needed. “Then it’s a good job you’re not asking. I’m telling.

Nick sighed, shoulders slumping as he tried to pull away from Judy’s grasp. She didn’t understand, she couldn’t understand. This was his lot in life.

Rather than letting him escape, Judy’s other paw shot forward, holding Nick’s head in her paws. Her gaze locked onto his, “You saved my tail, Nick, let me save yours,” She whispered, stroking his cheeks, smoothing the sleep ruffled fur. He briefly leaned into her touch, the action oddly intimate. “You’re so much more than a con-mammal, you’ve proven that to me over and over again. I was a dense bunny, it took me a while to realize just how great you really are. You can do so much good, Nick.” The fox’s jaw clenched, and Judy knew she didn’t have long before he’d clam up and forcibly pull back, shove those walls he often hid behind back into place. Remembering the words Nick had thrown around after the press conference, she chose her next words carefully, lacing them with all of her sincerity, holding his gaze. “I believe in you.”

For a moment they looked at one another, and Nick felt the weight of her words settle in his chest. So few people had ever believed in him. The faith this little rabbit had in him almost made him want to cry. She was so steadfast in her belief that he could do so much more, that he could be so much more. It made him feel invincible, like he could climb the highest mountains, so long as he had her by his side. “My own personal cheerleader.” The thought made Nick smile until the vision of Judy in a cheerleaders costume crossed his mind. “Urgh, you animal.” He reprimanded himself, shaking away the image.

Nick broke eye contact and glanced at the piece of paper on the counter, focusing himself back on the topic of conversation. That one piece of paper, covered in his scrawl, dirt from Judy’s family farm, and a few of her tears, held so much weight – it could change his life. It would be difficult, scraping by while at the academy, and Nick was under no illusions that it would be easy for him. If anything, given his species, he’d have it harder than any of the other cadets. Judy was the first bunny on the force; perhaps he’d get to be the first fox?

Judy’s words from the night before swam through his mind. “If a bunny could be a cop, something unheard of before, then maybe other preconceptions could change too. Maybe prey mammals could start trusting predators, something else relatively unheard of. I wanted to start challenging ideas, to encourage everyone to get along. After all, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

Making up his mind, Nick turned back to Judy, the rabbit who’d dragged him through hell and high water the past few months, who’d annoyed him, outsmarted him on occasion, blackmailed
him, and who’d ultimately kicked his tail into line. He couldn’t picture his days without her anymore. Nick couldn’t go back to his old life after getting a taste of something better. He didn’t want to go back to his old life – living in a box under a bridge, ashamed, scared, masking his hurt with sarcasm and jokes, hustling his way through life. Her strong faith in him was enough encouragement, and Nick knew she’d always have his back. “I think I might need a clean application form, Carrots,” he whispered, watching as Judy’s eyes widened, her hold on his cheeks tightened as she grinned. Her hind paws thumped happily against the pawrest of the barstool. Her reaction would make every difficult moment he’d face at the academy worthwhile, every time someone would tell him that he couldn’t just because he was a fox.

The pair cleaned up the dishes, agreeing to stop by the precinct to drop off Nick’s application before they’d go and view some two-bedroom apartments. Judy wanted them to live near Marian, knowing how much Nick enjoyed being near her, but Nick wanted to live closer to the precinct so it wouldn’t take them long to get to work every day. In the end, Judy gave in: Nick hadn’t been able to choose a home for himself before, and she wasn’t about to get in the way now. Judy was under no illusion that Nick’s months at the academy would be hard for her, but it would be worth every little hardship she would face. It was for Nick, after all. He needed her support, care, and understanding, and Judy was willing to give him her all.

Nick’s smile was full, and there was excitement in his voice as he spoke about them sharing an apartment, asking questions about what to expect at the academy, contemplating all the ways they could torment the Chief. Judy found herself pausing as she put the dishes away, the tea towel resting in her paw, finding pleasure in Nick’s happiness, the way his eyes shone, how the little crinkles appeared around the corners of them. His paws were animated, his tail swishing, his grin seemingly never-ending.

When she’d been a kit she’d asked her dad why he always gave her mom the last bit of cheesecake after dinner, even if he was still hungry, and why he always bought her the flowers she loved even though he was allergic to them. Her father had bent down as if to tell her the biggest secret in the world, and he’d whispered, there on the back porch of the Hopps Family Farm, that love was putting someone else’s needs before your own. "Oh..."
Holy moly! This little story is currently sitting at 1422 views and 95 lots of kudos. Honestly, I'm blown away. The response from you all to this story has been astounding and so encouraging. Thank you so much for all the love, reviews, bookmarks, views, and kudos. You guys are the best! <3

After they’d cleaned the dishes, Nick gave Judy some space to change, taking his own clothes into the bathroom.

Alone with her thoughts for a few minutes, Judy had some time to reflect on her epiphany in the kitchen. She knew she loved Nick, they were a great team, and he was her best friend. Judy couldn’t picture her days without him and his annoying sense of humor, but did she love him? Judy rolled the million-dollar question around in her head.

She’d been on dates before, but she’d never had an honest to goodness boyfriend. There hadn’t been the time; her entire focus had been on becoming a cop. Now though, with that achieved, perhaps there was room to concentrate on another aspect of her life. It wasn’t like Nick would get in the way of her job, especially as he would be working with her and they would be partners. If anything, having a boyfriend who understood her job and encouraged her to work would be a dream. The memories of the bucks she’d been on dates with who’d all scoffed when she’d told them about her goal of becoming a cop left a bad taste in her mouth.

Her thoughts shifted to that of a more intimate nature. She knew she and Nick were compatible on a day-to-day basis, proven during the missing mammal's case, but were they compatible in other, more intimate, areas? Judy wasn’t stupid, she knew there were some pretty glaringly obvious differences, the first being their species, then their sizes, and probably their mating habits too. Other than the brief mention from Marian about Nick’s tail, Judy had no clue about anything relating to fox customs. She’d have to do some research while Nick was away at the academy.

Having pulled on the pants that Marian had set out for her, Judy grabbed the shirt. Clutching the material in her paws, Judy caught a whiff of Marian’s scent. It wasn’t unpleasant, but Judy didn’t really want to be covered in Marian’s smell. Leaving Marian’s shirt over the chair at the desk, Judy pulled open the drawers under Nick’s bed, remembering that he’d stored some clothes under there. She felt a little bad for riffling through Nick’s belongings, but she had a feeling the tod wouldn’t mind.

Settling on a plain green t-shirt, Judy pulled the item on, enjoying the way it looked with Marian’s cream pants. Nick’s scent enveloped her and Judy’s mind returned to her previous thoughts.

The idea of being so intimate with Nick didn’t terrify her like she thought it would, but then the fact it didn’t terrify her terrified her. Nick was an attractive mammal; anyone could see that, with his bright green eyes, easy smile, soft fur, and fluffy tail. Couple that with his quick wit, humor, and trust in her and he was everything Judy wanted in a partner.

A quick knock on the bedroom door pulled Judy from her thoughts. She’d have to think about it later, examine her feelings some more, and do some research into fox customs.
Crossing to the door, Judy pulled it open to reveal Nick, dressed in a pair of beige pants and one of his usual Hawaiian shirts, this time in yellow, and he'd complimented it with a green tie. Nick took in Judy, tail wagging as he realized she wasn't wearing the shirt his mom had lifted out for her but had instead borrowed one of his. “Sorry, I hope you don’t mind. Your mom’s shirt was a little small.” Judy told a little white lie. Nick’s t-shirt was actually a bit too big for her, but she was too comfortable in it to care.

It took a moment for Nick’s brain to catch up, too focused on the fact that Judy was wearing his clothes again. Once again the sight of her in his shirt gave him a pleasant feeling. “Oh, sure, it’s fine.” He finally responded, offering her an easy smile, noting that his mom’s shirt was now over the back of his chair. “Mi casa es tu casa.”

The first objective of the day was to submit a new application form for Nick, so together they made way to the precinct.

“Hopps!” Chief Bogo yelled from his position on one of the balconies looking out over the atrium. Nick and Judy had only just stepped paw inside the building, but Judy jumped as her name was called, spinning on her good leg towards the Chief. She was still limping, and Nick had helped her a little during their walk over, taking some of her small weight. “I thought I told you I didn’t want to see you for the rest of the week,” he sighed, moving towards the stairs so he could descend and speak to the insubordinate bunny without yelling at her across the atrium. Nick helped Judy cross the space towards the front desk: Clawhauser sat there, paws covering his mouth in glee at the sight of Judy and Nick.

“Technically, Sir, you told me you didn’t want to see me in the Bullpen. This is the atrium,” Judy pointed out as the Chief stood before them, strong arms crossed over his chest. Nick had to suppress his laugh.

Bogo scowled at the pair for a moment before his features softened, noticing how she was still a little unsteady on her hind paws without Nick supporting her. He hated seeing any of his officers wounded. “Then why are you here, Hopps?”

Judy looked up at Nick, offering the fox a broad smile. Nick felt a little apprehensive, a ball of tension knotting in his stomach. Turning his attention to Chief Bogo, he took a deep breath. “Judy’s a trouble magnet, she needs a partner. Plus, I can’t help but notice that you don’t have any good-looking officers and quite frankly, that’s a travesty. I feel it’s my public duty to remedy that.” Nick met Bogo’s gaze, settling for humor, hoping it would soothe his anxiety. Judy’s grip on his shirt tightened, and she let out a small noise, trying to stop her laughter.

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“A fox and a rabbit… the world was indeed changing. Bogo paused, however, and turned back to call over his shoulder. “Oh, and Wilde, I’ll have you know that the ladies find me perfectly good-looking,” Bogo tried to hide his smile. He’d knock that fox’s ego down a few pegs.
“Aww Chief, they just forgot to put their glasses on,” Nick sassed with his signature lazy smile. Judy couldn’t contain her snicker, and Clawhauser had to hide behind his paws for fear of guffawing.

Bogo rolled his eyes and turned back toward the stairs, raising his voice as he left. “Shut your mouth Wilde, and fill in the damn form before I change my mind.”

Clawhauser squealed, paws falling from his mouth to rummage in the drawers of his desk. He produced a blank application form, offering it out to Nick. “O…M…Goodness! I gotta tell you, you’ll be the most adorable partnership on the force!”

Judy sighed. Clawhauser had taken her ‘cute’ comment to heart and had now settled on ‘adorable,’ never mind the fact she could take down a rhino with one kick.

Nick quirked an eyebrow, “I’m not adorable. Carrots can be the adorable one.”

Clawhauser squealed again, the sound making Judy wince, his large paws covering his mouth once more. “You call her Carrots? O…M…Goodness you have little pet names for her! That’s so romantic!”

“We’re not, it’s not, cheese and crackers!” Judy scowled at Clawhauser, the inside of her ears burning.

“Mhm…” Clawhauser grinned and picked up his pen, scribbling something on his notepad. Judy rolled her eyes. If there were one thing she’d come to know about the cheetah in her short time with the ZPD, it was that he’d think whatever he wanted and that the whole precinct would know about it within 24 hours.

Shaking her head, she turned her attention back to Nick, finding the fox watching her carefully. Uncomfortable with his intense gaze and scrutiny, Judy folded her arms over her chest. “So if I’m the adorable one then what are you, Slick?” Judy appraised the fox as she thumped her foot on the floor.

Nick hadn’t really thought that their pet names were romantic; they were names that came easily to them, offered a level of familiarity in their friendship. Sure he’d used some pet names to try and belittle Judy, to begin with, but they’d morphed into something more since then. Now, they were verbal cue’s to their relationship, a reminder of how far they’d come in such a short space of time. They were terms of endearment, rather than ones of ridicule.

Nick opened his arms, paws facing up to the sky as he shrugged, a smile tugging at his lips. “Courageous, witty, charming, handsome, sexy…the list goes on Carrots, take your pick.”

Judy rolled her eyes, thumping Nick in the side. The fox flinched; paw rubbing the spot where Judy had walloped him. “Watch it Fluff, I don’t fight fair.” The paw that had been rubbing his side shot out, tickling Judy’s side through the shirt she’d borrowed from him. Judy’s squel filled the atrium, and several officers turned to look at her. She blushed, the color visible in the tips of her ears as Nick pulled his hand away, offering her a lazy grin. He found pleasure in teasing her and pulling as many new noises from her as possible. After all, she’d pulled some embarrassing noises from him at the dinner table the night before. Judy was extremely ticklish, had been ever since she’d been a kit, but few knew how to exploit that weakness.

“Don’t even think about it!” Nick raised a paw at Clawhauser, silencing him before he could squeal again. The cheetah hid his excitement, shoving a donut into his mouth to try and keep quiet. Judy, now recovered from the impromptu tickle, shook her head fondly.
“Could we get that form please?” Judy looked up at Clawhauser, aware that she and Nick had a busy day ahead of them searching for somewhere to live. Clawhauser grabbed the relevant form and a pen, offering them down to Nick. The fox took them, leaning against the side of the front desk to fill it in. Judy, meanwhile, limped around the desk to rummage through the bottom drawer. Clawhauser returned to his donuts and scribbling, watching the two smaller mammals.

Nick filled in the application form, the details exactly the same as before. With that done, he offered the pen and paper back to Clawhauser. “Carrots?” He called out once the cheetah had taken the items from him.

Judy reappeared from behind the desk, paws behind her back. “Close your eyes, Nick,” she spoke in a singsong voice, rocking on her good hind paw.

Indulging her with a small sigh, Nick did as he was asked and closed his eyes. Judy approached and gently attached a new ‘Junior ZPD Officer’ sticker to the breast pocket of Nick’s shirt.

Though his eyes were closed, Nick could feel what Judy was doing, and it brought a smile to his muzzle. Once he was sure she was done, he opened his eyes and looked down at the little gold sticker. “Until you get your official badge,” She patted the sticker.

Nick chuckled, grabbing Judy’s paw in his own. “Thanks, Carrots.” He held her gaze, hoping she would understand that his thanks stretched to more than just the sticker now adorning his shirt.

“OHH……!” Clawhauser cooed from behind the desk, breaking their moment. Judy sighed, ears drooping as she shook her head. The cheetah meant well.

“I’ll see you Monday, Clawhauser.” Judy ushered Nick out of the building. “The whole precinct will know by tomorrow morning,” she groaned, thumping her good hind paw on the sidewalk. Nick marveled at how she was able to thump it so quickly.

“You make it sound like we indulged in rough, primal mating in the middle of the atrium,” Nick teased, enjoying how Judy seemed concerned with gossip about her being spread through the precinct. When he finally earned his badge, his first port of call would be Clawhauser. He could spread a tiny white lie or two about his favorite rabbit, watch as she tried to figure out where the story had originated from, all the while blushing furiously at the gossip. "You’re good Wilde, you’re good.”

Judy’s eyes widened at the comment, ears falling flat, the inside of them flushed bright red. She needed to move the conversation on to a safer topic, set a clear boundary. She couldn’t have Nick suspecting that she had less than innocent feelings for him before he left for the academy for nine months. “We would never…I mean…we could, maybe, no, wait, yes, argh…” She stumbled over her words, paws up in panic. “Great, just great! Nice one, Judy.”

Nick found Judy's response curious. She wasn’t completely throwing out the idea of the two of them being together in such a manner. His little rabbit, not at all bothered with the possibility of an interspecies relationship. It gave him food for thought. Interspecies relationships weren’t common, no matter how progressive Zootopia was, and they still faced some prejudice, but mammals were coming around. Taking pity on her, he offered her an out. “It’s alright Carrots, I know I’m too much mammal for you. We’ll find you a nice buck. He might be able to help you finally relax, too,” he teased. The words felt like poison in his mouth, but he pushed them out anyway.

“I’m perfectly relaxed, thank you very much. I don’t need a buck.” Judy crossed her arms over her chest, scowling at the fox. She played along with it when in all honesty she just didn’t want a buck. What Judy wanted was a 4ft tall, 80lbs red fox. She couldn’t let Nick know that, though.
“Mhm, I’m sure Chief Buffalo Butt would agree,” Nick shot back sarcastically. He squinted in the sunshine, wondering when they’d finally find some shade. He was a nocturnal mammal, but being awake in the daytime had been more lucrative for his hustling.

Judy sighed, reaching into Nick’s pocket to pull out his phone. “You know, you can’t call him that when you get your badge.” She shook her head, unlocking the device and clicking on the Firefox app. Once the browser was up, Judy navigated to Zoopla, entering her search terms for a 2-bed apartment in Savannah Central, for around $800 a month. Start salaries for officers weren’t great, but they weren’t awful either. Judy had been offered $27,000 a year out of the academy, and she assumed Nick would earn the same. Take home pay would be around $1500 a month each, after taxes, so together they’d have $3000 a month to live on. With an $800 a month apartment they would hopefully be left with enough to live on and to pay back Nick’s debt.

Nick didn’t bother snatching his phone back from the bunny, nor did he question how she knew the unlock code. “Phft, course I can, just maybe out of earshot. Those horns…” Nick raised his paws to his head in a bad imitation of Bogo. He didn’t have Judy’s full attention, he could see she was engrossed in finding them some apartments to view, but she snorted nonetheless, the corners of her lips quirking upwards as she tried to hide her smile. With a few clicks, Judy handed Nick back his phone. Taking it from her, he slid it back into his pocket.

“I just booked a few viewings, come on.” Judy smiled widely, limping off in the direction of the metro. Nick wanted to be annoyed that she hadn’t consulted him before she booked viewings, but he was sure her taste was acceptable, even if she was a country bumpkin…an adorable country bumpkin.

Catching up with her, Nick wrapped an arm around her waist, paw holding her side as he helped her walk, taking some of her small weight. The EMT had told her to keep as much weight as possible off it, but Nick had a feeling Judy Hopps would never slow down.

By their third viewing, Nick was starting to lose hope. All the properties had been in their price range and in Savannah Central, but none of them had called out to him. True, the only home Nick had ever had was with his mom, and anything was better than his box under a bridge, but he wanted a nice home, somewhere he and Judy could unwind after a hard day at the precinct, somewhere he could show his mom with pride.

“That’s three duds, Slick,” Judy groaned as they emerged from the apartment building of their latest viewing.

“We don’t have to rush, Carrots. Mom says we can stay with her as long as we want,” Nick pointed out, paws in his pockets as he leaned against the front of the building, watching with thinly concealed enjoyment as the hind paw on Judy’s good leg thumped the sidewalk, a little scowl on her face.

“I don’t want to overstay my welcome. Your mom was more than gracious last night.” Judy stopped thumping her foot, reaching into Nick’s pocket once more for his phone. Her phone was in the pocket of her damaged pants, which were still on the arm of Marian’s couch.

Nick only just held on to his rude comment about her always reaching into the pocket of his pants. As much as he wanted to make her blush, he was at least a gentle mammal. “My mom probably wants to adopt you, so I wouldn’t worry about overstaying your welcome.”
Judy’s features softened into a warm smile at the mention of Marian. She pulled up Zoole Maps, planning the route to their final viewing of the day. The city was still largely unfamiliar to her, and though she was confident Nick knew the way she didn’t want to confess to not knowing her way around. “Still, I can’t stay at your mom’s house forever. Plus, we need somewhere before you leave for the academy in three days.”

“Even if we don’t, it’s not a problem. I trust your judgment, and anything will be an improvement…” Nick stopped himself before he could finish his sentence, not wanting to voice in the light of day his current situation.

Judy caught on, though. Her ears drooped a little as she put Nick’s phone in her own pocket, in case she needed to refer to it again. Her small paws reached out, and she let them rest on his arm, wanting him to know she meant her next words. “Nick, I want you to help pick somewhere. I want you to like wherever we live, really like it.” He hadn’t shown much interest in the places they’d viewed so far, always finding some sort of fatal fault with them.

“I got the best roomie going, Carrots. The house doesn’t bother me,” Nick deflected, not wanting to be reminded of their conversation the night before and at breakfast. He was still a little sore about being so open and vulnerable to another mammal, but he knew Judy would never betray him by using the information against him. Nick wanted their home to be perfect too if he was honest with himself, but this opportunity was too precious to throw away and risk losing. He would finally have a proper roof over his head for the first time in twenty years, he would have his best friend as his roomie, and he would be training for a job that would try to make an honest mammal out of him.

Judy knew Nick was deflecting, covering for the fact that the apartment would mean a lot to him. Did he really think that Judy had forgotten his earlier excitement when they’d been doing the dishes? “We’ve got one more to look at today, but we need to get back on the metro. We should get off at Prairie Road.” Judy had picked apartments that were only a few metro stops away from Savannah Central station, the closest stop to the precinct.

“Lead the way, Fluff.” Nick pulled his paws from his pockets, pushing off the wall to walk beside Judy. He kept an eye on her steps, ready to swoop in and help her should she start to struggle. She was slower than usual, her limp more pronounced, and Nick had half a mind to call it a day and demand they go back to his mom’s house so she could rest. But, if there was one thing Nick had learned during his short time with the bunny cop, it was that Judy wouldn’t let her injured leg slow her down. It was that, and the thought that Nick would get to take care of her for the next few days while she recovered from over-exerting herself, that kept the fox from saying anything.

Together they entered the metro on Elm Street, swiping their passes and boarding the train. The train was busy, it always was this close to Savannah Central, and Nick insisted Judy take the last seat. “Such a gentlemammal,” Judy teased as she sat down, hind paws unable to touch the floor. Nick reached to grab for a rail to steady himself.

“Mom didn’t raise a heathen, Carrots,” Nick teased, casting a glance around the train to ensure they were safe. It was a habit, to keep an eye on his surroundings, mainly to make sure Catstro and his cronies weren’t lurking nearby. The train lurched into life. No mammal looked to be a threat, but that didn’t stop Nick from curling his tail around Judy’s ankles at the sight of some young bucks sitting a few seats away.

Feeling Nick’s tail around her ankles, and knowing now from his mom that it was a show of possessiveness, Judy cast a glance around the train. She caught sight of three young bucks sitting together a few seats away. They hadn’t even noticed Judy on the busy train, but she still smiled at
the thought of her fox being so possessive. “Are you sure, ’cause I know you’re not a morning mammal. You might leave things everywhere in your sleepy state,” Judy teased as the train pulled into Savannah Central. The next stop was Prairie Road.

Bringing his free paw to his chest, Nick gasped dramatically, “Are you accusing me of being a slob, Carrots?” He joked, offering her a smile. His nose alerted him to the fact a vixen had just boarded the train, but his attention was solely on Judy.

Judy noticed the pretty vixen entering their carriage. There was no seat for her, and as she looked around, she spotted Nick. Her eyes raked over him for a moment. Judy scowled. “Mine.” The sudden possessive thought surprised Judy, but she accepted it without question. It felt right, thinking of Nick as hers.

Reaching forward, Judy grabbed the end of Nick’s tie, playing with it between her paws, keeping his attention on her and hoping the vixen would get the hint. The train lurched into life again. “Not at all, Slick. Just don’t expect me to be picking your dirty underwear up off the floor.” Judy’s sharp hearing caught a quiet tut from an aardvark sitting across from them. Strangely enough, Judy didn’t care about whatever the aardvark was thinking. Nothing was going on between her and Nick, they were simply best friends. “Best friends who are a bit possessive of each other.” Judy shook the thought away. Growing up in such a large family meant that Judy had hardly anything of her own as everything was shared. In the city, however, now that she was without her siblings, possession was nine-tenths of the law.

“Carrots, you wound me. I would never leave my unmentionables anywhere near your delicate sensibilities,” Nick played along, studiously ignoring the vixen that he could feel checking him out. Slowly he tightened his tail around her ankles, leaning forward into her space, hoping that the vixen would get the hint. It didn’t hurt either that it drew him closer to Judy, filled his nostrils with her scent. He’d had a few flings over the years, pretty little things that were up for a good time, but in the end, they’d all wanted sometime more, to settle down and have kits, all of them thinking they could make an honest mammal out of him. They’d all been wrong. Commitment wasn’t in Nicholas P. Wilde’s vocabulary. Well, until a little gray bunny from the Burrows came along and made him question his feelings. She couldn’t know, though, how much she affected him. He needed to back off, create a clear ‘friendship’ line and never cross it. She was good to him, for him, and he would be damned if he messed up and lost her because of some silly feelings. “Put them back in the box, Wilde.”

The PA system interrupted them before Judy could respond. “Now approaching – Prairie Road.”

“That’s our cue, Fluff.” Nick leaned back, letting his tail fall away from her ankles. He offered her his free paw, which she took as she let go of his tie. Helping her stand, Nick wrapped his arm around her waist. The aardvark huffed, and Nick couldn’t help but wink at her, tightening his hold around Judy. Infuriated, the aardvark turned to look out the window. Nick led Judy through the crowd towards the carriage doors, a low rumble of amusement escaping him at having successfully riled up the aardvark. The vixen was closer now and was glaring daggers at Judy. Not liking her attitude, Nick went to drop his paw to rest on Judy’s cute fuzzy-wuzzy tail, hoping to get a rise out of the vixen while at the same time testing the waters with Judy. However, he stopped himself just shy, letting his paw sit protectively on her lower back. Though he was sorely tempted to feel Judy’s tail fluff, his mom would kick his ass if she found out he’d inappropriately groped Judy in public. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told her that his mom had raised him to be a gentleman mammal.

Judy felt Nick’s paw settle on her lower back and her eyes widened at the intimate action. The weight of his paw was reassuring though, and Judy used their closeness, and her injured leg, as an excuse to lean against the fox. She let herself savor his scent, his soft fur on hers. She was finding
it increasingly harder to shove her newly discovered feelings away, and though the thought of making such a confession to Nick terrified her more than anything else ever had in her life, he deserved to know how she felt. “After he graduates the academy. I don’t want to risk his future. Though it would kill me, he could be partnered with someone else if this is all one-sided.”

The train lurched to a stop, and the doors slid back. Nick helped Judy off the train and up the stairs to the surface. Swiping their passes as they left, they emerged back into the sunshine. “Urgh, the sun,” Nick grumbled, displeased when he remembered his old sunglasses were still underneath the bridge.

“How dare the sun shine,” Judy teased, enjoying the way the corners of Nick’s lips quirked upwards. Taking Nick’s phone from the pocket of her pants, she pulled up Zoogle Maps. “It’s only a few blocks away. This way.” Judy started to walk, Nick still supporting some of her weight.

A short distance away they stopped in front of a four-storey red brick house. “This is the place,” Judy called up the advert on Nick’s phone, double-checking. “The owner sent a message, said they’d meet us here,” she explained, closing the browser on Nick’s phone before she deftly put it back in the pocket of his pants. The house was well maintained, and while there was a front door on the street level that led to a whole range of apartments, there was also a set of stairs down to a basement apartment.

A medium-sized car parked at the curb and Nick subtly moved, putting himself between Judy and the vehicle.

From the car emerged an amur leopard, a little black handbag in one paw and a set of keys in the other. An honest to goodness amur! Judy had only heard stories about them. “Miss Hopps, right?” The amur asked locking her car as she slowly approached them, an easy smile on her face. “You have an appointment to view my property?”

Judy was still lost in thought at the fact that she was currently staring at an amur. Her mom would’ve whacked her with her wooden cooking spoon for being so rude.

Nick chuckled, offering out his paw. “I apologize about Judy. Small country bumpkin bunnies are in awe of all mammals bigger than them. Nick Wilde, pleasure to meet you.” His years on the streets had given him the ability to read animals, and the amur didn’t throw up any red flags for him.

The amur offered Judy a sweet smile, like she was an amusing little kit. “Akita Snowpaw, lovely to meet you,” she shook Nick’s hand before turning her attention back to Judy.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, how rude of me. It’s just, I’ve never met an amur before,” Judy stumbled over her apology, her paws falling from her muzzle as she looked up at Akita. Amur’s were rare, and Judy was both in awe of the mammal before her and saddened that she was one of only a few left.

Akita indulged the small rabbit, finding her reaction endearing. “No need to worry, Judy. There are so few of us in the city that it’s a miracle you can even tell me apart from your average leopard. There are a few more of us in the old world but…” Akita shrugged.

Judy finally composed herself enough to extend a paw. “It’s nice to meet you, Akita.” The amur took her outstretched paw and shook it; her massive paw dwarfing Judy’s.
“Pleasure to meet you too,” Akita smiled. “I assume the place is for both of you, given that it’s two bedrooms?

“Yes, Nick’s my partner…” Judy started to explain. Akita raised an eyebrow as she looked between the bunny and fox. “Work partner,” Judy added, wanting to clarify. Not that she’d be embarrassed to be anything more with Nick, but some mammals were funny about interspecies pairings, especially pred/prey ones.

“It doesn’t both me whether you’re work partners or not, I’m an open mammal.” Akita’s easy smile was back as she flicked through her ring of keys.

Judy’s shoulders slumped in relief. Nick relaxed too. He couldn’t allow anything to happen between him and Judy, he couldn’t risk losing her, but it was reassuring to know he wouldn’t lose his home because of his feelings.

Akita took the steps down to the basement. “It’s a basement apartment?” Nick whispered as he helped Judy down the steps.

“Is that bad? It looked good in the photos online.” Judy swallowed. She hadn’t really asked Nick what he wanted from their home. She had some idea as to what he wanted inside, and where he wanted it located, but he hadn’t mentioned anything about a floor preference.

Nick sensed her rising panic as he helped her down the last step. “It’s not bad at all, Carrots. We foxes make our dens underground, or at least we used to before we became more civilized,” Nick reassured her. If anything, he liked that this one was in the basement. His very nature meant he enjoyed seeking shelter underground. He expected it to be the same for Judy. Rabbit warrens were buried underground, too.

Keys jangled as Akita unlocked the front door, ushering them in. “So, it’s $750 a month, which includes utilities. The place has double-glazing on all the windows, all the modern appliances you’d probably ever need, and there’s a small communal garden out back too. Mr. and Mrs. Hungo, who live on the second floor, have cookouts every week in the summer months,” Akita explained, watching as the rabbit and fox took stock of their surroundings. “Tell you what, I’ll wait outside while you have a chat and look around. When you’re done I’ll be more than happy to answer any questions you have,” She excused herself, giving the pair some privacy. She knew how awful it was to have someone lurking around you when you were viewing a property. This was the last property in her portfolio left to rent out. Her parents had died in a car accident and left her their entire estate – including a vast property portfolio. Akita had been struggling to find mammals to rent this last property to. She’d dropped the rent and replaced the bathroom and kitchen, but finding two small animals – for the apartment had been built with smaller mammals in mind – who liked living in the basement and were comfortable with a predator for a landlady had proven difficult. The place needed a lick of paint just to spruce it up, but other than that it was a sound little apartment. Akita crossed her claws that Judy and Nick would like it.

They took their time looking around, and Nick found himself liking every aspect of the property. It was well maintained, recently renovated, and there was plenty of room for them both. It was close to the precinct and within budget too, plus Akita seemed like she’d be a lovely landlady. His excitement was hard to contain, and his tail wagged happily. The couch in the living room was large enough for them to enjoy Netflix together, and the kitchen would give him the opportunity to learn how to cook, to finally silence his mom. The bathroom had a power shower and a furdryer on the wall, and the bedrooms had plenty of storage as well as both having double beds.

Judy remained silent as they viewed the property. It was perfect, so perfect, but she didn’t want to sway Nick’s judgment. Judy didn’t want to voice her opinion and have him go along with it
because he wanted to please her and not cause a fuss. She wanted him to like the place they would be calling home. Judy noted how Nick’s tail wagged happily as he looked around, going from room to room. “What do you think, Slick?” She asked after Nick had finished scoping the place out, standing together in the small entrance hall.

“I like it, Carrots. It’s underground, it’s a good size, there’s plenty of space for both of us, and it looks like it’s been recently renovated,” Nick ticked off the positives on one of his paws. “It’s in budget too, and close to work.” He turned to look at Judy, noting how she rocked a little on the balls of her hind paws, violet eyes wide and ears standing to attention. “You like it too,” he grinned, able to read the small rabbit. They may not have spent much time together in the grand scheme of things, but their wild otter chase had given Nick the chance to study her carefully.

“I do, Nick, but your opinion is the most important. I want wherever we are to feel like home to you,” Judy spoke earnestly, paws reaching out to hold onto Nick’s arms. She found herself always reaching out for him, needing to touch him.

Nick couldn’t help but smile at Judy. She was too sweet, wanting to put his needs before her own, but then Nick had come to learn that was part and parcel of the gray bunny. She always wanted to help. The weight of her small paws on his arms reminded him of just how different they were, but they’d forged a friendship, a bond.

He took a moment to look down the small hallway and into the living room. He could see them watching Netflix together on the couch on their days off. He turned his gaze to the open door of one of the bedrooms and the double bed in there. It would be nice to finally have a bedroom again, and a real bed. His gaze shifted again, this time to the small wooden table next to the front door. He’d put his keys there, right next to Judy’s, probably in some ridiculously adorable little carrot-shaped bowl. He’d whine about it, say how ugly it was, but he’d secretly love it. Their ZPD issue jackets would rest next to one another on the coat rail. Nick smiled. He could see them living here. He could see himself thriving here. “A fresh start.”

“It’s perfect,” he declared. “Just promise me we’re not going to have some awful carrot themed doormat. I’ll lose all my street cred if I have to wipe my hind paws on some cutesy mat,” Nick grinned, teasing his rabbit companion.

Judy’s smile turned into a scowl, and she gave Nick a gentle shove. Her features softened, though, as she realized Nick truly did like the apartment. It had been impulsive, offering for them to share a place, but Nick deserved a fresh start, he deserved some help, and though the fox wouldn’t take charity, she’d managed to convince him to at least let her help put a roof over his head and apply for an honest job. It was a start. She was proud of him. “For you to lose any street cred, wouldn’t you have had to have some?” Judy sassed, knowing Nick sank back into humor when he felt vulnerable. She was more than happy to play along. Nick worked at his own pace, he’d tell her things when he was ready. The night before had probably drained his emotional chat quota for a long while.

“Carrots, you wound me!” One of Nick’s paws covered his heart, faux hurt on his face. His paw dropped as he reached for the front door handle. “Come on, we should tell Akita we want it.” Nick tried to suppress his excitement, he truly did, but his wagging tail gave him away.
Holy moly this story's stats have skyrocketed these past few days. I'm seriously touched, thanks so much guys!

I'm bunking the rating up to an 'M' from here on out. Nick and Judy are going to start exploring their feelings and I just want to cover my butt for the future.

Thank you again for all the kudos, comments, bookmarks, and love. This has been the warmest welcome I've ever had into a fandom! :)

They moved in the next day. Akita had been more than happy to take them on, and Judy had used her first pay cheque from the ZPD, which she hadn’t had the opportunity to spend given the whole press conference and her subsequent resignation, as the deposit. Some of Judy’s older brothers had been more than helpful, catching the train to Zootopia to drop off her belongings before they collected the farm truck, driving it back to Bunnyburrow. She’d kept them away from Nick, not out of shame, but more to stop the gossip back home. News traveled fast in the Hopps warren. She was pretty sure her brothers had cottoned on though if their twitching noses as they entered her new apartment were anything to go by. Marian helped them move in a few of Nick’s belongings once she’d finished work for the day, but in truth, he owned very little. Judy had kept her occupied while Nick had returned to the bridge, gathering his few belongings there. Marian had also insisted on a housewarming present, and had bought them blankets for lazy days on the couch – Nick’s was a soft gray, and Judy’s was reddish-orange.

Once their small amount of belongings were stored away, and Marian had left to go home, Nick sat Judy down on their couch to talk her through his drop-offs with Catstro. “I drop the funds off on the 10th of every month at a warehouse in the Rainforest District. The drop is next week. If you take the metro to Shady Place,” at that Judy snorted, the irony too much for her, “and follow this map,” Nick produced a piece of paper from his pocket, offering it to her, “You’ll find it. Inside there’s a little brown box, tucked in the far-right corner of the warehouse. If you just leave the cash there, they’ll find it. Please, Carrots, drop the money and go. All the info you need is on the paper,” Nick begged, not wanting Judy to spend any longer than necessary near Catstro and his cronies. He didn’t need them knowing about how much he cared for the bunny. They would use her as another bargaining chip, just like his mother.

“It’s fine, Nick. I’ve got this. Besides, I’ve taken down rhinos before. I don’t think a caracal is going to be too hard,” Judy assured him, examining the small map before she folded it, placing it on the coffee table.

Nick’s eyes widened, his paws shooting out to grasp at Judy. “No, Judy! Promise me you won’t provoke Catstro? He’s already threatened my mom, I can’t have him threaten you too.”

Judy shook her head, grasping Nick’s paws in her own. “It’s alright, Slick. I won’t provoke him, I promise,” She vowed, knowing full well she’d try to find some other way to get the caracal to wipe Nick’s debts. Maybe she’d be able to hustle a confession out of him and have him locked away forever.
“Whatever it is you’re thinking, stop thinking it. I’m serious, Carrots. Don’t mess with him,” Nick warned, pulling his paws from Judy’s. The seriousness of the conversation deserved the use of her full name. With a light thump, he landed on the floor, having scooted off the couch. He left the room, returning a moment later with a thick envelope. “There’s $750 in here. The monthly payment is $1000, so this month shouldn’t be too difficult to meet.” Nick handed the envelope to Judy. He hated that it had to come to this, that she would have to carry his financial burden while he was away. It was only for nine months though, and once he’d graduated and had a job at the ZPD, he’d be able to ease the burden on her.

Judy took the envelope, flicking through the bills before she placed it on the coffee table too. “I got it, Nick. Don’t worry,” Nick scrabbled back up onto the couch, turning to sit sideways so he could see her. “You need to pack a bag you know, nine months is a long time to be away,” Judy changed the topic, not wanting to dwell on the Catstro mess.

Nick, grateful for the conversation change, though very much still on edge about Judy and the drop offs, shook his head. “I don’t have much, Carrots. Besides, surely I’ll get to come back to see you and mom once in a while?”

Judy stretched out, her small limbs not taking up much room on the couch. Nick was tempted to grab her hind paw and give it a rub – rabbit hind paws were lucky, no? “You might, it depends. If Major Friedkin likes you, then you might get a few weekends off.”

Nick raised an eyebrow “Major Friedkin?”

Judy hummed in affirmation. “Yup, she’s a polar bear. She’s also very creative with nicknames.”

“Bet she’s not as good as me, Officer Toot Toot,” Nick teased, offering his roomie a broad grin.

One of Judy’s hind paws shot out, clumping Nick’s knee. The fox winced; his paw going to rub at the spot as Judy chuckled. “Call me that again, Slick, and I’ll never bring you some of my family’s blueberries.”

Nick froze; paw no longer rubbing his knee. “You wouldn’t dare…” he asked, horrified.

“If you can stay on Major Friedkin’s good side and get a weekend back here, I’ll make sure there are plenty of blueberries in the fridge,” Judy bargained. She wasn’t sure how she’d manage months at a time without Nick, and tempting him with food to be on his best behavior would ensure he’d get to come home for a few weekends. She’d been allowed back a few times during her training, and it had always felt good to recharge a little with her family. The academy was grueling.

“You got a deal, Fluff. Want to help me pack?” Nick gestured towards his room, already sliding off the couch.

“By that you mean I pack for you, right?” Judy called out after him, rolling her eyes as she too slid from the couch.

“Carrots, how dare you accuse me of such laziness! But you’re so kind for offering, thank you,” the fox grinned at the sound of Judy’s hind paws on the carpet behind him. She’d gained a little more speed and was able to carry her weight on her bad leg now. She still limped a little, and she’d popped a stitch when they’d moved in, but nothing was going to slow the bunny down. The sky was blue, the grass was green, his mom always wore her favorite pearl necklace, and Judy would never let anything slow her down.
The next morning, they stood together on platform four at Savannah Central. In one paw Nick clutched a small duffle bag, and in the other, he held his train ticket. Judy’s paws were empty, and she found herself wringing them. She was so proud of Nick, and she was so excited for him to graduate and join her on the force. They were one hell of a pair. On the other paw, though, she was worried about them being apart for so long. What if Nick realized the academy wasn’t for him? What if he found someone else at the academy he’d rather live with once he graduated? What if he…

“I can hear you thinking, Carrots,” Nick teased, pocketing his ticket. His tail flicked out to wrap around her ankles, and he threw an arm around her shoulders, pulling her to his side. “It’ll be fine. I’ll kick ass, get my badge, and then we’ll kick ass together. I’ll sweet-talk the Major and come see you a few times too. Don’t worry, Fluff,” Judy sighed, leaning against Nick. She would have to find some way of keeping in contact with him. Phones weren’t exactly banned at the academy, but they were a privilege item – good performance meant you had access to the phones, but all the calls were monitored. Maybe she could send him letters?

“Just, don’t annoy the other cadets, okay? I don’t want to hear about an elephant stepping on you because you sassed him about his tusk length or made a joke about his ears.” Judy wouldn’t put it past Nick to run his mouth. It was one of his many charms.

“Not promising anything,” Nick didn’t want to make a promise he couldn’t keep.

The PA System made its announcement. “The train now approaching platform four is the ten-thirty Zootopia Express to Bunnyburrow, calling at….”

Judy rocked on the balls of her hind paws. The Zootopia Express went all the way back to Bunnyburrow, but it stopped just outside the academy, midway between Zootopia and the Burrows.

“That’s me, Fluff.” Nick’s arm slipped from around Judy, his tail unfurling from around her legs. Judy’s paws shot out, and she grabbed him, pulling him in for a tight hug. Placing his bag on the ground, Nick pulled Judy close, resting his muzzle atop her head. “I’ll try to see you soon. It might take me a while to find Major Friedkin’s weakness and exploit it in return for a weekend off.”

Judy laughed despite herself, holding Nick tight. Her eyes were stinging, tears gathering. “Good luck, Nick. I believe in you.”

“Thanks, Carrots.” Reluctantly Nick let go of Judy and picked up his duffle bag. “See you soon.” He traced a claw down the center of her face, booping her nose in a playful gesture before he boarded the train.

His actions made Judy laugh, pushing her tears back. She couldn’t understand why she was getting so emotional. She’d get Nick back. He wasn’t going forever. “Have fun, Slick,” Judy called out after him as he took his seat. Nick had chosen a window seat, not only so he could wave to Judy, goodness knows she’d thump her foot angrily if he didn’t wave goodbye, but because he’d never been outside the city limits before. He’d get to see the countryside, Judy’s stomping grounds.

A whistle rang out, signaling the train was ready to leave. Nick stowed his luggage above him, turning to look out the window, finding Judy on the platform: The little bunny who’d managed to convince him to do something with his life. Finnick was probably laughing his head off. As the train lurched into life, Judy started frantically waving, her small paw going crazy. Nick smiled, shaking his head fondly. Raising a paw, he returned her wave, continuing to do so as the train pulled out of the station until Judy was no longer in sight. Nine months. Nine months and he’d have a shiny badge and a steady income. Nick leaned back in his seat, ignoring the looks he received
from other mammals. He was used to them by now. “Right, what was it Judy said about monkey bars?”

Judy waved until the train was out of sight, her paw slowing to a stop. “Now what?” She sighed, already missing Nick. His scent lingered on her fur, reminding her that he’d be back soon. It was good for him to be training for an honest job; the time apart would be good. Ever since they’d met, bar her three months back home, they’d been together 24/7. Space would be good for them.

It wasn’t good.

Judy walked around their apartment like a lost soul and would start talking only to realize no one was there to answer her. By the time Monday rolled around, and she was allowed back to work, Judy was itching for a case. As Chief Bogo dished out work for the day, Judy was relieved to have her paws on a case regarding a stolen necklace. “Oh, Chief!” Judy called out as the cape buffalo went to leave the bullpen.

“What is it, Hopps?” Bogo turned to look down at the small mammal. He had time for her, given her accomplishments, but she didn’t need to know that.

“Any word on how Nick’s doing, Sir?” Judy felt a little silly asking, but she was worried about Nick.

Bogo stared at the small bunny. “Why would I know how Wilde is doing, Hopps?”

Judy shifted her weight, small paws playing with the case file. “Well I mean, Sir, he was instrumental in the missing mammal’s case, and he’ll be part of this precinct and…”

“I know nothing about how Wilde is doing. I wouldn’t worry about him. That fox can take care of himself,” Bogo interrupted, enjoying the frustrated look on Judy’s face. He was telling a tiny white lie – he’d spoken to Major Friedkin when all the new recruits had arrived, just to double check that the fox had turned up. Hopps didn’t need to know that, though. “Dismissed,” he ended their conversation before the energetic bunny could start another line of questioning, leaving the room to return to his office.

“Right, thanks, Chief,” Judy spoke to the vacant spot Chief Bogo had just inhabited.

Judy spent the day working on her case, chatting with her co-workers, and cultivating leads. Before she knew it, the day was over. Stopping by the locker room to change Judy grabbed her bag, feeling the weight of it settle across her small body. She had Nick’s payment in there, along with the map. It was the first drop day. Usually, she went home in her police blues, but she didn’t want to alert Catstro to her job, so she changed into a pair of jeans and a soft brown jumper, stuffing her uniform into her bag.

Judy took the metro, trying to remain as calm as possible. Her mind was racing. She had no idea who this Catstro was, and knowing he came from the Nocturnal district made Judy uneasy. She was an officer, a damn good one, and that gave her the upper hand. It didn't stop her from worrying, though.

“Now approaching: Shady Place.” The announcement made her snort. Even a week later she still found it hilariously ironic. Pulling her bag closer, she disembarked once the train came to a stop. Navigating her way out of the station she stood in the doorway of a small bakery, which was shut for the evening. Fishing Nick’s little map from her pocket she examined it in the dim light.
Memorizing the way, she slipped the bit of paper into her pocket and took off.

The warehouse hadn’t been used for some time. "Someone really needs to dust." Judy mused as she stepped through a crumbling side-door, watching her hind paws so she wouldn’t stumble over the wreckage of the building that littered the ground. Roof panels were missing, throwing moonlight over the ground. The windows had been smashed, leaving the windowpanes empty, and graffiti covered the exposed brick walls. The place was damp and smelt like mold, and Judy swore she could smell the lingering scent of death. A chain hanging from one of the roof rafters swung ominously in the light breeze. "Dare I even question why that’s there?"

Judy spotted the little brown box Nick had mentioned, tucked in the far-right corner of the building. With steady steps, she crossed to it. Flicking the lid back revealed that it was empty. Judy rummaged in her bag, paws grasping the thick envelope. She didn’t particularly want to give Catstro the money, and part of her wondered what would happen if the Chief ever found out that she was helping repay Nick’s debts to some shady criminal. The thought of Marian being hurt by these monsters, the idea that they could hurt Nick, steeled her resolve.

"Well, you’re certainly not dear ol’ Nicholas,” The voice behind her made her freeze, mentally cursing herself for being so lost in thought that she hadn’t heard whoever it was approaching. “What use are your big ears if you don’t use them, Judy?” She scolded herself.

Swallowing, Judy rose to her feet, paws still clutching the envelope. Slowly, she turned. “Wowee! Got ourselves a sweet little bunny, boys!” The jackal whistled, eyeing Judy. From the shadows, Judy saw several other mammals emerge – a lynx, a wolverine, two raccoons, and a maned wolf.

Judy had to stop herself from grinding her teeth in aggravation as she glared at them. “Just making the drop, no need for alarm,” She lifted the paw holding the envelope so they could see it. A deep rumble from the back of the room had Judy’s attention, and the crowd of mammals parted to allow a caracal through. “Catstro.” His ears were alert, tufts of black fur on the tips deceptively sweet looking, but the hardness in his amber eyes and the flash of his canines as he laughed suggested otherwise. “I didn’t think you’d be here,” Judy couldn’t stop herself from addressing him.

Catstro observed the bunny, noted how she ever so slightly favored one leg, how she held herself tall and had no problem meeting his gaze. “I had to make sure Nicholas made his monthly payment. Rumour has it he’s left town. I was waiting to see if I would have to go and speak with his mother,” he purred; head cocking as he noted the envelope in Judy’s paw.

"Nick’s busy, but I have your money, and I’ll be making the drops for the time being so you can forget about bothering his mother,” Judy sounded stronger than she felt. She was in an unknown location, with strange mammals, and had no backup. “However, I want to negotiate a new deal.” She dove straight in. She had a feeling Catstro was a 'get to the point and get to it quickly' mammal.

The predators laughed, and Catstro gave a small chuckle. The slight lifting of his paw silenced the group. “What sort of deal do you want to make, little bunny? Are you going to take on Nicholas’ debt?”

“Take me, spare him!” The raccoon squealed in a high-pitched voice, a pathetic attempt at a damsel in distress. The predators laughed, and the corners of Catstro’s mouth quirked upwards before silence fell again.

Judy shook her head, scowling. “In for a nickel…” She took a deep breath. “I want you to stop adding interest. The balance will never be paid off at this rate.”
Catstro smirked. “That’s the point, little bunny. Nicholas is in my debt and will be for the rest of his life, and once he’s gone then his mother will pick up the slack, and if she’s gone, well, judging by Nicholas’ scent on you, then you’ll be next.”

Judy paused. Nick’s scent was still on her? His belongings were in their home, perhaps their smells had combined now? Shaking away the thought, Judy tightened her grip on the envelope. “Then at least lower his monthly payments.” If Catstro wanted to own Nick for his whole life, then surely reducing the payments would ensure that.

The group laughed, and Catstro shook his head. “I like to see the fox squirm. Call it entertainment. Now, I’ve entertained you and your requests enough for this evening. Hand over the money and be on your way, Officer Hopps.”

Judy froze, eyes widening as her ears pricked up.

“What? You think I don’t know who you are? Your face was plastered all over this city recently, and my sources did see you saying goodbye to ol’ Nicholas at the station. Tell me, did you send him back to your carrot farm?” Catstro’s smirk made Judy uneasy, the edges of his canines just visible in the moonlight as he took a step towards her, his cronies laughing. “Don’t play with fire, little bunny. Besides, surely you being here and trying to negotiate with me is illegal, is it not? I’m sure your boss would just love to know that his golden girl is out making deals with other mammals and paying off con-mammals debts. So, hand over the envelope every month without a word, and we’ll pretend we’ve never crossed paths, and I won’t tell your boss your dirty secret. Oh, and when ol’ Nicholas returns from whatever country hovel you’ve sent him to, I expect him to make the drops himself,” Catstro extended a paw.

Judy bit her tongue, her pulse racing. She wanted to beat the pulp out of the smug caracal and his cronies, but it wasn’t smart. He was right; the Chief would be furious with her and would no doubt fire her if he knew what she was doing. It was for Nick, though. For Marian.

Reluctantly, Judy handed over the envelope. “Good girl.” Catstro took the envelope from her, handing it off to the wolverine behind him. The mammal counted the contents, giving a nod when he counted the full amount. “See you next month, Officer Hopps. Stay safe out there.” His cronies turned, and Catstro departed with them, leaving Judy alone in the abandoned warehouse.

When she could no longer hear them, she let out a frustrated squeal, kicking a rock on the floor. It pinged against the brick wall, breaking. She’d hated Catstro the moment Nick had mentioned him, but now she’d met him she hated him even more. Her requests had been reasonable, she believed, but the predator was difficult. "Find a weakness Judy and exploit it, just like he exploited Nick’s.”

The metro ride home was uneventful, and Judy tried to work out how she could gather some dirt on Catstro without bringing too much attention to herself. She couldn’t speak to her co-workers or check the ZPD database, as it would be too suspicious. She’d have to find some other method.

Key’s jangling; Judy unlocked her front door, throwing the keys down on the table inside. The sight of Nick’s missing keys made her scowl. She missed his presence, his witty comebacks, and his stupid fluffy tail. Depositing her bag by the table, she took the few steps into the living room, flicking on the table lamp before face planting on the couch. Tomorrow was her day off: in the morning she’d look for some extra work to help with funds and then she was due to have dinner with Marian. She’d need to pick up some flowers en route, and a bottle of wine. “Dang, I didn’t ask Nick what kind of wine his mom likes.” She spoke aloud, needing to break the silence of the apartment.

Her phone buzzed in her back pocket, pulling Judy from her musings. With a deft paw, she pulled
the offending item free, accepting the Muzzletime without even checking the ID. "What?" She grumbled nose still buried in the couch.

"The weeks been that bad eh, Carrots?"

"NICK!" Judy’s head shot up as she pulled her phone closer to her face, Nick filling her screen.

"Hey Fluff," he grinned at his bunny, even though his whole body was tense. It was drop day, and the nerves had gotten the better of him several times. They’d had to scale the ice wall in the afternoon and with his mind on Judy and the drop he hadn’t made it over the obstacle, landing instead in the freezing water. He could still hear Major Friedkin shouting at him – "You’re dead, foxtrot!" It was one of her less insulting nicknames. He hadn’t appreciated firefox or foxy loxy, either. They were only a week in, too. He had eight months and three weeks left of her nicknames. "Give me strength."

"How’d you get a phone? It’s only been a week, surely you haven’t been that good? How are things? Have you made any friends?" Judy rattled off, overwhelming the fox.

"Whoa there energizer bunny, slow down!" Nick laughed, glad to see Judy so animated. It eased some of his tension, and his tail started to wag. He’d stolen away to the canteen after changing into his sleep clothes, while the other cadets were preparing to turn in for the night. “I have a phone and the privilege of two calls a week because apparently some small and fluffy bunny pestered a big scary cape buffalo, and to spare the cape buffalo any further aggravation he decided to cut himself out as the messenger. Really, it was more like ‘give that damn fox a phone, so I don’t have to deal with Hopps pestering me every week for the next nine months!’” Nick tried to imitate the Chief and knew he’d failed miserably when Judy laughed. It was worth the embarrassment of his bad imitation it to hear her laugh. “So, have you been worried about me?" He teased.

“I asked him once, this morning,” Judy argued, raising a paw in a bunny scout gesture.

Nick snorted. “Somehow I don’t doubt you were a bunny scout. You probably had all the badges too, didn’t you?”

Judy blushed, her fur and the darkness of the living room hiding most of it. “Maybe,” she grumbled.

Nick tried to hide his smile. “How was your week?” He settled for a safe topic, knowing his time on the phone with Judy was limited. He’d use one call a week for Judy, and the other for his mom.

“It was okay, I guess. Chief’s got me working a missing necklace case. Most of it is interviewing witnesses, running evidence to the lab, and working out leads, that kind of thing. Nothing hard, ‘cause I’m waiting for my partner,” Judy teased. She wanted to keep Nick in the loop with the goings on back in Zootopia. She knew how isolating the academy could be, but that was the point. They needed you in a certain mindset, and you didn’t get that by going home every weekend. Nick was a worrier, though, underneath all his bravado, and knowing everything was fine would soothe him and help him perform better.

Nick appreciated that Judy was keeping him informed. “Eight months and three weeks until we can kick ass together, Carrots.”

Judy groaned. “Speaking of ass kicking, Catstro is a jerk.”

Nick’s eyes widened, tail-stilling, ears flattening. “Judy. What happened? He wasn’t meant to be there. Did he hurt you? I can come back..."
Judy shook her head quickly, seeing Nick’s panic. “It’s okay, Nick! Someone saw you leaving the city and told him, so he wanted to see if the money would still turn up. I handed it over to him, nothing bad happened; he just gave me the creeps. I wanted to smack the smirk off his muzzle. I refrained, though, for your sake.”

Nick still didn’t relax entirely, his face shifting to a look of anger, but it was aimed at himself. “Stupid, so stupid! How could you think he wouldn’t know? Of course, he’d be there to check. Now he knows about Carrots. Dammit.”

“Whatever it is you’re thinking, Nick, stop thinking it,” she threw his words back at him, not liking the look on his face. He was beating himself up, again.

“He didn’t hurt you?” Nick asked, jaw clenching.

“No,” Judy shook her head, aching to reach out and soothe Nick. Bunnies were very physical creatures, especially when emotional. “I turned up, he turned up, I told him I was doing the drops for a little while as you’re busy, he accepted that, took the money, said same time next month, and he left,” Judy shortened the chain of events. She felt awful lying to Nick, but it was only a little lie, and it was to protect him. It was worth it to protect him, to keep him at the academy and on his new path.

Nick relaxed his jaw, nodding slowly as he let out a deep sigh. It was inevitable that Catstro would find out about his connection with Judy, but he’d hoped it wouldn’t happen so soon.

“Tell me what you did this week,” Judy asked, navigating the conversation into calmer waters.

Emerald eyes found violet, and Nick raised a paw, pointing it accusingly at the bunny. “You never mentioned anything about an ice wall and freezing water!”

Judy chuffed, the paw not holding her phone covering her muzzle. “You never asked,” she grinned, her paw falling to land on the couch she was sprawled on.

“Don’t be sly, that’s my job.” Nick wagged a claw at her.

“Well don’t fall in the water then, dummy.” They fell back into their usual routine, and Judy was glad for the distraction. Nick looked well, even though he’d only been gone a week. He told her all about his training for the week, a few of the other cadets he’d started to form friendships with, and even that he’d overheard Major Friedkin complimenting him when she’d been talking on the phone. Nick preened a little as he told Judy that.

Half an hour had passed before Nick knew it. “Wilde, lights out in ten,” Major Friedkin barked from behind the closed canteen doors. It didn’t surprise Nick that the stern polar bear had found him. He sighed, disappointed that he’d have to end his conversation with Judy.

Judy’s sharp hearing picked up on Major Friedkin, and she was tempted to call out a hello to her former teacher. “Looks like I’m going to have to go Fluff,” Nick offered her a rueful smile, free paw scratching behind one of his ears. He swore there was still some mud there from his training that morning. In truth, the academy was a lot harder than he’d thought it would be, but he wanted to do his best to make his mom proud, to make Judy proud.

“That you are, Slick. Take care, okay? Call me whenever you get the chance.” Judy’s ears drooped, she wasn’t ready to say goodbye, but she was grateful that she’d get the opportunity to chat to Nick on a regular basis now. The Chief would find a basket of goodies on his desk soon.

“Don’t worry, Carrots. Same time next week?” Judy nodded at Nick’s question. “Alright. Stay
safe, goodness knows I’m not there to watch your tail, and we both know how gung-ho you are,” he teased.

“Hey!” Judy whined, but she couldn’t argue. She was a little impulsive it had to be said. “Oh and watch out for the ice wall,” Judy winked, earning herself a bark of laughter from the tod. “Miss you,” she blurted out. She couldn’t help herself; it was as if part of her was missing.

Nick’s smile faltered, becoming something a little more serious. Trust his emotional bunny to throw him a curveball. “Miss you too, sweetheart. See you next week,” Nick ended the Muzzletime call, face falling forward to smack against the metal table he was sitting at. He missed his mom, Zootopia, and Judy, but it would all be worth it to finally have his badge, to finally have something to be proud of, for the mammals in his life to be proud of him. He still felt uneasy about Judy making the drops for him, especially since Catstro now knew he was out of town. Judy was smart, though. If there was one mammal in the world Nick trusted with the job, it was Judy.

“Five minutes, Wilde,” Major Friedkin banged on the canteen door. Lifting his face from the table Nick sighed. Dragging himself from his seat he crossed the room, opening the door to see the intimidating polar bear looking down at him. Her features softened a little as Nick offered her back the phone. He wasn’t allowed to keep it on him; it was only in his possession during his two calls.

“How’s Officer Hopps?” Major Friedkin took the phone back from Nick. She’d been surprised when Chief Bogo had informed her of a fox joining the recruits, but when she’d heard about his connection to Officer Hopps her surprise had turned to amusement. Major Friedkin wasn’t an idiot, she could tell that some of the recruits disliked Nick’s presence, that some of them said cruel things to him, but the fox took it all in his stride, giving smart-ass comebacks. She’d seen plenty of cadets hazed, plenty of them suffer from homesickness too, but Nick never outwardly looked to be bothered. Major Friedkin saw through him. She’d been about to call Chief Bogo when he’d called her, and it they’d agreed on giving Nick access to a phone twice a week to speak with Officer Hopps, to boost his morale. Major Friedkin was pleased that the little bunny had finally branched out from thinking solely about her job. A friend would do her some good.

“She’s good, but she’s running around like a lost kit without me there to guide her,” Nick forced a grin, falling back into his old con-mammal persona.

“At least she wouldn’t run into a tree,” Major Friedkin deadpanned, remembering the 2-mile run in the rain that she’d made the cadets do on their first day, as practice for the Rainforest District and to test their fitness level. As the smallest mammal, Nick had used his agility to overtake the other cadets, but he’d face planted into a fallen tree when he’d turned to gloat. It’d dazed him for a few minutes, but he’d sheepishly picked himself up and carried on with the run.

“Oh, come on! I’m pretty sure you pushed that tree over on purpose,” Nick protested, starting the short walk back to the dorms.

“You caught me, firefox. Dorm room, now,” Major Friedkin ushered Nick into the dorms, where the fox quickly climbed up onto his bunk. Major Friedkin turned out the lights, plunging Nick and the other cadets into darkness. Nick was a little more relaxed now that he’d spoken to Judy, and sleep came easily.

Judy groaned as Nick’s face disappeared from her screen. “Damn it! You forgot to ask about the wine!” She sighed, knowing it would be futile to call back. Judy let it go. She’d take a wild guess tomorrow and pray.

While getting to speak to her best friend had eased her worry, and boy had it been great to see Nick’s face and hear his voice, it only made her feel even worse about lying to him. “It’s for his
own good. You’re trying to help him.” She reassured herself. Judy couldn’t get Catstro out of her head though. She needed some more information on the caracal before she would try to tempt him with another deal. Picking up her phone again, Judy called a familiar number. She really didn’t know when to quit.

It only took three rings before the call was answered. “Hey, Fru! Is your dad around?”
Taking Care of Business

Chapter Notes

The stats on this fic have been going crazy again these past few days, my goodness. Major love to existing readers and hello to new ones! I hope you enjoy this chapter, it's my longest one so far :)

The next month flew past in a haze of work, her weekly dinners with Marian, and her phone calls with Nick. Judy remained in contact with Mr. Big, using burner phones that were delivered to her by Mr. Otterton disguised as ‘gifts’ to go with beautiful bouquets of flowers. They had a plan, and Mr. Big had wanted to ensure no one would be able to link Judy to what was going to happen.

During one of her dinners with Marian, Judy had spotted the vixen’s bookshelf. Marian had been more than happy for Judy to borrow some books, so while she had been cooking Judy had browsed the shelves. She’d picked up a few books – a few Jane Pawsten and Virginia Woof novels – but the book that had caught her attention the most had been titled ‘The Young Vulpes Guide – Life, Love, Happiness, and everything in-between.’ Judy had flicked through the pages, the book a plethora of information on foxes. She’d slipped the book into her handbag before Marian had emerged from the kitchen, offering her a glass of elderflower wine.

When Judy had made it home after dinner, she’d opened the book to the first page and had started to read. When she’d next looked up, she was halfway through the book, and it was 3 am. By the time her next dinner with Marian had rolled around Judy had finished the book, having taken in as much information as possible. When Marian had disappeared to use the bathroom, Judy had slipped it back onto her bookshelf, returning to her seat in the kitchen before Marian had come back. She’d felt a little naughty sneaking around, and she was sure Marian would answer any fox related questions Judy would ask her, but ultimately she’d decided that it had been a better idea to read about certain aspects rather than ask Nick’s mom. She could only imagine how embarrassing it would be to ask her about their mating habits and, goodness forbid, knotting.

Judy blushed as she remembered that little chapter of the book. Some Zoogling and numerous websites later Judy had quite literally seen far more than she’d anticipated. ‘It was supposed to…? And it…?’ Judy’s eyes had widened, and she’d seriously questioned whether it would fit. The question had led her to several online forums and website. She’d browsed them for a while, curiosity piqued. She wasn’t a prude, sex was common amongst rabbits, but when her thoughts had turned to Nick’s knot, her ears had turned bright red with her blush.

Thankfully the book had covered other, less intimate subjects. Judy had enjoyed reading up about their courting customs – both vixen and tod picked their den, but it was a vixen’s job to ensure the den was homely. The tod would follow the vixen around when interested in her, guard her against potential threats, and wrap his tail around her in a show of possessiveness and affection. The information had given Judy some food for thought.

She and Nick had picked their home, their den, together, and she’d already started decorating it while he was away – picking out some new furniture and bedding and rearranging existing furniture. Nick had followed her around for the duration of the missing mammal’s case too. Initially for her carrot pen, yes, but he’d stayed with her after, followed her back into the fray after
she’d apologized. She discredited it. Nick hadn’t seen her as anything other than a friend then, and probably still only saw her like that now. However, he had moved between her and Akita when they’d first met her. He’d also wrapped his tail around her several times. Judy had contemplated whether it pointed to Nick caring for her considerably, but she wasn’t sure. Nick was different; he didn’t follow the status quo. She decided to wait, let Nick make any and all moves. Judy knew he struggled with his emotions and she didn’t want to push him. In the meantime, she’d drop hints; follow a few examples of vixen behavior in hope he’d figure it out.

Judy had also decided in the past month that she needed to become familiar with Nick’s food. Fish and bug produce didn’t bother her, Nick had different dietary requirements, and he needed them to survive. It had been one heck of an experience, venturing down the predator aisles of the supermarket. She’d finished work late one night, and the sun had set by the time she’d left the precinct. Popping into the supermarket, she’d made a beeline for the predator aisles. She’d received many strange looks as she’d stopped in front of one of the freezers. The vast amounts of choice had confused her, and she’d been completely unsure about what to buy. “You look lost, little lady.” The voice next to Judy had spooked her. Turning, she’d found herself looking into the brown eyes of a male arctic fox.

“My best friend, he’s a red fox. I want to get him something nice to eat but…” She’d gestured to herself, leaving the ‘…but I’m prey and have no idea what I’m doing here’ unspoken. The arctic fox had introduced himself as Bandit Whitmaw. He’d laughed, telling her that his mom had known he’d be a terrible kit from the moment he’d been born, hence his terrible name. The irony had then been too much for her when, amongst his bright white fur, one stripe of jet-black had appeared across his face, covering his eye area, making him look like a criminal. Judy had tried to contain her chuckle, but Bandit had let her laugh, not at all bothered. “Genetic mutation” he’d explained with a shrug. He’d helped her pick out food for Nick, starting with burgers, sausages, and bacon made from bugs. Judy had insisted on getting salmon filets too, having read online that foxes needed the taurine from them or else they’d go blind and suffer from seizures. Explaining that to Bandit had made the arctic fox question just how close she and Nick were if she was that invested in his health. Judy had dodged the question, but the knowing smile on the arctic foxes face told her he wasn’t fooled. With a basket full of food she’d thanked him, and Bandit had given her his number should she have any more fox related questions. They’d exchanged a couple of messages since. She hadn’t told Nick about her little shopping trip or about Bandit during their phone calls. She wanted the freezer full of food to be a surprise.

It was the 10th of May, the next drop day, and Judy worked through her lunch hour so she could leave the precinct early. At 4 pm she left her desk, heading to the locker room. Changing quickly Judy grabbed her bag. Tapping her phone, she called for a Zuber. Emerging from the locker room, Judy decided to wait in the atrium for her ride. Clawhauser and Wolford were at the desk, and her sharp hearing picked up on them whispering. She couldn’t quite hear what they were saying, but Wolford had pulled out his wallet, counting out some bills. “Hey, guys!” She bounced up to them, offering both a broad smile. “What’re you doing?”

Both predators froze for a second, caught off-guard. Wolford was first to recover. “I owe Ben here some money for lunch.” He lied, offering his temporary partner a smile.

Judy frowned. They’d been partners for weeks now and always got lunch together. “You’ve taken ages to pay your debt back then Wolford, we’ve had lunch together every day for the past few weeks.” Judy was sure she could smell something fishy.
“Yeah, Wolford here is a pain when it comes to paying mammals back.” Clawhauser interrupted, nodding his head as he took the cash from Wolford.

“Funny, he’s always quick to pay me back for lunch.” Judy mused. Wolford was a gentlemammal, always wanting to pay his way. Judy had tried suggested that they alternated the days on which they paid for lunch in the spirit of fairness, but the timber wolf had declined, insisting on always paying her back.

“Well you’re a lady, and it would be rude for a gentlemammal to let a lady pay.” Clawhauser scrabbled for an excuse. Wolford silently prayed that Judy would leave soon. His prayers were answered when her phone pinged.

Judy glanced down at her phone, a message from her Zuber informing her it was outside. “That’s my ride, I’ll see you tomorrow. Enjoy your night!” She made her way to the exit, trying to keep her pace leisurely so as not to draw attention to herself.

Once Judy was out of sight, and out of hearing range, Wolford and Clawhauser sighed in relief. “You put that $20 on the day Wilde graduates from the academy,” Wolford demanded as Clawhauser pulled out one of his notebooks, flicking to the back page. The page was already covered in scribbles.

“Who do you think will make the first move?” Clawhauser had to hide his excitement at the thought of the fox and rabbit finally getting together. He hadn’t meant for it to evolve into a precinct-wide betting pool, but they were just too adorable!

“Wilde. Graduation is the end of January, and that’s in mating season.” Wolford failed to hide his smirk. “Plus, don’t they say absence makes the heart grow fonder? He’ll jump her bones, then the idiots will realize they’re in love.” Wolford stole a quick glance at the notebook as Clawhauser wrote down his bet. Bogo had placed a bet too? Wolford made a small noise of surprise.

Finding her Zuber outside, Judy climbed onto the back seats. The Zuber pulled back into the traffic. Judy had booked the cab to take her to the Fishtown Market in Tundratown. Once there she would walk through the market, taking several twists and turns in case she was being followed before slipping out of the back door. Mr. Manchas would collect her from the alley behind the building in his limo and take her to Mr. Big’s home. Living with a fox, and having dinner on a regular basis with one, made for a logical explain as to why she’d been at the fish market if someone saw her there.

From her bag Judy pulled out a sweater, slipping it on as the Zuber entered Tundratown. She’d never get used to the cold, no matter how many times the Chief sent her and Wolford to patrol the area. The car slowed to a stop outside of the Fishtown Market, and Judy made sure to give the driver a couple of dollars as a tip.

Entering the building, Judy had to stop herself from sneezing in a desperate attempt to clear her nose of the smell of fish. She’d gotten used to the scent a little over her dinners with Marian, but with the vast amounts of it on offer in the market, Judy found it overpowering.

Her police training kicked in as she started to walk. She’d scoped the place out last week, discovered where the back door was. Unsure if she was being followed, as she wouldn't put it past Catstro to have one of his cronies tail her to make sure she didn't skip town either, Judy set a leisurely pace as she walked between the stalls. She stopped every now and then to examine some fish, making it look like she was contemplating buying something before she moved on. She didn't keep a distinct pattern, instead weaving between the stalls, changing direction on occasion and finding as many reflective metal surfaces as possible to watch her six. Turning around frequently
would give away that she was nervous, or that she suspected she was being followed. Thirty
minutes after entering the market, and sure she wasn't being followed, Judy slipped through the
loading bay and out the back door. A limo idled in the alleyway and Judy made her way inside
quickly, the car pulling out smoothly to join the traffic.

"Good evening Miss Hopps. How are you?" Mr. Manchas greeted her, glancing up at his rear-view
mirror.

Judy met his gaze in the mirror. "Good evening Mr. Manchas. I'm good thank you, how about
yourself?" The pair had formed a friendship over the past few weeks. He'd tracked her down to her
home one evening and had gifted her with a large bouquet of flowers as a thank you for her work in
the night howler case. Judy had been touched by his kindness when all she'd been doing was her
job. They'd swapped numbers, and he'd promised that should she ever need transport anywhere,
he'd be happy to oblige. Though Judy wasn't in the business of collecting favors, she was waiting
for the right moment to use it. She was considering cashing it in for Nick's graduation, but that
depended on whether or not she could get the booking she was after.

"I'm very well, thank you." Mr. Manchas fell silent, attention focused on the road. Judy was
grateful for the silence. She was nervous about this evening and the plan she and Mr. Big had
come up with. She trusted their plan, knew they had all their bases covered - Mr. Big hadn't gotten
to where he was by being sloppy - but that didn't stop Judy from worrying. Needing a distraction,
Judy pulled her phone from her pocket. She checked the time, relieved to find that she was on time.
Her home screen made her smile, a silly photo of her and Nick that had been taken while they'd
been moving in. Judy hadn't been able to reach the top shelf in one of the kitchen cabinets, so Nick
had lifted her up. Marian had snapped it on her phone, and when Judy had gone over for dinner one
night, the vixen had sent it to her. The sight of her best friend, the fox she was in love with,
reminded her that what she was about to do was all for him. Unlocking the phone she pulled up
Zoogle, returning to her research on foxes. While the book from Marian had been useful, Judy had
taken to researching some topics in more detail. Her current research topic was fox vocal cues.
She'd watched several Zootube videos on the subject while kitsitting, once the kits had gone to bed,
and had listened to some clips. She'd heard a few of the noises from Nick before, but she'd found a
website explaining in detail why foxes still relied so heavily on their old vocal cues.

Engrossed in her reading, Judy lost track of time. The limo coming to a stop jolted her from her
research, and she quickly shut down the web page. The door opened, and a giant white paw
appeared. Grabbing her bag and sliding her phone into her pocket, Judy took the offered paw,
accepting the help while getting out of the vehicle. The purple tracksuit told her this was Amos.
Though Judy was making a conscious effort to try and tell Mr. Big’s polar bears apart, when they
were all dressed in formal suits it was difficult. She relied heavily on seeing them in their casual
wear. So far she knew Kevin, Raymond, Koslov, and Amos.

“Miss Hopps.” Amos greeted her, offering to take her bag. Judy let him carry it as she followed
him into the house.

“Good evening Amos,” Judy took several small strides for each of Amos’ large ones. He led her
through the house and up a flight of stairs. Offering her back her bag, he knocked on the door.

“Come in.” Koslov rumbled from behind the door. Amos pushed the door open, letting Judy enter
before it shut. The polar bear took his position outside the door, protecting the mammals inside.

Stepping in, Judy gave the room a quick glance over, spotting Koslov sat in a large chair by
another door. “Come here, my child.” Mr. Big broke the silence. Judy followed the sound, large
ears twisting to pinpoint the mob bosses location. She found him sat on a small sofa by the
fireplace, dressed in his usual suit. Placing her bag on the floor, Judy knelt beside the couch, lowering herself to a more suitable height. Mr. Big opened his arms, and Judy leaned in, leaving light kisses on each of his cheeks. “I trust you had no problems on your way here?” He asked as Judy moved back, taking a moment to observe the rabbit. She looked tense. Mr. Big knew this evening would be difficult for the godmother of his grandkit.

“All was fine Sir, no one followed me or suspected anything.” Judy knew that the riskiest part of the night was now over.

“Good, that’s good. This evening should go to plan, we have covered all our bases.” Mr. Big was sure the night would go without a hitch.

Judy nodded, comforted by Mr. Big’s confidence. “Just let me know whenever you want something, I’m aware this puts me in your debt.” Judy had come to terms with the fact she would owe a mob boss a favor. It wasn’t exactly ideal, a cop owing a mob boss, but Nick and Marian’s safety was more important.

“No no, my child.” Mr. Big shook a paw, brushing aside her comment. “You know that for me this is personal.” When she had first spoken with Mr. Big after Fru had handed the phone over she had explained the situation with Nick’s crippling debt, Catstro’s threats against him, his mother, and now her. As soon as Judy had mentioned Catstro’s name, Mr. Big had been on board.

During one of their subsequent calls, he had confessed that when Fru had been a kit, he had fallen for one of Catstro’s scams. The caracal had seemed honest and had been confident in his approach, introducing himself as a banker with Goldman Cats. He’d promised Mr. Big a strong return if he invested $1 million with the bank. The figures Catstro had been spouting had sounded good, well thought out, and with little evidence of the caracal’s shady dealings, Mr. Big had invested. Catstro had vowed that the money would be available upon Fru Fru’s 18th birthday, and Mr. Big had set it aside as a trust fund of sorts for her, enough money so she could strike out on her own and do whatever she wanted with her life. Catstro had maintained contact with him for several years, but when Fru had turned 12, the caracal had disappeared.

When Fru had turned 18, the money never materialized, and Mr. Big had sent his lawyer to Goldman Cats. They’d informed him that they’d never hired Catstro, that they had no knowledge of him or a $1 million investment in Fru’s name. Infuriated, Mr. Big had used all of his informants to try and hunt down the caracal, but every time they’d gotten close enough, they’d ended up dead. Catstro may have been one step ahead of him before, but the cat had underestimated Judy. She had passed along information to Mr. Big as to where he could find Catstro during one of their calls.

Judy still felt like she owed him. This evening’s task would be a huge weight off her shoulders. “I know Sir, but-”

“You and Nicky are family.” Mr. Big interrupted her. “I have known Nicky for eleven years, ten of them he was in my employ. When that boy came to me, he was willing to do anything to earn money. He undertook all the jobs I gave him, but I could see he was struggling with the morality of it all. He may hustle, and he may pretend that nothing bothers him, but that boy has beliefs and morals, he feels. He has a good heart, and good hearts are destroyed in this world. Yes he disrespected me, he disrespected grandmamma, but that boy needed a way out of this world and back to the surface, and his actions provided me with the opportunity to get him out. This world was not meant for him.”

“If he disrespected you and grandmamma, why did you provide him with a way out?” Judy couldn’t make sense of it. She also couldn’t understand why after ten years in Mr. Big’s employ Nick had sold him the rug that had ultimately cost him his job.
“I am not an unnecessarily cruel mammal, Judy. I do not take lightly those who insult me, but Nicky gave me ten years of his life. It was my way of thanking him for his service while also getting him out of my sight.” He had been furious with the fox for his betrayal, hurt by the boys’ greed, but having spent ten years with him on his payroll, he had not been willing to hurt him. Instead, he had given him an ultimatum – get out of his sight and never show his face in his part of Tundratown again, or be iced. The fox had taken the former; fleeing his home the moment Raymond had put his paws back on the ground. Hearing now that Nick had been buried to his neck in debt at the time helped explain some of his more questionable actions. It didn't get him off the hook, but it provided Mr. Big with the insight that Nick had doing all he could to survive, that he had been living day to day trying to make ends meet. Many mammals lived a similar lifestyle, many animals deserved it, but he knew deep down that Nick deserved better.

“He’s never mentioned that he spent ten years working for you.” Nick had told Judy a lot before he left for the academy, but he hadn't mentioned anything about the jobs and hustles he’d worked in the sixteen years between his deal with Catstro and meeting Judy.

“There is a lot he has probably not told you yet. Nicky does not open up easily. Do not take it personally. Too many mammals have trampled on that boy. It is fortunate you found each other, you are good for him, and he is good for you.” Mr. Big couldn't deny the fact.

“He’s more forthcoming with information, especially since we’re living together.” It still felt strange for Judy to talk about them living together, not used to having a roomie, let alone a roomie she was in love with.

“Ah yes, Fru mentioned that you have moved in together. When you pick a date, please let me know, I wish to throw you a beautiful party.” When his daughter had returned home from dinner with Judy one night, she had excitedly informed him of the fox and rabbits new living arrangements. He'd been surprised by how quickly they’d moved their relationship along, but he liked the idea of them together.

“Pick a date?” Judy frowned, ears dropping as Mr. Big confused her.

“Yes, for when you marry.” He found it only natural that soon there would be wedding bells, perhaps even the sounds of little paws to follow.

Judy’s ears shot back up in surprise. “O-oh no, Sir, we’re not-“

“Interspecies relationships do not bother me, Judy.” He had seen his fair share of couples in his life, and he held no ill feelings to those who sought love outside of their own kind. Life was short, happiness was to be seized whenever possible.

“Sir, while I’m very appreciative of your offer and support, Nick and I aren’t getting married. We’re not even dating.” Judy corrected the mob boss, unable to stop her ears from drooping at the mention of them not even dating yet.

Though surprised, and a little disappointed, Mr. Big maintained his casual demeanor. “Hm, that is a shame. We are all small boats in the rough sea of life, Judy, and we all need a safe harbor. I had hoped you and Nicky would find that in each other.”

“I care for him a lot,” Judy nodded, unable to disagree.

“My child, you would not be here if you didn’t. I see the way your features light up at the mere mention of him, how your smile widens. You do not need to hide your love for him from me.” Since being tricked by Catstro, he had taken to watching mammals body language. Even the best
con-mammals had told. It had been easy for his trained eyes to pick up on Judy’s reactions to even the slightest mention of Nick.

“It’s that obvious, huh?” Judy laughed humourlessly, paws playing with her ears. She felt a small weight lift from her shoulders as she came clean, lightened by the fact someone else now knew how she felt, that she had someone she could talk to about it.

Mr. Big offered the rabbit a fond smile. “Judy, I am an old mammal and have seen love between many. The look on your face when someone mentions Nicky is the same look my Fru has when someone mentions her husband.”

Paws falling to her lap Judy sighed. “I can’t tell him how I feel, not yet anyway.”

“Your secret is safe with Koslov and I. You tell him when you are ready, my child, do not let anyone push you. That boy would be a fool to not return your affections.” A knock at the door broke Judy and Mr. Big from their conversation. “They’re here. You know that you can change your mind if you wish and stay up here while I tend to business. I will not think differently of you.” He gave her one last chance to sit it out.

“I appreciate that Sir, but I want to be there. I know you’re a mammal of your word, and he’ll be dealt with, but I need to see it with my own eyes, so that I can tell Nick I personally saw it.” Judy had no idea how the evening would go from here on out. The plan had been for Raymond and Kevin to ambush Catstro and his gang at the warehouse before tying them up and bringing them to Mr. Big’s home.

“Very well my dear. Koslov?” The arctic shrew addressed the polar bear. Koslov stood, collecting Mr. Big in his giant paws. Judy rose from her spot on the floor, staying behind the polar bear bodyguard as he crossed the room to another door. He opened it, ensuring he didn't jostle his boss before he started to make his way down the spiral staircase. Judy followed, ears upright as she zoned in on the sounds from the room below.

They emerged in Mr. Big’s office, the other polar bear members of his mob standing around the chamber. Before the desk stood Raymond, giant paw resting on Catstro’s shoulder, a fabric bag over the caracals face. Just behind him and to the left stood Kevin and Amos, both of them holding ropes that had been wrapped around the paws of Catstro’s cronies. They too had fabric bags over their heads. Taking the office seat, Koslov transferred Mr. Big to his small chair. Koslov then offered Judy a paw, and the rabbit took it, accepting his help as she climbed up onto the desk to sit beside Mr. Big. Her hind paws swung over the edge, ready to knock out Catstro should he frustrate her.

With a wave of his hand, Mr. Big asked for the fabric bags to be removed. The polar bears uncovered their guests, ripping the tape from their mouths with a little more force than necessary. It took Catstro a moment to get his bearings but as his eyes focused on Mr. Big Judy tried to hide her smirk, enjoying the way Catstro’s heartbeat momentarily skyrocketed. “Surprise!”

“Mr. Big, Sir, wow you look very well! How longs it been? Five years? Ten?” Catstro pulled out all the charm he could muster. His body was tense at the sight of the arctic shrew sat on the desk. He’d gone underground after conning the fool out of his money, killed the mammals that came snooping. He thought he’d gotten away with it, but now…

“You!” His gaze found the rabbit cop sat beside the mob boss. He hadn’t expected her to be rubbing shoulders with the mob; she was too much of a golden girl.

“Me.” Judy crossed her arms over her chest, staring at the caracal. Her sharp hearing picked up
again on the slight stress-related acceleration of the cat's heartbeat.

Catstro’s mind worked through several situations quickly, trying to find the best angle. The shrew would be the most difficult one to break but the bunny? He smirked. “How cute. First Nicholas has you make his drops while he flees town and now he has you fighting his battles for him. He always was pathetic.” He aimed for the rabbit’s weakness. Some light digging had uncovered a plethora of information about the bunny cop, many predators were still angry with her for branding them all as savages with her little press conference speech and had been more than happy to speak up. What had been most interesting was her bond with fox indebted to him. He was her weakness.

Judy’s paws clenched, arms still folded, but she maintained her calm outward appearance. “That’s rich coming from the mammal who went underground the moment he heard he was being hunted.” She shot back, opening the floor for Mr. Big.

Mr. Big had remained silent, letting Judy speak to the caracal first. He used it as an opportunity to read the cat. He seemed to like finding mammal's weaknesses and using them against them. It was a coward’s tactic.

“Ah yes, my investment. I was perhaps a little careless with my money. It's an old habit. I spend my life trying not to be careless – ladies and kits can be careless, but not gentlemammals. However, I do believe you owe me an explanation. You’re a slippery one, Catstro.” Mr. Big was at ease, knowing he had the upper hand on his home turf.

“I invested your money like I promised. I can go and get it for you now if you'd like?” Catstro made to move, but Raymond tightened his paw on the caracal's shoulder, enjoying the way the cat flinched.

“You want to leave so early? We’ve barely started. What sort of mammal would I be if I did not show you some hospitality?” Kevin and Amos forced Catstro’s cronies to their knees. Their paws were still bound with thick rope. They were shaking, Judy detecting the faint tremors in their bodies. They’d probably spent so much time lording themselves over other mammals, thinking they were untouchable with Catstro as their ringleader. How the tides had turned.

Catstro caught the reflection of his crew in the room’s window. He paid them little mind. They were expendable. “I wonder what your boss would say if he knew his golden girl was trying to make deals with other mammals and paying off con-mammals debts? I wonder how he'd react knowing you're also rubbing shoulders with a crime boss?” he smirked, attention turning to Judy as the corners of his lips lifted just enough to show a flash of canines. “Oh, he would be disappointed! You’d probably lose your badge, be shamed by the press, forced to run back to your country hovel. Alas, you wouldn't be able to take Nicholas with you. He's still mine, after all.”

“Nicky is no longer your concern. His debt is gone.” Mr. Big brushed aside Catstro’s claim.

“You don't get to decide that.” The caracal shot back. Nicholas was his and would be until his death, then he’d own his mother should she outlive him, and then the rabbit cop would be next.

“You seem to have forgotten your place in the world, Catstro. You are but a big fish in a small pond.” Mr. Big shook his head.

“Doesn't change the fact that ol’ Nicholas owes me over $200,000. I may be a big fish in a small pond, but I'm very comfortable where I am.” Catstro shook his head, amused.

“And you owe me $1 million, putting you in my debt. So how about we make an arrangement. You let Nicky out of his debt, you and your gang do not bother him, Judy, or their families, and
you walk away from here a free mammal, I do not take my revenge for you robbing me.”

Catstro laughed. “Like I said, I have your money, so I’m therefore not in your debt. If you’ll just let me go and…”

“Enough. I’m tired of your games. Do I look like I need that $1 million? No. I am more than comfortable. Besides, if you truly had my $1 million to paw, you would be a rich cat, living in a home like mine, making Nicky run your errands as payment. No. The fact you chase him for money, keep tabs on his whereabouts, you do not have my $1 million. You lie to me. What have I ever done to make you treat me so disrespectfully?” Mr. Big shook his head, disappointed.

“I do not disrespect you, Sir. Let’s talk, negotiate a deal, gentlemammal to gentlemammal. Among reasonable mammals, problems of business can always be solved.” Catstro saw an opportunity. Though he hated the idea of making a deal with the shrew, his father had always taught him to know his enemies and understand how they work.

Mr. Big waved a paw, requesting Catstro to continue. He would indulge the caracal; let him dig his own grave. Catstro glanced around the room. “I was under the impression that you and I could talk alone.”

Mr. Big had to hide his smile. As if he would be alone in the room with the cat. Every member of their world knew that a mob boss was never alone, especially when faced with their enemy. “I trust these mammals with my life. If I were to ask them to leave it would be an insult.”

“I can respect that.” Catstro mentally cursed. “I have an idea, a way we can both work together – mutually beneficial.” He started his pitch. “I will pay you back your $1 million, clear my debt, and as a sign of good will I’ll stop adding interest to Nicholas’ debt, drop his payment amount each month. You get your money, the noose around Nicholas’ neck is loosened, and the rabbit stays off my back.”

“I asked you to stop adding interest or reduce his payments last month, and you said no deal. Change your mind now your tail is on the line?” Judy couldn’t stop herself from butting in, her arms still folded across her chest.

“I’d watch your tongue, rabbit. My tail isn’t the only one on the line here. I’m sure the ZPD would not be too pleased to find they have a crooked cop working for them.” Catstro shot back, hard amber eyes finding Judy.

It was that thought which had bothered Judy the past month as they planned for this evening. Did this make her a crooked cop? She knew things worked differently in this world, that most mammals exacted their own revenge rather than going through legal means. While it went against everything she had been brought up to believe, she knew that Catstro was a threat not only to Nick but many other mammals, and he needed to be taken care of. Her association with Mr. Big did put her in an awkward position, but Judy had already proved that she was loyal to the ZPD. She’d spent her whole life training for her job. She’d staked her much loved and hard-earned badge on the night howler case.

Catstro was on a roll. “Did ol’ Nicholas tell you about his time working at Hotel Verglas, by the way? He was banging cocktail waitresses two at a time.” Catstro baited Judy, hoping the fuzzy bunny would react. Knowing about her bond with the fox, how he had trusted her with his monthly payments, had led him to suspect that the pair were involved. It disgusted him. Interspecies relationships disgusted him. They were abhorrent, against nature.

Judy only just found the strength to keep her poker face. Nick hadn’t mentioned anything about a
hotel, or cocktail waitresses. His business was his business though, even if the thought of Nick with others made her heart clench and her gut twist. She didn’t have any right to be jealous, especially not with matters of the past.

Mr. Big sighed, tired of Catstro’s games. “You and I both know I sent Nicky to work at the hotel as a bellboy, to gather information about the owner. We also both know that boy would not sully his paws by partaking in such libidinous behavior. Stop trying to get a rise of Judy. It's insulting to her. It's insulting to me. You come into my home and insinuate that a member of my family would partake in carnal pleasures in exchange for information, degrade themselves in such a manner?” Mr. Big shook his head, disappointed and disrespected. Though his dealings were not all above board, he did have some rules in place for those in his employ, lines that were not to be crossed. Sex in exchange for information was one of them.

Judy had to hide her relief. Though she had no idea what Nick had been up to while in Mr. Big’s employ she was aware he had been arrested a few times in the past, his original application form enough proof as he’d hastily corrected one of his answers. On a slow day, she'd called up his file, tried her hardest not to laugh at the disgruntled expression he wore in his mug shot before she'd read up on why he’d been arrested. There was nothing since he'd started working for Mr. Big, now that Judy could put dates to his time in the shrew’s employ, but before that he'd had a string of minor offenses – breaking and entering, petty theft, antisocial behavior. There was nothing to cause any real alarm.

“I do not accept your deal. Nicky is a moot point. He has left our world behind. Besides, I am tired of your disrespect, tired of your games. You may claim to have my $1 million to pay me back, but we both know you do not, and even if you did, that is not the payment I now want. You have lied to my face. Disrespected me. Disrespected my family. You have lived like a fool, and now you will come to a fool’s end. Ice ‘em.”

“No no no!” Catstro’s calm façade slipped as Raymond lifted him from the floor with one paw, the other paw pulling the rug away and lifting the cover off the ice pit. “Mr. Big, Sir, please, this was just a misunderstanding! Please!” The caracal begged as Raymond held him over the water. Paws flailing and panic etched on his face, Catstro tried to break free. Mr. Big remained silent, stony gaze set on the caracal as he gave a flick of his paw.

In a fluid motion, Raymond dropped Catstro into the icy water; the cat’s scream pierced the air before the polar bear slid the wooden cover back over the hole, muffling the sound. Judy held her breath, ears drooping and eyes widening as she listened to the thumping under the wooden panel, the gargled screams and hisses, the sound of claws scraping against the wood. The sounds of a mammal dying. She finally remembered to breathe, and it only took a few minutes before the room fell silent.

Catstro’s gang shook, wide eyes focused on the wooden floor panel. Their ringleader was gone, and no one would protect them now. With another flick of Mr. Big’s paw, Raymond removed the wooden cover. There, face down in the icy water, Catstro bobbed.

Judy couldn’t stop herself from looking. She’d never seen a dead body before, none of her cases that intense yet. Morbid curiosity and the drive to know he was actually dead fuelled her. Catstro’s fur was soaked, and she could see claws missing from his paws, from where he’d tried to scrabble his way out. The blood from the wounds mixed with the ice water, tinting it red. The tufts of fur on the ends of his ears swished in the light current. He was silent, and Judy’s acute hearing confirmed he was dead. Guilt at his death being on her paws was only slightly soothed by the relief that Nick was now free of his debt, that Catstro would never harm him or Marian.
“Revenge is a dish best served cold, my child. His death is on my paws, not yours.” Mr. Big seemed to read her mind. Judy tore her eyes from the dead caracal to look at the mob boss, swallowing. “He betrayed me, and he got what he deserved. Now…” Mr. Big turned his focus to Catstro’s gang.

They cowered under his gaze. “I don’t like violence, boys. I’m a business mammal. Blood is a big expense. Your leader, though, he tested me. I do not have the time or patience to be tested. Let this serve as a warning. Nicky’s debt has been wiped; you will not try to extort any more money from him. You will not bother him, or Judy, or their families. You will not bother me or seek revenge. If I hear even a whisper that any of you are sniffing around Judy, Nicky or their families well, let me tell you something, my friends, I’m going to make so much trouble for you, you won’t know what hit you. Do you understand?”

The two raccoons, the lynx, wolverine, maned wolf, and jackal all nodded, eyes wide and heartbeats racing. Judy had to stop herself from smiling in victory. “I didn’t quite catch that,” Mr. Big lifted a paw to his ear.

“Y-yes Sir, we understand.” The predators spoke in chorus.

“Good, excellent.” Mr. Big turned his focus to Amos and Kevin. “Take them to the middle of the tundra and leave them there. They’ll either survive the walk home or they won’t.” Amos and Kevin nodded; hauling the six mammals up to their hind paws before they were dragged trembling from the room.

Raymond slid the wooden cover back over the ice pit. “He will float for a while, but the water will drag him down eventually. He will join the others at the bottom.” Mr. Big and Judy watched as Raymond put the rug back, returning the room to its usual state before he left, taking the stairs they had come down earlier.

“They will not bother you or Nicky ever again, my child.” Mr. Big turned his attention back to Judy, concerned by her silence. He had not expected her to be chatty, one could never prepare for witnessing death, but he had thought she would at least ask some questions.

“Thank you, Sir.” Judy offered him a smile. Her thanks were heartfelt, she truly was grateful for him taking care of the problem.

“We are even for this matter, though I still owe you for saving Fru’s life.” Judy went to shake her head, but Mr. Big cut her off. “My child, in this world favors are more valuable than any amount of money. I know you are not in the business of collecting favors but, if I may pass on some advice, I suggest you obtain them. The world is a complicated and fickle place; you never know when you may need to call upon someone. Now, with this evening’s business taken care of, we can move on to more pleasurable matters. Fru and little Judy are out having dinner with friends, unfortunately, but you are welcome to join me for a drink and wait for them?” Mr. Big offered. He didn’t know if the young rabbit needed some company for a while as she processed the evening’s events.

Judy shook her head; acutely aware that time was marching on. “That’s very kind of you, but I’m afraid I need to head home. Nick calls me on drop days, and he’ll get suspicious if he see’s I’m here.”

Mr. Big didn’t bother to hide his smile at the way Judy’s face lit up as she mentioned Nick, the doe’s love for the fox endearing. “Very well my dear. Mr. Manchas will take you home. Please pass on my good wishes to Nicky.”

“I will Sir, thank you.” Judy leaned in, offering Mr. Big their standard cheek kisses. Raymond
returned, Judy’s bag in his paws. “Thank you, Raymond.” The polar bear offered her a sincere nod, gesturing with a paw for Judy to follow him to Mr. Manchas.

Before Judy could reach the door, Mr. Big spoke up again. Judy turned to look at the mob boss as he was talking. “One final thing, Judy. I know it is none of my concern, but I suggest you tell that boy about this evening sooner rather than later. I have known him eleven years, and I know he is worried about you while he is away at the academy, concerned that Catstro and his gang may hurt you. Ease his concerns, let him know he is a free mammal.”

“I’ll tell him soon, don’t worry Sir,” Judy said farewell, following Raymond of the house. Mr. Manchas greeted her outside, holding the limo door open for her. The ride home was silent, and Judy fiddled with her phone, the screen lighting up with the photo of her and Nick. She couldn’t control her smile. As the car slowed to a stop outside her home, Mr. Manchas helped her out, limo idling as he waited for her to disappear inside her home and lock the door behind her. Satisfied she was safe, he pulled the car from the curb, heading back to Tundratown.

Judy dropped her bag by the door, placing her keys on the small table. She’d only taken a few steps into the living room when her phone rang. Nick’s smiling face flashed up on the screen, and she quickly accepted the Muzzletime call, desperate to see him.

“Hey Slick!” Judy grinned, moving further into the living room to sit on the couch.

“Hey Carrots, how was the drop?” Nick sat in the canteen at the academy again, his entire focus on Judy. He wanted to get the chat about the drop out of the way first, and then move on to more pleasant topics. Thankfully the days training had consisted of endurance running and firearms training. Though Nick had still worried about Judy, the activities had helped him relax. Nick’s years on the streets had given him decent stamina, and the fresh air had helped clear his mind. Shooting a gun had also been therapeutic, and with his sharp vision, he’d outperformed the other cadets.

Judy couldn’t stop her smile. “There were no problems at all, Catstro was just a bit colder than usual.”
Coming Clean

Chapter Notes

Some soul searching, some heartache, and some fluff.

On a side note, you know how Nick asked if Bellwether counts herself when she tries to get to sleep? Well at Easter, do you think Judy and the other bunnies deliver Easter eggs to kits?...

Judy tossed and turned in bed. Catstro had been iced six days ago, and Judy had been struggling with sleep ever since, the image of the dead caracal seared into her brain. It wasn’t the outcome she’d hoped for if she was honest. Judy had hoped Mr. Big would frighten the caracal, force him to give up Nick’s debt. She’d been naive. The underbelly of society may have worked on fear, but on occasion, an example had to be set. If she’d spoken up, asked Mr. Big to show some mercy, would that have been a better way of dealing with the cat? Indebting him to Judy, making sure he knew the only reason he was alive was because of her. She would have been disciplined for her insubordination, but would it have been worth it?

Judy turned in bed once again, eyes finding her badge on her nightstand. Her heart lurched. Trust, integrity, bravery. Could she still wear her badge and say with all of her heart that she carried those qualities? That she served all mammals and protected them? Here she was, having sat back and watched an animal die and she hadn’t raised a paw to stop it. It had all happened so quickly, and she’d been riding such an emotional rollercoaster that she hadn’t had the chance to process it until after her call with Nick. It had all hit her like a freight train at 100 mph. She’d only just made it to the bathroom before she’d thrown up. With her stomach empty she’d continued to dry-heave, tears wetting her fur as she’d cried. She’d stayed in the bathroom all night, questioned herself into the early hours of the morning before exhaustion had finally caused her to fall asleep. She’d been late for work and Bogo had chewed her out in his office. She’d apologized, promised to never do it again, and had left to find Wolford so they could head out on patrol.

Judy rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling. She’d had many phone calls with Mr. Big during their month of preparation. She ran through their last conversation before that night.

“My child, Raymond and Kevin have made all the necessary preparations for the 10th. I will have Mr. Manchas meet you in the alley behind the market.” Mr. Big had kept her informed through their planning. They needed to surprise Catstro and his gang, catch them off guard. As Judy held all of the information, Mr. Big had consulted her on several occasions. This was to be their last call.

“What are you going to do to them?” She asked quietly. Mr. Big had his own score to settle with Catstro, Judy was well aware of that.

“You don’t have to worry about that, Judy. Whatever happens, it will be on my paws, not yours.” Mr. Big assured her.

“Sir, I’m the one whose been giving you information. Whatever happens is my fault.” Judy couldn’t help but feel responsible.
“They’re dangerous, Judy. They have no morals, no code of conduct. They have stolen from me. We will try reason, and if that fails, an example will be set.” Mr. Big sounded so casual like this was an everyday occurrence for him.

Judy’s blood ran cold. “An example? Sir, you don’t mean…

Mr. Big sighed. “My child, a leopard never changes its spots. I may be able to frighten them into getting rid of Nicky’s debt, I might be able to intimidate them into paying me back, but there will be nothing stopping them from doing it again to other mammals.”

“I don’t want anyone to die.” Judy panicked. She’d hoped he’d frighten them a little, maybe rough them up. She never wanted anyone dead.

“Judy, my dear, death is the only certainty we have in life.”

“Their death will be my fault.” She protested, not wanting that weight on her.

“Have I not just told you that their blood will be on my paws?” Mr. Big soothed, aware of Judy’s sweet nature. He had been expecting such a reaction from her.

“I can’t help how I feel, Sir.” Judy knew she was emotional, it was a running joke now with her and Nick.

“If you want to back out now I understand. My world is new to you, the way we do things here is new to you. I do not want you becoming too entrenched in it all. Good hearts do not belong here. After this we will part ways for a while, I shall only call you when I have no other choice. Know though that as much as I love you, if you decide to remain onboard, then you are not to challenge whatever decision I make in front of Catstro and his gang. Underneath my rough exterior, I am caring towards those I love, but a public challenge will mean I will be forced to discipline you or I will be seen as weak.” Mr. Big warned her. He didn’t like the idea of having to discipline Judy, he loathed the idea, but if she were to publically challenge him, then he would be left with no choice. It was the mob way.

Judy gulped. “I understand, Sir. I’ll be there.”

“Good. Now, you must rest. I will see you in a few nights.” Mr. Big had other business to attend to, and as much as he enjoyed speaking with Judy, the night was only so long.

“Goodnight, Sir.”

Judy had gone into the evening knowing death could be an option for Catstro and his cronies, and as Catstro had drowned she’d heeded Mr. Big’s words and hadn’t challenged him. Now though, she wondered if she should have. She would have been punished sure, but wasn’t that better than having a mammal die? Her head hurt from all the questions, her heart heavy with guilt. Yes, she had freed Nick, but had she inadvertently condemned herself? Reaching for the box of sleeping pills she’d purchased on her way home from work the day after Catstro’s death, Judy popped two, swallowing them dry. She’d only bought them so she would be guaranteed some sleep and wouldn’t be late for work again, unwilling to face an angry Chief Bogo, reluctant to have anyone ask too many questions. She lay back, waiting for them to kick in.

Nick sank back into his bunk, staring up at the ceiling that was only a meter or so above him. As the smallest mammal at the academy, he’d been assigned the top bunk of the only bunk bed in the
dorm room. He’d contemplated complaining, asking to be moved to another bed, but honestly, he was just pleased to have been accepted into the academy in the first place. It wasn’t like he spent much time in bed. Usually, he was too busy training. By the time he was ready to call it a night he was too exhausted to really care about sleeping arrangements. It was better than his old cardboard box that was for sure.

Nick closed his eyes, letting his paws rest on his belly. It was May 16th, and he’d been at the academy for 6 weeks now. It had been tough, but Nick had gotten into a routine. He was building strength, using muscles he’d never had to before, and his mind was a lot sharper. Sure, Nick had had his wits about him when he’d been a con-mammal, but the academy was a lot more mentally taxing than he’d anticipated. He was grateful for the weekly phone calls with Judy and his mom. His mom wanted to know everything he was up to, and she was already starting to plan what she’d wear to his graduation. Nick had laughed, enjoying the way she’d fussed. It felt good to know his mom was proud of him.

His calls with Judy mainly revolved around her wanting to know how he was doing, and Nick wanting to know if she was staying safe with whatever case she was working on. He worried about her, frustrated that he couldn’t have her back on cases yet. During their second phone call, she’d informed him that she’d cracked the necklace case. She’d been bouncing with excitement, talking avidly as she’d explained about Wilfred, the broke wolf who had stolen the jewelry to sell it and had framed another mammal for it. Judy, his smart bunny, had worked out the real culprit and had gathered enough evidence to arrest him. Apparently, Chief Buffalo Butt wasn’t pleased with the speed in which Judy worked. She was making the rest of them look bad. Her next case had been relatively safe too, and the Chief had partnered her with Officer Wolfard. Nick had laughed at Judy being paired with the timber wolf. He could still hear her indignation when he’d mockingly howled down the phone. “No, I’m not going to howl around him, Nick! Cheese and crackers, how old are you?!”

He’d called her on May 10th after her drop, but she’d only touched briefly on it. All of the extra work Judy was doing to make ends meet while he was away made Nick’s chest tighten with guilt. The debt was his to carry, not Judy’s. His ever-optimistic best friend brushed off his concerns and bounded into the next topic of conversation with her usual level of enthusiasm whenever he brought it up. He’d received a few bits of mail from her in the past six weeks – a care package of Hopps Family Farm blueberries, a few letters with photos of the things Judy was getting up to, and paint swatches for his bedroom. Without constant access to his phone, it was hard to keep up to date with her. Nick realized just how much he relied on his cell phone. Boy, did he miss Furbook and Instapaw. He’d settled on a forest green for his bedroom, circling the swatch he’d liked the most before sending it back to her. She’d promised not to paint his room without him.

“Wilde,” Major Friedkin barked, startling the fox. He’d been ready to sleep, tiredness creeping up on him. “You’re going home tomorrow morning for the weekend. I expect you back here at twenty-one hundred hours on Sunday,” she gave her orders, leaving the room and the cadets to themselves.

Nick’s eyes widened, the tip of his tail flicking happily. He’d get to go home, see his mom and Judy. He’d have to get up early and pack. Judy had told him during their weekly phone call that she had the next few days off. Nick paused. It couldn’t be a coincidence. It was mid-May, and Judy’s birthday was this weekend. He’d asked his mom to pick up a present for her, and she’d posted him her card, which Nick had filled in and returned to his mom, ready for her to give to Judy on Sunday. If Nick were going home though, he’d get to spend Judy’s birthday with her. The thought made his tail thump happily against the bed. He still had his keys to their apartment in his locker. He could surprise her with his return, stop by the little bakery at the end of their street and pick up some fresh bagels for her.
“Aww Nicholas gets to see his bunny,” Tony Clawford piped up. Nick rolled his eyes. He and the tiger had had a rocky start. Tony hadn’t been thrilled to have a fox joining them at the academy, but after Nick had helped him master the ice wall, they’d formed the start of a friendship. The other cadets had warmed to him after, taking their cues from the Bengal.

“It’s okay Stripes, I’m sure they’ll let you go home and see your wife soon…and your mistress,” the tod shot back, earning a round of boisterous laughter from the other mammals in the dorm. The hazing had been pretty bad, to begin with, and had cumulated with a night of drinking cheap liquor that some of the cadets had managed to sneak into the academy. If there was one thing Nick was excellent at it was drinking other mammals under the table. It had been useful when he’d been executing elaborate hustles – inebriated animals were more frivolous with their cash. Of course, the other cadets assumed Nick’s small size meant he would be the first to fall. He was the last mammal standing, but not before a very drunk Tony had confessed to having a mistress his wife was completely unaware of, a mistress who was into some very eyebrow-raising antics. Nick shuddered. He’d seen and heard a lot in his life, and little fazed him, but the things Tony said he and mistress did? He really didn’t want to think about it.

“Beside’s, she’s not my bunny,” Nick corrected Tony for what had to be the hundredth time. It had become a running joke, after Nick’s first phone call with Judy, that the little country bunny had ensnared the scary, city fox. Nick let it all go over his head, but it would be unlike him to not bother correcting the knuckleheaded tiger.

“Don’t deny it, Wilde. You want a piece of that fluffy tail,” Horton, one of several elephant cadets, broke in. The other cadets chuckled, all eyes turning to Nick.

Nick sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of his bunk, careful not to smack his head on the ceiling. “Those blue balls are really starting to hurt eh, Horton?” He deflected.

The mere mention of Judy had Nick’s full attention, the sight of violets in the fields around the academy reminded him of her eyes, and the sound of her voice during their calls soothed him after a long, hard week. “You lovesick fool.” It had terrified Nick, realizing that he loved her. He’d never loved any mammal outside of his family, and he’d certainly never had romantic feelings for another mammal before. Nick found himself wishing he had internet access so he could Zoogle rabbit customs and habits. It would make everything so much easier if he knew what he was supposed to do to convey his feelings. In the meantime, he’d contain his feelings and wait until after graduation before even thinking about acting on them. There was too much on his plate at the moment.

Horton snorted, the sound hilarious as his trunk wafted through the air with the force of his action. “I swear Wilde if you get laid this weekend we’re gonna need all the details.” Nick laughed. In the past six weeks, he’d slowly gotten used to the other cadets. They reminded him of frat boys, hazing one another and wanting to know all the juicy details of conquests. “Sorry fellas, my mom raised a gentlemammal, so you’ll have to get your rocks off some other way.” Nick sank back into his bed, staring up at the ceiling once again. “Thanks, Horton, now I’m thinking about sex with Judy.” Nick rubbed his eyes, willing the mental images away.

The boys groaned, knowing that if Nick didn’t want to share they’d never get the info from him. Major Friedkin interrupted them all, banging her way into the dorm. “Lights out, cadets.” She turned the lights off, staying in the doorway while the cadets climbed into bed. When she was sure everyone was in bed, she finally left the room.

Nick pulled the blanket up over him, knowing his body clock would wake him at 5:30 am. He still hated mornings, but Major Friedkin had them in a routine now, and he really didn’t want to be
woken again by a bucket of freezing cold water. No one respected that he was naturally nocturnal. Closing his eyes, Nick grinned. He’d get the first train home and surprise Judy.

It was 8:30 am as Nick left Snack Rack, a bag of fresh bagels in one paw and his duffle bag in the other. Major Friedkin had given him his phone back as he’d left the academy and he’d called his mom, knowing she was an early riser. Nick had stopped by her house first to collect Judy’s present and card, and Marian had insisted that the pair of them join her for dinner that evening. Nick had agreed if only so he could get away quickly, too excited to see Judy. It didn’t take him long to walk down the street and down the steps to the front door of their apartment, but he paused at the bottom of the steps. There was a doormat. A cutesy doormat. With carrots on it. Nick groaned, trying to hide the way the corners of his lips quirked upwards into a smile. Placing his bag down, he pulled his keys from his pocket. Unlocking the door, he propped it open with a hind paw, picking up his bag. Once inside he shut the door quietly and left his keys on the small table by the door, next to Judy’s. She’d added two little paw key rings, one shaped like a rabbit paw and the other like a fox paw. “You’re adorable, Carrots.”

Moving through their apartment, Nick spotted a few more changes. There was some new furniture, and Judy had brought some more books. She’d told Nick during one of their phone calls that she actually enjoyed reading after work. A few times she’d spent ten minutes or so reading aloud for him. Nick didn’t care for the stories, but the sound of Judy’s voice was soothing.

He placed the bagels down on the kitchen counter and was grateful to see the coffee machine next to the microwave. He’d missed his coffee while at the academy. However, the sharp tang of illness tickled his nose, making Nick frown. Nick found himself following it worried Judy was unwell. He stopped at the bathroom door, the smell slightly stronger. It would be faint to other mammals, but his keen nose picked up on it. He dumped his bag in his room and, concerned Judy was sick, Nick moved quickly to her room, pushing the door open to search for her. She was curled up in bed, blanket wrapped around her, large ears smoothed down. Nick crossed the room, crouching next to her bed. He spent a moment watching her sleep. She looked okay, no visible signs of illness. The purple box on the nightstand drew his attention. Picking it up, he turned it over. “Sleeping pills?” His frown deepened, troubled. Placing the box back on the nightstand he raised a paw, stroking it lightly across her head. Judy snuffled, shifting slightly. “Rise and shine Carrots,” he cooed, using a claw to scratch the top of Judy’s head.

Judy woke slowly, the sleeping pills still heavy in her system. Her violet eyes finally opened, finding Nick’s emerald ones. “Nick?” She breathed, completely caught off-guard by the tod’s presence in their apartment. Was she imagining things? Did the pills cause hallucinations?

“Hey, Fluff.” Nick kept his tone soft, still concerned about her health.

“Oh, Nick!” Judy rose as quickly as she could, a little unsteady on her hind paws as she pulled the fox into a tight hug, burying her face in his neck.

“Hey,” Nick soothed, wrapping Judy up in his arms, holding her close. He could feel her little heart jackhammering, could smell the faint trace of sleep on her.

“What’re you doing back? Why didn’t you call?” Judy asked, voice muffled by his fur and then, in a turn that surprised Nick, she started to sob.

“Carrots?” Nick tried to pull back, but Judy tightened her grip on him, refusing to let him go. Her whole body was shaking, loud, high-pitched squeaks coming from her as she clung to him. “You’re scaring me.” Nick barely contained his panic. He dropped from his crouch to sit on the floor, keeping a tight hold on Judy. “What happened? Judy?” Her name slipped from him before he could
stop it, his heart breaking at her distress and his mind racing as he tried to work out what was going on. This wasn’t the reunion he’d hoped for.

“I-I did something so terrible.” She sobbed

“What do you mean? Carrots, what happened?” Nick lifted a paw, running it down Judy’s back as he tried to soothe her, his panic building further.

Between her sobs, Judy spoke, her sentences incomplete. “I went to Mr. Big. Told him. Told him about Catstro.” She hiccupped. “Raymond. Kevin. Caught him. Mr. Big iced him; I saw it happen. Nick. I didn’t stop it.”

Nick’s blood ran cold. “W-What?”

“He owed Mr. Big. Stole $1 million from him. I only wanted to scare him, make him clear your debt. He died. I got him killed.” Judy had been bottling it up since Bogo had chewed her out. She’d tried to throw herself into work, but her heart hadn’t been in it. The sight of Nick, getting to hold him again and knowing that he was now safe; it allowed her to finally cry it out.

“He’s…?” Nick couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Judy, his Judy, goody-two-shoes ’stop in the name of the law’ Judy had gone to Mr. Big about Catstro?

“Dead. I saw it. It’s my fault.” She buried her nose further into Nick’s fur, suffocating herself with his scent.

“No, Judy. It’s not your fault, Mr. Big, he…” Nick was still struggling to process all of the information that had just been dumped on him.

“I told him where to find Catstro.” She pointed out, paws scrabbling as she tried to hold on to Nick a little more, pull him impossibly closer.

“What Mr. Big did with that information in on him.” Nick found his tongue. He knew Mr. Big was not a mammal that could be pushed around.

“I helped! He took an icy swim right in front of me. I heard him dying.” Her crying picked up again, the image of Catstro as he was dropped into the ice pit swam to the front of her mind, and the noises he’d made as he’d died rang in her ears.

“It wasn’t your fault, Carrots.” Nick tried to soothe the rabbit. He grabbed her face, pulling her back from his neck so he could look straight into her eyes. His voice was firm and his eyes focused, as he demanded that she pay attention to his next words. “Listen to me. It is not your fault. Not at all. Catstro was playing a dangerous game, and he knew it. He died because of his own mistakes. Mr. Big doesn’t kill mammals just for the fun of it.”

“B-But Nick-“

“No. No. You are not blaming yourself for this. Is that what the pills are for? You’re struggling to sleep because of this?” Nick cut her off.

Judy nodded, still sniffing, paws shaking as she grasped at Nick’s shirt. “I shouldn’t have told you about the debt. I shouldn’t have left for the academy. Dammit.” Nick cursed, mentally kicking himself. It had been too much to ask of her, too much for someone as sweet and good and kind as Judy.

Judy’s eyes widened, paws shooting up to rest on Nick’s chest. “No! Nick, no! I’m glad you told
me. You need to be at the academy, fresh start remember?”

Nick shook his head, eyes still focused on Judy. “So I get a fresh start, and you have to suffer? No. That’s not how this works.”

“Nick—”

“No,” Judy whined at Nick’s rebuttal, the noise high-pitched and distressing, tugging at his heartstrings. “Come here.” He pulled her back in, tucking her under his muzzle. “Shh, it’s okay.” He soothed as another round of tears started. Nick found himself putting every ounce of effort into not crying too. Judy was in pain, and there was nothing he could do about it.

After a moment her sobs slowed. “I’m a bad cop.” She sniffled.

“Carrots, no, you’re not a bad cop.” No matter what, Nick knew Judy did everything out of the goodness of her heart. Everything Judy did, she did because she thought she was helping. “You’ve stopped him from hurting many other mammals, ruining countless other animals lives. Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do? Protect the vulnerable?” Nick had paid attention in the academy classroom, knew the ZPD mantra off by heart. It was a little flimsy, could be interpreted in a number of ways, and he hoped to use that to his advantage now.

“I’m meant to protect everyone.” Judy protested.

“You can’t protect everyone, Judy. No matter how good you are at your job, no matter how much you want to.” It was a sad fact of life.

“I could’ve stopped it though, stopped Mr. Big from killing him.” Judy was adamant, having had a chance to think over that evening.

“I know how that world works, Judy. I spent ten years in it. If you’d of challenged Mr. Big in front of Catstro and his gang he would’ve been forced to discipline you for your insubordination.” Nick ran a paw down Judy’s ears. The thought of her being punished made his gut twist. He’d only ever made the mistake of being insubordinate once. “Why did you want him to get rid of the debt? We were doing fine. Why would you…?”

“I didn’t want it looming over you. I wanted you to have a fresh start after graduation.” Judy confessed her voice muffled by Nick’s fur. Nick sighed. Judy was too kind-hearted for her own good. “I just wanted to make it better, but I made it worse.” Judy sniffled, fur soaked from her tears and her nose running.

“You meant well. Honestly, I’m more worried about the favor Mr. Big will ask for in return. I’m here, though, we’re a team.” Nick wouldn’t leave her, whatever Mr. Big asked of her he’d stay by her side and help her with it.

“No favor, he said we’re equal.” At least Judy didn’t have that weight on her shoulders.

“Then why are you worrying?” Nick couldn’t see the problem. With no favor owed to Mr. Big, Judy was in the clear.

“Catstro’s dead.” Judy reminded Nick, pulling back a little to raise her paws and wipe at her eyes, trying to clear away her tears.

“Countless other mammals are dead because of him, many innocent animals. He was a sacrificial lamb, Carrots. His death stops others from dying.” Nick pointed out. Catstro’s death meant Nick no longer had to fear that the caracal would kill him, no longer had to fear him hurting his mom. He
was certain Catstro had been threatening other mammals, too.

“I know, but I don’t feel good about it.” Part of Judy knew Catstro had it coming. He was cocky and greedy, lording over other mammals, using their debts against them. Sooner or later someone was going to try to get rid of him, Judy had just sped up the process.

Nick still couldn’t believe what Judy had done for him. The debt had been his burden, not Judy’s. Now the weight of Catstro’s death was bogging her down, and Nick found himself wishing that he’d taken care of the caracal sooner. He had connections, maybe not as many as he’d once had, but it might’ve been enough to stop Catstro. Jaw clenching, Nick took a deep breath as he gathered his thoughts. Catstro was dead. He wiped a paw down his face, unable to even comprehend it. His debt was gone. His mom was safe. But Judy...his Judy was in pain. He was still stumped that she would go to all this trouble for him. Judy had already given him a home and steered him in the direction of a good job, and now she’d freed him from his debt, saved his mom from any possible harm. She was incredible, and Nick couldn’t believe his luck that he had her in his life.

“I don’t think anyone ever feels okay when another mammal dies. You come to terms with the feelings though, and then you move on.” Nick sighed. “After my dad died I was so lost, so angry with the world. I couldn’t understand why he’d been taken from me, from mom. He was a good mammal, he worked hard, paid his taxes, helped animals in need, and he loved mom and I. It took a few years, but I began to move forward with my life.” Nick had never properly grieved for his father, never fully let go of the anger and pain, but he’d had to move on with life, to help his mom. He’d shoved his feelings into a box and left them thee, untouched, ever since.

Judy moved to nuzzle under Nick’s muzzle; instinctively seeking out his scent and the comfort it offered her. From her position in his arms, she could hear his heartbeat thudding, and Judy lost herself in the comforting rhythm. Eyes closed, she listened as Nick spoke. Without Nick, she’d been adrift, consumed by the feelings that night had stirred in her. She was conflicted. On one paw she was glad Catstro was dead, that Nick was now safe and she’d never lose him to the loan caracal, but on the other paw she felt guilty that a mammal had died.

“What was your dad’s job?” Judy’s curiosity got the better of her. She pulled back a little to look up at Nick, using a paw to wipe her nose, voice hoarse from her earlier crying. Nick hadn’t said much about his dad before, and Judy hadn’t wanted to ask Marian in case she accidently upset the vixen.

“Dad was a tailor, and my paternal grandpa was too. Dad taught mom how to sew when they started dating.” Nick remembered the story well. His mom had been hopeless with sewing before she’d met his dad. Long forgotten memories surfaced. He tried not to think of his father, the memories and his death still painful, but if it distracted Judy, then he’d happily talk about it. “They served predators predominantly. There was some substantial prejudice in the city back then, separate stores for predators and prey, different buses and bars. No prey mammal wanted to supply predators with anything, let alone suits. My paternal grandpa sailed to the Old World and found an investor, and then he came back here and opened up the first predator owned tailors in Zootopia. My dad took over the business when my grandpa died.”

The Old World. Judy had heard stories about it from Akita, had learned that their landlady was originally from a place called Zussia. Akita had told her about how different Zussia was to Zootopia. She’d showed Judy a few pictures, too. “What happened to the company?”

Nick shook his head. “I was too young to take over the company when dad died, and though mom could sew she’d never made a tailored suit in her life. She tried to plug as much money as possible into keeping it afloat, but with only her diner wages and our house to pay for the debtors came
calling and the company collapsed.”

“Would you have liked to take over the business and become a tailor?” Judy could see Nick following in his father's footsteps, she could see him owning a business and being successful.

Nick thought about it for a moment. “Perhaps. It would’ve kept me off the streets; given me a way to be connected to my dad, and it would’ve ensured mom would never need for anything. At the same time, though, it would’ve meant that I’d have never met you.”

“I’m sure being a successful tailor beats meeting me, Slick.” Judy couldn’t believe what Nick was saying.

Finding her gaze, Nick offered Judy a warm smile, his voice dropping to a soft tone. “I’m not sure it does, Carrots.”

They held one another’s gaze for a moment longer than necessary, Judy’s expression shifting into one of fondness for the fox. “Come on,” Nick murmured as he untangled himself from Judy, standing, he took one of her paws in his. Nick led her out of her bedroom and across the hall, into his room. She needed to rest. True they could’ve slept in her bed, but if Judy were struggling to sleep, then Nick figured that maybe a change of environment would be beneficial for her. Judy followed him willingly, wondering what Nick was up to but trusting him completely. Throwing his phone onto the nightstand, Nick turned to flick the bed sheets back. He paused, seeing new cream bed linens and a new forest green throw blanket.

“You bought me new bed sheets?” He asked quietly as Judy stood by his side.

Judy nodded, a light blush coloring the inside of her ears. “It’s not much I know, but it’s a start. They’re a bit nicer than the sheets we cobbled together during our first few nights here.” Her voice was quiet, hoarse from her emotional outburst. When Judy’s brothers had brought some of her belongings over from Bunnyburrow she’d asked them to bring bed sheets too, and while the sheets had served a purpose they were old and a little tatty, years of washing and drying in the Hopps warren having worn them down. Nick hadn’t minded, grateful for some sheets, but Judy had wanted to get him some new ones.

She’d bought them in a discount soft furnishings store in the Canal district during one of her lunch breaks when she’d been sent to patrol the area with Wolford. The timber wolf had teased her for being so domestic and for taking care of Nick like she was his vixen. She’d gone against her statement to Nick, back when he'd discovered the rabbit and the timber wolf had been assigned as temporary partners. One little howl from her had sent Wolford into a frenzy of howls in the middle of the street, making everyone turn to look at him. Embarrassed and annoyed, he’d learned his lesson and had never brought up the subject again, grudgingly earning a little more respect for the bunny cop and her smart thinking.

Nick took in the new bed sheets and throw blanket, touched that Judy had bought them for him. He swallowed, questioning whether Judy knew that her behavior was similar to that of a vixen’s. “They’re great, thanks, Carrots.”

“You’ll have to let me know what they’re like. They felt soft when I was making the bed.” Judy glanced at the bed, remembering the battle she'd had with the sheets when she'd been making it.

“Come on, we’ll test them together.” He gestured to the bed. He had no ulterior motive in sharing a bed. Judy’s reliance on sleeping pills told him she’d had little sleep these past few nights. She needed to rest, and he hoped she might be able to rest a little easier with him there to comfort her. “You need to sleep, and I got up really early to catch the train. We’ll nap together. I promise I’ll
keep my paws to myself, scouts honor.” He raised a paw in the Ranger Scouts symbol. Judy stared at it, her eyebrows quirking upwards. “Yeah, okay, I wasn’t a Ranger Scout.” Nick chuckled as he dropped his paw.

“It’s okay, I trust you.” Judy conceded. She was starting to feel a little tired; the emotional rollercoaster she’d just been on had drained her. She climbed up onto the bed and Nick followed behind her, but not before he discarded his shirt, which was damp from her tears. He pulled the sheets over them as Judy curled against his side, her arm sliding around his middle. He wrapped an arm around her and Judy shuffled, burrowed against him and sighed. She couldn’t get comfortable. “Nick,” she whined.

Chuckling, Nick pulled most of her torso up onto his chest, letting her rest on top of him. She settled, finding a comfy spot, head under Nick’s muzzle as he held her. He’d promised to keep his paws to himself, and he meant it, but that wouldn’t stop him from holding her.

“Thank you.” She whispered, paws smoothing over Nick’s fur.

“No Carrots, thank you.” Nick took a deep breath. “That debt. It was crippling. I was so worried that he’d hurt my mom. You made it go away.”

“I wanted you to be safe, for your mom to be safe.” The thought of either of them being hurt just wasn’t acceptable to Judy. They were good mammals.

“You risked your own safety though, Carrots. Jeez,” Nick tightened his hold on Judy. “If something had of happened to you.” The idea of Judy being hurt didn’t bear thinking about, and Nick had to screw his eyes closed, reassure himself that Judy was safe.

“It’s okay Nick, I’m here, and I’m all right.” Judy soothed the tod, butting her nose against the underside of his muzzle.

“Promise me that you won’t make such a huge decision again without speaking to me about it first, please?” Nick asked. The thought of anything happening to her because she was too gung-ho made him shake. It was why he wanted to be her partner, so he could keep an eye on her and keep her safe from harm. Yes working for the ZPD would be good for him, he would be contributing to society, but he wasn’t fooling himself – he applied for the job because of Judy.

Judy nodded, paws playing with Nick’s fur. Her brain finally realized he was shirtless and she tried to hide her blush. “I promise.”

They were silent for a while. Nick really wasn’t tired, having told a little lie to get Judy to rest. “You were allowed home for my birthday.” Judy suddenly spoke, the realization making her smile.

Nick chuckled, jostling Judy a little. “Seems Chief Buffalo Butt and the Major like to conspire behind our backs. I’m glad I came home.”

“How long are you home for?” Judy knew she hadn’t had long whenever she’d been allowed back.

“As long as you need me.” Nick would happily postpone his academy training if Judy needed him. She was more important than anything else.

“How long are you home for?” Judy knew she hadn’t had long whenever she’d been allowed back. “As long as you need me.” Nick would happily postpone his academy training if Judy needed him. She was more important than anything else.

“Nick, I’m feeling a little better now, I promise. When does Major Friedkin want you back?” Judy wasn’t in the mood to argue.

Nick sighed. “Twenty-one hundred tomorrow. I should call my mom, though. She’s invited us for dinner tonight, but we should cancel.”
“You told your mom you were coming home?” Judy and Marian spoke regularly, and they’d grown closer over the weeks Nick had been away.

“I stopped by before coming here, to pick up your birthday present.” Nick glanced at his bag, still by his bedroom door.

A soft smile crossed Judy’s lips. “You didn’t have to get my anything, you know. Having you home this weekend is enough.” Judy murmured, taking a deep breath, inhaling Nick’s scent. She couldn’t get enough of it. The tod smiled at the mention of him being home. It felt good to finally have a place he could call home.

“I know, but I wanted to get you a little something anyway.” He stroked down her ears, marveling at how soft they were. Rabbits had never let him get close enough to feel their ears before.

Judy let her chin rest on his chest, enjoying the rise and fall as he breathed. She hoped the action would leave a trace of her scent behind. It wouldn’t leave a lot, as she hadn’t properly wiped the scent gland there over his fur. She longed for the day she could wipe her scent all over him, though, and claim him as her own. Her mom had taught her that it was an act saved for mates, and no matter how much she loved Nick she didn’t want to jinx it. “I had dinner with your mom a few days ago. Do you want to go alone, spend some time with her, just the two of you?” Judy asked.

Nick shook his head. He wasn’t going to leave Judy’s side this weekend. She seemed a bit better now but Nick wasn’t taking any chances. “We’re a package deal. Besides, I don’t think mom could get tired of seeing you.” Nick knew his mom adored Judy. Whenever he called, she’d talk about their weekly dinners.

“She’s making us some throw cushions for our beds now that we’ve picked color schemes.” Judy’s voice was still soft, but she smiled at the memory of Marian showing her all the soft fabrics she’d picked out for them. “Apparently she felt the need to thank me for the fact you can now call her every week.” Judy really hadn’t needed anything in return from Marian.

“Mom likes repaying people’s kindness.” They fell silent and Nick’s mind wandered back to his debt. It had been an enormous weight on his shoulders, and he was still trying to process the fact that it was gone, that he’d never have to pay Catstro again. He’d spent the past 16 years hustling every day to pay it back, barely getting by as he handed over all his cash to the caracal. He didn’t have that worry anymore. His mom was safe. Judy, his Judy, had taken care of it, taken care of him. Though he wasn’t religious, Nick sent a prayer of thanks to any deity that was listening, eternally grateful that Judy had walked into Jumbeaux’s Café all those months ago.

“March kits are kind, affectionate, trustworthy, and charming. They’re good listeners but are shy, big-hearted, and impossible to forget. They’re not sleepy at all unless their name is Nick.” Judy whispered, breaking the silence. She’d found the description to fit him perfectly. She tipped her head, pressing her cheek to Nick’s chest.

Nick hummed in amusement, body shaking as he laughed quietly. Judy cracked a smile. Once Nick’s laughter had subsided, he spoke, paws rubbing Judy’s back. “You did your homework.”

“I always do my homework.” She pointed out, smoothing her paws over Nick’s chest.

Nick had to give her that. Judy was always prepared. “Fancy doing my academy work for me?” Her paws on his chest felt wonderful and Nick had to actively stop himself from making a sound of pleasure. He’d promised that there would be no funny business, but with her small weight on him, her scent around him, the knowledge that she’d gone to such extreme lengths to keep him safe, to protect him, it was all testing his restraint.
Judy snorted, giving Nick's chest a playful swat. “Not a chance.”

“Eh, it was worth a shot.” Nick gave the end of one of Judy’s ears a gentle tug, the sound of her laughter filling the room. Nick savored it. “That’s better.” He glanced around his room, noticing that Judy had also put some picture frames up on the walls, leaving them blank so he could put his own photos in them. The bunny he loved had been making their den more homely. He smiled. “I missed you,”

“I missed you too.” Judy murmured against his chest. Though she tried not to notice, it was hard to miss how much stronger Nick was, how much firmer his chest felt beneath her paws since their last hug on the platform of Savannah Central. Judy yawned. Smacking her lips together, she finally felt her lids grow heavy.

“Sleep, Carrots. I’ll be here when you wake.” Nick soothed. Judy’s eyes finally closed. She felt like she could sleep for the first time in days without reaching for the pills. Nick was home for the weekend, and he was the perfect salve to her wounds.

Nick watched as Judy fell asleep. The silence gave him the chance to sort through his emotions a little more, to think about Judy’s actions and what it meant for them. She was so difficult to read. She’d done something so extreme for him, to keep him safe, to protect him. Her actions went above and beyond those expected of best friends. Did that mean that she thought of him as something more than a friend? Was there the chance she could think of him as more? He focused on her breathing, the fact she sought comfort from him, seemed to enjoy being wrapped in his arms. Their friendship had come such a long way already. Nick forced himself to stay awake even though his new bed sheets were ridiculously comfortable and soft, trying to tempt him into sleep. He needed to keep watch over his emotional little bunny.
Judy woke feeling warm and relaxed, and as she opened her eyes she remembered why. Reddish-orange fur filled her vision, the undeniable scent of Nick surrounded her, and the sound of his heartbeat rang in her ears. He was home. Judy had told him about Catstro, about what she'd done. He was safe now. Marian was safe.

Crying her feelings out to Nick had been therapeutic. It probably hadn't been pretty, she could vaguely recall there being a lot of snot involved, but she felt lighter for it. Nick had given her plenty of valid reasons as to why Catstro’s death had been a good thing, why it hadn't been on her paws. It didn't mean that she felt okay about it yet, but she was starting to acknowledge that maybe it hadn't been a bad thing after all.

Nicks phone sat on the nightstand and, careful not to wake him, she leant over for it. Grabbing it with one paw she pulled it back to her, hitting the home button to bring up the time. That wasn't the first thing that caught her attention though; instead what caught her eye was the wallpaper. He'd changed it from the last time she'd borrowed his phone. Now it was a photo of her asleep on their couch, from the first night they'd moved in. She'd been snuggled under her new blanket from Marian, ears smoothed back, exhausted and somewhat in pain from the wound on her leg. As her eyes moved over the image her smile turned to a look of disbelief. Nick's paw was visible, making the rabbit ear symbol behind her head. “You're such a child, Nick.”

Finally taking note of the time her eyes widened in surprise. 2pm. Had she really been asleep for that long? Nick had mentioned they were having dinner with Marian this evening, but he hadn't given her any indication as to what time the vixen was expecting them. She needed to shower, make herself presentable. Her last dinner with Marian had been a subdued affair; Judy's internal conflict had dampened the evening. She'd apologised to Marian, claimed she was working a difficult case, and the vixen had given her a larger slice of chocolate cake for dessert to cheer her up.

“Nick,” Judy whispered, gently patting his chest, not wanting to startle him awake. The tod grumbled in his sleep, sighing heavily. “Slick,” she tried again, but still didn't get a response. His phone in one paw, she lifted the other to scritch under his muzzle. “Nick.” She called in a singsong voice.

Nick swore he could hear Judy calling him in his dream, and he felt the most wonderful scritching sensation under his muzzle. Fighting through his sleep, he became aware that he wasn't dreaming, that Judy really was calling for him, scritching him. Waking to the sight of wide violet eyes, Nick smiled. “Hey, Carrots.” He cleared his throat, groggy from sleep.

“Hey. Sleep well?” She knew it could be tough at the academy to get decent nights sleep. One of the cadets, when Judy had been there, had been a hellish snorer, and with Judy sharp hearing it had been a nightmare.

Lazy emerald eyes watched Judy, gauging her current emotional state. “I needed that nap. You?”
Nick hadn't meant to fall asleep, he'd tried desperately to stay awake, but after an hour of watching Judy, he hadn't been able to stop his eyes from falling shut.

Judy nodded. “I needed it too.”

Nick lifted a paw, smoothing it down Judy’s ears and over her back. He noticed that she was clutching his phone. Muzzle gesturing towards it, he silently asked her why she had hold of it.

“I was checking the time, it's 2 pm. When are we having dinner with your mom?” Judy explained.

“I told her we’d be there at 6 pm, plenty of time still.” Nick stretched, a little uncomfortable from his sleeping position. Judy’s comfort had been his priority.

Relieved she still had time to be a little lazy, Judy smiled. “Speaking of moms, I should probably call mine. I haven't spoken to her in a few days and I wasn't exactly in a good place when she last called.”

“That's alright, call her now.” Nick started to play with the end of one of Judy’s ears, enjoying the softness.

Judy grumbled. “My phones in the other room and I'm too comfy to move.”

“Is that a hint that you want me to go and get it, lazy?” Nick teased, giving the end of Judy’s ear a gentle tug. “Use mine.” He offered, figuring that this way Judy got to speak to her mom and be comfortable.

“You sure?” Judy unlocked the device, pleased to find Nick hadn't changed the passcode. He nodded, eyes closed as he yawned. Judy paused while typing her mom’s number into the Muzzletime app, eyes focused on Nick’s sharp teeth. She knew what they felt like around her throat, his gentle bite when they’d hustled Bellwether rushing through her mind, but she found herself wondering what it would feel like to have them nip at her throat, leave a trail of small bites down her body, tongue and teeth working together and….

She was still staring as Nick finished yawning, and the tod raised an eyebrow at her. “I know I'm attractive, Carrots, but jeez, didn't your mom ever teach you that it's rude to stare?”

Judy blushed furiously. She was grateful Nick wasn't well versed in rabbit pheromones yet or she'd have been even more embarrassed. “Real subtle, Judy.” Returning to typing in her mom’s number, Judy hit the call button.

Nick had to hide his smile at how adorable she was when blushing, but a light sweet smell made his nostrils flare. He frowned. “Does Judy wear perfume?” His grandmother had always worn it, even when going to bed. He hadn’t seen Judy using any, but he couldn’t be sure. He cast the thought aside, now concerned that she had been staring at his teeth. He guessed that it was ingrained in her survival instincts that sharp teeth were bad news, but he'd never use them to harm her. Surely she knew that? Nick sat up a little, propping himself against the headboard, bringing Judy with him. She was half sprawled across his lap, phone in her paws as she waited for her mom to answer. Nick resumed playing with the ends of her ears.

It only took a couple of rings before Bonnie Hopps answered, squinting into the camera. “Hello? Who’s there?”

“Hey mom, it's me.” Judy smiled at the sight of her mom. Judy had called her mom two days after Catstro’s death, and she hadn't really been in the mood to talk. Her mom had asked her what was wrong but she'd brushed it aside, said work was a little tough but she was powering through.
“Judy! Oh my goodness, I didn’t know it was you! Did you get a new number?” Bonnie was so pleased to hear her daughter's voice.

“No, mom. Nick’s home for the weekend so I'm just borrowing his phone and…” Before Judy could explain further her mom interrupted.

As her daughter spoke Bonnie looked at Judy closely, checking her ears to more accurately decipher her daughter's mood. There was a paw playing with Judy’s ear, a very large paw, with sharp claws and reddish-orange fur. “What on earth is Nick doing to your ears?”

Judy should’ve guessed her mom would look at her ears first. Bonnie Hopps could always tell how her children were feeling by looking at them. Nick’s paw stilled as he stopped stroking the end of Judy’s ear, slowly pulling his paw away and out of sight.

“Wait a moment.” Bonnie leant in closer to the camera, as if that would help her see what was happening a little better. Judy had said Nick was home for the weekend and with what Bonnie was seeing... “Is Nick naked? Are you in bed together?”

Judy’s eyes widened. She glanced to the area of the screen showing her what her mom was seeing, noticing that an awful lot of Nick’s fur was on show, along with the edge of the bed sheet.

“Judith Laverne Hopps, are you calling me after sex? You should be snuggling that boy, not phoning me.” Bonnie scolded her daughter. While excited that Judy might have finally embraced a rabbit's more passionate nature; she couldn't believe her daughter was calling her. She should be curled up with Nick, in post-coital bliss.

Judy raised a paw to shake it at her mom, hoping to stop her there. “What? Who's Judy having sex with?” Judy heard her dad’s voice and he suddenly appeared on screen with her mom. Judy groaned. Her dad meant well, but he could be a little overbearing.

“Judy was having sex? Who with?” A few voices could be heard from behind Bonnie and Stu. Judy groaned, paw covering her face. It sounded like several of her siblings were in the room with her parents. With all the voices she wasn’t able to tell which ones, though.

“Mom, dad…” Judy started, the inside of her ears burning bright red, needing to get a word in edgeways, but her parents were on a roll. She could hear Nick laughing quietly and she had half a mind to glare at him, but she was too busy trying to get her parents to stop talking.

“Nick. The fox she lives with. They’re naked in bed together.” Bonnie supplied, causing a commotion behind her as her other kits started to gossip. News would spread quickly that Judy was involved with Nick.

“No, we’re…no! Mom, I’m wearing a nightshirt!” Judy protested, knowing that no matter what she said now it was pointless. Some of her siblings had overheard, and that meant the whole warren would know within the hour.

“That hasn’t stopped your dad before.” Bonnie pointed out, Stu nodding beside her. With 312 kits they took every opportunity they could.

“Cheese and crackers, mom!” Judy couldn't believe what she was hearing. She didn’t need to know the more intimate aspects of her parent’s sex life. Nick didn’t need to know anything about her parent’s sex life.

Nick listened as Judy’s parent spoke so openly with her, and he found himself liking them already. At least they were open and honest, unlike some parents who clammed up and refused to talk about
anything with their kits. His mom had always said an open environment was a healthy one. Besides, watching Judy get increasingly more flustered was amusing.

Bonnie ignored her daughter’s protests. “I hope you’re being safe young lady. Your father and I taught you that…”

Nick could see Judy’s flustered expression changing to one of panic and though it had been amusing, to begin with, he could see it was starting to overwhelm her. Besides, he didn’t want Mr. and Mrs Hopps thinking that he was corrupting their daughter. “Not yet, anyway.” Her parents seemingly weren’t bothered about the fact a fox may have just done the deed with their daughter, and he stored the information away to think about later. Plucking his phone from Judy’s paws he turned it so the camera faced him, hiding Judy from her parents gaze. “Mr and Mrs Hopps, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you, though I had hoped the first time we spoke it would be in person.” Nick fell back on his old con-mammal charm, offering them a warm smile.

Bonnie and Stu suddenly fell silent, surprised at seeing Nick. They hadn’t met him before, but they’d heard a lot about him from Judy. “Well, it’s lovely to finally put a face to a name, Nick. Judy talks about you all the time, don’t you bun bun?” Bonnie spoke as she looked over the fox her daughter had moved in with, shouting out her question to Judy. Judy was always talking about Nick, and Bonnie thought it was sweet how enamoured she was with him. Some clever questioning from Bonnie had led to Judy once letting slip that Nick was a good-looking mammal. Now that Bonnie could look at the tod, she had to agree. He was certainly easy on the eyes.

Judy groaned, burying her face in the cream fur on Nick’s stomach. Nick didn't bother hiding his smile. “I hope it’s all good things she talks about, Mrs Hopps.”

Bonnie was unused to the formal address. “So polite.” She offered Nick a smile. “Oh please, call me Bonnie. This is my husband, Stu.” She introduced Stu, who’d stood silently next to her, weighing up the fox his daughter was currently in bed with.

Stu had no problem with foxes now; he enjoyed Gideon’s company and had come to learn that foxes usually got a raw deal in life. What he did have an issue with was the fact his little girl was currently naked with a guy. Judy had never had a proper boyfriend before and Stu worried about her, worried she might be rushing things.

“Sir,” Nick greeted Stu formally. “I just want to reassure you both that nothing happened between your daughter and I. I came back from the academy very early this morning for the weekend and found her asleep in the living room, case files everywhere. The Chief has her working a very important case that involves a lot of paperwork and research. I thought she looked uncomfortable on the sofa so I moved her to bed.” During one of their phone calls, Judy had briefly touched on how her parents worried about her being in constant danger with her job. Nick figured that telling them she was doing a more desk-related case for the time being would ease their concerns. It wasn’t decent of him, lying to Judy’s parents, but it beat telling them that their daughter had teamed up with a mob boss to drown a caracal that’d been holding Nick to ransom for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and had subsequently had a breakdown when Nick had finally come home.

“Oh Nick dear, we wouldn’t have cared if you were doing something with Judy. She’s been in a very long dry spell an-” Bonnie started up again, not minding in the slightest if Judy had slept with Nick. From what she’d heard, he was a nice boy. Judy could do with some stress relief too.

“MOM.” Judy cut in, embarrassed. She didn’t need Nick knowing that she hadn’t actually been past third-base. She’d been too focused on her career, and the few dates she’d been on with the bucks her mom had thrown her way had ended in disaster.
Bonnie apologised even though she wasn’t actually sorry. “Sorry bun bun. Anyway, that sounds just like our Judy, throwing herself into her work.”

“So you moved her to bed and then what? You happened to fall into bed with her?” Stu questioned. He still wasn’t entirely convinced. He didn’t know Nick; he could only go off of what his daughter had told him, and his lack of knowledge about the tod made him nervous about Judy getting so close to him.

Nick had a feeling the buck was very protective of his daughter. Convincing Stu that he was a good match for Judy would take some time and effort, but Nick was willing to invest. Judy was worth it. He wasn’t sure whether the line of questioning was because he was a fox, or simply because he was male. Either way, Nick was happy to answer his questions. “She was like a clingy little kit, Sir, wouldn’t let me go and wanted to use me as a giant living teddy.” Judy swatted Nick’s chest, capturing his attention, and the tod smiled at her fondly, enjoying the look of indignation on her face.

Bonnie paused, caught off guard by the look on Nick’s face that was aimed at her daughter. Though she’d been quick to jump the gun she now believed both Judy and Nick, that nothing had happened between them, but that look…

“That does sound like our Jude.” Stu mused, remembering all the stuffed teddy rabbits Judy had taken with her when she’d moved to the city. “But then why are you naked?” Nick still hadn't explained the situation to Stu’s satisfaction. Bonnie sighed at her husband’s questioning. The poor fox didn't need grilling.

Nick turned back to look at the screen, offering Bonnie and Stu a charming smile. “My pants are firmly on, Sir.” In the hopes of showing Judy’s parents that he was a mammal of his word, Nick flipped to the back camera to show his bed and the sight of his pants still firmly in place. “See?” He flipped the camera back, still offering them a smile. “My shirt is another matter. The early morning train was full of commuters and an antelope accidentally spilt coffee on it. I didn't want to nap wearing it.” Nick told a small white lie about the train but stuck to the truth about his pants.

Judy watched in awe as Nick fielded questions from her parents like a champ. He had an answer for everything. Though he’d left his con-mammal life behind, Judy knew that after 20 years of living that life the remnants of it would never leave him. Nick would always be able to switch on the charm at the drop of a hat; he’d always be able to smooth talk himself out of situations.

“Mom, dad.” Judy interrupted before her parents could further embarrass her, moving so that she could see the screen. Nick tilted the phone, capturing them both in the camera. She didn’t get far before there was another commotion on her parent's end.

“What’s all this ruckus about Trudy and a fox?” Pop-Pop yelled as he entered the room, making Bonnie sigh. News travelled so fast in her home. “You know foxes are red because they’re made by the devil!”

Embarrassed that a member of their family was insulting Nick, who'd been nothing but polite to them, Stu sought to get Pop-Pop out of the way. “Pop-Pop, please, isn’t it time for your afternoon nap? Love you Judy, nice to meet you, Nick.” He quickly excused himself, hoping he could stop Pop-Pop from further insulting the fox his daughter was friends with.

Bonnie couldn't hide her embarrassment. Her father was still so stuck in his old ways, and Nick didn't deserve to have such harsh words about his species thrown his way. ‘I’m so sorry about him Nick, he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” She apologised profusely, having seen Nick’s eyes widening at the outburst.
Nick cleared his throat, offering Bonnie a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry Bonnie, I’ve heard worse.”

Bonnie’s expression fell into one of sadness. It didn’t sit right with her that the kind young mammal on the other end of the phone was subjected to such abuse. “Oh, you poor thing.”

Nick shrugged, not really all that bothered. Judy’s relative had just caught him off guard, that was all. “You get used to it.”

“That doesn’t make it okay, dear.” Bonnie didn’t want any excuses made for Pop-Pop’s behaviour. She’d have to have a few words with him after the call, explain to him that Judy was best friends with a fox called Nick and no, he wasn’t made by the devil, and no, he wouldn’t eat her.

“Hey mom,” Judy broke in gently; not liking the direction the conversation was taking. “How about I call you tomorrow night?”

“Okay bun bun, don’t forget about the presents we sent you!” Bonnie could see her daughter itching to end their call. Judy rarely got to see Nick and Bonnie didn’t want to intrude on their time together.

Even though her parents had her new home address they’d sent her birthday presents to the ZPD, figuring Judy wouldn’t be at home to accept them. Given the vast number of kits in the Hopps family they had a long established present rule. Bonnie and Stu would get each kit a present, and then each kit only received presents from their littermates. The five neatly wrapped packages from her parents and littermates were in the bottom of Judy’s wardrobe. She’d already sent presents back for her 4 littermates - Julian, Jasmine, Josh, and Jackie. Clawhauser had helped her get her presents home one evening after work, the cheetah itching to see Judy’s new apartment. When he’d found out that she was living with Nick he’d squealed so loudly that Judy had believed that her eardrums would burst.

“Don’t worry mom, I got it,” Judy reassured her, knowing that she would have to wait to open them until she called her mom again. It was another rule, that presents were opened with family around even if that meant making a Muzzletime call.

“I’ll tell your siblings it was all a misunderstanding bun bun, and stop them spreading gossip about you two,” Bonnie reassured them before she turned her attention to Nick. “And Nick, dear, it was so lovely to meet you. You and Judy should come visit us some time.” She truly meant it. While it would be nice to have Judy home for a while she wanted the fox to come with her. If she’d read the look he’d been giving Judy correctly, then he’d need some lessons in rabbit culture. Bonnie had a black belt in such lessons; you didn’t raise 312 kits and not know a thing or two.

“We’ll think about it, mom.” Judy wasn't entirely sure if it was a good idea to expose Nick to her family just yet. She knew her family could be a bit intense, and as Nick had no siblings she didn’t want to overwhelm him. Besides, the last thing she wanted was for one of her more judgmental siblings to say something insulting in front of Nick and ruin everything.

Surprised by the doe’s kind offer, Nick smiled. “That sounds lovely Bonnie, thank you. It was wonderful to meet you and your husband.”

The surprise on Nick’s face at her offer made Bonnie’s heart ache. It only reaffirmed that it had been a good decision to invite him over. “Take care now you two, enjoy your weekend.”

“Love you, mom, bye!” Judy called out, waving a paw.
“Love you too bun.” Bonnie waved back, looking forward to speaking to her daughter again soon.

The call clicked off, the app closing to bring up Nick’s home screen. “Sorry about them. They can get a little carried away at times.” Judy was first to speak.

“It’s fine, Carrots. Sounds like your home is quite lively.” With his lack of siblings Nick had only ever experienced a quiet home life, and sometimes he wondered how different his life would be if he’d had a sibling or two to grow up with.

“It is. I thought the city would be livelier but it’s actually much quieter. I’m still not sure if that’s a good thing or not.” Judy shrugged. She missed the chaos of home, but she also enjoyed the unexpected peace in the city.

“Your parents sound great too, though I’m concerned about your dad. He doesn’t still have his taser, does he?” Nick remembered their conversation in his childhood bedroom, of her dad trying to gift her a fox taser when she first moved to the city.

“No he doesn’t, and even if he did I wouldn’t let him anywhere near you with it,” Judy vowed. She wouldn’t let her family hurt any fox, let alone Nick.

Paw coming to his chest, Nick batted his eyelashes, channelling a damsel in distress. “Aww Carrots, you’d defend me from your dad? My hero.”

“Har-har.” Judy rolled her eyes and took Nick’s phone from him, cradling it in her paws.

“Are your parents always that open about everything?” Nick inquired. His mom had been pretty open with him when he’d been a kit, his dad too. He’d never spoken about any of his sexual escapades over the years with his mom, though. She knew, of course, Nick could see it every time he came home smelling like a hook-up, but she never mentioned it.

Her mom and dad had always been open with her, always insisted that she could tell them anything. Judy nodded. “Yeah, kind of have to be when you have 312 kits. They’ve seen and heard it all.”

“I’m impressed you share so much with them, especially that they know how long your dry spell has been. When was the last time you took a tumble with a young buck, eh? Barns weren’t just made for storing hay.” Nick teased, giving Judy a nudge. She’d probably been with a few bucks in her life. Judy was a good-looking mammal, smart as hell too. He didn’t really want to know how many partners Judy had had, he felt a swell of irrational jealousy inside, but he figured it was important to know.

Judy glanced down, playing with Nick’s phone in her paws. She swallowed, a little embarrassed that she wasn’t as experienced as other does, probably not as experienced as Nick. “I’ve, um… never.” She muttered, suddenly finding the slight dent in the casing of Nick’s phone highly interesting.

Nick’s expression of amusement shifted to a frown as Judy’s words sank in. She’d never? His frown smoothed out as his eyes widened, partly from surprise and partly from concern. When he finally asked her to be his mate, if she hadn’t even been with a buck before, how on earth was she going to deal with him? He’d need to explain canine mating to her first so that she didn’t end up running scared the moment he took his pants off. That would be the ultimate mood killer. The more possessive part of Nick’s brain latched on to the fact that Judy had never had a partner before, finding pleasure in the fact that he would hopefully get to be her first, while the more rational part of his brain pointed out that his first time had sucked, so he’d have to pull out all the stops to make sure Judy’s didn’t.
His first time. He’d been 16 and she’d been 20, told him her name was Scarlett. Nick hadn’t questioned if that was her real name or not, he hadn’t really cared. Living on the street and low on funds he’d visited a bar in the Nocturnal district, talked his way in, hoped to hustle some mammals out of their cash with a few games of pool. Scarlett had been sat at the bar and had eyed him up the moment he’d walked in. They’d hit it off and she’d taken him back to her place. The night had deteriorated from there. He’d been an awkward fumbling teen with no experience, and it had all been over embarrassingly quickly. Nick didn’t want to think about it again. “So, you’ve never…?” He clarified.

Judy’s stomach chose that moment to growl loudly, and she couldn't have thanked her lucky stars enough. “Oh gosh, I haven't eaten in ages! Come on, I stocked the cupboards and the freezer.” She slipped from Nick’s bed, leaving his phone on the nightstand as she crossed the room quickly.

“Carrots,” Nick called out as she reached the door, watching as she slowly turned to look back at him. Her ears were droopy and he felt bad for teasing her earlier. “You can talk to me about things like that, you know. You don't have to hide it, be embarrassed about it, or anything else. You can tell me anything and everything and I’ll listen. I can be serious when I need to be, and whatever you tell me I'm not going to judge. I'm here for you. I was just surprised that's all.” He didn’t want her feeling bad about her lack of experience; he wanted her to know that it was okay to tell him things like that, that it was okay for her to tell him anything.

“What, surprised that the little country bunny hasn't had sex before?” Judy tried to sound like it didn't bother her, but Nick could hear how much it did. He could imagine coming from such a large family that a fair amount of teasing happened, that sometimes a sibling or two went a little too far with it. He could also imagine that Judy had broken with the status quo, wanting to be a cop in the city and that there had been a fair amount of disappointment in her decision not to settle down with a buck and have a warren full of kits.

“I was just surprised that some young buck hasn't tried it on with you yet, that’s all,” Nick answered truthfully, offering Judy a small smile.

Judy shrugged. “Oh they have, a few times, but I wasn't interested. They didn't understand me, or the things I want from life. All they wanted was a stay at home wife and mom. That’s not me.” Judy had been disappointed that on every date she’d been on the bucks had pulled a face when she mentioned wanting to work for the ZPD. They’d tried to tempt her into being a housewife and stay at home mom, but that wasn’t the life she wanted to lead. She had no problem with doe’s choosing such a path in life, all her sisters had chosen that life after all, but it wasn’t the path for her. Maybe in the future she’d consider it, with the right mammal by her side, but for now, it wasn’t even on her radar.

“Then they’re idiots.” Nick decided. He was baffled as to why the bucks hadn't wanted to pay attention to the things Judy wanted. Relationships were give and take, accommodating each other’s wants and needs, encouraging one another.

Judy returned Nick’s small smile. “What I’d give to see you call Billy and George idiots to their faces.”

“When we head to Bunnyburrow to visit your family, point them out to me and I'll happily do it.” Nick meant it; he’d gladly call some young bucks idiots to their faces. To cast aside a mammal like Judy they had to be idiots. Besides, he’d called other mammals much worse, though he’d made sure his mom had never found out. She’d wash his mouth out with soap.

“When we visit?” Judy caught Nick’s phrasing.
“Well yeah, Fluff. I'm not going to be rude and turn down your mom’s kind offer. Besides, blueberries.” Bonnie’s offer had been very kind, and while Nick did want to gorge himself on the blueberries from the Hopps Family Farm, he also wanted to get to know Judy’s family.

Judy laughed, no longer feeling embarrassed. “Goodness help you if the world ever ran out of blueberries.”

“I’d die.” Nick deadpanned.

“We’d have to find you something else to eat.” Judy mused.

“I don’t think I’d cope. You’d have to leave me behind, I’d wilt away to nothing.” The fox kicked up the dramatics. He could be serious when he needed to be, but humour came more naturally to him.

Judy snorted, shaking her head fondly at her idiotic fox. “Come on, I need food.”

“I came home with bagels - cream cheese and strawberry ones, with extra honey on yours.” He pulled out his surprise, sparing a moment to wonder whether they’d actually still be good to eat now, after Judy’s breakdown and their unscheduled nap.

Judy turned to reach for the door handle, unable to stop her smile. “Living with you is great.” She was touched that Nick had remembered her favourite bagel filling from Snack Rack. Some mornings on the way to work she liked to stop off and treat herself, and she then usually told Nick about it during their weekly calls.

“I do have my moments.” Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, Nick stretched again. He could feel a twinge in his lower back and silently cursed himself for sleeping in such an awkward position. Judy had been comfortable though, and after the state she’d been in last night her comfort had been his top priority. She was looking better this morning, more like her old self. Nick could see some guilt still lingered, though. It would take a while for her to not feel guilty anymore, if she ever did stop feeling guilty. He’d stay by her side and help her work through it, though. Watching as Judy left for the kitchen, Nick took a deep breath.

He was still trying to come to terms with the fact that Catstro was dead. He couldn’t find it in him to feel sad about it, the caracal had been a bad mammal, but after 16 years of monthly payments, the freedom was a foreign feeling for Nick. He couldn’t find the words to describe how immensely grateful he was that Judy had wiped away his debt, but Nick felt like he’d been let off easy. There were no repercussions for him. Curious, he reached for his phone, pulling up the calculator app. Maths was his mom’s strong suit, not his. “$1000 a month for a year is $12,000, times that by sixteen and that’s...$192,000.” Nick was blown away. He’d really paid that much money back to Catstro? If the caracal hadn’t been adding such sky-high interest Nick would’ve nearly paid it all off by now. As it stood, he was only $8000 short of paying back the full $200,000 he’d been given. Suddenly, he didn’t feel like he’d been let off so easy. He’d given 16 years of his life to paying the money back, handed over $192,000. He didn’t have a penny to his name right now, relying on handouts from his mom, but at least his mom had a roof over her head, and because of Judy’s immeasurable kindness, he had a roof over his head now too.

Aware that he’d been sat for several minutes and not moved, Nick threw his phone back onto the nightstand, grabbing a clean shirt from his bag and dressing before he scooped up Judy’s birthday present and card. Leaving his room, Nick joined Judy in the kitchen. Judy was sat on one of the barstools, her bagel in front of her as she ate. Nick paused at the door, feeling a strange sense of pleasure in watching Judy eat the food he’d provided for her. Having heard Nick approach, Judy pushed his bagel along the counter. Smiling, Nick took the seat next to Judy, putting her present
and card down. “You’re not allowed to open them until tomorrow.” He warned, pulling at the wrapping on his bagel.

“Can I poke it?” Judy asked, a paw reaching out towards the present Nick had set down.

“Carrots, your present is in a box.” Nick shook his head, not bothering to hide his amusement. He’d had a feeling she’d be a present squeezer.

Judy’s paw paused and she tipped her head to look at the fox. “And?”

“If it’ll make you happy.” Nick conceded, finally freeing the wrapper around his bagel.

Judy’s paw finally made contact with her present, and the doe gave it a few prods. She knew that with it being in a box she wouldn’t figure out what it was, but there was a sense of satisfaction in poking it anyway. Nick watched as Judy prodded at her present, and he couldn’t stop his snort of amusement. “If your bagel’s no good then I’ve already filled the freezer,” Judy remembered her impromptu trip down the predator aisles and meeting Bandit.

Nick’s bagel was fine, the few hours since he’d bought it having had no effect. Besides, as great as Judy was with keeping their kitchen stocked, she’d probably missed the items he needed the most. “We’re going to need to stop at a supermarket at some point, I’m going to need some fish and bug produce.”

A slow smile crossed Judy’s lips. Nick still wasn’t getting it. “Like I said, I’ve already filled the freezer.”

It took him a moment, but soon Nick’s ears pricked up in surprise as he cottoned on, putting down his bagel. “Wait, you went down the predator aisles and bought me food?”

“Mhm. I had some help. An arctic fox saw me struggling and stepped in. I don’t know what you like but I got a bit of everything. Bandit said you’d probably like something out of everything we picked out. He gave me his number just in case I had any more questions or needed some more help.” Judy was honest with the chain of events, having nothing to hide and even feeling a little proud that she’d taken the initiative to get food for Nick. She lifted her bagel, ready to take another bite.

Nick’s paw shot on to rest on Judy’s arm, stopping her from taking another bite. His jaw clenched at the thought of another fox trying to make a move on Judy, an arctic fox at that. “He gave you his number?” Nick’s voice dropped an octave, possessiveness and irrational jealousy coursing through him.

Judy noted the change in Nick’s tone, how his paw on her arm tightened ever so slightly. “Well yeah, it’s useful to have. If I have any questions I can ask him. I was in the drugstore the other day and spotted some Musk Mask, wasn’t sure if you used it but decided to grab some anyway. I sent Bandit a text and he told me which one was the most popular, so I bought that one. It’s on your dresser.”

Nick had never bothered with Musk Mask, there hadn’t been any point when he’d worked the streets and lived alone under the bridge, he hadn’t been able to afford it either, but he’d have to start wearing it now that he had a proper job and shared a home with Judy. “Does he know that you live with me?” He questioned, concerned with how much information she’d given the other fox.

Judy frowned, perplexed. She wasn’t sure she understood why it mattered whether Bandit knew they lived together or not. Putting her bagel down, she turned in the seat to look at Nick. “Yeah,
why would I hide that from him? He knows you’re at the academy and that without you here I’m floundering when it comes to everything to do with foxes.”

“You could just ask me.” Nick shot back, a little hurt that she was asking another fox for help rather than asking him or his mom. 

“We speak once a week, Nick.” Judy pointed out. True she could save up some questions for then, but Nick was busy with the academy and the stress of it all, he didn't need to be answering her silly questions. Besides, sometimes she needed a quick response, like when she’d been in the drugstore, so speaking to Bandit was easier. 

“Save your questions for then,” Nick demanded, loosening his grip on Judy’s arm a little, concerned he might be accidently hurting her. 

Judy frowned, forcing herself to pay close attention to the subtle nuances of Nick’s face and body. “You don’t like me talking to him.” She stated, finally understanding Nick’s behaviour. 

Nick knew Judy was smart, so it didn’t surprise him that she’d worked it out. “I’m not here to protect you.” He pulled his paw away from Judy’s arm. 

“He’s not going to hurt me, Nick.” Though she hadn't known Bandit long she could already tell the arctic fox meant her no harm. He'd had plenty of opportunities to try and hurt her but he never had. A low grumble of displeasure left Nick. “Hey.” Judy moved her paws to grab Nick’s wrists, needing the physical contact. She waited until he looked at her and she held his gaze, needing him to understand that her next words were the truth. “You don’t have to worry. You’re my favourite fox, you always will be. Bandit is a friend, that’s it. I promise you.” She reassured him, having come to the conclusion that Nick was perhaps feeling a little jealous that she’d made another fox friend. “As if I’d ever leave him.” Bandit was kind and helpful, but that was it. Nick was everything to her. “Besides, I’m pretty sure he has a thing for Akita.” 

Nick frowned, “Our landlady?” 

“Mhm, we went for lunch and we bumped into Bandit. They seemed to hit it off and she gave him her number.” Judy was secretly rooting for them. She’d felt like a third wheel once Bandit had joined them, but she was happy that her landlady was interested in someone. The fact they were interspecies made her feel more comfortable about her feelings for Nick, knowing she’d have some friendly support. 

Nick relaxed a little. If Bandit’s attention was on Akita then he might leave Judy alone. He really didn’t like the thought of another fox skulking around Judy, especially when he wasn’t there to fend them off. He was positive now that his choice of birthday present for her was perfect. His mom had voiced her concerns but Nick had put his paw down. “If he gets too much you need to find Finnick. That little jerk owes me a favour, so you can cash it in if Bandit needs putting in his place.” 

“Nick, stop it. I’m not going to have someone threaten Bandit, and I’m not going to run off with him. You’re the only fox for me, okay?” Judy needed Nick to know that he was so important to her, that she wouldn’t drop him in the blink of an eye, and that she was sticking around. She loved him, not that he knew it yet. He needed the stability though; the security of knowing Judy wasn’t going anywhere. She had a feeling Nick hadn’t had much stability or security since leaving home when he’d been 12. 

Nick couldn’t help his feelings of excitement and hope as Judy proclaimed he was the only fox for
her. Now he just had to stop any bucks from hitting on her. He was prepared to fight off other mammals for Judy’s affections, it was common amongst foxes to compete for mates, but he wanted to avoid it as much as possible.

“Eat up, Slick.” Judy prompted him, noticing that he’d stopped eating to talk to her. He’d gained a little weight at the academy, three high-calorie meals a day would do that to a mammal, but he was burning a lot with his training. Judy was still worried that his years of scrimping by on little food had done some damage to his body, and he still wasn’t at a weight Judy thought was right for him. He’d had to pass a medical exam upon arrival at the academy, but that didn’t stop the rabbit from worrying. When he graduated and returned home, Judy vowed to cook proper, wholesome meals and ensure that he never went hungry again.

Nick finished his bagel quickly, grateful for some good food. The food at the academy wasn’t great, but it wasn’t terrible either, and Nick really wasn’t in any position to complain. Scrunching up his bagel wrapper, he took aim at the trashcan. With a sure throw, he sent the rolled up wrapper flying, watching as it landed right on target. “Well look at you and your brilliant aim.” Judy marvelled, passing Nick her own wrapper. He did the same again, aim still as accurate.

“Top of my class at the firing range.” Nick grinned, enjoying the way Judy looked proud.

“Well colour me impressed Mr. Sharp Shooter.” Judy was genuinely proud that Nick was doing so well. She hadn’t doubted him for a second, but if he was top of his class he would be considered for extra training, possibly even some sniper work in the future. “We still have some time to kill before we head to your moms. Fancy helping me build the shelving unit I bought for the bathroom?” Judy had picked it up at a furniture store in Sahara Square. They’d been having a 50% sale and she’d spotted it in the window. She’d caved, figuring it would be great to store towels on. No longer needing to pay Catstro, and with the extra she was still earning from her additional jobs, Judy was able to purchase a few new bits for their apartment. She’d counted the unit as a necessity as once Nick was home permanently she wouldn’t be able to walk naked from the bathroom to her room to pick up her towels. “We should probably invest in some hooks on the back of the door, too.”

Nick leant back in the chair, folding his arms across his chest as he raised an eyebrow. “Oh I see, you save all the handymammal jobs for when I get home.”

Judy smiled, enjoying the way Nick looked so comfortable in their kitchen, so relaxed and at home. She still couldn’t believe that she’d managed to convince him to live with her. “I’m glad he feels comfortable here, that I’m making it as homely as possible for him.” She still had a few more jobs to do to make their apartment even more homely, all the curtains needed swapping out and she wanted to get a slightly bigger TV, but she was pleased her efforts were paying off. “What can I say, I imagine you’re good with your paws.” The words were out before Judy could stop them, and she turned her ears to hide how they’d flushed pink inside at the unintended innuendo.

Nick didn’t miss Judy’s blush, nor did he miss how her words could be construed. “Oh, I’m very good with my paws.” Nick couldn’t help but drop the tone of his voice, watching as Judy’s blush deepened. They often exchanged puns and smart remarks, but innuendos were new. Nick found himself enjoying them. He’d have to think of some more. Taking pity on her, he moved the conversation along. “Time’s marching on, Carrots. Those shelves aren’t going to build themselves.” Nick slid from the barstool, heading towards the bathroom. Judy’s mind had wandered to thoughts of Nick and his paws, but as the tod slipped from the barstool Judy was jolted from her imagination, leaving her own barstool to follow Nick out of the kitchen.

It took them an hour to build the shelving unit, creating makeshift tools to build it with. Judy
promised Nick that she’d pick up a small toolbox and some tools when she was next near a hardware store. They at least needed a hammer, screwdriver, and wrench. With the unit in place, Judy had put their towels on it, shooing Nick out of the room so she could take a shower. As she’d left the bathroom after her shower Nick had slipped past her so he could clean up, brushing against her at the door, enjoying her scent, and very much enjoying the view of her in a small cream towel.

Once they were both cleaned up, dressed and ready to go, Nick led the way to the front door. He picked up his keys, offering Judy hers. “Cute key rings.” He commented, watching as the inside of Judy’s ears flushed.

With deft paws she unhooked the fox paw key ring from her keys, offering it out to Nick. “Your keys look lonely, and this way we won’t be confused as to who owns which set.” Nick wanted to point out that her point was moot considering he had no key rings on his at present and she had two, but he offered her a smile instead.

“Can’t I have the bunny paw?” Nick questioned, mentally cursing himself. “You’re a sap, Wilde.”

“Why? That would make things more confusing.” Judy couldn’t understand why Nick would want a rabbit paw on his keys. It’d only lead to them getting confused over which set of keys belonged to which of them.

Before he could panic his brain helpfully supplied him with a cover story. “Rabbit paws are good luck, no?”

Judy stared at Nick. She was well aware of the myth, had even been asked by several mammals in the past if they could rub her hind paws, but she hadn’t thought that Nick believed it too. “You want a rabbit paw keychain, for luck?”

Nick shrugged. “Yeah, going to need all the luck I can get at the academy.”

Bewildered, Judy gave in, slipping the rabbit paw keychain from her keys and offering it to Nick. She put the fox paw one back on hers, placing them into the small handbag she was taking with her. She had to admit that having a fox paw on her keys was actually quite sweet – a little piece of Nick with her all the time. Nick fastened the rabbit paw to his own keys before he ushered Judy outside, locking up behind them and sliding his keys into the pocket of his pants. His keys. The keys to his home. The thought still made him smile.

“Oh, and this thing?” Nick remembered the doormat, pointing to the cutesy carrot mat beneath his hind paws. “I thought I said no cutesy doormat?”

Judy bit her lip, trying to stop her laugh. She’d already had the doormat, a relic from when she’d first moved to the city, and when Nick had mentioned not wanting one she’d just had to bring it back. “You also said you’d lose street cred, of which you have none, so quit complaining.”

Feigning hurt, Nick followed Judy up the steps to street level. “You wound me all the time Carrots, I’m starting to think you enjoy it.”

“I do get a perverse pleasure out of it.” She shot back, hiding her grin. Nick was easy to tease and took it all in his stride. She never meant any of it, and he knew that. It was what made their friendship so great.
Dinner with Marian was a much more enjoyable affair than the last time Judy had been to visit the vixen. She’d cooked a beautiful dinner for them, pleased to have Nick home. The conversation had revolved around Nick’s training at the academy, the new cushions Marian was making for them, and a few cases Judy was working on.

When Judy had disappeared to use the bathroom and wash her paws, Marian had pounced on the opportunity to pass along the booking she’d made for Judy’s birthday dinner. She’d only booked a table for two, not having expected Nick to come home, but she wanted her son and the rabbit to have an early dinner together. Marian could eat with Judy whenever she wanted. She’d also used the opportunity to double-check that her son was sure he wanted to give Judy the present she’d been tasked with buying. Nick had been adamant; Judy’s run in with Bandit only furthering his resolve. He’d also asked his mom to watch out for Judy while he was away, telling her that Judy’s last case had been difficult and had emotionally impacted her. Nick had the forethought to tell his mom that the doe probably didn’t want to talk about it, he didn’t need his mom asking questions and Judy breaking down and telling her about Castro, but he asked that his mom be there for Judy and check in with her a little more, and if there were any problems she was to call Major Friedkin and Nick would be on the next train home. Marian had been worried, concerned about what had happened to the sweet bunny, but she’d promised her son she’d keep a closer eye on Judy.

Once they’d finished their main meal, Marian had presented Judy with a birthday cake, complete with candles. Cajoling her son into singing with her, Marian had watched as Judy blushed, blowing out her candles and making a wish. They’d enjoyed a slice of cake each, with Marian wrapping up the rest for Nick and Judy to take home with them.

Marian had then pulled out her present for Judy. She’d spent a few weeks working on it; aware that Judy’s birthday had been approaching. When the rabbit had stopped by after work one day, Marian had been able to get her clothing size. She’d used the information to make Judy’s birthday present, a pretty cotton summer dress in a lovely shade of violet, the hemline decorated with vines and leaves in forest green, and a pocket at the waist for Judy’s phone or keys. Marian knew she wasn’t the best seamstress or dressmaker in the world and it had taken her several attempts to get the dress right, but it had been a fun project to work on and the look on Judy’s face as she’d opened it, right before she’d started crying with happiness, had made it all worth while. She knew it was hot in the city in the summer, and the dress would keep Judy cool.

Nick knew his mom and Judy were good friends, they spoke about one another often during their phone calls with him, but seeing the bond between his mom and his potential mate made Nick feel immeasurably happy. He’d heard horror stories of mates and in-laws not getting along, so not having that worry made Nick feel happy. He’d heard horror stories of mates and in-laws not getting along, so not having that worry made Nick feel immeasurably happy. He’d heard horror stories of mates and in-laws not getting along, so not having that worry made Nick feel immeasurably happy.

On their way home Judy had asked Nick if he would ever tell his mom about Castro and his debt, about how he’d paid off her mortgage. With a shake of his head he’d told her that it was better his mom didn’t know. There was no point telling her, especially now that it had all been dealt with. If she ever asked then he’d come clean, he didn’t like lying to his mom after all, but for now, he was okay with keeping her in the dark. Judy promised not to say anything, respecting Nick’s choice and knowing that it was a conversation he would have to initiate with Marian should the need arise.

When it had been time for them to sleep, Nick had asked if Judy wanted to sleep together again.
The doe had jumped at the offer, still worried that her dreams would be plagued with images of Catstro without Nick there to comfort her. She had no idea what she’d do when he left to head back to the academy, but she’d deal with that later. Curled up together, they’d fallen asleep.

Nick woke at 5:30 am, his body so used to waking at that time at the academy. Major Friedkin had thrown cold water over him twice during his first week when he’d been late to wake. He’d learnt his lesson quickly. Nothing was more motivating than having a bucket of ice water poured over you.

Yawning, he tried not to move too much. Judy was still asleep, wrapped in his arms. Though Nick had made the offer of sleeping together to help Judy through the night, as he still wasn’t sure if she’d be able to sleep properly, he couldn’t deny that he enjoyed having her in his arms, wrapping himself around her in their slumber. They’d been spooning when they’d gone to bed, but during the night Judy had turned, and now her nose was buried in the cream fur on his chest. Careful not to wake her, Nick gently stroked the smooth fur on her back.

The early morning silence gave him time to reflect on the new information he’d learnt about Judy during her phone call with her parents. He knew that he’d probably have to ask around soon, do a bit more digging as to how Judy felt about him. He was stuck in limbo, unsure whether she returned his feelings or not and it was becoming tiring. He wanted her, wanted her as his mate, wanted to claim her and have her by his side. She was doing things that made him question whether she did return his feelings – she was making their den more homely, purchasing food for him, mimicking vixen behaviour. If she did return his feelings then Nick doubted very little would change between them. Their friendship would be just as strong, but he’d finally get to kiss her, introduce her to other mammals and his girlfriend, and make love to her.

Wasn’t that a whole new can of worms, though? Judy hadn’t even been with a buck yet, and though Nick wasn’t one to brag he figured he was packing more than any buck. Would they be compatible? Though he’d never been in a serious relationship before he knew sex wasn’t the most important aspect of a relationship, but it was still an integral part of a healthy relationship.

Nick’s thoughts also wandered to his future meeting with Bonnie and Stu. He wanted to take them up on their offer, head to Bunnyburrow and get to know them, but he’d need to wait for Judy to extend the invitation again. The thought of meeting her parents and siblings made him nervous. He knew Bonnie had warmed to him, guessed that Stu had a little too, but her 311 siblings were another matter. Statistically, Nick knew that a fair percentage of them probably wouldn’t like him and that they’d kick up a fuss about Judy being friends with him and bringing him back to their warren, but he was okay with that. The fact Judy had accepted him and that he believed her parents would accept him was enough for him.

Judy had mentioned that being a stay at home wife and mom wasn’t something she was interested in. He knew Judy’s dream was working for the ZPD, and he’d never want her to give it up, but at the same time, he’d given some serious thoughts to having kits. He knew that one day he’d like kits, would like to start a family, and the thought of having kits with Judy was even more appealing. But he knew her career was more important at the moment. He respected that. Besides, could he and Judy even have kits? He didn’t know much about interspecies relationships or whether interspecies couples could have kits, but it was something for him to look into. If he and Judy couldn’t have their own kits then he’d like to adopt – maybe a baby bunny and a little fox.

Nick filed the thoughts away for later. He and Judy weren’t even dating yet and here he was, already thinking about having kits with her.

Resting his snout on the top of Judy’s head, Nick inhaled, her scent flooding his nostrils, making
him dizzy. This bunny, this little country bunny with her crazy foot thumping and big purple eyes, with her large ears and persistent need to help others, had changed him for the better. She’d given him a home, lined him up for an honest job, cleared him of his debt, and had encouraged him to open up, share parts of himself with her that he’d never shared with anyone else. She was the most precious mammal in his life.

Careful not to jostle Judy, Nick extracted himself from her. He had a few phone calls to make, but he’d make sure she was back in bed before she woke. Leaving his bed, Nick grabbed his phone, making his way out of his bedroom and into the living room, making sure his bedroom door was shut behind him to muffle as much sound as possible. He knew Judy had incredible hearing. Smiling at his phone wallpaper, Nick unlocked it as he sat on the couch, stretching out. Pulling up a familiar number he hit dial, lifting the phone to his ear. With his other paw, he scratched his stomach, further ruffling the cream coloured fur there.

“What?” The angry voice on the other end of the phone made Nick smile.

“Is that any way to say hello to daddy?” Nick admonished; tutting.

“The hell you want Wilde. It’s 6 am and mammals got to sleep. How’d you get a phone anyway? Thought the fuzz banned ‘em.” Finnick grumbled. He hadn't heard much from Nick since he'd disappeared off to become a cop. He'd received a message when the idiot had been on the train to the academy, having been convinced by the bunny cop to sign up, but he hadn't heard anything since.

“You’re not asleep, Fin, you’re working at the fish market. I’m home for the weekend.” Nick may have been out of town for a while, but that hadn't stopped him from receiving letters. His mom had told him that she’d seen Finnick working at the market one morning when she’d gone to pick up some halibut for old Mrs Montgomery who lived next door.

“Well, when I lost my partner I had to diversify. Ain’t no point dressing up as an infant when I’ve not got a father.” Life had taken a sharp turn for him with the departure of Nick. With no fox to play the role of a parent, he’d had to rethink the father and son con. He still used his small size to his advantage, still pulled a few tricks and hustled unsuspecting mammals out of their cash, but he topped up his income by working early mornings at the fish market in Tundratown. He had a job. An actual honest job. He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to punch Nick for forcing him into doing some real work or thank him for leaving and opening up new opportunities for him.

“Aww have you got abandonment issues?” Nick teased, easily falling back into his old jokes with the fennec. They’d been one hell of a team, and though Finnick had always been more business associate than confidant or close friend, Nick trusted the little jerk with his life. Finnick had pulled him out of some pretty tight spots in the years they’d been working together.

Finnick didn't even bother getting angry, though he was tempted to cuss out the red fox. “Shut it, Nick. What’d you want?”

“Can’t I just call for a chat?” Nick tried to delay the inevitable. They both knew he was calling for a reason, neither mammal was stupid, but Nick was aware he was about to ask a lot of his old partner.

“It’s 6 am, you hauled ass outta town to go join the fuzz and ditched the streets. You don’t want to chat with me. What do you want?” Finnick didn't have time for Nick’s games. He'd never had any patience for them. Besides, he had a job to do.

“Fancy doing me a favour? I’ll owe you.” Nick knew favours were still a highly valued currency
for mammals living on the streets – it wasn't like they had much in the way of material possessions
to bargain with – and when he became a cop he'd have a bit more clout. Nick would never abuse
his badge, not when he was working so hard for it and making Judy and his mom proud, but if
Finnick ended up in a situation he'd vouch for him.

Finnick sighed, shaking his head. “Wilde, you already owe me 15 favours.” Nick was always
offering him favours, and at the beginning of their relationship, he'd cashed a few in. Now though,
he didn't bother. Nick gave them out to him like they were candy.

“You’re keeping count?” Nick winced, not realising he owed Finnick that many favours. He only
hoped the fennec wouldn't cash them all in at once.

“One of us has to” Finnick snorted, watching as some of his fellow employees started to unload the
crates of fish from the back of a delivery lorry. He figured he had 10 minutes or so before his boss
would come looking for him and demand to know why he wasn't pulling his, admittedly small,
weight.

“Ouch. Look, remember Catstro?” Nick didn't exactly want to start divulging all his secrets,
especially not Judy’s ones, but he needed this favour and the only way he was going to get it was
by being honest.

“Caracal you owed money to. Word on the street is he’s dead.” Finnick had been down in the
Nocturnal district the last few nights, scoping out the potential partners he could work with now
that Nick was on the straight and narrow. While he’d been sat the bar of a particularly seedy club
he’d overheard several mammals talking about Catstro’s death, and about how his gang were so
frightened that they’d split up, cut off all contact with one another and gone even further
underground. Finnick had used his big ears to his advantage, eavesdropping on the conversation.

“Yeah. Between you and me, and if you tell anyone I swear I’ll arrest you for everything I can
think of when I get my badge and have them throw the book at you, Carrots went and told Mr. Big
about my problem, and the shrew made him disappear.” Nick came clean. He'd gladly arrest
Finnick if he put Judy in danger by opening his mouth.

Finnick was silent, letting Nick's words sink in. The bunny cop knew Mr. Big? Mr. Big had been
the one to kill the caracal? The cop had freed Nick from his debt? He burst out laughing. “Wait, the
little fuzzy bunny is in with the mob?”

“Godmother to Big’s granddaughter,” Nick confirmed, unable to help but feel a little proud that
Judy had earned such a prestigious title. On the streets, being favoured by a mob boss was high
praise.

Finnick was stunned. He knew the rabbit was smart, she'd hustled Nick after all, but it was even
smarter to form familiar ties with the mob. They did anything for family. “Well shit. Who’d have
thought? Let me get this straight, you told her about your debt, she went to Big for a favour, Big
iced the bastard, and now she owes him?”

Nick shook his head. “No favours owed, it’s a long story. Anyway, I need you to keep an eye on
her while I’m away. I head back to the academy tonight but I don’t know when I’ll next be home.”

“Why’d you want me to keep an eye on her? She’s friends with the mob.” There was little Finnick
could do in all honesty. He could spread the word that the rabbit was Nick’s girl, and that would
pretty much ensure no one would touch her, but other than that his clout was limited.

“The mob isn’t exactly going to help her emotionally. Look, I just want you to pass by every now
and then, get a glimpse of her and see if she’s doing okay. If not, you call the academy and ask for me, say it’s an emergency.” Nick felt a little awkward asking Finnick to keep an eye on Judy, and while he knew his mom would call with the slightest issue he wanted another set of eyes on her.

“You want me to keep an eye on your girlfriend's emotional state?” Finnick couldn't believe what he was hearing. Nick was like a kit with his first crush when it came to the damn rabbit.

“She’s not…urgh. Yes. She saw Big Ice Catstro and she’s not been doing well. Just keep an eye on her okay? I’ll owe you big time.” Nick didn't even bother correcting Finnick, knowing it was a waste of time. Without Nick there to offer her comfort, and with a limited support system in the city, Judy could end up emotionally beating herself up again and Nick wouldn't know about it.

Finnick was silent for a moment. He didn't need any more favours from Nick, was perfectly within his rights to say no, but underneath his anger and general hatred for mammals he cared for the red fox and the bunny cop. He respected them both, knew they loved one another, even if they were too stupid and knuckle-headed to admit it. “No favours Wilde, I ain’t collecting them from you no more, not now you’re gonna be a cop. You and that bunny are close, so I’ll keep an eye on her for you, but only ‘cause I know you’ll be a mopey depressed shit again if anything happens to her. Besides, I kind of like her, she out-hustled you after all.” Finnick laughed, remembering the way the small bunny had outsmarted Nick.

Sighing in relief, Nick smiled. “Thanks, Fin.”

“Don't mention it. No really, don't you dare mention it. I have a reputation to uphold and I will beat your ass if you damage it. Speaking of reputations, words getting 'round that you've cleaned up your act and gone straight. A lot of mammals are nervous, you've got dirt on plenty of them.” He'd heard gossip after news had started to spread that Nick was no longer hustling and it had concerned him. Nick knew everyone, had dirt on nearly everyone, and they were nervous about where he'd disappeared to and what he'd do with the information he'd gained over the years.

“Well spread the word that so long as they don't give me cause to use any of the information, I'll keep it all to myself. I don't want any trouble, I've got a good thing here.” Nick looked around the living room, at all the little touches Judy had added – her books, some scented candles, their blankets. He wouldn't do anything to jeopardise this, he wouldn't do anything that would jeopardise his chance at happiness with Judy.

Finnick pulled a face as Nick spoke, picturing the mushy look that was no doubt on his old partners face. He'd grown tired of Nick's whining and pining after the press conference, so much so that he'd told the red fox to build a bridge and get over it. Nick hadn't listened. Instead, he'd found his old bridge and had whined from there instead, didn't even bother hustling for weeks on end. “You're going soft in your old age, it's nauseating.”

“Not all of me is soft, Fin.” The crude remark was out before Nick could stop it, at ease with boyish banter. He and Finnick used to exchange rude barbs and crude comments all the time, and Nick’s weeks at the academy in a testosterone fuelled environment hadn't helped. He hoped he would be able to tone it back down when his training was over and he moved back home. Judy didn't need to put up with it.

Rolling his eyes, Finnick caught sight of his boss. He offered the wolf thumbs up, letting him know he was done and ready to work. “You’re disgusting. Go back to your bunny, Wilde. I'll keep an eye on her and call you if there's an issue. Ciao.” He hung up.

Nick pulled his phone back from his ear, which now showed his home screen. “Hanging up on mammals, so rude,” He muttered, locking the device before he threw it onto the couch. At least he
had another pair of eyes looking out for Judy now, and he was sure between his mom and Finnick he would be alerted should there be any problems.

Nick’s phone binged and he reached for it. His screen lit up, showing him that he had several Furbook notifications. He hadn't had the chance to check his social media since getting his phone back. Unlocking it he found the app and scrolled through his notifications – some of his friends were getting married, some had had kits, and some were doing time in jail, all the usual stuff. What caught his eye the most were six new friend requests. He found one from Judy, which he automatically accepted, one from Bonnie Hopps and one from Stu Hopps, both of which he'd respond to later once he'd cleared up his profile, one from a Julian Hopps which made him frown, the name unfamiliar though he assumed he was a relative of Judy’s, and the final two were from Clawhauser and Wolford. He accepted the chatty receptionist and Judy’s temporary partner. They’d be his colleagues soon too. Taking himself to Judy’s profile he found very little – her friend’s list, however, was immense. Her profile photo was from her graduation and Nick rolled his eyes at how predictable she was. She needed a new one.

Now that his Furbook had been dealt with, Nick stood, stretched, and left the living room for the kitchen. He grabbed Judy’s card and present from the kitchen counter, carrying them back to his bedroom. He’d lay down with her for another hour or two before he’d attempt making her some breakfast. Tip-toeing into his room, he paused to watch Judy sleep, noticing how she’d curled up around his pillow and buried her nose in the soft fabric. Placing his phone on the nightstand, along with Judy’s present and card, Nick slipped back into bed. Judy snuffled in her sleep, moving around until she finally ended up half on top of him. She settled quickly, small nose twitching. Wrapping an arm around her, Nick held her close, letting his eyes fall shut. He’d catch another hour of sleep.

Judy woke later to the feeling of a paw stroking her cheek. Nose twitching she caught the undeniable scent of Nick surrounding her. “Carrots.” Nick cooed, claw gently scratching at Judy’s fur. He’d crouched down next to his bed, a tray beside him with breakfast for Judy on it.

Blinking, Judy opened her eyes, met with the bright emerald eyes of Nick. “Morning sleepy.” He teased, offering her a warm smile as he pulled his paw back.

“Hmm, morning.” Judy stretched, ears springing to their usual position as she sat up.

“No no, don’t move. The birthday girl gets breakfast in bed.” Nick lifted a tray from the floor next to him, sliding it onto the bed and across Judy’s lap.

Blinking down at the tray of food suddenly presented to her, Judy turned her gaze to Nick. Touched by the sweet gesture, she offered him a fond smile. “You shouldn’t have, Slick.”

Nick shrugged. It wasn’t much, he hadn’t let his mom teach him how to cook after all, but he’d managed to whip up some oatmeal for her, sprinkled it with some blueberries he’d found in the fridge. He’d made some toast too, spreading some strawberry jam on each slice. Raiding the fruit bowl, he’d cut an apple into slices, adding it to a small dish with some grapes, and he’d finished it off with a glass of orange juice. It was a little too healthy for his liking, but if the amount of wholesome and organic items in the cupboards and fridge were anything to go by then Judy liked this kind of food, and would invariably make him eat it when he graduated and returned home for good. “I wish I could’ve cooked you something, but I figured the smoke alarm going off wouldn’t be a great wake-up call.”
“This is a perfect wake up call, thank you.” Judy hadn’t been expecting anything like this from Nick. She’d never been woken up with breakfast in bed before. The Hopps warren was too vast for breakfast in bed to be an option, too many mouths to feed. Her mom conducted mealtimes with military precision.

Pleased that Judy seemed happy with breakfast, Nick stood, sitting at the end of the bed to keep Judy company while she ate. “You’re not having any?” The doe frowned, noting Nick’s lack of tray.

“I ate while preparing it for you. Besides, it’s your birthday.” Nick explained, content to simply watch Judy eat.

“Well this is a lot of food, and I’m not having you simply sit there and watch me, so you’re going to join me.” Judy picked up a grape, holding it out to Nick. Smiling at her, Nick took the fruit, popping it into his mouth. Satisfied that he was eating with her, Judy gently moved the tray to place it between them, going first for a slice of toast. She guessed the oatmeal would take another few minutes to cool down to a more palatable temperature.

They ate in comfortable silence. Nick only took food when it was offered to him, and it didn’t take long for Judy to realise that Nick wasn’t eating without her prompting him. She started a ‘one for me, one for Nick’ system. She was still concerned about his eating habits, so getting to see that he was eating eased her worries a little. She’d had half a mind to call Major Friedkin initially, to ask her to keep an eye on Nick’s eating habits, but Judy hadn’t wanted to come across as overbearing, so she’d refrained.

With the food gone and their bellies full, Nick disappeared with the tray back to the kitchen, returning a moment later to resume his seat at the end of the bed. “Go on,” he nodded towards her card and present on the nightstand. Like an excited kit, Judy grabbed them, bringing them onto her lap. Starting with the card, Judy opened the envelope. The front of the card featured a cartoon bunny, front paws resting on a giant carrot that had a pink bow around it, the words ‘Hoppy birthday’ printed in black font above the image. Judy couldn’t stop her smile or her snort of amusement. She should’ve known Nick would find a card with a rabbit pun on it.

Nick wasn’t particularly good with words, he wasn’t great at writing down his feelings, but he’d tried hard for Judy. He could’ve gone for humour, had contemplated it initially, but in the end the need to show a more serious side had won out. He’d been heartfelt in his birthday wishes for her and when Judy finally looked up from the card, Nick could see tears gathering in her eyes.

Placing the card aside, Judy leant across the gap between them, tugging Nick into a hug. “Thanks, Slick.” She whispered, paws holding on tightly to the fox she loved. She hadn’t expected such a serious and sweet message inside her card, especially with the comical front to it.

Nick held on to Judy, enjoying her embrace. As the rabbit pulled back Nick quickly wiped his paws under her eyes. She hadn’t started to cry, but the action made her laugh. “Emotional bunny, I know.” Judy joked as she sat back in her original position, her paws finding the wrapped present.

Nervousness filled Nick as Judy gently shook the package, and his heart rate picked up. Judy’s ears flicked, honing in on Nick’s heartbeat. She kept quiet, intrigued by his bodies reaction to her picking up the present. Pulling at the bow, it unravelled in her paws. Gently she pulled the wrapping paper, unfolding it until she found a long white box. The lid was embossed with a logo Judy had never seen before. Curious, she lifted the lid. “Oh, Nick.” She breathed, taking in the delicate silver bracelet inside. Two charms were threaded onto the bracelet and sat in the centre of it – one was a carrot and one was a pawsicle.
Nick held his breath, waiting for Judy’s response. Her soft whisper as she saw the bracelet made him relax a little, but he was still nervous.

“It’s beautiful.” Judy used a paw to brush gently across the two charms. She hadn’t expected anything from Nick, let alone something as beautiful as the bracelet in her paws. No mammal outside of her family had ever gifted her something so lovely. Her heart felt like it would explode with affection and love for Nick, and she had to stop herself from leaning across the gap between them and planting the mother of all kisses onto his snout.

Glad that Judy liked it, Nick gently took the box, freeing the bracelet from it. Judy offered up her right arm and, holding the bracelet by the clasp and eye, Nick fastened it around her wrist. It fit perfectly and Nick let out a small sigh of relief. “I know that jewellery isn’t really your thing, at least I’ve never seen you wear any, but when I saw this I immediately thought of you,” Nick explained, watching as Judy pulled her arm back once the bracelet was secure, violet eyes taking in the charms. “A carrot for you and a pawpiscle for me.” The bracelet had another meaning, the style very particular and well known amongst canines. Nick vowed that one day he’d tell her the real meaning behind it, but for now, he was content with her simply seeing it as a pretty piece of jewellery.

Judy didn’t even bother trying to stop her tears, overcome with emotion. She’d received plenty of gifts in the past, but nothing as beautiful or meaningful as her new bracelet.

“Hey, don’t cry sweetheart.” Nick relaxed completely, pleased that Judy genuinely liked the present. Reaching across he wiped away her tears, only to find himself with a lap full of emotional bunny as Judy bridged the gap between them, throwing her arms around his neck and embracing him, burying her nose under his muzzle. Wrapping his arms around her, Nick held her, enjoying their closeness. A faint sound similar to Judy chewing caught Nick’s attention and he focused in on the noise, feeling Judy’s jaw move in sets of three, in time with the noise. She’d pause between sets, only for a few seconds, and then her jaw would move and the noise would start again. He had no idea what she was doing but he filed away the noise as something else he would have to research.

Filled with enough happiness to let herself tooth purr, Judy pulled back as her tears stopped, giving Nick an affectionate smile. “Thank you, Nick.” She whispered, paws grasping at his fur.

“Happy birthday, Judy.” Nick caught a flash of silver, eyes finding the bracelet around her wrist. Seeing it filled him with a sense of pride, enjoying that she was wearing something he’d gifted her. “We have a table booked at The Dunes at 4 pm for an early dinner, but between now and then the birthday girl gets to decide what we do.” Nick was happy to go along with whatever Judy wanted. The trip home had been sprung on him so he hadn’t had time to plan anything.

Judy really didn’t know the city very well. She patrolled some of the districts, yes, but she didn’t know what there was to do for entertainment in the city. Outside of work, she didn’t really venture out unless it was for dinner with Marian or lunch with Akita. Her friendship circle in the city was very small. “You’re the city mammal, what’s the best thing to see?”

“That depends entirely on what you like.” Nick was open to anything; he really didn’t mind what they got up to so long as Judy was happy. It was her day, after all.

Judy stopped to think for a minute. “Independent bookstores, museums, galleries, monuments.” She rattled off a list of places she liked to visit. To some they were touristy, but she found them the most exciting. Without Nick by her side, and with her very small social circle, Judy hadn’t had the chance to explore much of the city’s tourist attractions yet.
“How about the city gallery then?” Art wasn't really Nick’s thing, he’d dabbled in it for a while when selling paintings for Mr. Big and his dad had taken him to the gallery a lot when he'd been a kit, so he’d learnt a thing or two, but he knew the inside of the city gallery was impressive and would probably excite Judy.

“Sounds like a plan. Let me grab a shower real quick and get changed.” Judy slipped from Nick’s bed, gathering up her card and bracelet box. As she disappeared into her bedroom to get ready, Nick shook his head fondly.

They made it to the gallery with plenty of time to explore before their early dinner. Judy had decided to wear her new dress from Marian, and when she'd stepped out of her bedroom wearing it, along with the bracelet, it had taken every inch of Nick’s control not to pin her to the wall and kiss her. She had no idea what she did to him, and it was getting harder and harder for Nick to restrain himself.

Judy had grabbed his paw while on the crowded metro, telling him she didn't want to get separated from him, and Nick had made sure to keep hold of her paw once they were back out on the street level, walking towards the gallery. They’d garnered a few stares, Nick more acutely tuned in to his surroundings from his years on the street, but it hadn't bothered the tod.

Judy had been telling a small lie when she’d grabbed Nick’s paw on the metro. While part of her was afraid of losing him, as she had no idea where they were going, another part of her simply wanted to hold his paw, to feel what it would be like if they were to be mates. So far her hints hadn't seemed to do much, or at least that's what Judy believed, so the doe was ready to amp things up a notch in a hope that Nick would finally catch on. She could feel the small weight of her bracelet around her wrist and she couldn't help the surge of affection she felt for Nick when she thought about it. She wasn’t much of a jewellery mammal, true, but she’d wear it all the time because it had been a gift from the fox she loved.

As it was a Sunday, their admission to the gallery was free. Nick found himself quietly thanking his lucky stars. He had enough in his wallet to cover dinner and his train home, but that was about it. He'd had to ask his mom for some cash for Judy’s present, and the vixen had told him he didn't need to worry about paying it back, but Nick knew the moment he got his first paycheque he’d be paying her what he owed. It wasn't fair for her to keep giving him cash.

Heading into the main atrium of the gallery, Nick watched Judy’s face. The moment they stepped inside the rabbit gasped, wide eyes roaming as she tried to take in as much as possible. The awe and joy on Judy’s face made Nick smile, and he couldn't tear his gaze away from her. She was so beautiful. Nick had to admit that the entrance to the city gallery was impressive, with its high vaulted ceilings supported by polished marble columns, elaborate wood panelled walls that were hand carved and painted with gold leaf, two double sets of stairs sweeping up to the upper level with a marble archway between them on the ground floor leading to the lower level, and the twenty or so marble statues of mammals that lined the sides of the room. He’d visited the gallery with his father a lot when he’d been a kit. His dad had enjoyed art immensely, and he could remember his father telling him on one of their many trips to the gallery that “art is fascinating, Kiddo, because for a moment we get to witness the way another mammal see’s the world.”

Spotting some maps on a small table, Nick grabbed one with his free paw, Judy still lost in her admiration of the room. “What do you want to see first?” He asked, awkwardly opening the leaflet with a paw, not wanting to let go of Judy. Snapped out of her admiration at the sound of Nick’s voice, Judy took note of the map in his paw. Reluctantly she let go of him, helping him unfold the leaflet. “They have works by Vincent van Goat, Claude Mousey, Micealangelo, Salvador Baali, Pablo Pigcaso, Rathael, and Leonardo da Vicuña to name a few.” Nick rattled off the list, able to
recall the most famous paintings in the building.

“Can we start with Pigcaso, please?” Judy looked over the map.

“Course we can Fluff, come on.” With the map open Nick held it in one paw, the other finding Judy’s once again as he started off in the direction of Pigcaso’s paintings, Judy falling into step beside him.

They spent a few hours in the gallery, and Nick couldn’t get enough of Judy’s happiness. She was like a kit at Christmas. She’d stopped at several paintings to admire them for a few minutes, giving Nick some indication as to her favourites. Sometimes when she stopped Nick grabbed his phone, taking sly photos of her lost in her admiration. He’d send a few to his mom so she could see Judy in her dress, but the other’s he’d keep to himself. There was one, in particular, he loved the most, taken from behind as Judy had looked up at a Claude Mousey painting.

Sometimes when she stopped he would stand behind her, dipping down to whisper in her ear, remembering all the things his father had told him about the paintings when he’d been a kit – “this one is the view from the east-facing window of his bedroom” he’d whispered in front of a van Goat painting, and “this one is sometimes referred to by more descriptive titles, such as ‘The Soft Watches’ or ‘The Melting Watches’” he’d added in front of a Salvador Baali painting.

Judy had to stop herself from shivering every time Nick stood behind her, whispering in her ear. She’d silently questioned how he knew so much, but his unexpected knowledge of the paintings had further served as a reminder to her that there were many layers to Nicholas P. Wilde, and she was still peeling them all back. She’d wanted to lean back against his chest as he’d whispered to her, wanted him to wrap an arm around her and hold her while he spoke. “Maybe one day.” She mused. She’d caught a few of the glances thrown their way, it wasn’t every day a mammal saw a fox and a rabbit together in the city gallery, but she couldn’t find it in her to care.

At 3:30 pm they’d reluctantly left the gallery, but not before Judy had insisted on a photo together in the main entrance. She’d sweet-talked an employee, a kind looking deer, into taking a photo of them stood in the grand entrance. Nick had never been overly fond of having his photo taken, after all, it was then proof he’d been somewhere he probably shouldn’t have been, but he’d let it slide for the birthday girl. He’d taken the opportunity to slide an arm around Judy, paw on her waist as he held her to his side. With a coo, Judy had shown the final photo to Nick. He’d quietly admitted to himself that it was a great photo of them and had asked Judy to forward it to him.

Judy had sought out Nick’s paw again, pleased that he seemed okay with the physical show of affection before she’d suggested that they walk to The Dunes. With the spring weather pleasant, Nick had agreed. He hadn’t been able to stop his tail wagging happily as Judy had taken his paw. She was being much more affectionate than usual, and though Nick knew rabbits were very physical creatures he didn’t want to get too ahead of himself.

The walk to The Dunes only took them twenty minutes, and Judy spoke avidly about the gallery the whole way there. Nick could’ve zoned out, Judy was so lost in chattering away that she probably wouldn’t have noticed, but the tod found himself listening to her, paying attention to everything she was saying. Her enthusiasm was intoxicating and Nick wanted to take her to other places in the city, show her things that could perhaps incite a similar reaction from her.

With their table ready upon their arrival at the restaurant, the maître d’ had shown them to their seats. Ever the gentlemammal, Nick had pulled out Judy’s seat for her, tucking her close to the table once she was seated. Placing their orders, Judy had settled on the chopped salad while Nick had opted for the salmon and avocado salad. While waiting for their meals, their conversation had centred on Judy’s plans for the week and Nick’s training. He’d regaled Judy with tales from the
academy, omitting those that were less than savoury – such as the hazing and Tony’s declaration that he had a mistress. Judy had laughed, realising that Nick’s experience at the academy was much different than hers. When their meals had arrived they’d eaten in comfortable silence. The food was good, and Judy had enjoyed her chopped salad. She could see now why it was deemed the best in the city. They’d decided to share dessert, a strawberry sundae, and Marian must have told the staff it was Judy’s birthday as the chef had piped ‘happy birthday’ in strawberry coulis on the dish. Judy had found it adorable, and Nick had silently vowed to thank his mom for her foresight.

With dessert finished Nick had paid the check, and together they’d headed back home so he could pick up his bag, ready for the trip back to the academy. Judy didn’t want the weekend to end, it had been perfect, and going back to work tomorrow would suck, especially as she’d come home to an empty apartment.

Entering Savannah Central, Nick and Judy headed towards the ticket kiosk. “I’ll go and check the boards for your platform, Slick.” Judy offered. Nick nodded, appreciating her offer. Judy left his side and Nick retained his place in the queue, fishing in his pocket for his wallet.

Judy moved through the station, heading towards the departure boards. Finding them she stopped, looking up and searching for the next Zootopia Express train to Bunnyburrow. “Hey there pretty lady, need a paw?” a deep voice next to her spooked Judy, and she turned to face the owner of the voice. The voice belonged to a fox, but he looked nothing like Nick or Bandit. His coat was a sandy colour and when he smiled Judy could see his teeth were much smaller than Nick’s.

“I’m good thank you, Sir.” Judy politely declined his offer, a little uncomfortable that he’d randomly approached her and had started talking to her.

“You look lost.” The fox pushed, sparing a glance around to look for any other rabbits. He couldn't see any, so assumed she was alone.

“No no, I assure you I’m not.” Judy put up a paw, glancing to the departures board once more to find the next Zootopia Express departure time, hoping the fox would get the hint that she wasn't interested in talking to him.

“I’m Jake, and you are?” The fox didn't take the hint, carrying on the conversation. He thought the rabbit was cute, in her little dress that matched her eyes.

Nick had just finished collecting his ticket when he’d started his search for Judy, only to find her being chatted up by another fox. The corsac had his tail up, wagging it slowly, showing interest, and his ears were forward and focused on Judy. A flash of anger coursed through Nick, along with a swell of jealousy, and before he could stop himself he was across the station, heading towards Judy. He caught the corsac introducing himself and before Judy could respond Nick gently pushed her back, standing just in front of her, free arm out to hide her behind him while the paw holding his bag and tickets clenched. “She’s not interested.” He snapped, eyeing up the corsac fox as he curled his lip back into a snarl. “What is it with Judy and attracting foxes?”

Letting out a short, sharp warning yip, Nick reverted back to an old vocal signal, hoping the corsac would get the hint and back off. The noise attracted some attention, and several mammals paused to spare the two foxes a glance before they sped up, rushing past them to get on with their evenings, not wanting to be caught up in whatever they thought was about to happen.

Nick’s sudden protectiveness surprised Judy, as did the sound of Nick’s yip. “Warning yip...that’s
a warning yip.” Lifting her right paw, Judy placed it on Nick’s outstretched arm. “It’s okay, Nick.” She soothed, paw moving up and down his arm, rubbing his fur. She could feel how tense he was, could see the clenching of his jaw.

Nick kept his eyes on the corsac, not daring to look away. As Judy’s paw came to rest on his arm he caught the corsac looking down at her paw. Recognition flared in the other foxes eyes. “Sorry, I didn’t realise. I apologise.” He was quick to stumble over his apology, offering his paws up in submission as he backed away, disappearing into the crowd. Nick couldn’t hide his smirk. Her birthday present was already working.

“Nick,” Judy spoke again, eyes focused on Nick’s face. “It’s okay, you didn’t have to send him a warning.”

Once he was sure the corsac was gone he glanced down to Judy, finding her looking up at him with wide violet eyes. Her paw still rested on his arm, the bracelet catching the light streaming in from the glass ceiling. Nick took a few deep breaths, centring himself before he spoke. “I could see that he was bothering you, and he was interested in you if his tail was anything to go by.”

“Are you gonna chase off every mammal that hits on me?” Judy raised an eyebrow. She couldn't stop herself from silently admitting that his protective possessiveness was kind of doing it for her.

“Well…” Nick suddenly felt a little embarrassed by his reaction. Judy would’ve been able to handle herself; she didn’t need him stepping in. It had been instinctual though, the need to protect her. Besides, he wanted her as his mate; he couldn't let other mammals think they stood a chance. “Wait, how did you know that was a warning?” Her words ran through his mind and he frowned.

Judy offered Nick a fond smile. “I always do my homework, remember?”

Nick blinked. Had Judy researched fox vocal cues? He wasn’t sure what to make of that. On one paw he thought it was sweet, on the other he wondered why she’d done so. What else had she researched about his species? “Come on, we need to go to platform five. Your train will be here in ten minutes.” Judy had managed to find out which platform they needed to be on before Nick had confronted the other fox. Moving her right paw, Judy took Nick’s free paw in her own, giving him a gentle tug to get him moving. Jolted from his musings, Nick followed Judy as she led him through the station and to platform five. Finding a vacant space on the platform, Nick set his bag down. With his free paw he rubbed at his muzzle.

“Sorry about that.” Nick apologised, feeling a little silly now that he thought back on it. His reaction had been a little over the top, but the sight of the corsac hitting on Judy had bothered him immensely. He had no right to feel that way, they weren’t dating after all, but his instincts had driven him to defend her.

“Don't apologise, it's fine.” Judy brushed it aside, still holding one of Nick’s paws. She gave it a reassuring squeeze. While it had attracted some attention it hadn't dissolved into a fight, and the corsac had been making Judy feel uncomfortable.

“It wasn’t very polite.” Nick sighed. His mom would’ve scolded him if she had witnessed his little display. She’d always taught him that though their vocal cues were important, they were only to be used as a last resort. A lot of mammals were spooked by the sounds they made, so it was in their best interests to keep quiet.

“You were just trying to protect me. I’m not mad, Nick. He wasn’t taking the hint.” Judy didn't want Nick to feel bad for standing up for her, for scaring off the corsac who hadn't been able to get the hint that she wasn't interested. She would've been more forceful with her response if Nick
hadn't of stepped in.

Nick took a deep breath. “I know, but it was none of my business, other mammals are allowed to hit on you as you’re not dating anyone.” Nick forced the words out, hating them. “Just promise me you’ll be on your guard while I’m away. I know you don’t need protecting, that you’re smart and strong, but I worry about you.”

“I don't want other mammals hitting on me, silly. Just you.” Judy’s brain helpfully supplied. “I promise.” She held his gaze, wanting to reassure him. She knew not all mammals were kind; the night howler case had opened her eyes to that. Bellwether had seemed sweet but had actually been a criminal mastermind.

“The train now arriving at platform five is the 7 pm Zootopia Express to Bunnyburrow, calling at…” the PA System announced.

Judy wasn't ready for the weekend to end, she wasn't ready to say goodbye to Nick, to go home to an empty apartment. Reaching up, she pulled him into a tight hug. “Thank you for a perfect birthday, Slick, and thank you again for my beautiful bracelet”

Wrapping his arms around her, Nick held her close, focusing on the way she smelt, the way she clung to him. “You’re welcome, Carrots. I’ll try and come back as soon as possible. Stay safe while I’m gone.” Nick had no idea when he’d next get to come home, but he hoped he wouldn't have to wait too long. If he continued performing at the high level he was currently at, Major Friedkin would have no cause for concern and would probably let him come home again soon.

“I will. Be good.” Judy buried her nose in Nick’s fur as she heard the train come to a stop at the platform.

Without giving it a moment of thought as they pulled back from one another, Nick swooped down, pressing a lingering kiss to Judy’s cheek. “I'll see you soon.” He whispered, nuzzling his nose against her before he let her go, grabbing his bag. He felt like he was fleeing as he boarded the train, finding his window seat, felt like he was running away from any repercussion for his impromptu kiss. His heart beat wildly as he stowed his luggage above him, paws sweaty as he took his seat. He wiped them on his pants, taking a moment to pull his ragged breathing under control.

“Was that too much? Did I overstep? It was just a cheek kiss, idiot. Perfectly innocent, you didn't reveal your hand…” his mind raced.

As Nick let go of her Judy stood frozen, caught off guard by Nick’s kiss. Paw rising to touch the spot he’d kissed, Judy blinked. Whipping around she watched as he took his seat on the train, her heart jackhammering. He’d kissed her. Okay, it was only a cheek kiss, but Nick had kissed her. Paw falling to her side she stared at his profile as he took his seat. Her silly, witty, smart, handsome, best friend had just kissed her. “Are you reading into this too much, Judy? It was only a cheek kiss after all. Or could he possibly feel the same way you do? He made you breakfast in bed, bought you jewellery, held your paw all day, took you to a gallery, bought you dinner, and he just kissed you goodbye…”

With a whistle, the train started to move, and Judy lifted her right paw to wave. Nick found Judy on the platform, lifting his own paw to return her wave. Sadness swept through him at the fact he was leaving, that he wouldn’t be home again for a while, but the sight of the bracelet around Judy’s wrist soothed him, reassured him that she’d be okay, that no other canine would try it on with her so long as she continued to wear it.

As the train pulled away and Judy disappeared from sight, Nick sent a quick text to his mom, thanking her for the dinner reservation. He attached a photo of Judy in her new dress, knowing his
mom would appreciate a copy. He sent another message to Finnick, letting the fennec know he was heading back to the academy, and then he set about tidying up his Furbook page so he could accept Bonnie and Stu. His paws worked on autopilot, his brain still too focused on the fact he'd planted a kiss on Judy’s cheek, right there on the platform of Savannah Central.

Dazed, Judy left the station. Not wanting to walk she held out her right arm, flagging down a taxi. The charms on her bracelet jingled, the little carrot and pawpsicle together, a little piece of Nick with her every day. She glanced at it, unable to stop her smile. Climbing into the taxi, Judy pulled out her phone from the little pocket in her dress, ready to text her mom and tell her that she’d call her soon for present opening. However, as she unlocked the device she was presented with the photo of her and Nick from the gallery. She spent a moment looking over it, enjoying the way they stood close, Nick’s arm around her waist, and she quietly admitted to herself that they looked good together. Lifting a paw to her cheek she touched the spot he’d kissed. Giddy, she opened Furbook, spotting that Nick had accepted her friend request. Navigating to her profile she uploaded the photo, tagging him in it. Still high on her feelings, she set it as her display picture. It was time for a new one anyway.

Chapter End Notes

I had way too much fun coming up with animal puns for famous painters
#sorrynotsorry
A Day in the Life: Officer Hopps

Chapter Notes

I'm literally speechless. This little story is now at over 200 kudos, over 4000 hits, and fast approaching 200 comments. Thank you so, so, so much! All the love, comments, kudos, hits, bookmarks etc. encourages me to continue writing and gives me some seriously warm and fuzzy feelings. You're the best <3

I'd like to get a banner for this story along with some artwork/drawings (I wish I was artistic, but unfortunately I'm not) so if anyone can recommend someone who would be up to the task please then I'd greatly appreciate it :)

And for those interested in which painting Judy was looking at in the city gallery when Nick took his favourite sly photo of her, it was Garden Path at Giverny. It's my favourite Monet painting.

Monday morning saw Judy heading into work feeling a little better than when she’d left on Friday. She’d called her parents when she’d arrived home, opened her presents with her littermates and thanked them profusely for their kindness. When she’d tried to go to sleep she hadn’t been able to fall asleep as easily as she had with Nick, especially as she was back in her own bed. By the time 2 am rolled around she’d had enough of tossing and turning. Grabbing her phone she’d made the short journey from her bed to Nick’s, depositing her phone on his nightstand before she’d slipped under the covers. Nick’s scent had enveloped her, soothed her, and she’d fallen asleep quickly.

On time for work, Judy entered the atrium of the ZPD at 8:30 am, a spring in her step and the slight jingle of her bracelet audible. Remembering the uniform policy she tucked it under the sleeve of her shirt. She didn’t want to take it off, but she knew all jewellery except wedding bands weren’t really allowed. The atrium was empty, Clawhauser missing from his desk. Frowning, she looked around. With no one in sight, she started her journey towards the bullpen.

Though the door was made for much larger mammals, its light weight meant that Judy was able to push it open with ease. The moment the door was pushed fully back the room exploded in noise. “Happy birthday!”

Judy shrieked, having been caught off guard. There, in the middle of the bullpen, stood her colleagues. The room had been decorated with streamers and balloons, a massive birthday banner hanging from the ceiling, and Clawhauser had a party hat on. Blinking, Judy looked around. With no one in sight, she started her journey towards the bullpen.

“You guys remembered.” Judy was surprised by their kindness.

“As if we’d forget our favourite bunny’s birthday!” Clawhauser admonished, bounding over to put a little party hat on Judy’s head. “Bogo said we could have a mini party for you before work today. We’ve got cake and presents.”

“But, I’ve never seen you do this for anyone else.” It had been Pennington’s birthday on Judy’s first day, and even though Bogo had wished her a happy birthday they hadn’t thrown a party for her.
“You’re younger, your birthdays count.” Francine shrugged. She was counting her birthdays backwards now, but the young bunny had plenty of years ahead of her.

Unable to stop a few tears from escaping, Judy pulled Clawhauser into a hug “Thanks, Ben.”

Giving the adorable bunny a hug in return, Clawhauser’s nose was suddenly assaulted. “Oh woah, you really smell like Nick!”

“He came home for the weekend.” Judy blushed, letting go of Clawhauser. She wrung her paws, offering the cheetah a smile.

“What a coincidence…” Wolford piped up, sparing a glance to Bogo, who pretended not to hear.

“Oh I know, your new Furbook photo is too adorable!” Clawhauser grinned. Judy’s phone had been going crazy all evening, and well into the early hours of the morning, with notifications. Her siblings had been commenting on it, a lot of them liking it, and Judy had a feeling the next time Nick opened his Furbook he’d have hundreds of friend requests. The thought had made her snigger. Her parents and littermates had mentioned it during their call, with Bonnie declaring it a beautiful photo and wanting a copy for the family albums, but Judy’s brother Julian hadn’t looked too happy.

“Alright alright, let Hopps cut the cake so we can eat ourselves into a sugar coma before I dish out work for the day and make you all miserable.” Bogo interrupted. He was enjoying the camaraderie, but they still had work to do.

Clawhauser lit the candles on her cake and Judy blew them out, making a wish. He’d tried to get everyone to sing to Judy but the other officers had met the cheetah’s request with stony silence. They didn’t sing. Judy didn’t hold it against them. Besides, Marian and Nick had sung happy birthday to her on Saturday night, and she couldn’t ask for more. Candles blown out, Clawhauser dished out cake to all the officers. Mingling while they ate, Judy received well wishes from all of her colleagues, feeling an immeasurable amount of love for them all. A small pile of presents sat at her desk and Judy was touched that they’d bought her gifts. She quickly realised that she’d need a hand getting them all home.

With their cake finished and dishes cleared away, Bogo cleared his throat. “Take your seat officers, we’ve got a busy day ahead of us.”

McHorn and Wolford had swapped seats a few weeks back, the timber wolf now taking the seat beside Judy while the rhino took Wolford’s old seat at the back of the room. “I’ll give you a hand getting them home later.” Wolford offered, gesturing towards the pile of presents on Judy’s desk. He tried to hide his smile at how stunned Judy had looked when she’d entered the room to find a surprise mini party. Contrary to popular belief, most mammals in Chief Bogo’s team were fond of the small rabbit. She’d cracked a difficult case with little help, came in every morning filled with enthusiasm, and reminded them all that what they were doing mattered.

“Thanks, Wolford.” They’d formed a strong bond over their weeks together as temporary partners. Judy had been a little nervous to be partnered with the experienced wolf cop, but he’d been nothing but kind and encouraging towards her.

“Connor.” Wolford corrected her gently.

“Huh?” Judy knew it wasn’t very eloquent of her, but she had no idea what Wolford was talking about.
“I realise we’ve been working together for weeks now and haven’t told you my first name. It’s Connor.” While it was sweet that Judy continued to refer to him by his surname, his official officer name, he figured they were close enough now that she should know his first name.

“Well then thank you, Connor.” Judy hadn’t expected Wolford to tell her his first name, but she was pleasantly surprised.

With a sharp nod, Wolford turned his attention back to Bogo, who was shuffling five files. “Okay mammals. Assignments for the day.” Bogo slid on his glasses, glancing down to his clipboard. “We have reports of a series of noise disturbances in Outback Island, so McHorn, Rhinowitz, Delgato you’re going to check them out.” The three officers stood, collecting a file from Bogo before they left the bullpen.

“Grizzoli, Pennington, Fangmeyer. We have reports of a group of bats stealing from fruit stalls in the Nocturnal district. Go check it out.” Bogo handed over a file to Francine as the three officers also left. “Higgins, Snarlof, Johnson, you’re on patrol in Tundratown. Trunkaby, Andersen, Swinton, you’re on patrol in the Marshlands.” Bogo rattled off, the six officers gearing up and exiting the bullpen with their files in paw. “Hopps, Wolford. We have reports of a spate of burglaries at a row of stores in Downtown Savannah Central. I want you to keep an eye on the stores, take note of any suspicious mammals.” Bogo assigned his final two officers their work for the day. As Judy and Wolford stood, he spoke again. “Oh and Hopps, a word before you leave?”

Curious as to what the Chief wanted to talk to her about, Judy nodded, sparing a glance to Wolford. “I’ll meet you at the car.” The timber wolf picked up Judy’s armful of presents, along with their file, taking them with him as he left to prep their vehicle for the day. He’d leave her presents in the trunk so that if they drove past her home they could drop them off.

Once Wolford had left the room, Judy turned to look at the Chief. “Is something the matter Chief?”

Bogo took a moment to observe the rabbit cop. She looked a lot better today, more colour to her, the bags under her eyes a little less. “Just want to make sure you’re feeling better. You were off your game last week, Hopps. It wasn’t like you.” He’d been extremely concerned when she’d been late for work, and though he hadn’t wanted to chew her out for it, it was ZPD policy to reprimand officers for being late.

“I know, and I’m sorry again Sir. I’m feeling better today though.” Judy apologised. She’d hated being late, but with her lack of sleep and her mind on other matters, it had been unavoidable. Thankfully her weekend with Nick had helped.

Shuffling his papers, Bogo nodded. “Mhm. Glad to see a weekend with Wilde sorted you out.”

Judy couldn’t stop her smile. “Thanks for giving me the weekend off Chief, for asking Major Friedkin to give Nick time off too.”

Bogo blinked. “Damn. She figured it out. Deny it, you old fool.” He tipped his head down to glance at the rabbit, looking over the rim of his glasses. “I gave you the weekend off because you were overworked, Hopps. Friedkin giving Wilde the weekend off was none of my doing. Now, get going. Dismissed.”

Judy wasn’t fooled. The Chief and Major Friedkin had conspired, she was sure of it, but she didn’t pull the cape buffalo up on it. Offering her boss a quick smile she left the bullpen, heading down to the garage to meet up with Wolford and start their assignment.
Two hours. For two hours Judy and Wolford had been parked just outside of a row of shops in Downtown Savannah Central, keeping their car a safe distance so they wouldn’t be spotted by any potential criminals. They’d been watching mammals come and go, looking for any suspicious activity. So far it had been pretty quiet. Though the ZPD’s cars were relatively comfortable, and the one they were riding it had been modified so Judy could drive it safely, the rabbit still felt cramped. Stretching, she held back her yawn. Paws resting on the wheel, she exhaled, watching the mammals around them going about their day.

Wolford had spent many a day on the force doing just this, watching mammals, looking for anything suspicious. It was second nature to him now. Sure this job was a step down from his usual undercover work but when Bogo had informed them all that Judy needed a temporary partner, Wolford had been happy to volunteer. She was a newbie; she needed someone to show her the ropes. Besides, Wolford respected Judy for her accomplishments not only at the academy but in the missing mammal's case too. From the corner of his eye he caught her stretching, and while that in itself wasn’t noteworthy, the flash of silver that appeared from under her sleeve was. Focusing in on the item Wolford couldn’t hide how his eyes widened. There was only one place in the city that made such bracelets, and they only meant one thing. “Well damn. I never took Wilde as the sort to follow old traditions, or be that committed.”

“Hey Wolford,” Judy had used the silence between them to think some more on her actions of the past week. She’d been reminded of what she’d done to Catstro thanks to Chef Bogo’s need to check up on her. Nick had said that it wasn’t her fault, that Catstro’s blood was on Mr. Big’s paws, but then Nick would say that. He wouldn’t want Judy to blame herself, he wouldn’t want her to think it was her fault. While it was admirable, and she wanted to believe Nick with all of her heart, she needed an outsider’s perspective. “Have you ever done something with good intentions and its lead to someone getting hurt?”

Regaining his composure from the unexpected sight of Judy’s bracelet, Wolford turned his head to look at the rabbit sat in the driver's seat. “Bit heavy for a Monday morning isn’t it, Judy?”

Biting her lip, Judy kept her eyes forward, focused on the shops. “You’re right, sorry.”

Wolford sighed softly, feeling bad for shutting down the conversation. Judy obviously wanted to talk to him about something important. Reaching forward he flicked off the microphone on the dash cam. “I’ll take the heat from Bogo, don’t worry.” He reassured her, leaning back into his seat. “This about last week?”

Touched by Wolford’s unexpected kindness, Judy hummed in confirmation.

“You want to talk about it? I might not be as good a listener as Wilde probably is, but we’re partners for the time being. You got a problem then I’ve got your back.” The ZPD were a family, and those under Bogo’s command were a tight-knit group. If Judy needed to talk about something, get something off her chest, then Wolford would help her out. He’d done a little digging, after his first two weeks as Judy’s temporary partner, curious as to her future partner. He’d heard of the Wilde family, every pred had, they were the first family to open a tailor's catering to predators and the first pred to sail to the Old World had been Edward Wilde. It was part of their history lessons when they were kits, stuck in school and dreaming of what life would be like once they were adults. He’s uncovered a few bits of information about the fox, but nothing that caused him any concern.

“I appreciate that Connor, thank you.” Judy gestured towards the dashcam. “Nick came home for the weekend and we talked about it.”
Wolford didn’t bother hiding his smirk, making a show of inhaling. “Yeah, I can tell he came home.” He teased, eyes flicking to her bracelet briefly before he looked out of the windscreen again.

Judy blushed. She’d have to see if Nick’s Musk Mask would work on her. “I must really smell like him. You’re the second mammal today to point it out.”

Wolford shrugged, eyes forward as he smiled. His nose was one of the strongest on the force, well trained for sniffing out criminals and narcotics. “Foxes have a distinct smell, it’s easy to recognise. You probably don’t smell it because you’re used to it. Anyway, who got hurt?”

Judy didn’t want to give too much away, but at the same time, she wanted to talk to someone on the outside of the situation, get their perspective. “Not someone I know, not someone I even care about. Dare I say they even deserved a little pain? It still bothers me, though, that their pain is my fault.”

“You were doing something with good intentions right?” Wolford double-checked, catching Judy’s nod. “You know, I believe in the theory of consequentialism. It states that of all the things a mammal might do at any given moment, the morally right action is the one with the best overall consequences. In other words, if the ends justify the means. If the consequences are for the greater good, then any method of achieving it is acceptable, even if others might see it as morally questionable. I’ve spent the last several weeks with you, trapped in this damn car for hours on end, chasing perps through the streets, watching you eat lettuce for lunch, and I still can’t believe you eat so much of that crap, and if there’s one thing I’ve learnt about you, it’s that you would never take pleasure from another mammal’s pain. Everything you do is for the greater good. We all carry this sense of duty through our lives, live with a sense of morals, of wrongs and rights. We think the world is black and white. It isn’t until we’re forced into a morally questionable situation, made to make a decision that challenges that view, that we realise the world isn’t so clear-cut, that amongst the black and white are varying shades of grey. Sometimes we have to step into that grey zone. It might be uncomfortable, unfamiliar, but if you know what you’re doing is for the greater good then it’s worth it.” Wolford paused, gathering his thoughts. He and Judy had engaged in many conversations during their time as partners, but he’d never spoken so openly and for such a long period of time before.

“You’re one of the rare ones, one of the mammals who genuinely wants to make the world a better place. A lot of us on the force never had that belief when we joined – we joined because we had bills to pay, mouths to feed, and knew we’d always have a job. We might all act like your enthusiasm annoys us at times, but it’s a reminder to us all that actually, we’re doing some good with our lives, even when we’re treated like shit – when perps call us names, or spit at us, or pull weapons on us. Whatever happened I wouldn’t worry about it. Your hearts in the right place and that makes you a good cop and a good mammal.” Wolford concluded. He kept his eyes front and centre the entire time he spoke, a little uncomfortable with how forthcoming he’d been with his feelings. She’d worried him last week, her behaviour highly unusual. She’d never been late before, and he’d caught her almost falling asleep a few times. He’d initially put it down to a fight with Wilde, but if the bracelet around her wrist was any indication then everything was perfectly fine between them. He was curious now as to what she’d done that had resulted in another mammal getting hurt.

Judy mulled over Wolford’s words. His theory made sense, but it didn’t seem solid. “Some mammals might be concerned with the greater good theory, though. Look at Bellwether. She thought she was helping prey mammals, doing it all for the greater good, and many innocent mammals were hurt in the process.”
“Your key word there was innocent. Was the person who ended up hurt by your actions innocent?”

Wolford asked, paw opening to face the sky

Catstro certainly wasn’t innocent. “No, but that doesn’t justify hurting them.”

“Maybe not, but perhaps karma was long overdue. I can’t see you hurting someone for the fun of it, Judy. The way I see it they were hurt because they’d done something wrong. I mean, take that alpaca for example,” Wolford nodded to the street, to a mammal heading towards the bakery.

Judy followed Wolford’s gaze, snorting. “That’s a llama…”

Wolford sighed, shrugging his shoulders. They both looked the same to him. “Alright, take that llama for example. If he were to go into the bank brandishing a gun and demanding all the cash from the register, threatening and scaring the pregnant ocelot behind the counter, and we went in there to stop him and he ended up hurt, say his gun went off and he shot his thigh, or he broke his arm as he tried to flee from us, would that be our fault?”

“No.” Judy’s response was instant.

“Why is that?” Wolford had a purpose for his line of questioning, but Judy had to figure it out herself.

“Because he put himself in that situation.” Judy kept her gaze on the llama, following him as he entered the bakery.

“Exactly. He was an idiot and he got himself hurt because of it. He’d try to blame it on me or you…actually more like me, but a judge would throw it out because he was a fool and put himself in a bad situation. We are the sum total of our choices, Judy.” Wolford concluded.

They were silent for a moment, Judy thinking over Wolford’s words. He had a point. Put yourself in danger and if danger came knocking you couldn’t act like it surprised you. It was the risk you’d willingly taken. “What happened anyway?” Wolford broke the silence.

Instinctively Judy’s paw went to her bracelet, touching the silver charms as she kept her gaze on the street. “Someone I care for deeply was being threatened. The person threatening them ended up hurt by a third party. I’d told this third party that the mammal I cared about was being threatened.” She omitted that they’d actually ended up dead, avoided mentioning anything mob related too. It wasn’t right for her to lie to her colleague, but she couldn’t risk him telling anyone, couldn’t risk losing her job.

“If that third party hurt them then it was their choice. Any and all blame lies at their paws. They could’ve decided not to act on the information you gave them, but they did. The weight of that is theirs to bear.” It made sense to Wolford. If Judy hadn’t been the one dishing out the hurt, then it wasn’t her fault.

“I swayed the decision by telling them,” Judy argued.

“No, you didn’t. You gave them a choice. They made it. Every mammal has free will, and if the third party decided to hurt another mammal then that was his or her choice. Did you coerce the third party into hurting them? Bribe them?” Wolford still wasn’t getting through to her.

“No! Gosh no! I told them I didn’t want anyone to be hurt. But I couldn’t stop myself from feeling a little pleased when the mammal was hurt.” Judy whispered, finally voicing her feeling. Catstro had tormented Nick, threatened him and Marian. A dark, deep part of Judy had wanted Catstro to feel something akin to what he’d put Nick through, get a taste of his own medicine. When Mr. Big
had backed Catstro into a corner, Judy had taken immense pleasure in his panic. She took no pleasure from his death, but she’d enjoyed the caracal being put in his place beforehand.

“Because they wronged Wilde.” Wolford hid his smile.

“I didn’t say anything about Nick.” Judy shot back quickly, turning to look at her partner with wide eyes.

Sniggering, Wolford shook his head fondly at her response. “You didn’t have to. When mentioning the mammal you care deeply about you touched your bracelet.” He nodded in the direction of Judy’s wrist.

Judy’s gaze moved to the silver bracelet around her wrist. She couldn’t stop her wide smile as she touched it. She hadn’t taken it off since Nick had fastened it around her wrist. “It was a birthday present. How did you know it was from him?”

“Like I said, I’ve spent several weeks with you now and I know you don’t wear jewellery, so the fact you’re wearing that bracelet suggests it’s important to you, that it was from someone important. Wilde’s the only one you hold in such a high regard.” Wolford glanced again to the bracelet around her wrist, noting the charms. “It’s an interesting present.”

“Interesting?” The word struck Judy as an odd choice.

“Mhm. They’re tokens of affection, usually gifted by male canines to females they’re fond of. The two charms symbolise how you met. It’s an old tradition, goes back centuries. Few canines follow it these days. Wilde’s family are pretty old school though, so it doesn’t surprise me.” Wolford mused.

“Tokens of affection? A tradition? Old school?” Judy was left with more questions than answers.

“Yeah, it’s an old tradition that all canines know about. If Wilde didn’t tell you what the bracelet means though, well then it’s not my place to do so. Wilde’s family are also well known in pred circles, his grandfather was the first pred to go to the Old World, opened the first pred tailors, and his family was very vocal in their support of the pred-rights movement too. We’re all taught about it as kits at school.”

Wolford was a goldmine of information. “None of this was mentioned in the book…”

“The book?” Wolford lifted an eyebrow. What the hell was Judy reading?

“Oh, I figured since I’m going to be working with Nick, and seeing as how we live together, I needed to do some research on foxes. I borrowed a book from his mom. It never mentioned this bracelet.” Judy explained, eyes lifting from her bracelet to look at the timber wolf. She’d have to do some Zoogling on Nick’s family, too.

“You borrowed a book from his mom?” Wolford shook his head at the fact Wilde had already introduced her to his mother. “The bracelets are a tradition that’s all but died out, passed on through word of mouth when we’re kits. Only one place in the city still makes them now.”

“What place?” If Judy could find out where the bracelets were made she could do some digging, try and figure out why her bracelet was ‘interesting.’

“Yeah, I ain’t telling you.” Wolford turned his attention back to the street.

“I’ll howl.” Judy threatened. She was partly joking, knowing she wouldn’t really follow through
with it, but at the same time, she hoped the threat might make him talk. Wolford had been pretty embarrassed the last time Judy had forced him to howl.

“Go ahead. It’s a canine secret; I’m not going to say anything no matter what you do. Besides, it’s down to Wilde to tell you what it means.” Wolford didn’t really want to keep secrets from Judy, but it wasn’t his place to tell her anything about the bracelet. “Back to the point, though. My wife is a strong believer that in order for harmony to exist in the world there needs to be balance. When mammals talk about yin and yang, they assume one is good and one is bad. That’s not true. Think of two concepts that are opposite to each other, like day and night. The night is good because we can rest, while day is good because we can live. They’re not bad, just different. This is true with lots of things. Bad is an imbalance of these two things. If there were too much day, everyone would get tired. If there were too much night, everyone would sleep too much and nothing would ever get done. They complement each other. Good and bad are two faces of the same coin. A mammal that steals bread to feed his family is doing good for the family, but bad for the mammal whose bread is stolen. If there were only good in the world, you’d never know to value and treasure it. Light is no light when the eyes have never seen the darkness. The bad makes you realise the importance, value, and need for good.”

Judy mind was still trying to process all of the information Wolford had given her regarding the bracelet and Nick’s family, but she managed to roughly follow along with Wolford’s speech. “So what your saying is, even though what happened was bad, it was ultimately good too?” Judy thought she understood the point Wolford was trying to make.

“It could be construed that way, yes. The mammal threatening Wilde was hurt, which is bad, but now that mammal will think twice about threatening Wilde again, the good. The world relies on a balance of both.” Wolford surmised.

Judy didn’t bother correcting Wolford, telling him that Catstro really wouldn’t be able to hurt Nick again unless he came back from the dead. Eyes front and centre, watching the street, Judy smiled. “Who knew you were so deep? Thanks, Connor.” Judy genuinely appreciated the timber wolf’s insight. Getting the perspective of an outsider was helping her process her actions and the consequences better.

Wolford shrugged. “I have my moments. I’m not just a pretty face, or at least that’s what my wife tells me.” He sighed, glancing out of the side window of their car. His wife was an interesting mammal, her beliefs so different to his, but they complimented one another beautifully.

Judy’s gaze caught a shifty looking coyote walking down the street. He was slouched down, paws in his pockets, ears flat, and tail flicking side to side in agitation. “Speaking of moments, possible 10-66 at our two o’clock”

Wolford moved his gaze forward, catching the coyote at their two o’clock. Slowly leaning forward he flicked the microphone on the dash cam back on. Eyes on the canine, Judy and Wolford watched as he entered the jewellers next to the bakery. Unplugging her seatbelt, Judy grabbed the car keys. She had a gut feeling…

Moments later the coyote came sprinting out of the shop, a bag under his arm. Following closely behind him the store owner came running outside, screaming for someone to stop him.

“Damn it. Could do without a 211 today.” Wolford cursed, undoing his seatbelt quickly. The timber wolf and rabbit abandoned the car, Judy remembering to hit the lock button as they ran after the coyote.

Judy was quicker off the mark, having been prepared for the coyote to flee, and her small height
enabled her to weave amongst the heavy crowds of Central Plaza. “ZPD! Stop!” Judy yelled, figuring it would have little effect other than alerting the mammals around her that she was chasing a perp.

“Hopps, I’m looping around!” Judy heard Wolford yell. Wolford was statistically faster than the coyote, so he should be able to outrun him.

“Dispatch, we have a code 211 in Central Plaza – coyote fleeing a crime scene on foot, Hopps and Wolford in pursuit.” She called through to Clawhauser, paw on her radio as she continued to follow the coyote. Judy’s hind paws pounded the pavement, heart rate picking up as the thrill of the chase kicked in. Central Plaza was busy, it always was as it approached lunchtime, and Judy knew the coyote was hoping to use that to his advantage, to slip through the crowds and lose her, possibly even get her trampled on by larger mammals. She was smarter, though, lighter on her feet than most mammals. Judy’s lungs burned as she sped up, pushing herself to get that little bit closer to the perp, to not lose sight of him. Crossing the plaza, Judy could see a family of squirrels. They were right in her path of pursuit. They wouldn’t be out of the way in time. Paws pounding the pavement as she closed in on the family Judy pushed herself up on the balls of her hind paws, the run up having given her more than enough momentum to spring over the family of squirrels. Their screams rang in her ears as she landed on the pavement the other side of them, regaining her stride with ease. “Sorry!” she yelled back over her shoulder, sparing a moment to feel bad for the scared family before her attention returned to the coyote.

Weaving past an elephant Judy spotted the coyote taking a sharp left turn down a street. “ZPD! I said stop!” She yelled again, skidding as she changed direction, following the coyote. The unexpected turn hadn’t given Judy time to scope out the street, so as she took the sharp left she planted into the side of a tipped over dumpster, the contents spilt all over the street. With a frustrated shout, Judy scrambled over it, hind paws slipping as she tried to find some traction on the smooth metal sides of the dumpster. Finally over the obstacle, she spotted the coyote up ahead. The distance between them was greater now, but with few other mammals on the street, it was easy to spot the coyote. Judy knew she wasn’t as fast; that she wouldn’t make up the distance now. She hoped Wolford would appear soon.

Her prayers were answered when the coyote came to a screeching halt. Looking past him Judy caught sight of Wolford, blocking the other end of the street. “ZPD. Drop the bag and raise your paws.” The timber wolf demanded, lifting his tranq gun and aiming it at the coyote. With the coyote focused on Wolford, Judy took the opportunity to slink closer; keeping her steps light in a hope the perp wouldn’t hear her as she pulled her tranq gun from its holster. The range on it wasn’t great; she needed to be closer before she could fire it.

Wolford watched as the coyote snarled, his view of Judy blocked by the perp’s body. He could smell she was on the street though, the undeniable scent of Wilde that seemed to permanently cling to her now was hard to miss. “Drop the bag and paws in the air, now.” He demanded again, sensing the coyote’s rising aggression and the tension in his body.

In a blink and you’ll miss it move the coyote’s ear flicked around and he turned, taking a massive lunge with his paw extended, claws exposed as he took a swipe at Judy, having heard her approach. Pivoting on one of her hind paws Judy threw herself sideways, barely making it out of the coyote’s reach. It was only her fast reflexes that saved her from being mauled. Before she had time to fire her tranq gun the coyote hit the floor face-first, sprawled across the street. His paw came to land millimetres from Judy. She took a deep breath, heart racing at the shock of how quickly it had all happened.

“Hopps! You good?” Wolford checked in with the rabbit, his own heart beating frantically. If the
coyote had of even caught her with one of his claw he would’ve torn her in two.

Shaking, Judy took a deep breath. “I’m good. I’m good.” She reassured the timber wolf, taking several quick steps back, keeping her tranq gun aimed at the coyote sprawled on the street. Wolford left the bag of stolen goods, keeping his eyes and gun trained on the coyote, ready to let off another dart if he stirred. Moving around to stand opposite Judy, the unconscious coyote between them, he lifted his gaze for a second to make sure Judy really wasn’t hurt. Satisfied there wasn’t a scratch on her, relief flooded through him as he picked up the sound of sirens approaching.

Judy and Wolford sat together on a metal bench, eyes forward, watching the unconscious coyote that had been unceremoniously dumped into a holding cell. Wolford had hit him with a high dose of tranquillizer, and it was taking some time to wear off. “You don’t need to be here when he wakes if you don’t want to be, Judy.” Wolford offered. He’d seen the terror on Judy’s face as the coyote had lunged for her, smelt her fear afterwards when they’d driven back to the precinct together.

“It’s okay, I need to be here, Connor. This is my job and I can’t run away the first time a perp turns on me.” Judy had known that joining the force wouldn’t be a walk in the park, that some mammals wouldn’t want to be caught and would put up a fight.

“It was close, Judy.” Wolford’s heart had been in his throat and time had seemed to slow down as the coyote had turned to attack Judy, having obviously worked out that she was the most vulnerable of the pair.

“You stopped him in time though. Thank you.” Wolford’s fast reaction time had saved Judy from the coyote making another lunge for her. She was quick, her small height and weight giving her that advantage, but she wasn’t so stupid as to think she would’ve walked away unscathed had the coyote lunged at her again.

“Yeah well, they’d probably partner me with Rhinowitz if something happened to you, and we both know his surliness is irritating.” Wolford tried to play it cool. It was his job, as her partner, to protect her. He didn’t need thanking for it, though he appreciated the sentiment. “That, and Wilde would chew me out if you were hurt.”

Wolford snorted. “What? Tell Wilde you were nearly mauled by a coyote? I don’t have a death wish, thanks.”

Then we won’t tell him. We’ll have to write it in the official report, but he won’t see that.” Wolford shrugged. Wilde had to know that Judy would always be in danger so long as she was a cop. It wasn’t exactly an easy, safe job.

The sound of snuffling dragged Wolford and Judy from their conversation, and both mammals turned towards the sound. The coyote was starting to wake up, trying desperately to stand. The sedative in the tranquillizer would make him groggy for a while, but it’d wear off fully in a few hours. “Hey sleepy.” Wolford couldn't help but tease the perp, rising from his seat on the bench to stride towards the cell, keeping a safe distance away. Though there were bars across the front of
the cell, Wolford wouldn’t put it past the coyote to lunge at him.

Judy stood, moving to stand on Wolford’s right side, paw going for the tranq gun resting on her right hip, just in case. With a groan, the coyote turned to face them, and he bared his teeth in a show of aggression. “Looks like I missed. I’ll try harder next time.” The coyote’s gaze had landed on Judy, lips curled up into a snarl.

“You’re not going to get a next time, Sir. You were caught stealing $10,000 worth of jewellery from Beaverooks & Co. Jewellers, so you’re formally under arrest for felony theft.”

“And resisting arrest. I hate cardio.” Wolford sighed. “Oh and don’t forget attacking an officer, so let’s add felony assault too.”

Judy lifted her right paw to her muzzle, looking up at Wolford before she moved her gaze to the coyote. “Gosh, that’s got to be what? 10 years jail time?”

The coyote lunged for the bars, snarling at Judy and Wolford. “You going to punish a guy who was just trying to make ends meet, predo?” He snapped at Judy, the hard glint in his eyes full of loathing.

Judy frowned. She’d heard the term before, used as a slur against prey mammals who had a thing for preds, but it had never been used against her before.

“Don’t act all surprised. You wanna walk around wearing that thing then you better be prepared for mammals to call you what you are.” The coyote shot a glare at the bracelet now visible around Judy’s wrist. “How disgusting. What, not enough cute little rabbits for you to date, so you gotta chase after a pred now?”

“That’s enough,” Wolford demanded, paw going for his tranq gun.

“Interspecies, the biggest load of shit I’ve ever heard of. Sharp teeth and claws turn you on little bunny? Get you all excited?” The coyote inhaled, his disgust deepening. “And a fox at that? Wow, you really do have a pred kink. Your parents must be so proud. Their little girl is banging a fox. I wonder what kind of nasty things you get up to. Didn't they use to hunt and eat your kind? Guess he’s doing a different kind of eating these days.”

Wolford drew his tranq gun, firing off another dart, right into the coyote’s soft belly. “I said, enough.” He repeated, jaw clenching as the coyote’s eyes rolled back into his head and with a thud he fell sideways, unconscious again.

Judy blinked, still surprised. How could a mammal say such cruel things? How could he jump to conclusions without knowing anything about her situation? “Hopps, you alright?” Wolford checked.

“Yeah I…Connor, does wearing this really make me a predo?” The thought had never crossed Judy’s mind before.

Wolford sighed, paw rising to rub at his muzzle. “You smell like Wilde. Like I said, foxes have a very distinct smell. The bracelet doesn't help.”

“I’m not attracted to predators.” Judy stated. It was true, she’d never been attracted to predators before, it was just Nick.

“But you’re attracted to Wilde, and he's a pred.” Wolford pointed out. He knew Judy didn’t have a pred kink, she hadn’t shown any interest in any other predators.
“Yeah but it's only Nick and…wait,” Judy's eyes widened as she realised what she’d just revealed.

“None of us here are idiots, Judy. We all know you have the hots for Wilde. It's fine. None of us are bothered. If you're happy that's all that matters. But you've got to understand that for every mammal who approves there will be a mammal who won't, and that won't be the last time you’ll probably hear such slurs.”

“I just don't understand how he can think it's disgusting. We can't control who we like.” Judy glanced back to the unconscious coyote on the holding cell floor. She was a little concerned too that her fellow officers knew about her feelings for Nick. She wasn’t ashamed, but at the same time, she hadn’t told Nick how she felt, and the thought of others knowing before him didn’t sit right.

“A lot of mammals like him lash out because they're afraid or jealous. Honestly, Judy, I wouldn't let it bother you. Just, maybe keep your bracelet hidden a little more? I know you shouldn't have to but it's for your own safety. At work feel free to show it, we’ve all got your back, but when you’re alone please be careful. I've seen your academy report, the video of you taking down the rhino, I know you’re strong and capable but these idiots roam the streets in packs.” Wolford was genuinely concerned for her safety. While the bracelet would stop other canines bothering her, even though Wilde wasn’t at her side, to others it would be like a red rag to a bull. “Is that speciest?...”

Judy nodded, mind racing. Wolford was like a brick wall and she was tired of smacking her head against him, not getting any straight answers about her bracelet. “Come on, we should fill in the paperwork for this.” Wolford started to lead the way out of the holding area.

It took Judy and Wolford the rest of their shift to finish all the paperwork in relation to their day’s arrest. Once the final document had been filled in, Judy stretched. “Alright, Hopps looks like we’re done for the day. I'll drop you home, your presents are still in the trunk of our cruiser but I'll transfer them to my car.” Wolford stood, stretching upwards. Judy had abandoned her usual small desk to take the vacant medium-sized one next to Wolford. She didn’t think the timber wolf would be comfortable working at the smaller desk next to hers. When Nick finally started work it would be his desk, and the two of them would share a cubicle.

Tidying away her things, Judy followed Wolford down to the locker room where they grabbed their respective belongings before making their way to the employee parking garage. The timber wolf promised to be back shortly, throwing Judy the keys to his sedan so she could settle in the passenger seat. Unlocking the vehicle, she hopped in, sinking into the large leather seat, unable to see over the dashboard. Judy couldn't help but laugh. Sometimes her height was an advantage, sometimes it wasn't, and sometimes she knew she just had to laugh about it. The back passenger door opened, Judy tuned in enough to her surroundings not to be spooked, and Wolford placed all of her presents on the back seats. Shutting the door he circled the car, sliding into the driver's seat. “Your keys.” Judy offered them out to him. With a grin Wolford took them, starting up the engine. He'd dropped her home a few times after their shifts, on days where he wasn't comfortable with letting her walk or take the metro. Some days he had a gut feeling that he should drive her home. He liked to trust his gut. It hadn't failed him before.

The trip home passed by in peaceful silence as both mammals decompressed from the day, arranging their thoughts. Wolford pulled his car up to the kerb before he helped Judy carry her presents inside. When Wolford left, Judy was faced with the pile of presents from her colleagues. Quickly she changed out of her police blues, hanging them up in her wardrobe before she grabbed a notepad and pen so that she could a record of the gifts she’d received and send personalised thank you cards. Wrapping herself up in her blanket from Marian, she opened her gifts.
While clearing away the wrapping paper from the many thoughtful presents her colleagues had gifted her, Judy’s bracelet jingled, making her pause. “Wolford mentioned being taught about Nick’s family at school…” She tossed the paper into the recycle bin, moving back to the couch to grab her phone. Unlocking it, she brought up Zoogle.

‘Wilde family, Zootopia’ she typed into the search bar, hitting enter. Thousands of results appeared and Judy’s eyes widened. How hadn’t she known about his family? Selecting the first website, a Zoopedia page on Edward Wilde, Judy began to read.

Personal life:


In 1983, at the age of 26, Robert Wilde married Marian Lena Caswell (1959 – present) in a private ceremony conducted in the same church Edward and Florence were wed in. In 1985, Robert and Marian welcomed their first child, Nicholas Piberius Wilde (1985 – present). In 1992, Robert was targeted by an unidentified individual with no known motive and was attacked in the street while closing up the Wilde & Son Tailoring store he had inherited from his father. He subsequently died from his injuries and was pronounced dead at the scene by first responders. He is outlived by his wife and son.

Professional life:

Edward Wilde opened Zootopia’s first predator-owned tailors in 1960, trading under the name Wilde & Son Tailoring. In 1958 Edward sailed to the Old World to acquire a silent business partner, one whose only involvement was to provide capital. Edward spent a year in the Old World before he returned to Zootopia in 1959. It took another year before Wilde & Son Tailoring was ready to open their doors to the population. The store was located at 1437 Dune Street, Sahara Square, close to the Olive Street metro station.

After Edward’s death, the business was passed on to his son Robert. Robert continued to own and operate the business with great success until his own death in 1992. The business was passed on to his wife for her to hand over to their son once he reached the age of 18. Business tapered off after Robert’s passing and in 2001 debtors seized the business. Wilde & Son Tailoring ceased trading 41 years after it first opened its doors.

Controversies:

The Wilde family is well known amongst predator families and predator kits are often taught about Edward Wilde during their pred-history classes. While Edward Wilde was the first predator to sail to the Old World and was the first predator to own a tailoring business in the city of Zootopia,
which served predominantly predator clientele, the Wilde family are also recognised as having been very vocal in their support of the pred-rights movement. Some theories suggest that Robert Wilde’s murder was in part due to his support for the movement, while others suggest he was targeted because of his species.

Newspaper articles indicate that Edward Wilde was arrested in his youth for breach of the peace and trespass. In 1948 Edward organised a mass rally in Savannah Central and many members of the protest, along with Edward, forced their way into City Hall in order to confront Zootopia’s lawmakers. Responding officers led him away from the scene in police cuffs, but all charges were later dropped.

Newspaper articles also indicate that in 1977 Robert Wilde was arrested for obstruction of the highway and breach of the peace as he partook in a Zootopia-wide protest. Predator protestors chained themselves together and blocked key transport routes in and out of the city as part of a wider attempt to force the lawmakers of Zootopia to lift their laws stopping predators from being seen as equal to the city’s prey population. Robert was led away from the scene by officers but never formally charged.

Florence Wilde and Marian Wilde do not appear to have arrest records, though photographs and witness reports place them at the protests their respective mates were arrested at.

There is currently no information available as to whether Nicholas Wilde has ever been arrested. It has been suggested that he may hold a record, given his family history. However, multiple sources confirm that he was seen helping Zootopia Police Department’s first rabbit officer, Officer Judith Hopps, solve the high-profile Night Howler case. Working with the ZPD would seem to suggest that he does not hold a record.

Judy couldn’t stop her snigger. She could clearly remember Nick’s disgruntled mug shot when she’d called up his record a few months back. Breaking and entering, petty theft, and antisocial behaviour, all of which he’d been arrested for but never formally charged with. The evidence against him for the crimes was flimsy and the judges hadn’t wanted to waste their time with them. With no formal charges the press hadn’t caught wind of it, and as Nick’s antics hadn’t been at highly public events, such as the protests his parents and grandparents had attended, no one had witnessed the crimes either.

“Sometimes I wonder what I would read if I Zoogled my own name. Actually, I probably don’t want to know.” Judy shook her head. Her focus returned to the web page, to all of the information she’d just read. She’d been aware of the basics of it, but she was still baffled as to how she’d never heard of his family before. Nick’s parents and grandparents had been very active in campaigning for better legislation for predators, and Judy found herself admiring them. They’d stood up for what they’d believed in and campaigned to make Zootopia a better place for all predators. “Maybe we are quite insular in Bunnyburrow.” She mused. Pred-history classes weren’t part of the curriculum back home, the local authority deeming it unnecessary when there were so few predators living in the district. Judy felt like she was missing out on a lot. Surely predator history was just as important as prey history? After all, it all melted together to create the history of their country.

Judy vowed to buy some predator history books and read them all. She loved Nick, and if she was going to be in a committed, long-term relationship with him then she needed to know as much about predators, and their history, as possible. But first, she needed to know as much as possible about Nick and his history. Sure she could Zoogled some more, save some questions for Nick, or even call Marian, but she had a better idea. Up and off the couch she grabbed her metro pass and
keys. Grabbing her jacket she slid it on, hiding her bracelet. Leaving home, and locking the door behind her, Judy opened up the map app on her phone, typing in her destination.

“1437 Dune Street, Sahara Square.”
"Good morning cadets, it's another beautiful day!"

Nick groaned as Major Friedkin banged her way into the dorm room at 5:30 am, shouting her usual morning wake up call as she turned on all the lights. Nick missed the lazy morning in bed he'd been able to indulge in with Judy when he'd last been home, two weeks ago. It was the start of June now and they were fast approaching the longest day of the year. As a nocturnal mammal, Nick hated the summer months.

Aware that if he dithered he'd find a bucket of ice water thrown over him, Nick sat up on his bunk, careful to avoid smacking his head on the ceiling. “Good morning princess!” Randon, the only wolf cadet and the occupier of the bed beneath Nick’s, called out as he lifted a paw, pushing Nick’s mattress from underneath to jostle the fox. It had become a running joke for Randon, calling Nick princess. Nick's love of sleep had reminded the wolf of a story his mom used to read to his sister, about a princess called Sleeping Beauty.

“Good morning, Randy.” The nickname slipped off his tongue. The first time the wolf had introduced himself Nick had asked him to repeat his name several times. Apparently his mom had wanted to call him Brandon, but his dad had hated it. In the end, they’d settled on Randon. Nick was positive Brandon would have been a much better name. Regardless, he garnered much joy out of shortening it to Randy.

“Damn straight I am. You’re the only one whose been home to get laid.” The wolf shook his head, moving off his bed to stretch.

Nick jumped down from his bunk, sticking his landing. “I didn't get laid when I went home.” He clarified for what felt like the hundredth time. He'd come back smelling strongly of Judy and his fellow cadets had picked up on it the moment he'd sauntered back into the dorm room. The teasing had been merciless since.

“Yeah, and I'm the Mayor of Zootopia,” Horton called from his bed a few feet away.

Nick’s fellow cadets laughed and the fox shook his head fondly. They were idiots, but they were also part of his academy family. Some of them hadn't liked him, to begin with, and he could see a few were still apprehensive, but Nick didn't let it bother him. Grabbing his training clothes, he changed quickly, grateful that this year’s intake hadn't included any females.

“Ten mile run this morning boys.” Major Friedkin started to usher them out of the dorm room, leading them out into one of the fields around the main building of the academy. “As per usual, you have an hour and a half to complete your run. Breakfast will be served at 8 am. It's now 5:45 am. You have 15 minutes to warm up and you'll have 30 minutes after your run to stretch and shower.”

Nick exhaled. Years on the street had made him fast on his hind paws, he knew he could complete the 10 miles in under an hour and a half, but he’d rather be in bed. They weren't being judged on who was the fastest, there were too many speedy mammals at the academy with an unfair advantage, but they were being judged by their ability to pace themselves and not collapse into a heap at the finish line.

Realising he needed to warm up, Nick set about stretching. His mind wandered though, body working on muscle memory. He could do this routine blindfolded. The sound of Major Friedkin’s
starting whistle a few minutes later spurred Nick into action. He turned sharply, taking off in the direction of the cross-country running route. Up ahead he saw Randon, followed closely behind by Tony. Behind him, he could hear several other cadets, including the unmissable sound of Horton’s massive hooves slamming against the ground. The poor elephant had to lug his 5500kg weight 10 miles. For once Nick was grateful he was a small mammal.

Nick set a steady pace; hind paws pounding the grassy ground of the academy’s cross-country trail. The rhythm was hypnotic, and he was familiar with the route now. From the open fields around the academy, Nick carried on into the nearby woods, never losing sight of Randon and Tony. The path narrowed, the grasses of the fields beneath his hind paws becoming the dirt of the woodland track. The open space closed in on him, tall beech trees stretching upwards, battling for sunlight and space. The lush green leaves of the trees created a canopy over the path, only allowing some of the limited morning light through. Nick was grateful for his sharp night vision as he bounded over some unearthed tree roots hidden in the dark. The cool morning air burned his lungs but the feeling of running, without being chased by angry mammals that he’d hustled, was exhilarating. In his whole life he’d never left the city limits, but on his way to the academy, he’d been glued to the window. He found himself enjoying the countryside, the wide-open spaces and the fresh air. He’d have to speak to Judy, see if they could organise camping or hiking holidays. She was a country girl; she’d probably love it.

Judy. Nick’s thoughts turned to the bunny he loved as he kept running, kept his steady pace and his eyes on the wolf and tiger up ahead. It had been a big deal, asking his mom to go and get Judy’s birthday present. He knew the importance of the jewellery; his mom had drilled it into him since he’d been old enough to understand. His mom had always worn her bracelet until his father had died. Nick could remember the two charms on it – a playing card and a jukebox. When he’d decided to ask his mom to get the bracelet made for Judy, Nick had thrown together a quick sketch on a scrap of paper of what he was after, posting it to her along with an IOU. It would take him several pay cheques to pay her back, but Judy was worth it. Nick knew it had been sneaky of him not to explain the meaning behind the bracelet to Judy when he’d gifted it to her, but he’d been afraid – afraid she’d reject it, afraid she wouldn’t return the sentiment, afraid it would damage their friendship. He wanted her to have it though, wanted her to know she was important to him, the most important mammal in his life beside his mom.

His thoughts shifted to Catstro. It was liberating, not having his crippling debt, but he knew it had come at a great personal cost to Judy. She was still working for Mr. Otterton as a delivery girl on her days off from the ZPD, still kitsitting a few nights a week too. During their phone call last week Nick had tried to convince her to cut back on her extra jobs, that they didn’t need the money now that Catstro was gone, but his sweet bunny had wanted to keep working, to build up a slush-fund for them. It made Nick feel a little inadequate. He knew that in modern society females were more independent, that they didn’t need to rely on a male to provide for them, but Nick liked the idea of providing, liked the idea of being able to take care of Judy.

He’d bought her the bracelet as a token of his love and commitment to her, as well as it being a warning to other canines. The sight of Judy wearing it had stirred some deep possessive feelings in him, made him want to claim her and mark her, love her and knot her. Those thoughts terrified him. He’d never wanted that before with any mammal. Judy though, she was different. She was good and sweet, caring and beautiful, and Nick knew time was running out. It was getting harder and harder to hide how much she meant to him and he’d have to come clean soon. He cursed, remembering that he hadn’t picked up a book on rabbit customs and culture while he’d been back in the city. He’d ask his mom tomorrow during their call. It would be embarrassing, but his mom knew how he felt about Judy.

Breathing a little heavier now than he had been a few minutes prior, the path taking a turn up a
steep incline, Nick could feel the back of his calves burning. Eyes ahead he caught sight of Tony suddenly tripping. Randon was further ahead, oblivious to Tony’s tumble. Nick slowed to a jog, coming to a stop by the tiger on the ground. “Come on.” He offered out a paw, knowing he wouldn’t be able to lift the Bengal off the ground if he was injured.

“Damn tree roots got me,” Tony growled, taking Nick’s offered paw. Climbing slowly back onto his hind paws, Tony flexed, checking he hadn’t damaged anything.

“This path isn’t the safest, I’ll grant you that.” Nick conceded. He’d already had to jump over several exposed tree routes. “Come on, we’ll keep pace together.” He offered, hearing the sound of Horton approaching. Several other cadets had overtaken them while Nick had been helping Tony up. “We’ll also keep pace with Horton. We can cross the line together, like The Three Mouseketeers.”

Tony offered the fox stony silence, lifting an eyebrow. They hadn’t had the best start. Tony hadn’t wanted a fox at the academy, questioned how he was even allowed to be there, but when he’d been struggling to conquer the ice wall Nick had told him to use his claws as mini ice picks. Sure enough, by following his advice, Tony had been able to make it up and over the wall with ease.

“Yeah okay, that wasn’t funny. It’s 6:45 am, sue me.” Nick shrugged. Tony snorted, amused.

The sound of Horton’s heavy footsteps and breathing coming to a standstill next to them made both smaller mammals look up. “I hate running.”

“We can tell.” Nick shot back, earning himself a light thwack around the back of his head from the elephant.

“We have 45 minutes and we’re just over halfway through, come on.” Nick really wanted to finish within the allotted time. He didn’t want to risk underperforming and losing his phone privileges, along with his trips back home. That, and he was craving a shower and some breakfast.

The three mammals started to run again, remaining steady. Nick led the pack, jumping over exposed tree roots, giving the tiger and elephant behind him some clues as to where to be careful. The woodland path soon opened back out, revealing the grassy fields of the academy. Though tempted to sprint ahead, to really push himself for the last leg of his run, Nick maintained his speed. Crossing the line with 10 minutes to spare, Nick let out a sigh of relief. It wasn’t his fastest time, but he’d stopped to help his fellow cadets. He found himself enjoying the chance to help other mammals for once.

Once showered, Nick joined his fellow cadets in the canteen, taking his usual table with Randon, Tony, and Horton. The food still hadn’t improved in all the weeks he’d been training, but some food was better than no food. He missed his moms cooking though and he absently wondered what Judy’s cooking would taste like. They’d gone out for food when Nick had been home and before he’d left to start at the academy. Perhaps she’d cook for him the next time he was granted leave.

Clicking fingers in his face snapped Nick out of his thoughts. “Earth to Wilde, come in Wilde.” Randon tried to grab his attention.

“Sorry, my mind was elsewhere.” Nick apologised, stabbing his fork into the pancakes on his plate.

“On a certain fluffy bunny?” Tony teased from his seat to Nick’s left, his elbow coming out to catch Nick’s side.
Wincing at the sharp jab to his side, Nick rolled his eyes. "With the way you keep going on about her, someone might think you have a thing for her." Nick deflected.

"Think she'd be up for some stripes in her life?" Tony had seen a few photos of the bunny, her face splashed all over the newspapers in the city countless times. She was a pretty thing. He'd initially blamed her for the uprising in the city after the night howler case. He'd been forced to flee with his wife to the countryside for a few weeks when their neighbours had turned on them. He hadn't wanted to risk his wife getting hurt. He was still a little bitter, yes, but when Wilde spoke about the rabbit he could see that she'd been a little naive at the time. When he'd voiced his concerns, earning himself the mother of all glares from the fox now sat beside him, Nick had assured him that Judy was different now, aware of what she was saying and the impact it could have. Tony would have to see for himself in the future, he had no doubts their paths would cross at some point, but for now, he would take Nick’s word for it.

The warning yip aimed at Tony was out of Nick’s mouth before he could stop it. "Dammit." He hadn’t meant to, but his sudden surge of possessiveness had been uncontrollable. He figured it wasn’t healthy, the way he hated even the thought of someone taking Judy from him, but with very little in his life he wanted to hold on to the greatest treasure he had.

The canteen fell silent, all eyes turning to look at Nick. Tony’s eyes had widened, the tiger leaning back in surprise. "Woah, Wilde. I was only joking.

"I’m sorry, that wasn’t polite." Nick found himself apologising again for another uncontrolled vocal cue. He’d thought the one at Savannah Central was embarrassing, but this one was worse. "What is it about her that keeps making me use vocal cues?"

“No, it’s cool.” Tony raised a paw, eyes on the fox as he started to piece it all together.

“Nothing to see here, back to your meals,” Horton told the other cadets in the room, glaring at those who tried to keep their focus on their table.

Dropping to a hushed tone, Tony spoke. “You honestly care for her, don’t you?” While he’d enjoyed tormenting the fox about the little bunny waiting at home for him, he’d never actually believed there was anything serious between them. The rumour mill had said the bunny cop was as straight-laced as they came, so even the idea of her being in an interspecies relationship was crazy to him. He’d thought the bunny simply worked off some steam with Nick, gossip suggested they were amorous creatures and the entire district dedicated to them suggested they couldn’t keep it in their pants, but he’d never factored in that the two of them might actually have deeper feelings for one another.

Nick gave a short, sharp nod. His gaze was settled on his food as he played with it, no longer feeling hungry.

Nick’s confirmation made Tony feel like a jerk. He’d been tormenting the fox by his side for weeks now about the rabbit, suggesting he was using her for sex given the connotations associated with her species. Finding out that Nick’s affections for the rabbit cop ran deeper made him feel awful for being so crass. “Does she know?”

“No.” Nick kept to short, clipped responses.

“She could feel the same?” Tony offered. He didn’t want to get Nick’s hopes up, but at the same time, he knew the rabbit often sent Nick care packages and letters. Hook-ups weren’t really known for that. His mistress hadn’t sent him a single letter since he’d left for the academy. He didn’t know if the rabbit did anything else for Nick as while he and the fox had formed a sort of friendship, he
knew Wilde was closer to Randon, finding familiarity with a mammal of his own species.

“Doubt it.” Nick was more than capable and willing to have a heart to heart with Judy, but he wasn’t quite prepared to do the same with the mammals sat at the table with him.

“Wilde, you need to tell her. She deserves to know. She has dinner with your mom weekly, you two talk every week, she sends you care packages every fortnight, and heck, Wilde, you mention her all the time so I’m absolutely sure she talks about you all the time.” Randon butted in. “It sounds to me like she cares for you an awful lot. You need to tell her when you next go home.”

“I know, and I will. You don’t have to mother me, Randy. My own mom is bad enough as it is.” Nick rolled his eyes comically, slipped back into humour; uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken.

Sensing that Nick was done talking about, Randon let it go. He’d said his piece, now it was up to Nick to follow through. “Is your mom hot?”

Nick, Tony, and Horton groaned, all leaning back in their seats. “You’re disgusting.” Nick shook his head. He was used to the question, many con-mammals had asked about his mom when he’d been living on the streets. It wasn’t something he’d ever escape – photos of his mom had been plastered all over newspapers when she’d been younger, protesting with his father. A quick Zoogle of his family name gave most mammals all the info and photos they needed.

“It’s part of my charm.” Randon shrugged, leaning back in his chair with a lazy grin. He’d successfully moved the conversation along and eased the fox’s discomfort.

“No wonder you’re single.” Horton tutted. Though he engaged in the boyish banter his mom had raised him to be a gentlemammal.

“I’ll have you know that I’m single because I’m simply too much mammal for most she-wolves.” Randon had enjoyed a few ladies over the years, but he’d never wanted to settle down with any of them. There were too many fish in the sea, and he wanted to try them all.

“Keep telling yourself that.” Tony retorted. The brief conversation with Wilde made Tony think about his wife. He loved her, loved her with all of his heart and soul, they were kithood sweethearts, but their sex life had been lacking. That was where his mistress factored in. She was into the kinkier stuff, and Tony’s wife wasn’t. He and his wife had experimented and she’d given it her all, but it hadn’t been to her tastes and had left her feeling bad afterwards. Tony had never wanted her to feel that way again, so he hadn’t pushed her for more interesting sex since. Now though, he wondered whether he was making his wife miserable. He hadn’t told her about his mistress, but his wife had a good nose on her, she’d probably smelt the other feline all over him. The thought made his heart clench. His wife always carried herself with dignity, always sang his praise and loved him, and yet he was skulking around behind her back. His wife deserved better. He vowed to do something about it when he was allowed home.

“Cadets! Breakfast is over. Time for your morning's training.” Major Friedkin barked, the canteen suddenly a flurry of activity as they cleared away their plates, heading off to their morning's training.

Back outside, Nick looked up at the monkey bars. Major Friedkin had decided that today would be Rainforest district training. Monkey bars, vine climbing, and torrential rain were all on the cards. Nick had struggled with the monkey bars initially, the rails a little too thick for him to wrap a paw around comfortably, but he’d worked out that if he took them quickly enough, put enough swing in his forward momentum, he made it across with no problems.
Major Friedkin decided to scupper his plan.

Hosepipe in paw, she drenched the area, leaving the spray on to soak the cadets as they tried to cross the bars without falling into the mud pit below. Nick wondered for a moment why he’d even bothered showering after his run if he was just going to get soaking wet again. Thankfully he didn’t fall into the mud pit as he crossed the bars fifteen times, but his arms were burning, his paws aching from the rough treatment, and his issued training clothes clung to him uncomfortably. Major Friedkin was relentless.

Giving them only a few minutes to catch their breath once the bars were done, she moved them onto the vine climb. Thankfully, she kept the hosepipe away from them this time. Arms and paws sore from the monkey bars, Nick stared at the vine in front of him. With a deep sigh, he pushed himself up, jumping a little before grabbing onto it. Trying to hide his discomfort, he managed to clamp his hind paws around the slippery vine. Hauling himself up the vine, Nick was grateful for his small size once again. While the larger mammals at the academy were able to grip the vine higher up, and therefore start climbing from a higher point, they had more weight to pull up with them.

Major Friedkin made them climb the vines and safely descend fifteen times, and Nick was pretty sure the polar bear got some form of enjoyment in seeing some of the cadets fall into the mud below. When she finally declared that it was lunchtime Nick was beyond grateful. He’d known that the academy would be tough, he wasn’t stupid, you couldn’t become a cop if you weren’t physically fit, but he hadn’t realised just how tough it would be, especially for someone as small as him. It gave him a greater sense of respect for Judy’s accomplishments.

Lunch was a more subdued affair than breakfast. They’d all had to shower again to remove the mud and dirt from their fur, and Nick barely stopped himself from yawning several times as he ate his salmon. The afternoon’s session would be in the classroom, much to his relief. During his youth Nick had fallen asleep a few times at his desk, late nights at his family store helping his dad had tired the young kit out. If Major Friedkin had no problem throwing ice water over him to get him out of his bunk, Nick didn’t want to know what she’d do to him if she caught him sleeping in her class.

Once lunch was over and the cadets were shepherded into the classroom, Nick took his usual seat at the front. Being small meant being front and centre. Randon took his usual chair to Nick’s left, while Tony took the seat to his right. Horton was all the way at the back of the room; his large size meaning anyone behind him wouldn’t be able to see the board. When Nick had first arrived at the academy and sat at the small desk at the front, a very familiar lingering scent had filled his nostrils. Judy. Nick had spent that first class half-listening, too engrossed in the smell. Now that he’d been sat at the desk for several weeks, her scent had all but gone, his own replacing it. He felt sorry for whatever mammal would sit in the seat next. He knew he had a distinct scent, all foxes did. At least Judy didn’t seem to mind it. “No. Your mind is not going there. You need to pay attention, Wilde.”

Standing at the front of the room, Major Friedkin looked over the cadets. “Alright, today’s class is on taking down criminals who are larger than you.”

“Then why’s Horton here? He could just sit his large ass on the criminals and the problem would be solved.” Tony piped up, snickering.

“Watch it Tony, or I’ll sit on you.” Horton shot from the back of the room. A balled up piece of paper sailed through the air seconds later, smacking Tony on the back of the head. The tiger whined, rubbing his head.
Nick couldn’t stop his laugh, and neither could the rest of the cadets. Major Friedkin even had to hold back her snort. The boys in this years intake were a handful, and without any girls to make them toe the line and reduce their boyish behaviour there had been a few instances where things had gotten a little out of control. “Settle down, settle down.” She hushed the room; pleased to see the cadets listen and shut up. Depositing their notebooks onto Wilde’s desk, she watched as the fox found his, before passing the pile on to Tony. “Take notes today, we’re going to cover a lot of ground.”

Once all the cadets had their notebooks and pens, Major Friedkin started to list the ways in which to safely bring down a larger mammal. “Paw-to-paw combat is usually seen as a last resort, but I feel it needs a mention and you will receive some training in it. Mammals larger than you will no doubt be more powerful, and as their fight or flight instincts will have invariably kicked in they will also be working on a surge of adrenalin and will try anything to get out of your reach. The ZPD doesn’t advise the use of paw-to-paw, but accepts that in some instances where all else fails it can prove useful.” She explained, watching as the cadets scribbled notes. During their third week she’d thrown the cadets into the boxing ring, trying to figure out who was natural fighter and who needed some work. Wilde had outmanoeuvred all of his opponents but had been unable to take any of them down. She’d concluded the session by showing them her favourite tape – Officer Hopps knocking out one of her fellow cadets last year. She’d secretly enjoyed the look on Wilde’s face as he’d watched his future partner take down the rhino. He’d be in for one hell of a ride after graduation.

“Repellent spray is only available for certain species of mammals, and the chances of you carrying a spray suitable for the mammal you’re trying to take down is slim to none. Irritants that may affect one mammal may not work on another and you would be wasting your time and risking getting very close to an agitated criminal for very little payoff. In windy conditions, repellent is all but useless and the effects of it are not always instant. Some mammals choose to carry repellents for their own protection and the ZPD does not prohibit this.” Major Friedkin continued. Nick scribbled down as much as he could, wanting to keep decent notes so that when it came time for the final exams he would have plenty to study from. He was pretty certain Judy would have some of her old notes, but he didn’t want to rely on them. Besides, part of him felt using her notes would be like cheating. “You’re a changed mammal, Wilde.”

The conversation about repellents reminded Nick of the first time he met Judy, stood in Jumbeaux’s Café. He’d spotted the little can on her belt the moment she’d interrupted his conversation with the elephant, and though he’d been concerned that she was carrying it he’d been pleased she hadn’t decided to use it on him. His parents had always told him that should a cop pull repellent on him, he was to slowly lift his paws and submit, answer all their questions and not run his mouth. He’d followed their advice all but once, and Nick still winced even now when he thought back to the extreme pain he’d experienced when he’d had repellent sprayed all over his face and in his eyes. The fact Judy no longer carried it, no longer felt the need to carry it, made him smile. She’d come a long way.

“How’s are the ZPD’s weapon of choice, along with tranquilisers. In the past only authorised firearms officers were allowed to carry tasers but now its been rolled out to all officers. You’ll receive training in how to safely use them later on in the semester. The benefits of tasers are that they are very effective if a mammal is hit with them. The ZPD issue tasers feature a dial for the officer to select the size of mammal they’re dealing with, to ensure that no mammals are killed from experiencing a larger voltage than is safe for them. Moving targets at a safe distance are hard to tag, and a clean hit can be very tricky. If the weapon snags on their outer clothing it may not be as effective as it should be. All of the above can be said for tranquilisers too, and you’ll also receive training in handling and deploying them later on in the semester.” Major Friedkin pulled up images on the interactive whiteboard from her computer, showing the cadets the ZPD issue tasers
Tasers. The thought made Nick shake his head fondly. Judy’s dad had tried to give her a taser when she’d first moved to the city and the fox was pretty sure Mr. Hopps still had it kicking around. Nick was also pretty sure that when the opportunity came around for him to meet Mr. Hopps the buck would remind him that he owned said taser, and wouldn’t hesitate to use it if Nick were a pain in the tail. Sure his bunny had told him that her parents had come a long way since she’d first joined the ZPD and moved to the city, but some habits were hard to break and it didn’t help that his species was commonly associated with being shifty, sly, and untrustworthy. Nick only hoped he’d be able to win Mr. Hopps over.

The class continued, Major Friedkin listing the various ways in which larger criminals could be brought down and subdued. Eventually she had to end the session so the cadets could have dinner. They were allowed two hours free time in the evening after dinner to unwind and bond, write letters home or catch an early night. She had some post to hand out this evening too, and she was aware that it was Wilde’s night to call Officer Hopps.

After the cadets had finished dinner Major Friedkin started to hand out their post. “Wilde, package for you.” She called out into the common room, watching as the fox popped his head up from the game of cards he’d been playing with Tony. It was her job to check all incoming and outgoing mail and so she’d opened the package this morning before waking the cadets, and though she hadn’t read the letter inside she’d spotted an interesting item at the bottom that had made her smile. She was also very familiar with the handwriting, having had several parcels from the same person arrive at the academy before.

Curious as to who was sending him an unexpected parcel, Nick abandoned the game, offering his cards to Randon. The wolf took his place, groaning as he looked over the awful hand Wilde had been dealt.

“You’ll want to open this in private. Go to the canteen, I’ll stop by in thirty minutes with the phone for you.” She whispered, handing the fox the package.

Frowning, Nick took it from her, offering a small smile of thanks. Leaving the common room he made his way to the canteen, pushing the door open and taking his usual seat. Placing the parcel down on the table, he took a moment to look at the handwriting on the box. It wasn’t his mom’s, and it wasn’t Judy’s either. Peeling back the tape Major Friedkin had used to reseal it, Nick opened the box.

The first thing he spotted, sitting on top of the items inside, was a handwritten note folded in two. His name was scrawled on the outside of it. Picking it up, Nick unfolded it and started to read.

Nick,

I hope you’re doing well. I also hope the fact I’m sending you a little care package isn’t too strange. I used to send them to Judy all the time while she was at the academy.

It was lovely to finally get to speak to you a few weeks back; Judy is always talking about you. I apologise again for jumping to conclusions at the time. Don’t worry, my kits have all been told that it was a big misunderstanding.

Judy tells me that you’re fond of our family farm blueberries, so I’ve included a large punnet of them in this package for you. They should be good for several days. I’ve also included some homemade strawberry and white chocolate cookies for you. I’m not sure if they’re something you like but I may have gotten a little carried away baking over the weekend, trying out some new
recipes from Goatdon Ramsey. Please let me know your thoughts on them if you try them, I’m not offended in the slightest if they’re not to your taste.

There are a few other bits and pieces in this box, including some bug products. I don’t know what you’re a fan of so I picked up a little bit of everything. Judy also mentioned that you’re not too fond of the sunshine, and when I went shopping the other day I spotted a pair of aviators I think may suit you, so I’ve included those too.

At the very bottom of this box is a book I recommend you read. Now please don’t take this the wrong way, but I saw the way you looked at my daughter during our call. I have 130 sons, so trust me when I say that I know you adore Judy very much.

Don’t worry, I don’t think Judy has noticed how you look at her – she’s not very experienced in matters of the heart. If you’re intending on telling my daughter how you feel though, perhaps even acting on those feelings, then this book should help you. I’ve gone through and placed sticky tabs on pages containing very important information, and I’ve pencilled in a few small notes on other pages. I hope you don’t think it’s too forward of me.

If you have any questions, or if there’s anything in particular food-wise that you’re craving, please send me a letter and let me know. I’ve made sure our home address is at the top of this note. Don’t worry; my kits know they’re not to open my mail on pain of eating onions for a week!

I hope you’ll come and visit soon; it would be lovely to have you and Judy home for a weekend.

With love,

Bonnie Hopps

The unexpected care package from Bonnie and her thoughtfulness at including not only his favourite blueberries but also bug-based candy made him smile. Placing the note down he pulled out the packet of cookies, giving them a look over before he put them down on the table. He was more than happy to try Bonnie’s baking and give her his honest feedback. Removing the punnet of blueberries, Nick couldn’t help but throw a berry into his mouth, groaning at the sweet taste. He had no idea how the Hopps family managed to make his favourite fruit even more delicious, but he could quite happily live on their blueberries. A handful of bug-based treats came next, all of them ones Nick had seen before but hadn’t eaten in years. His tight budget had meant such treats were few and far between. Producing the aviators next, Nick grinned. They looked awesome, and he couldn’t wait to try them out. The book at the very bottom of the box caught his attention next. His new aviators joined the pile of goodies from Bonnie, and Nick dipped his paw into the box to pull out the recommended book.

“A Young Leporidae's Guide to Love, Family, and Life.” He read the title aloud, noting the drawings of rabbits and hares on the front. Turning it over he skim-read the blurb. Without access to Zoogle, Nick only had the book to go on, but it looked like it covered a whole range of topics. Flicking through the pages he saw several of Bonnie’s sticky tabs and pencil notes. The book also seemed to include illustrations. One illustration, in particular, made him stop flicking through the pages, and he found himself staring at a sketch of a doe’s reproductive system. Scribbled in pencil in Bonnie’s handwriting, he found a tip – ‘don’t forget to keep your claws filed, we’re delicate.’

His cheeks and ears burned. He knew Judy’s parents were open about everything but he hadn’t expected them to be that open with him. He spared a moment to glance at his paws, at the sharp claws there. He’d have to get a claw file. He’d need to keep them somewhat sharp, they were useful weapons should he ever be backed into a corner, but he didn’t want to risk hurting Judy with them when they were intimate. “If you become intimate. You still haven’t told her yet.”
Curious, he returned his attention to the book and flipped through the subsequent pages, finding a detailed description of the rabbit mating process. He knew mammals had mating seasons, for him it was the winter months, but he was surprised to read that rabbits were ready to go all year round, that mating triggered the does body into releasing an egg, rather than relying on cycling hormones. What Nick found even more surprising was that rabbits were receptive to mating every 14 days out of 16. His eyes widened. “Oh hell. That explains the whole ‘breeding like rabbits’ thing.” If Judy returned his feelings she’d be constantly ready to mate. He’d die from too much sex. “There are worst ways you could go, Wilde.”

Overwhelmed he flipped through a few more pages, finding himself at the section about rabbit courtship. Skimming the pages he discovered that rabbits weren’t too different from foxes when it came to courtship, but there were certain elements to courtship that were uniquely Leporidae. He read that does often boxed their potential mates with their paws, and he was reminded of all the times Judy had playfully punched him. He also read that flowers were very important for does, a way for bucks to convey their feelings. Bonnie had scribbled another note, letting him know that plant husbandry and flower meanings were very important in their family. She’d also slipped in a small scrap of paper discussing the meanings of different flowers, all of which seemed to centre on feelings of love and joy and commitment. She’d circled and underlined tulips. Nick wasn’t stupid; he knew it was a hint. Shaking his head he smiled. He’d take Judy some flowers, including tulips, the next time he went home. “Thanks, Bonnie.”

A sharp knock on the canteen door caught his attention and Nick turned to the noise. “Phone time, Wilde.” He heard Major Friedkin call. Placing down the book he vowed that he’d read it in its entirety over the next week or two, but he’d have to read at night when the other cadets were sleeping. Thankfully his night vision and naturally nocturnal state would help him. Crossing to the canteen door he opened it to find Major Friedkin stood there, offering a phone down to him. “I take it you opened your package?”

“I did, thanks for letting me open it in here.” Nick hadn’t expected such kindness from the polar bear. He knew that if he'd opened the package in front of the other cadets, pulled out the book or the note, that some of them would've taken great pleasure in tormenting him over it. At least now that Tony, Randon, and Horton were aware of his deeper feelings for Judy they might back off a little with the teasing.

Major Friedkin offered the fox a smile. She knew Bonnie Hopps handwriting like the back of her paw. The doe had sent Judy countless letters and packages while she’d been at the academy. When Major Friedkin had been going through the box and had found the book at the bottom, she’d known that if the other cadets saw it then Wilde would be the butt of even more jokes, that there would be more whispers about the first fox at the academy. The tod didn't need that. Major Friedkin could be hard on the cadets, would always push them to be their best, but she knew that some of them struggled, some were a little more emotional than others, and some were picked on a little more than she liked. Wilde fell into the final category. Letting him open the package alone in the canteen hadn't been any skin off her nose, but it'd given the tod the chance to look over the contents in peace. “Thirty minutes.” She reminded the fox as he took the phone, offering her a quick nod before he shut the door.

Taking his seat back at the table, Nick typed in Judy’s number on the Muzzletime app before he hit the call button. While waiting for her to answer he contemplating whether he should tell her about his package from her mom. While he wanted to come clean and mention it to Judy, he also kind of liked the idea of keeping it to himself. He had several questions already for the Hopps matriarch and he was worried that if Judy found out he was talking to Bonnie, she’d ask questions about what they were discussing. He'd keep it a secret for now, but if Judy brought it up then he'd come clean.
“Nick!” The call finally connected, Judy’s happy smile filling the screen. “Hey, Carrots.” The sight of her made his tail wag happily. “I’ve missed you, how have you been?” Judy’s features softened. “I’ve missed you too. I’ve been good, you?”

Nick reflected on the past week, all the training and lessons he’d undertaken. “Yeah, I’ve been pretty good too. What did you do this weekend?” He settled into his seat, knowing Judy would probably talk for a while. He paid attention to everything she said, but he couldn’t deny that sometimes he just liked the sound of her voice.

“Mr. Otterton needed me to make a huge delivery to the Marshlands. The order was for 200 red roses. 200, Nick! The deer that answered the door was so surprised that she started crying and blabbered on about how she would forgive him.” Judy had figured that the deer’s mate had done something to upset her and the roses were his way of apologising.

“Maybe he royally screwed up and thought the grander the gesture the more likely he’d be forgiven?” Nick shrugged. He thought over the top gestures were sometimes conducted solely for attention. Small gestures could be just as meaningful and important and have an even larger effect by remaining personal and intimate.

“Perhaps, but I don’t understand why he couldn’t just buy her a dozen roses and go to her house and talk things out with her, apologise to her face if he really did something wrong.” Judy felt like the mammal that had sent the roses had been skirting around whatever the problem was, hoping 200 roses would fix it. She never wanted that to happen to her. 200 roses would be nice, yes, but they would never fix a problem.

“Yeah, but for some mammals flowers and gestures are important.” His gaze dropped to the book on the table and to the scrap of paper Bonnie had slipped inside of it, thoughts wandering to the flowers he’d take for Judy. He’d most certainly take her some tulips, maybe even some heliotrope.

“I guess. Flowers are pretty, and I’d never say no to them, but if I ever got into a fight with someone I’d want them to at least talk things through with me, not think that they can send me some roses and everything will be fine.” Judy huffed.

“Not all mammals think like you, Carrots.” Nick pointed out, enjoying the little frown on Judy’s face and the way her nose was twitching.

“Yeah, I know. What did you get up to today?” Judy switched topics, itching to know what Nick had been up to. She didn’t think her days were all that interesting, especially without Nick by her side, but the fox always asked her and always seemed genuinely interested in her response.

“Up at the crack of dawn again for a 10-mile run, followed by some Rainforest district training.” Nick’s body was still a little sore and achy from the morning’s activities, and though he’d intended on falling asleep as soon as he was in his bunk, now that he had the book from Bonnie in his paws he figured he’d be functioning on little sleep for the next few days.

“Please tell me Major Friedkin has turned the hose on you?” It had been the worst part of the Rainforest training for Judy. With her paws only just able to grip onto the dry monkey bars, the moment Major Friedkin had soaked them all with water she’d been doomed. She’d landed in the mud countless time and it had taken multiple tries and endless hours of working out for her to finally make her way across the wet bars.

Nick groaned, remembering the freezing cold water soaking him. “Yes. Thanks for warning me
about that.” He grumbled.

Judy laughed, smile widening. “I can’t tell you everything Slick, need to leave some surprises for you, keep you on your toes.”

“Oh I’m very much on my toes here, you don’t need to worry.” Shaking his head, Nick thought about some of the other obstacles that had caught him off guard. He’d conquered them all with some practice, but once he’d mastered them Major Friedkin had made them harder for him, pushed him a little more. “Anyway, after that she had us climb vines for a while before finally letting us have lunch.”

“And after lunch?” Judy pressed for more information. She knew Nick’s time at the academy was much different than hers, and she couldn’t help but be curious.

“We had a classroom session, on how to take down criminals who’re larger than us.” Nick had never enjoyed school, he’d attended because he’d had to, but he was actually enjoying the classroom sessions at the police academy. The fact the information he was learning would prove useful in the real world made it far more interesting.

“Don’t you have an elephant as one of your fellow cadets?” Nick had mentioned his fellow cadets a few times, and Judy knew his social circle consisted of an elephant, a tiger, and a wolf. She thought a lesson taking down large criminals was pointless for the biggest mammal of them all.

“Yeah, Tony pointed out that it was pointless for Horton to be present.” He laughed, remembering the flying ball of paper that had smacked the mouthy tiger on the head.

The sound of Nick’s laughter made Judy smile. He was making friends and getting along with the other cadets. Nick had acquaintances, and Finnick had been his business partner, but she knew Nick had very few mammals that he could class as his friends.

“Major Friedkin gave us the low-down on a bunch of weapons we could end up using in the future, including tasers funny enough.” Nick couldn’t resist the playful dig.

“Don’t worry, I’m sticking to my promise of not letting any of my family members near you with one.” Judy had spoken to her dad last week and he’d informed her that he’d thrown out the fox taser he’d purchased for her when she’d left for the city. He was a changed mammal.

“I’ll just have to stand out of range. 25,000 volts doesn’t sound fun.” He knew the voltage of tasers was different for different mammals. 25,000 volts would be enough to incapacitate him, but wouldn’t have much of an effect on a mammal the size of Horton. “What did you get up to today?”

Judy sighed, grumbling. “The usual. Wolford and I were doing paperwork for most of the day; we made a couple of arrests this week and let the paperwork slip a little, so we had to spend all day catching up.” Judy decided to omit the fact that she’d gone for lunch with Bandit. She knew how Nick felt about the arctic fox. Besides, truth told Judy had only asked to meet up with Bandit so she could grill him about her bracelet, try and uncover some more information about it. She’d thought he’d be willing to give her information considering he didn’t know Nick. Unfortunately, the arctic fox had flat out refused to tell her anything, parroting Wolford by telling her that she’d have to ask Nick to explain. She was growing impatient, but given her discussion with Wolford, she figured it was a conversation she needed to have in person with Nick, not over the phone. She would have to wait a little while longer to finally get some answers.

Over the past two week’s she’d made several excursions to the boarding up building that had once housed Wilde & Son Tailoring, and during one of her trips she’d spotted a dusty old photo on the
wall of Robert and Marian, and around Marian’s wrist had been a bracelet very similar to her own. Judy reasoned that it made sense for Marian to own one, considering they were canine tokens of affection, but it gave her more questions than it did answers.

“Oh, by the way, do you think you’d be able to get some time off in mid-July?” Judy was a little nervous about asking Nick her next question, but her mom had been pestering her and she realised he would have to meet her family at some point. “I was thinking of going home for a weekend for the Carrot Day Festival, and I was wondering if you’d like to come with me? I know it might not be your kind of thing, so don’t feel like you have to come along if you don’t want to.” While introducing Nick to her family did worry her, she knew she couldn’t keep them apart for much longer, especially when her mom already liked him.

Nick blinked, surprised. “You have a whole festival dedicated to carrots?”

Judy shrugged, a little embarrassed. “Yeah, it sounds lame but-”

“No! No, that’s not what I meant.” Nick interrupted. He’d been genuinely surprised, but he was flattered that Judy wanted him to go home with her for the celebration. “I’d love to attend and meet your family.” Nick smiled. Was he terrified of meeting Judy’s huge family? Yes, absolutely, but he knew that it would happen sooner rather than later, and if his care package was anything to go by then he’d already won over Bonnie.

Not quite believing him, Judy sought clarification. “You would? Really?”

“Sure. Just let me know dates and I’ll speak to Major Friedkin.” Nick was positive he’d be able to get the time off. His performance was good and it was still a few weeks away. He was also sure that if he mentioned that he wanted to go to Bunnyburrow to spend time with Judy and her family, Major Friedkin would grant him the time off with no questions asked.

“I’ll let my mom know you might be joining us. She’ll be so happy. Every time she calls she asks how you’re doing.” Her mom always asked about Nick, even though she knew Judy only spoke to him once a week. Her mom was already fond of him, and Judy hoped it would make things easier should Nick return her feelings.

“Your mom is a sweet doe, Carrots.” Nick’s gaze dropped to the items on the table. He’d tried desperately to make a good first impression on the doe and her husband, knowing that if he was going to ask Judy to be his mate in the near future then they’d need to like him, and he was relieved that he seemed to have Bonnie on his side already.

“I also think we need to talk when you next come home.” If the conversation weren’t so serious Judy would’ve laughed at how quickly Nick’s eyes shot up to find her, his ears flattening at her words. “You need to tell me what my bracelet means.” Judy lifted her right paw, bringing her bracelet into view of the camera on her phone. She still hadn’t taken it off. “Every canine I come across reacts to it. Some say it’s interesting and when I ask them why it’s interesting they clam up, and others call me a predo when they see it.”

“You’ve been called a predo?” Nick had to hold back his snarl at the thought of a mammal insulting Judy in such a manner. He was aware of the slur, had heard a few of his old street acquaintances use it before, but it should never be used to describe Judy. Nick had only a moment to panic about the fact that if Judy knew what the slur meant then she might be able to figure out what the bracelet meant too.

“Yeah, by some coyote Wolford and I arrested. He saw my bracelet, called me a predo, and then started making nasty comments.” Judy recalled, trying to hide her disgust. He’d been kept
overnight and when Judy and Wolford had gone into work the next day and had bumped into Fangmeyer taking him into questioning, the coyote had been even nastier. He’d made cruel remarks about Nick, uttered several speciest comments about foxes and it had all made Judy so incredibly mad. In the end, she’d put the coyote in his place, informing him that Nick was a much better mammal than he could ever hope to be. She may have also told the coyote that his personality was a pretty great form of birth control.

Nick had never wanted Judy to receive such abuse. He failed to see why loving someone, regardless of his or her species, was wrong. “Carrots, I’m so sorry. That was never my intention when I gave it to you.” He wanted to be sure she knew that.

“I know, Nick. I’d just never had a mammal say it to me before. It’s fine, honestly.” Judy shrugged. She figured the longer she wore the bracelet and the longer she lived and worked with Nick, the more she’d get used to such comments.

“You can take it off, you know, to stop the comments.” It broke Nick’s heart to say it. The bracelet wasn’t meant to be taken off, it was a bad omen for it to be removed, but he’d live with the pain of no longer seeing it around her wrist if it meant that she no longer had to hear cruel remarks. Sometimes he cursed the fact he was born a fox, and that other mammals looked down on him because of his species.

“No. It’s a gift from you; it’s the most beautiful thing I own. I’m not taking it off because of some rude mammals.” Judy found the idea of taking it off absurd. She loved her bracelet, loved that Nick had put so much thought into it. She’d never take it off.

“Carrots…” Nick started; ready to argue with her over it.

“No, Nick. It’s important to me, I’m not going to take it off to spare the feelings of mammals whose opinions don’t matter.” Judy put her hind paw down. The bracelet meant far too much to her, there was no way in hell she was going to take it off.

Knowing it was futile to argue with Judy when she’d made her mind up, Nick conceded. “Okay, but if it gets any worse then please take it off.”

Judy bobbed her head, not wanting to promise anything.

Steering the conversation back on track, Nick sighed. “You’re right though, we should probably talk when I come home.” He silently cursed himself. By giving her the bracelet he’d forced his paw. He’d have no choice but to tell her now. On one paw it terrified him, knowing he would have to bare his soul and heart to her and pray she’d be receptive, but on the other paw, he had a feeling life would be much easier once he had his feelings out in the open.

“Five minutes, Wilde.” Major Friedkin banged on the canteen door, making Nick jump. He hated how short his calls with Judy were, but he knew he was lucky to get some screen-time with her.

Capturing Nick’s attention again, Judy offered him a smile. “Don’t focus too much on it, Nick. Let me know if you can get the 14th to the 16th of July off for the festival.” Judy knew it was futile to tell Nick not to focus on their upcoming conversation, but she had a feeling nothing bad would come of their discussion. They were best friends and had shared their deepest secrets with one another, the death of Nick’s father and his subsequent years of hustling to pay off his debt, and Judy’s actions that had led to Catstro’s death, and they’d come out the other side of those confessions stronger.

“I will don’t worry.” Nick would ask Major Friedkin tomorrow so that he’d be able to give Judy an
answer the next time she called. He’d do anything in order to get the time off so he could attend the festival and meet Judy’s family.

“Hey Slick?”

The sound of Judy’s voice broke Nick out of his thoughts. “Yeah?”

“I still miss you.” Judy grinned, wanting to lighten the mood before they ended their call.

Nick laughed, warmth spreading through him. “I miss you too, sweetheart.”

“Call me again same time next week. If you need anything in the meantime send me a letter, okay?” Judy mothered.

Rolling his eyes, Nick couldn’t stop his smile. “Yes, mom.” He couldn’t find it in him to be annoyed with her mothering him. He knew Judy meant well and that she worried while he was away.

Judy’s laugh set off Nick’s, and the pair of them chuckled. Pulling his laughter under control, Nick settled on a semi-serious tone. “I’ll call you next week. Stay safe.” Without him there to watch her six, he worried about her safety. He’d heard only good things about Wolford, figured the experienced cop would have Judy’s back, but that didn’t stop him from being concerned. He hadn’t heard anything from Finnick or his mom about Judy’s emotional state, so he assumed everything was okay now.

“I will. Take care of yourself Slick. Bye!” Judy waved her free paw.

“Bye, Fluff.” He raised his own free paw to give her a small wave back, right before the call clicked off.

Paw falling back to the table he sighed as he set the phone down. Judy wanted to talk. She’d figured out the bracelet had another meaning amongst canines. Nick kicked himself. Judy was smart, so it was no surprise that she’d figured it out, but Nick had been hoping it would take a little longer than the two weeks since he’d given it to her. He guessed his next time home would be for the festival, and though he didn’t really want to have the conversation in Judy’s family home, with her 311 siblings and her parents lurking, he knew he probably wouldn’t have any choice. He’d use the time between now and then to figure out what to say to her.

Nick glanced at the pile of goodies from Bonnie, unable to stop the small smile that tugged at his lips. He packed away the food and aviators, sliding the note into the box. He kept the book in his paw, though. He had some reading to do.
Scheming over Supper

Chapter Notes

My muse was kicking my ass so hard with this chapter, so it was quite a struggle getting it done. I'm not 100% happy with it but I don't know what else I can do. The next few chapters are the ones I'm most excited for so I'm hoping my muse will get off her butt and help me out a little more.

It was a Wednesday, the end of June, and usually, Judy would be at the precinct today. However, all those working under Chief Bogo were preparing for a major drugs bust at Outback Island next week, and their shifts were different so they could prepare for the raid. Judy was thankful that Mr. Otterton had been kind enough to let her change the hours she worked for him. Her mom and dad had come to the city for the day to look at purchasing new equipment for the farm, and they wanted to get dinner with her before catching the Zootopia Express back to Bunnyburrow. Wednesday’s was the night Judy usually had dinner with Marian, but her parents had told her to invite the vixen to join them, rather than cancel on her. It had taken a bit of cajoling from Judy, but Marian had finally agreed to tag along.

Having spent the day delivering flowers for Mr. Otterton, Judy was grateful to be home. Stopping at street level, she rummaged in her pockets for her keys. Finding them, Judy descended the steps. As she opened the front door, she collected the post from behind it; locking the door once she was safely inside.

Padding into the kitchen, she flicked through the post in her paws. There were a few bills and letters from her siblings, a hand-posted letter addressed to her, and a letter for Nick.

Opening the hand-posted letter first, Judy skim read it. It was from Finnick, the fennec fox updating her on the task she’d given him. While out on patrol a week ago she’d bumped into him and had asked him for some help. She’d been spending a fair amount of her free time at the old Wilde & Son Tailoring building, discovering something new every time she ventured there. It was still boarded up, still untouched since the debtors took it in 2001. They hadn’t been able to sell it on, no one wanted to buy a building where a mammal had been murdered on the front step. She was working her way through the building, combing over every inch of it. It was like it was stuck in a time warp, everything as it had been when the debtors had boarded the place up. She was grateful that one of the mammals boarding it up had missed a small window on the third floor. It had been left ever so slightly ajar, and after shimmying up a drainpipe, she’d been able to gain access into the building.

While there, she’d found a few items that she’d wanted to get restored, time having not been kind to them. She’d asked Finnick for recommendations on the best mammal to restore them, and he’d offered to act as the intermediary for her. The letter told her the items would be ready for collection next week, and Judy couldn’t stop her feeling of excitement and her broad smile. In just over two weeks it would be the Carrot Day Festival, and Nick had managed to get the time off to go home with her. One of the traditions of the festival was to give gifts to those you cared about, to show your appreciation. Judy had asked for a few things to be restored so she could gift them back to the tod. She’d also asked for another item to be restored in time for his graduation. She’d found it in the drawer of an old desk, in one of the back rooms that she assumed had once been an office. It
hadn't taken much for her to realize it was an important piece of Nick’s family history.

Putting Finnick’s letter down, she glanced to the one addressed to Nick. Unable to stop herself she opened it. She knew it wasn’t noble of her to open his post, but she figured it would be a while until Nick was next home to open it himself. Besides, it could be something urgent. Pulling out the letter, Judy took note of the Bank of Zootopia logo at the top of the page. Skim reading, her frown deepened. It was a letter thanking Nick for opening a safety deposit box. Nick didn’t have access to a phone other than to call her and Marian, and he certainly hadn’t been anywhere near the Bank of Zootopia when he’d been home for the weekend. They’d spent all their time together. Why would Nick need a safety deposit box?

She was interrupted by a knock at the front door. Not expecting Marian for another hour or so, Judy frowned. “Coming.” She called out, making her way back to the door, sliding her key into the lock, turning it and pulling the door open. She was eye-to-eye with an arctic hare. “Can I help you?” Judy had never seen the mammal before, and their unexpected appearance at her home confused her.

“Judith Hopps?” The hare asked.

“Yes…” Judy answered apprehensively.

The hare held out a letter, offering it to Judy. Cautiously, Judy took it from her. Her name was scribbled on the envelope, but other than that there was nothing to tell her whom it was from. Nodding, the hare turned and left, taking the steps to the street two at a time.

Judy retreated back into the apartment, closing and locking the door behind her. Hind paws carrying her into the kitchen she opened the letter, a key falling into out of it.

My child,

I hope you are well. I know it has been a long time since we last spoke but it was important for us to break contact for a while.

A letter should have arrived for Nicky from the Bank of Zootopia. I sent my bears to explore the Nocturnal district, to find the caracal’s home and any interesting information he may have had. While there they uncovered a safe, along with a detailed record of money going in and out.

My daughter tells me that I should do some ‘random acts’ of kindness every now and then, to remind me of how fortunate I am.

With that being said, my accountant worked out that some of the money in the safe had come from Nicky. So, I am returning it to him. I’ve had a safety deposit box at the Bank of Zootopia opened in his name and had the money put in there for him. His key is in this letter, and the bank holds the other one.

Don’t fret, I have ensured that my accountant also returned money to the other mammals that were making monthly payments. The money is of no importance to me, but I know it may make all the difference to those it was taken from.

When Nicky is next home, please send my daughter a message; it would be lovely to have you both over for dinner.

Fondly,

Mr. Big
Judy’s gaze moved to the letter from the Bank of Zootopia on the counter. It all made sense now. Touched by Mr. Big’s unexpected act of kindness, and filled with excitement at the thought of getting to tell Nick that he had some money now, she gathered both letters and the key and darted into her bedroom, storing them safely at the back of her underwear drawer.

“Are you sure I look okay?” Marian asked for what felt like the hundredth time. She was nervous about meeting Judy’s parents, wanted to make a good impression. If her son was going to get his act together soon and ask Judy to be his, then Marian wanted Mr. and Mrs. Hopps to like her. They could end up as in-laws one day. “Getting ahead of yourself again Marian!”

Judy smiled, offering the vixen a reassuring nod of her head. “It’s just my parents, Marian, there’s no need to worry. Dad will probably still be in his overalls anyway.” Judy had opted for a pair of jeans and her favorite yellow blouse, while Marian wore one of her many black pencil skirts, completing her look with a green top. “Besides, the first time you met me I was a mess, with a massive cut on my leg.”

The Zuber had dropped them off outside of Tender Greens, a casual restaurant in Savannah Central that was known for serving farm-to-fork cuisine. Judy figured it would cater for all of their dietary needs and it was close enough to the train station for her parents to catch the Zootopia Express afterward. Marian continued to fuss with her clothes as Judy led them inside.

“Hi, I have a table booked for four, under the name Hopps.” Judy told the antelope maître d’, who flicked through the reservations book.

“Ah yes, the other two members of your party are already here. Let me show you to your seats.” The antelope led Judy and Marian through the restaurant, towards a booth against the far wall.

“Mom, dad!” Judy grinned, dashing ahead a little as her mom slid out of the booth, wrapping her daughter up in a warm hug. Stu slid out the booth behind his wife, embracing Judy once Bonnie had let her go.

Marian hung back a moment, letting Judy greet her parents. They seemed openly affectionate with her, and it made the vixen relax. She took a deep breath, centering herself. It was important that she gave a good first impression, to lay the foundations for their meeting with Nicky in a few weeks.

Pulling back from her embrace with her dad, Judy took in their clothes. Her mom had opted for jeans and a pink checked shirt, while her dad had traded in his overalls for a pair of jeans and a blue button-down. It was a rare sight to see him out of his farm overalls. Glancing over her shoulder, Judy held a paw out to Marian.

Marian crossed the short distance to Judy’s parents. “Marian, this is my mom and dad, Bonnie and Stu.” She introduced them all, gently biting the inside of her lip.

Marian offered out her paw, but she was surprised when Bonnie pulled her down into a hug instead. “It’s so lovely to meet you, Marian. Judy talks about you all the time.”

“Oh, she doesn't have a bad word to say! Thank you for looking out for her here in the city. We know she can get herself into some trouble.” Bonnie shot a glance at her daughter, enjoying the way Judy gave her a wry smile in return.
“She talks about your boy a lot too,” Stu added as he pulled back from the hug with Marian. With introductions out of the way he slipped back into the booth, his wife following. Judy gestured for Marian to slide in on their side first before the young doe followed her.

“Nicky talks about Judy all the time too.” Marian spared a glance to Judy, watching the insides of her ears turn a little pink. Attention returning to Bonnie and Stu, Marian felt immediately at ease around them. They gave off a cheerful vibe, relaxed and calm. “He’s so excited to visit your home for the festival.” Nicky had called her the day after Judy had invited him to meet her parents, and though she’d heard some worry in her son’s voice, she’d also detected that he was, on the whole, looking forward to meeting Judy’s family and seeing her home. Marian also had a sneaking suspicion her son wanted to get his paws on as many of the Hopps Family Farm blueberries as possible.

“It’ll be an experience for him, that’s for sure.” Bonnie hid her smile, nodding her head. The poor fox didn't know what he was letting himself in for. She'd exchanged a few letters with Nick over the past couple of weeks, answered a few questions the tod had in regards to Judy and rabbits as a whole. Bonnie had even sent him another punnet of blueberries and some more cookies - he'd informed her they were lovely in his first letter.

“Are you ready to order some drinks?” A young chamois asked, appearing at their table with her pad and pen.

“Water for me, please.” Judy went first. As much as she would've loved to have something a bit stronger, she didn't want to risk any hangovers given the upcoming raid at work.

“Bun-bun, you don't want anything stronger?” Bonnie quizzed, watching her daughter. It wasn't like Judy to opt for water; wine was usually her tipple of choice when they had dinner out. If she wasn't drinking alcohol was she…? Bonnie shook the thought away. “Don’t be silly Bon. She hasn't seen Nick in weeks, and they haven't even spoken about their feelings. She's not with kits yet.”

“No, waters fine, mom,” Judy reassured, offering her mom a smile.

“A glass of the house white wine for me, please.” Marian placed her order. She wasn't familiar with the restaurant or the menu, but she figured there would be something fish based on it. Judy would've double-checked before booking their table.

“A pint of whatever beer you have on tap, thanks” Stu wasn't much of a drinker. The early mornings on the farm meant he couldn't risk getting drunk, but he enjoyed the odd tipple before bed and kept a few bottles of good quality scotch stashed away from his kits.

The chamois wrote down their drinks order. “Alright then, I'll go get these sorted for you and then come back for your food order.” She left the table, heading for the bar.

“How was your day bun-bun?” Bonnie asked her daughter, all eyes at the table turning to the younger doe.

Glancing at the three mammals she was sat with, Judy found her mom’s eyes last. “It was good, thanks. I delivered a few orders for Mr. Otterton.” Judy kept the news about Nick’s presents a secret, unsure if it might upset Marian. She also kept quiet about his safety deposit box.
As she was about to ask her parents how their day had been, and whether her dad had purchased any new farm equipment, Judy’s phone started to ring. “Sorry!” She apologized, pulling it from her pocket. Back home there was a strict ‘no phones at the dinner table’ policy, and Judy felt a little embarrassed that she’d forgotten to switch hers off. Glancing at the screen, she saw the precincts number flash up. “I've got to take this, its work. I'm sorry, I'll be right back.” She excused herself, hitting the answer button as she slid from the booth and disappeared outside the restaurant.

“Always working, never takes a day off,” Marian commented as she watched Judy head outside.

“Jude’s always been a hard worker, especially when it involves making the world a better place.” Stu chipped in. Contrary to popular belief he was proud of his daughter, proud that she was out chasing her dreams and helping other mammals. It scared him, knowing she was in the city and could be hurt by all the animals that were bigger than her, but he also knew that Judy was smart and that her ZPD training had helped prepare her a little for life in the city.

Marian found herself humming in agreement. Judy often spoke about her work during their weekly dinners, and she knew how dedicated the rabbit was to her job. She hoped Nick would be just as committed once he graduated. “She mentioned that she was so devoted to the night howler case that she risked her badge for it.”

Bonnie nodded solemnly. When Judy had come home for the three months after the case, she’d told her parents about how she’d gambled her badge on the case, about how the Chief had demanded it from her before her 48 hours were up, and about Nick standing up for her. “Mhm, she also told us she would've lost that badge if it wasn't for Nick.”

Marian shook her head. Judy was meant to be a cop; she was made for it, she would’ve figured out a way to keep her badge. Marian told Bonnie and Stu as much. “Oh no, she’d have kept it somehow. Nicky just didn't like the way the Chief was talking to her.”

Judy suddenly appeared back at their table, phone clutched in her paws. “I'm so sorry, but Chief Bogo is calling everyone back in. There's been a development in the drugs case we're working and-”

“Slow down bun-bun, don't forget to breathe.” Bonnie interrupted. “It's not a problem at all. You've got work to do. Your father and I will have dinner with Marian and then catch the train home after. We’ll send you a message when we get back, and then we’ll see you and Nick in two weeks.” She knew how much work meant to her daughter, and though Judy hadn’t been allowed to share much information with her about this drug case, she knew Judy was excited about it.

“Is that okay? I'm so sorry.” Judy looked between the three mammals at the table, annoyed with the Chief for calling her in but at the same time excited as to the new development. She was in more of a background role, her limited experience excluding her from being on the front line, but she was treating it like a learning experience, another step in her training. She hoped that she’d take on more challenging cases soon, something like the night howler case. A part of her wanted to work undercover, but as the first rabbit on the force that would never happen. It would be obvious right away who she was, especially being partnered with the first fox on the force. Nick was already shaping up to be quite the sharpshooter, and she had no doubts that Chief Bogo would take advantage of his skills, train him up to be a sniper. Judy hoped that she could find a role that would ensure they would remain partners for the lengths of their careers. She couldn’t imagine being partnered with anyone else. Wolford was a great temporary partner, yes, but no one understood her or had her back as much as Nick.

Marian took in the flustered rabbit, how she rocked anxiously on the balls of her hind paws. “It's fine Judy, go ahead. We’ll catch up next week over dinner like usual, okay?” She offered, giving
the doe a reassuring smile. Marian was fond of their weekly dinner nights, enjoyed the company and the chance to get to further know the rabbit her son was so enamored with.

Nodding her head, Judy’s shoulders sagged in relief. “Thank you.” She leaned across the table, embracing her parents and giving them each cheek kisses before she embraced Marian. The vixen dropped a quick kiss on the top of Judy’s head, a gesture that had become second nature to her.

Bonnie watched as her daughter interacted with Marian, noting how the vixen treated Judy as if she were her own kit. It had frightened Bonnie, the thought of Judy being alone in the city, but knowing she could go to Marian if there were ever a problem soothed her concerns. The vixen seemed to genuinely care for Judy, and Bonnie wondered what it would be like to see her daughter interact with Nick. She’d seen them together during their phone call, her daughter sprawled across the tod like he was the comfiest pillow in the world, but she wanted to observe them in their daily interactions. She wanted to watch how they spoke to one another, how her daughter looked at him, how he looked at her daughter, how they moved around one another. Does Judy box him with her paws? Does Nick tease her? Do they step around one another with ease, knowing exactly where the other is at all times? Bonnie knew Nick held more romantic feelings for Judy, the look in his eyes during their phone call all the confirmation she needed. His letters since had continued to prove her right. Bonnie also knew that Judy loved Nick. Her daughter probably hadn’t realized it yet, but the way she went on about the tod, the way her face lit up at the mere mention of him, it all pointed to her loving him. Bonnie had 182 daughters, 75 of which were married. She knew what her daughters looked like when they were in love.

With a quick wave of her paw, Judy made her way out of the restaurant, scampering towards the precinct. “Always on the go, nothing could slow her down.” Stu shook his head fondly as Judy disappeared from sight. Even as a kit Judy had been full of energy, always looking for the next adventure, throwing herself into everything, willing to give anything a go at least once.

Marian watched Judy leave, unable to stop her smile as she noted how Judy’s speed picked up as she left the restaurant. The doe was never late for anything. “Nicky likes to joke that she reminds him of the energizer bunny.”

Bonnie laughed, familiar with Nick’s sense of humor now they’d exchanged a few letters. It had only taken a few days since posting the care package for her to receive a letter back – the unfamiliar handwriting on the outside of the envelope her first clue as to who had sent it. Nick had thanked her for the wonderful care package and had told her that he wasn’t sharing the blueberries, but that he’d shared the cookies with his friends. They’d all reported back that her cookies were excellent, and Nick had even asked whether blueberry and white chocolate cookies was a thing. Bonnie had laughed, enjoying the way the tod wasn’t afraid to drop hints, and sure enough in her next package, she’d sent him some homemade blueberry and white chocolate cookies. He’d also asked her several questions about rabbits, and Judy, in his letter. What’s Judy’s favorite food? Why doesn’t she like being called cute? Are all rabbits emotional and/or overly affectionate?

The chamois appeared at their table again, distributing their drinks. Without Judy there for her water, Bonnie asked for it to be placed in the middle of the table. Pad and pen in paw the chamois looked at Bonnie first. “Are you ready to order?”

“Oh goodness, right!” Bonnie glanced at the menu before her, having been lost in her thoughts. “Could I get the romaine hearts salad please?” She asked. The chamois wrote down her order, turning her attention to Marian.

Making a quick decision, Marian offered the chamois a smile. “Could I get the tuna nicoise please?” Marian wasn’t sure how comfortable Bonnie and Stu were with the idea of her eating fish,
but Marian knew a straight salad wouldn’t be enough to fill her up. She hoped they’d understand. The chamois nodded, scribbling down her order before she looked at Stu.

“Could I get the falafel salad please?” Stu asked the waitress, watching as she wrote down his order. Stu always enjoyed dining out, enjoyed getting the chance to pick his own meal. Though his wife was an excellent cook and he would eat whatever she served him, with 312 kits to feed there wasn’t the luxury of getting to choose what to eat.

“Okay, I’ll put those through to the kitchen. Do you need anything else in the meantime?” The chamois asked, looking between the three mammals at the table. Bonnie, Stu, and Marian all shook their heads, and the chamois left them to their conversation.

Once the chamois had left them alone, Bonnie turned her attention to the vixen opposite her. Though she’d only seen Nick once, she could see now that he’d inherited his mother’s eyes. “So, Marian, Judy’s told us a little about you, but I’m afraid we don’t know much,” Judy spoke about Marian often, kept Bonnie and Stu filled in on their dinner nights, but she’d never really gone into much detail about the vixen.

Marian had never been good at talking about herself, never sure what was the right or wrong thing to say. Looking at the two rabbits opposite her though, she offered them a smile. “Well as you know, I’m Nicky’s mom. My husband and I only had Nicky. He’s a rarity – usually, we have four to six kits at a time. We decided not to have any other kits; Nicky was very demanding as a little one. My husband and I met at a diner when we were teenagers. I was stood beside the jukebox, and he tried to impress me with a card trick. It was an awful trick, but I loved that he’d had the guts to walk right up to me in front of all of my friends to try to impress me. I let him think that I hadn’t figured out how his trick worked, I didn’t have the heart to tell him, and he asked me for lunch the next day. We started formally dating soon after that. Unfortunately, my husband passed away when Nicky was seven, so it has only been the two of us ever since.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that, Marian.” Bonnie reached across the table, resting a paw on Marian’s. She couldn’t imagine life without Stu by her side, couldn’t imagine losing him. Judy hadn’t mentioned that Nick’s father had died, and Bonnie felt immense sadness for the vixen opposite her, and the tod Judy was so fond of.

“It’s okay, it was so long ago.” Marian appreciated Bonnie’s comfort, appreciated the honesty and openness on the doe’s face. However, she didn’t want to dwell on Robert’s murder. When he’d died, a part of her had died too. He’d been her mate, her lifelong love, and he’d been cruelly taken from her. He’d been cruelly taken from Nicky.

Bonnie slowly withdrew her paw from Marian’s, sensing that the vixen didn’t want to speak about her husband. “What is it you do, Marian?” Stu too understood the vixen’s reluctance to talk about her husband, so he moved the conversation along.

“I work at a doctor’s clinic, not too far from my home, as a records keeper.” Marian liked her job, but it wasn’t her passion. Working at the doctor’s clinic paid the bills though, and that was all that mattered. Loving one’s job was a rarity. If she could afford it, she’d be a full-time dressmaker, revive Wilde & Son Tailoring, re-establish it as the best tailoring business in the city, and spend her days surrounded by mountains of fabric.

Surprised, Bonnie tipped her head. “I thought you were a dressmaker? You made Judy that absolutely beautiful dress for her birthday.” Not only had she seen the dress in Judy’s new Furbook photo, but during one of their calls her daughter had lifted it up for her to see, shown her the leaf and vine detail along the bottom hem. Bonnie had tried to hide her smile at the color combination. Marian may think she was subtle, but Bonnie had a distinct feeling the use of purple and green in
the dress hadn’t been an accident.

“No, unfortunately, I’m not. I wish I were, I had a lot of fun making that dress for Judy.” It had taken Marian a few weeks to get the dress right, skills she’d thought long-forgotten were revived, and when she’d finally finished it she’d been so proud. She’d also been a little concerned, wondering if the doe would like her present. When Judy had burst into tears after opening it, embracing her in a fierce hug, Marian knew she’d done the right thing. Nick had sent her several photos the next day of Judy wearing it, and it had inspired Marian to pull out her sewing machine and start making the doe some more clothes, along with the throw pillow cushions she’d already been working on. Marian had finished the cushions now and was waiting for an opportune moment to gift them to Nicky and Judy. She’d also nearly finished a few more dresses for the young doe.

Though fashion wasn’t something Stu followed, he could appreciate the skill and love that Marian had put into making the dress for Judy. “Where did you learn to sew?”

“My husband was a tailor, we owned a tailoring business. It was his fathers, and my husband took it over when his father passed. It was meant to be handed down to Nicky when he turned eighteen, but the business had to be shut down.” Marian didn’t want to discuss the fact that after her husband had died, she hadn’t been able to fund the business and pay the bills for her home. Robert had been the best tailor in the city, and though he’d taught Marian how to sew, she couldn’t compete with his level of talent. Mammals from all over the city had come to Robert for their clothes, they’d even had a few customers from out of town.

“That’s a shame. You have such a talent for it, Marian.” Bonnie complimented. With so many babies she’d never had the chance to take on a hobby or to learn a new skill. As a kit, she’d been taught how to knit, and it had come in useful when making clothes for her little ones, but other than being able to crochet jumpers and socks she didn’t have any other hobbies. Her life revolved around taking care of babies, but for her, it was rewarding to watch them grow and develop, flourish into well-rounded adults.

“Thank you.” Marian blushed at the compliment, though the red hue was covered by her fur.

“One of our daughters, Hazel, is really into dressmaking too. She’s always sat at her sewing machine, saved up all summer for it, and she’d trying to make clothes for her and her sisters. She’s teaching herself.” Stu was proud of Hazel for saving up the money she’d earned working over the summer, and was pleased that she’d spent it on something practical. They didn’t have the spare funds to pay for sewing lessons, else all of their other kits would want lessons in their respective passions, so Hazel was using Zootube and Zoogle to find guides and step-by-step instructions.

“Well if she ever wants some help, I’m more than happy to offer a paw. I’m not as good as my husband was, but I’d love to help her if she needs it.” Marian offered, happy to pass on some of her advice and a few tricks she’d learned over the years. After his father’s death, Nicky hadn’t been interested in learning how to sew anymore, hadn’t been interested in becoming a tailor. It had hurt Marian, knowing that her baby didn’t want to carry on the family business, but she understood that Nicky associated the painful memories of his father’s passing with tailoring. Marian had worked through the emotions of her husband’s death, and though it still made her want to cry at times, and on occasion, it was hard to talk about Robert, she knew it was even harder for Nicky. He hadn’t really grieved, hadn’t opened up to anyone about his feelings. Marian had a feeling her son still carried that pain with him.

Touched by her kind offer to help Hazel, Bonnie smiled. “You’re too sweet, Marian. Thank you.”

Shifting the focus from her, Marian looked between the two rabbits sat opposite her. “What about you two? Judy’s mentioned that you own a farm, and my boy absolutely loves your blueberries.
Judy also said that she has 311 siblings.”

“Bon and I went to school together. Our families knew one another. My dad owned the farm, and he passed it to me when I finished school. I started courting Bon shortly after and we were married a year later. Had our first kits a few months after that.” Stu couldn’t help but puff out his chest, proud that he’d managed to woo Bonnie and win her affections. Their kits were a testament to how much they loved one another.

“Been having kits ever since.” Bonnie tagged on, smiling as she gave a playful eye roll. While she had no problem with having so many kits, she loved all her babies; she was currently enjoying the feeling of not being pregnant. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d gone this long without carrying kits.

“I honestly don’t know how you do it. Having Nicky was bad enough, but 312 kits? I salute you.” Marian shook her head. Carrying Nicky had been difficult - she’d been sick a lot, confined to the house and on bed rest. His birth had been complicated and messy, too. It had been worth it though, all the pain and suffering, because the moment he’d been placed on her chest, she’d fallen so deeply in love. He’d been a little bigger than normal, with no siblings to fight with for space he’d stretched out. Born blind, deaf, and dark gray in color, Marian had scent-marked little Nicky the moment he’d been placed on her chest, so he’d always be able to tell who she was. Marian and Robert had waited with baited breath for Nicky to open his eyes, and two weeks after he’d been born he opened them to reveal emerald eyes. For Marian, it had been like looking in the mirror.

Bonnie laughed. “Oh, it gets easier the more you have. My older kits help with the younger ones.” It was an unspoken rule in the Hopps warren that each kit pulled their own weight once they entered their teens – helping on the farm, helping in the house, or looking after the younger members of the family. Over the years Bonnie and Stu had lost a few of their eldest. Some had moved away, like Judy, while others had started their own families and warrens nearby, like Judy’s littermate Julian.

“How do remember all their names?” Marian was genuinely curious. She struggled to remember the names of all the ladies she worked with, so had no idea how she would manage with 312 names.

“We name our kits alphabetically. Our first litter all had ‘A’ names, the second had ‘B’ names, and so on. All our babies have a distinct smell, and over the years I’ve learned to associate names with smells, so I never mix them up.” Bonnie explained. It had been a practice her mom had used when raising her kits, and Bonnie had carried on with it. Some of her sisters had done the same, but none of them had as many kits as she did. “Stu struggles with their names the most. Then again, I’ve covered all our babies in my scent, so it’s a bit difficult for him to pick out their underlying smell.”

“That’s not a bad thing Bon, I quite like your scent.” Stu chipped in, feeling he had to clarify Bonnie’s comment.

Looking at her husband fondly, Bonnie offered him a warm smile, paw reaching out to rub his arm. “That’s reassuring, dear.”

“So scent marking is a thing for rabbits, too?” Marian hadn’t had the chance to do much research into rabbit custom and cultures, but she realized it would be prudent to do some now. She couldn’t get away with not knowing anything about rabbits anymore, especially if Nicky was going to pull his head out of his tail and tell Judy about the bracelet. She’d scolded him when he’d confessed to not telling Judy what it meant. The bracelets were important in their culture, their meaning highly symbolic, and the fact Nicky was letting Judy walk around wearing it without her knowing what it meant irked the vixen. It wasn’t her place to tell the doe, but her patience with her son was wearing
thin.

“Oh yes, it’s crucial. I mark my kits with a familiar scent, so it’s obvious they’re mine, but Stu and I mark one another with a mating scent. They’re very different. Mating scents are essential though. I’ve told all my kits they should only chin their partners when they’re entirely sure they want them as their mate.” Bonnie had instilled many values in her kits. Choosing a partner was a big deal; you were making a lifelong commitment to another mammal. You had to be sure.

“Chin?” Marian questioned, raising an eyebrow. She’d never heard the phrase before.

Bringing a paw up, Bonnie tapped a finger gently underneath her chin. “Our scent glands are under our chin, so we call scent marking chinning.”

Marian chuckled, the name making sense now. “Ah, ours are on the sides of our muzzle, so we call it muzzling. I’m sorry that I don’t know much about your customs. Judy was the first rabbit I’d ever met. Not many rabbits in the city like to associate with foxes.” It was a sad truth, but one mirrored by many species. No matter how hard they tried, foxes would probably never be able to shake the stereotypes associated with them. It had caused a lot of tension when Nicky had been a kit. He’d been bullied simply for being a fox. On occasion she’d had to pick him up from school because some idiotic kit had made a rude comment and it had made all the other kits in the class laugh and mock Nicky, leaving him in tears. Marian had watched on helplessly as over the years Nicky had built up his walls, shoved his emotions into boxes and took everything in his stride with a smirk and a witty comment. She knew that wasn’t her baby though, that wasn’t the little emerald eyed munchkin she’d raised. It was why she knew Judy was so right for him. Parts of her baby were coming back, parts that had long ago been repressed and abused. He smiled more, his tail wagged more, and he no longer hid behind his walls and sarcasm around the small rabbit. Her little Nicky was coming back.

“I’m afraid we don’t know much about foxes either, so don’t worry. The city rabbits are missing out though, Marian. Bon and I used to be a little closed minded, but Judy really opened our eyes. We work with a fox now, he uses our farm produce in his pies.” Stu made it clear that he and his wife were still new to Marian’s customs too, and he wanted to assure Marian that they were perfectly fine with foxes. It had been eye-opening for them, when they’d started working with Gid, completely oblivious to anything fox related, but they were starting to learn a thing or two about vulpines. It also helped that Judy spoke about Nick frequently, brought up the occasional fox habit while on the phone to them.

“Gideon, yes? Judy mentioned him.” Marian recalled the first time she’d met Judy when Nicky had brought her over with her injured leg. Judy had divulged that her parents worked with Gideon, and she could distinctly remember the way her son had choked on his salmon when Judy had added that Gideon was a fox. The memory made her smile.

“The very one. I’m sure Nick will get to meet him when he comes to visit. Gid stops by regularly to pick up more produce.” Stu carried on. He worked closely with Gideon, trusted him now they’d been partners for a while. Stu was hoping to introduce the two foxes and then get Gideon’s honest opinion on Nick afterward. Stu had heard from both Bonnie and Judy that Nick was a good mammal, that he wouldn’t do anything to hurt Judy physically or emotionally, but he was her father, and he couldn’t let her run off with any old mammal without making sure he was good enough first.

“Are Gideon and Judy friends?” Marian couldn’t remember Judy mentioning whether or not she got along with the other fox.

Bonnie and Stu spared a quick glance at one another, and it didn’t go unnoticed by Marian. Taking
a deep breath, Bonnie decided to opt for the truth. “Gid bullied her as a child, clawed her once, but I think they’ve put it behind them now.”

Marian gasped. A fox had clawed Judy? She would never have guessed. Judy seemed entirely at ease around her and Nicky. “Oh my, he didn't hurt her too much, did he?”

“She’s got some scars across her left cheek, but her fur hides them.” Stu had been furious when Judy had come home with the three marks across her cheek, but he'd been a little too frightened of Mrs. Grey to do anything about it. Instead, he'd taken his concerns to the school, asked for Judy to be in a separate class to Gideon, but as the incident had occurred off school property and outside of school hours, they hadn't been able to do anything about it. Stu had contemplated going to the police, reporting Gideon for assault, but Bonnie had talked him down, reminded him they were kits fuelled by energy and emotions they were yet to master. That didn't make it right as far as Stu had been concerned, and it had taken a while for him to warm up to Gideon enough to partner with him. The country fox wasn't as aggressive as he had been as a kit now though, and he seemed pretty harmless.

“I hope Nicky doesn’t know that she was clawed. He’s very protective of Judy.” Marian mused. She had no doubt in her mind that if Nicky knew Judy had been hurt by a fox he'd be as horrified as she was, he'd probably even hunt this Gideon down and give him what for. “He needs to rein in his instincts. He’s going to end up overbearing and pushing Judy away if he keeps acting the way he is.”

“Oh, he is?” Bonnie knew Judy was protective of Nick, but hearing it went the other way too piqued her interest.

“Of course, he adores her.” It was the most obvious thing in the world to Marian. She'd never seen Nicky dote on another mammal so much in her life. That, and he'd bought her the bracelet. “There's really no question as to how he feels.”

Bonnie cooed “We saw that sweet photo of them at the gallery for her birthday, and the bracelet he bought her! So beautiful.” Judy had proudly shown off the bracelet during their phone call on her birthday night. No mammal had ever bought Judy jewelry before, especially not something as exquisite as her bracelet.

Marian smiled, relaxing as it became apparent that Bonnie and Stu didn't seem to have any issues with their potentially being something between their offspring. “Our kits are very close…”

“Nick is the center of Judy’s world, he’s all she talks about.” Stu shook his head. He could never get a word in edgeways when he called his daughter, especially when she went off on a tangent about Nick.

“Nicky was so sad when Judy left to return home after the night howler incident. He was a mess.” Her son had turned up on her doorstep after the press conference. Her usually cool and composed kit, who hid his true feelings behind his jokes and lazy smile, had looked despondent. She hadn’t known at the time that he’d fallen out with Judy, hadn’t even been aware of the fact her son knew the rabbit cop, but he’d been like a lost soul. He’d spent two weeks with her, hardly leaving the apartment. One morning at breakfast he’d informed her that he was going to return to his own home, that he was feeling better. Marian knew it was all a lie, could see it in his eyes. She knew something was still wrong, she could see it in the way he kept looking down a little to his side as if he expected another mammal to be there. His jaw would clench every time she served carrots with dinner, and he always changed channels on the TV whenever anything related to the night howler case was broadcasted.
Stu inhaled sharply, pieces of the puzzle finally starting to come together. “That’s why her ears were droopy. We thought it was just because she’d given up her job, thought she’d made things in the city worse.” Judy’s appearance at home had been sudden, with no warning. She’d turned up on the doorstep with her suitcase in paw, sorrow in her eyes and had been uncharacteristically quiet. “I messed up, dad.” Her voice had been soft, laden with immeasurable sadness. Stu had brought her inside, helped her down to her old room so she could unpack. When Bonnie had returned from the store, he’d filled her in. They’d kept Judy’s return quiet, made sure not to overwhelm her. Judy hadn’t elaborated on how she’d messed up, but Stu had read the newspapers, knew about the goings on in the city.

“It makes sense that she was missing Nick too,” Bonnie added. She’d known that Judy had been beating herself up about the press conference, it had been splashed all over the news and the papers, but she hadn’t been aware of her relationship with Nick at that point.

“I didn’t know she cared about Nicky that much back then. It would make sense though, given how quickly they’ve moved in together and that she borrowed one of my books.” Marian contemplated. It had amused her when she’d checked the bookshelf after Judy’s departure from one of their dinners to see her fox customs book was missing. It had amused her, even more, when it had suddenly reappeared the following week. “Buying that book on a whim was a sound investment.”

“Judy’s always been an avid reader. Her tastes are quite mixed.” Stu pointed out. They had a library in their warren, and he was sure Judy had managed to read every book in it. Several of her siblings were avid readers too, and Stu imagined that it came from being told stories every night before bed as kits.

“I’ll say. I had a book on fox culture and customs on my bookshelf. Judy asked if she could borrow some books and she did, including that one.” Marian started to test the waters.

The information was news to Bonnie, and it took her a moment to process it before she began to laugh. “Oh my goodness. Judy borrowed your book on fox culture and customs? I sent Nick one on rabbit culture and traditions!” She’d spotted the book at the local market and had purchased it on a whim, figuring it wouldn’t hurt to help educate the fox on their customs and culture. She’d only intended it as a rough guide, but she hadn’t been able to stop herself from going through it over the course of a few nights and sticky tabbing information of interest, scribbling her own notes in it. She’d been very open with Nick in her notes, not wanting to sugar coat anything.

Marian blinked. Bonnie had sent her son a book on rabbits? “Oh, I would’ve paid good money to see him opening that package!” She laughed, unable to stop herself. She thought she was subtle by buying them blankets in one another’s fur color, making Judy purple and green clothes, dropping hints over time, but Bonnie had obliterated that with her forwardness. With her laughter subsiding, Marian had one more question. “This might seem out of the left field, but has Judy ever dated someone?”

Bonnie and Stu shared a quick glance before they focused their attention back on Marian. “Not really, nothing serious. She’s been on some dates with a few bucks I sent her way, but she always came home angry and upset.” Bonnie hadn’t been sure why Judy’s dates had never worked out. The bucks she’d sent her daughter’s way had all been kind enough. “She’s quite inexperienced in matters of the heart.”

Hearing that Judy didn’t have much experience made Marian feel momentarily uneasy. She knew Nicky had slept around, had played the field, and had some experience under his belt, but she was also aware that her son had never been in love before. Not until Judy, anyway. “Nicky’s not very
experienced with matters of the heart, either.”

Bonnie had a feeling that Marian was dancing around the subject, perhaps even worried about addressing it. She couldn’t have that. “Okay, I’m just going to lay all the cards on the table. I called Judy a few weeks back, the day before her birthday, and I caught her in bed with Nick.”

It was like the whole world came to a standstill. Marian’s brain had blanked for a moment before it started to race. Nicky had already slept with Judy? Before he’d even claimed her as his mate? “Oh, that boy is going to get an ass whooping as soon as he comes home!” She couldn’t believe he’d be so foolish. Judy wasn’t some one-night stand. “What!?”

Seeing the flurry of emotions cross Marian’s face, Bonnie realized the vixen may have taken it the wrong way. “Nick assured us that nothing had happened.” She quickly reassured her.

“He had his pants on,” Stu added, wanting to soothe Marian.

“He did, he made a point of showing us.” Bonnie continued, nodding her head. Nick had been so polite to them, hadn’t batted an eye at proving he hadn’t slept with Judy. Bonnie wouldn’t have minded if he had, goodness knows Judy was in need of some loving.

The reassurances from Bonnie and Stu soothed Marian, and she took a deep breath to calm herself. “Judy did mention that she slept in the same bed as Nicky when she stayed over. It wouldn’t be unreasonable for them to continue sharing a bed seeing that they live together. But a two-bed apartment seems a little redundant now….”

Deciding to take the plunge, Bonnie made sure she had Marian’s attention before she spoke frankly. “I can read my kits like books, Marian. I have 312 of them, its second nature to me now.” She paused. “I think Judy is in love with Nick.”

Marian blinked, the news unexpected. She’d figured that Judy might have tentative feelings for Nicky, that the doe was still exploring them, but she’d never expected to hear from Bonnie that Judy was in love with Nicky. Marian let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, her whole body sagging with relief. “Oh thank goodness! I think Nicky is in love with Judy too.”

Bonnie was the first to laugh, and Marian found herself mimicking the doe. The relief at knowing Judy returned her son’s feelings were overwhelming. “I’m so glad we’re in agreement. I think Nicky is a little scared to tell her.” Marian knew her son wasn’t good with his emotions, didn’t like being vulnerable in front of other mammals. It would take a bit of pushing to get her son to open up.

“I think Judy is scared to tell him, too. They’re quite a pair.” Bonnie agreed. Though Judy was a risk-taker, a trier, Bonnie knew that her daughter was probably trying to figure out Nick’s feelings and thoughts before sharing her own. If Nick was doing the same with Judy, then the pair of them were probably stuck in some awkward dance, trying to suss the other out first.

Stu had been silent for a while, lost in thought. Jude the Dude, his little girl, in love for the first time. It made his fatherly instincts scream, made him want to get his shotgun and remind Nick that if he so much as made Judy shed a single tear, he’d fill him full of lead. He had no problems with his daughter being interested in a fox, he’d come a long way from his old speciest line of thinking, but that didn’t stop him from being concerned about their differences.

“Stu?” Bonne interrupted him, snapping him from his thoughts. “You’ve been silent. What’s the matter?”
“I’m concerned. Judy has never shown this much interest in a mammal before.” Stu came clean, knowing it was futile to hide anything from his wife.

“Nicky would never hurt her.” Marian chimed in. She knew how much the doe meant to him, and she knew Nicky would never do anything to hurt her or anything that would risk him losing her.

“Oh no, that’s not what I mean!” Stu quickly added, not wanting Marian to think for a moment that he was concerned about that. “It’s all so new to Jude. It’s a big scary thing for her, especially given the species difference.”

“Oh Stu, she’s a big girl.” Bonnie brushed aside her husband’s concerns. Judy knew what she was doing, it was futile to try and stop her or tell her otherwise.

Sighing, Stu knew his wife was right. That didn’t make him worry any less, though. “She’s still my baby.”

“She’s in safe paws. Nick is a good mammal.” Bonnie pointed out, lifting an arm to rub one of her paws soothingly over her husband’s arm.

Stu sighed again, shoulders slumping. “I know, but as her father, it’s natural for me to worry.”

“I’m sure Nicky will ease your worries when he visits.” Marian offered the buck a reassuring smile. She knew Nicky would be on his best behavior while at the Hopps warren, and she had a feeling he would try to win over the buck. If he were going to take Judy as his mate, then he would need Stu’s permission.

The chamois appeared next to their table, arms laden with dishes, effectively putting their conversation on hold. She placed the meals down, remembering which mammal had ordered what. “Do you need any condiments? Sides?” The waitress double-checked.

“Bon and I are fine, thank you. Marian?” Stu asked, sparing a glance to the vixen.

Marian shook her head. “I’m fine, thank you.”

The chamois nodded, pleased to be serving a table of mammals who weren’t fussy and probably wouldn’t give her a hard time. She did wonder where the third rabbit had disappeared off to, and she would be lying if she said she wasn’t curious as to why two rabbits were having dinner with a fox. It wasn’t her place to ask questions, though. “Give me a call if you need anything. Enjoy your meal.” She left them to it, returning to her other tables.

Picking up her knife and fork, Marian licked her lips. Her meal looked delicious. They ate in silence for a few minutes before Marian spoke up. “Now that we’re in agreement that our kits have feelings for one another, perhaps we should help them a little? Nicky has never been good at talking about his feelings.”

Bonnie finished her mouthful before she spoke, seeing the benefit of Marian’s idea. “Judy’s usually quite emotional and forthcoming with her feelings, it comes with our species, but I don’t think it would hurt to give them a little push. What did you have in mind?”

Marian paused, thinking for a moment. “We need to create a situation where they’d be free to talk and feel comfortable doing so.”

“Well the next time they’re together will be the Carrot Day Festival.” Bonnie was looking forward to welcoming Judy home for the festival, and having Nick with her would be wonderful. She only hoped her other 311 kits didn’t scare the tod away.
“It’s the biggest celebration in the district, Bon. No one gets any peace.” Stu was all for getting Nick and Judy to talk, but the festival made it difficult for anyone in the district to get some peace.

“We could make some peace?” Bonnie suggested. She wasn’t sure how they would go about it, but it would be worth trying.

Stu continued eating, trying to come up with a way for Nick and Judy to be alone. On the Friday night they would have a big family meal and prepare for the following day's festivities, then on Saturday, they would spend the day at the fair and market, finishing off the day with a massive bonfire and party in one of the many fields in the district. Sunday would consist of farming competitions, a huge feast, and then the closing ceremony. Stu paused, an idea forming. “The closing ceremony.” He offered. Bonnie’s eye lit up, excitement painted on her face.

“Closing ceremony?” Marian asked, not entirely sure what the Carrot Day Festival involved. “Something else for you to research.”

“On the Sunday night, the final night of the festival, the whole district comes together for a massive firework display. I usually send some of my older kits home to keep an eye on the house and the fields, to make sure no stray fireworks hit them. We could send Judy and Nick home, under the guise of them keeping an eye on the place. They’d get a few hours of uninterrupted time.” Stu explained. He’d have to send some of his other kits home to watch over the place, should Nick and Judy actually have their talk and end up distracted by one another, but that wouldn’t be difficult. They could bring Jasmine into their plans; she was Judy’s littermate and loved her dearly. She was also excellent at keeping secrets. He’d ask her to go home and watch over the place, stay outside or hide in one of the barns. Jasmine would probably love helping her sister out.

“I like that idea, Nicky would feel more comfortable talking to Judy about his feelings if he knew no one would interrupt them.” The excitement started to build inside Marian. She wouldn’t be able to help much from the city, but Bonnie and Stu seemed determined to get their kits together. Marian was happy to trust them with this.

“How do we get them to discuss their feelings though, and not watch Netflix or talk about work and the academy?” Bonnie hated playing devil's advocate, but they’d need to cover all their bases and eliminate any chance of their kits getting distracted.

The three mammals fell silent, thinking. “We could get Jasmine to knock the power off? With nothing to distract them, they’d be forced to talk.” Stu suggested, seriously liking the thought of bringing Jasmine in on their plan.

“I could guilt Nicky.” Marian offered. “The bracelet he gave her? Nicky didn’t tell Judy exactly what it means, but it’s significant in our culture. It holds a lot of meaning. My husband gave me one, and I wore it every day until his passing. I scolded him for not telling Judy what it means, so perhaps I could guilt him into talking to her about it during the weekend? With the power knocked out, and with them being alone, he’d more than likely feel comfortable talking to her about his feelings.”

“What does it mean, the bracelet?” Stu asked. When Judy had shown them the beautiful silver piece of jewelry around her wrist, he’d been concerned. It was a big thing, buying a lady a piece of jewelry, and Stu had worried that Judy was getting ahead of herself when it came to Nick.

Marian bit her lip, food forgotten for a moment. “I want to tell you, I trust you both with the information, but it would ruin it. Judy should be the one to tell you after Nicky has told her.”

“We understand. Perhaps I could mention the bracelet to Judy a few times too, between now and
then, drop some hints? We could even recruit one of her sisters to help.” Bonnie offered, having picked up on Stu mentioning Jasmine.

Marian was apprehensive, the more mammals involved, the higher the possibility of something going wrong. “Are you sure we should bring others into this?”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry. Jasmine is Judy’s littermate, and they were inseparable growing up. Jasmine would do anything for Judy, and she wouldn’t tell a soul. Stu and I could ask her to watch over Nick and Judy all weekend, mention how lovely her bracelet is and ask her about it, that kind of thing.” Bonnie reassured the vixen.

Marian mulled it over. “So long as Jasmine can be subtle with it. If Nicky feels like he’s being forced or a mammal is getting too close to the truth, then he probably won’t talk.”

“Jasmine is good at subtle, don’t worry. Stu and I will make sure that Nick and Judy have the house to themselves on the Sunday evening.” Bonnie was almost vibrating with excitement. Her little girl might finally have a mate.

Marian’s excitement was palpable too, her tail thumping against the booth. “Oh, I’m so excited! I hope they pull their heads out of their tails and tell one another how they feel.” She stabbed some of her food with her fork, having momentarily forgotten to eat in all of her excitement.

Stu shook his head fondly, realizing now that his wife and Marian wouldn’t let it rest until Nick and Judy expressed their feelings to one another and became mates. Chewing his mouthful of salad, he thought about having a chat with Nick before the Sunday night. He wanted to make sure the tod would be good for his girl one last time, do some last minute questioning and digging.

“Do you think they’d have kits?” Bonnie asks nonchalantly.

Stu inhaled sharply, eyes widening as he erupted into a violent coughing fit, choking on his mouthful.

Bonnie and Marian didn't bother holding back their laughter.
Welcome to Bunnyburrow

Chapter Notes

This chapter was so long that I've had to split it into two. If I hadn't of split it, this chapter would've been around 20,000 words! I get so carried away once my muse decides to cooperate x]

Thank you again for all the love, comments, kudos and bookmarks. Watching the stats on this fic go up and up makes me so happy and fills me with so much love. Also, hello to all my new readers, I see you! :)

July 14th saw Judy standing at the train station in Bunnyburrow, hind paw thumping the bricked platform impatiently. She’d been given the day off work, had traveled home this morning to spend some time with her family before Nick arrived and the chaos of the Carrot Day Festival began. It was 5:46 pm and Nick’s train was due in at 6 pm. Though it was early evening the summer weather meant that Judy had been able to wear a dress, another beautiful garment made for her by Marian. This one was red, with a gray sash across her middle and delicate lace detail along the sweetheart neckline. She’d thrown a red cardigan over the top, just in case the temperature decided to drop. Judy lowered her gaze to her left forearm, to the gash that had been expertly stitched up by Zootopia’s emergency services. The drugs raid hadn't gone to plan. “You should probably cover that up.” The soft voice from behind Judy pulled her from her thoughts. Casting a glance over her shoulder, Judy knew Jasmine was right. Her littermate had insisted on coming with her. “He might need help with his bags, Ju.” Jasmine had argued. Judy had protested, but their mom had shooed them both out of the house, worrying they’d be late if they argued about it any further.

“Yeah, he'd freak.” Judy sighed, rolling down the sleeves of her cardigan to hide her arms. The action hid her bracelet, still around her right wrist, and Judy hoped that she'd finally get some answers from the tod about it this weekend. She figured she wouldn't be able to keep the gash a secret from Nick for long, though. He was too observant, too smart, and her mom had insisted that they share her old room for the weekend. Regrettably, none of Judy’s sleepwear covered her arms. “You’re just delaying the inevitable, Judy.”

Nick had managed to convince Major Friedkin to give him the weekend off, to let him go and see Judy and her family in Bunnyburrow. The weekend came with some stipulations, though. The first was that he wasn't allowed to miss Friday’s training and the second was that he was to be back Monday morning at 7:30 am. Major Friedkin had decided to give him the Sunday night off too, and Nick couldn't be more grateful for another evening with Judy.

The last two weeks had been hell for him. He'd have to tell Judy this time home about the bracelet. There was no way around it. They'd agreed to talk, and now Nick was beating himself up, cursing himself. He’d ran through the conversation in his head millions of times, thought about all the questions Judy would ask, the ways in which their chat might go. Judy could start shouting and accuse him of being high-handed. She could be disgusted, reject him and his advances entirely. She could return his advances, let him kiss her senseless and love her until the end of time. Nick
knew which option he preferred.

Stealing a glance at the time on his phone, which he had clutched in one paw, Nick sighed. Another 14 minutes until the train would pull into Bunnyburrow station. His duffle bag was on the seat next to him, the train not as busy as he'd expected it to be. In his other paw, he held a big bouquet of flowers. He'd read the book from Bonnie several times over, familiarized himself with it as much as possible. He'd then taken her note about flowers and used it to draft a letter to Mr. Otterton, asking for a very specific bouquet. His mom had gone in to pay for him, and she'd proceeded to send him some cash for the weekend. Nick found himself owing his mom more money, and it didn't sit right with him. He wasn't comfortable with her spending what little she had left each month on him. The flowers had arrived this morning, and Major Friedkin had been kind enough to sit them in water for him. The look she'd given him after breakfast was enough to let the tod know that if he tested her patience, she'd get immense pleasure out of telling all his fellow cadets that he'd bought Judy a big bouquet of flowers.

Staring at the bouquet, he ran through their meanings once more. “Purple stock for affection and a happy life, lavender roses for enchantment, purple lisianthus for appreciation, white hydrangeas for heartfelt gratitude, white alstroemerias for friendship and devotion, and Judy's favorite tulips, in red, for love.” It wasn't lost on Nick that the bouquet consisted of a lot of purple flowers, but the meanings were perfect, and they reminded him of Judy’s eyes. “You’re still a lovesick fool.”

The PA system broke Nick from his thoughts. “The next station is Bunnyburrow. This service terminates here. Please remember to take all your belongings with you, and mind the gap between the train and the platform. We thank you for traveling on the Zootopia Express.”

With a deep breath, Nick stood. Sliding his phone into his back pocket, pleased to have received it back from Major Friedkin for the weekend, and terrified by the sheer number of Furbook notifications he had. He used his now free paw to pick up his bag. Flowers and bag in tow, Nick made his way to the train doors.

The train slowed to a stop, the doors sliding open a moment later. “You got this, it's just Carrots and her family.” Nick stepped off the train; hind paws finding the brick platform. A few mammals milled around on the platform, and he searched for Judy.

A blur of gray and red ran towards him, and Nick soon found himself engulfs in a hug, Judy’s arms around his waist, the side of her face pressed to his chest. Depositing his bag onto the platform he wrapped his free arm around her, pulling her close. “Slick!” Judy’s grip tightened, eyes closed. She'd watched as the train had come to a stop, searched every door to see which one Nick would emerge from. It had been instinctual, running along the platform to greet him. It had been two months since they’d last been able to touch one another, and Judy found herself greedy with the need to be near him.

Glancing down at the rabbit embracing him, Nick didn't bother hiding his grin. Tail flicking; he wrapped it around Judy’s ankles. It had to be the sweetest welcome he'd ever received. “Hey, Carrots.” He breathed, unable to stop himself from pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too, so much, and-“ Judy pulled back from their embrace, refusing to move out of the grip of Nick’s tail. However, she stopped mid-sentence as she saw the bouquet of flowers.

“For you.” Nick offered them to her, paws suddenly a little clammy as he did his best to calm his nerves. Bonnie’s advice swam around his mind that flowers and their meanings were important in the Hopps family.
Judy blinked, surprised. Letting out a small noise of appreciation she gently took the bouquet, bringing it to her nose to smell the flowers. They were beautiful, their scent making Judy close her eyes to savor the sweetness. Nick had brought her flowers. Flowers! And not just any old flowers, but her favorite tulips too. “Thank you, Nick. They’re beautiful.”

“Not a problem, Fluff.” He watched as she buried her nose amongst the petals, his shoulders sagging with relief that he’d managed to get this right.

“How did you know I love tulips?” Judy asked, looking up from her bouquet to find the emerald eyes she knew so well.

“Educated guess.” Nick skirted around the topic, not willing to reveal his paw and confess to having been tipped off by Bonnie.

Pushing up onto the balls of her hind paws, Judy planted a light kiss on Nick’s cheek. “You’re the best.”

Eyes widening at the brief kiss, Nick watched as Judy sank back to her usual height. His heart pounded, paws even clammerier than before, and he felt a little lightheaded. “If a cheek kiss does this to you, what on earth will happen if you finally get to kiss her properly?”

The sound of a throat clearing to their left had Nick and Judy turning, breaking them out of their moment. Jasmine had stayed back, watching as her sister had greeted the fox. Bonnie had recruited her into helping a few days ago, filled her in on the plan to get Judy and Nick to tell one another how they felt. Jasmine had jumped at the chance to help her littermate, but having watched their little platform exchange she had a feeling it wouldn’t take much pushing to get the rabbit and the fox together. “So you’re the mammal all the fuss has been about?” Now she was closer Jasmine could look Nick over properly. He was in good shape, his fur clean and brushed, and his eyes bright and tail fluffy. She could see why Judy was attracted to him. “Oh my goodness, he’s wrapped his tail around Judy. How adorable!”

Having been unaware that Judy had brought one of her siblings with her, Nick flushed, his fur thankfully hiding it. Quickly and surreptitiously wiping a paw on his pants, he then offered it out to the other doe. She was the same height as Judy, had the same fur color too, but instead of violet eyes she had brown ones. “Nick Wilde, hi. There was a fuss?”

Jasmine took the fox’s outstretched paw in her own, giving it a firm shake. “Jasmine Hopps, pleasure.” Letting go of Nick’s paw, she folded her arms across her chest. Unable to stop her smirk, she decided to tease the tod. “Oh yes, our warren became an immense hive of activity when everyone learned that Judy was bringing home a friend.” She glanced quickly at her sister, noting that Judy was giving her the stink eye. Brown eyes settling on Nick, Jasmine smoothed her smirk into a smile, not bothering to hide her amusement at the way Nick gulped.

“Jasmine’s joking, don’t worry.” Judy jumped in to reassure Nick. She knew the weekend would probably be a lot for him, and she didn't need him panicking before he’d even stepped paw inside the warren.

“That’s reassuring.” Nick chuckled nervously, picking up his bag.

“Come on, mom’s waiting.” Jasmine tipped her head towards the station exit, taking the lead as they started to walk back to the pickup truck.

Bonnie had pushed dinnertime back a little so that Nick could eat with them, and Judy had spent all afternoon in the kitchen preparing food for him. Bonnie had offered to help, Jasmine had even
offered a paw, but Judy had politely turned them both down. Judy knew that her mom and sister had never handled fish before, but she'd been practicing while Nick was away at the academy.

Clutching her flowers in one paw, Judy’s free paw took Nick’s as they walked. Nick glanced down at their joined paws. Her response to the flowers, the way she was holding his paw, it reassured him that their talk would go well, that she possibly returned his feelings. She still wore the bracelet around her wrist; he could see it peeking out from under her cardigan. He took in her dress, not having seen it before. “New dress?” He questioned, admiring how it hugged her body.

Judy looked up, ears smoothed down behind her as she nodded. “A present from your mom.” Marian had visited Judy last night, a large gift bag with her, filled with several new dresses. Judy had cried and had hugged the vixen like her life had depended on it. She’d brought all the dresses with her to Bunnyburrow, unable to choose just one or two.

“You’re going to have a whole new wardrobe soon.” Nick couldn’t help but smile. It meant the world to him that his mom got along with Judy, that she liked the doe. He’d never brought a girl home before, never felt close enough to another mammal to let them into his family home. He’d had some flings, some one-night stands, but they meant nothing compared to his relationship with Judy.

“I’m not complaining. Your mom is an excellent dressmaker.” Marian’s sewing machine had been out the last time Judy had gone over for dinner, and she’d spotted a few new pieces the vixen was working on. Judy loved hearing about Marian’s latest sewing escapades, loved watching the way the vixen’s face would light up, her paws animated whenever she spoke about her latest projects.

“I think you might be her muse. Mom hasn't sewed in years.” Nick couldn't remember the last time his mom had pulled out her sewing machine, but it had been before his dad had passed away. His mom had lost her love for sewing when she’d lost her husband.

“I'll ride in the bed. You two can take the cab.” Jasmine offered, pulling the keys from her pocket. She threw them at Judy, suppressing her smile as her sister was forced to let go of Nick’s paw to catch them. “You can throw your bag in the bed with me, Nick.” Jasmine offered, clambering up into the back of the truck. Nick offered her his bag, and Jasmine secured it to the floor of the truck bed with bungee cords. Judy could drive, yes, but sometimes her driving was a little scary.

Judy took her place behind the wheel, her flowers resting on the bench seat beside her. Nick slid into the passenger seat, glancing around. “No blueberries?” He pouted as Judy started the engine.

“Sorry Slick, don’t want you ruining your dinner. Besides, I thought we’d go and pick some ourselves tomorrow morning.” Judy pulled the truck out of the car park and started the drive home. She knew they would be attending the fair tomorrow, but she'd set aside some time for Nick to gather his favorite blueberries. She'd ask her dad for a large punnet of them on Sunday afternoon so Nick could take some back to the academy with him.

“You know the way to my heart, Carrots.” Nick would take every opportunity he could get to get his paws on the Hopps Family Farm blueberries. They were far superior to any blueberries he’d ever eaten before.

The back window of the cab didn't slide open, but with both driver and passenger windows rolled down Jasmine was able to eavesdrop on the conversation between her sister and the fox. “Carrots? He calls her Carrots?” Jasmine frowned, not sure if she would ever understand cutesy pet names.

“Oh, by the way, I found this in a punnet of blueberries I received from your mom.” Nick pulled out the small pink toy he’d found in his last care package from Bonnie. It was cloud shaped, with a
cartoon face on it. He had no idea what it was, but he was pretty sure it wasn't meant to be in the punnet and wasn't meant for him.

“Mom sent you a package?” It was news to Judy. Her mom had never mentioned sending Nick anything. Sparing a glance at the item in Nick’s paw, Judy snickered, eyes returning to the road. A quick inhale told her who the toy belonged to. “That’s Sasha’s gnaw toy, she thought she’d lost it.”

“Yeah, she’s sent me a few.” Nick glossed over the subject of Bonnie’s care packages, his attention returning to the little pink cloud. “How do you know it’s Sasha’s?”

“The smell. It carries Sasha’s scent.” Judy explained, watching as Nick lifted it to his nose to sniff it.

Nick frowned, pulling the toy away from his nose so he could stare at it. “I don't smell anything.”

Shaking her head fondly, Judy explained. “That's because you don't know Sasha’s scent. When we get home, your nose will tell you when she’s nearby.”

“What’s a gnaw toy?” Nick turned the toy over in his paws, as he had done many times since he’d found it at the bottom of one of his blueberry care packages.

“Rabbit’s teeth don't stop growing, so we have to wear them down all the time, or they become painful. As kits, we’re given gnaw toys to chew, and as adults, we use special wooden dowels.” Judy explained, realizing that she’d never told Nick about that little rabbit quirk. She kept her wooden dowels in her bedroom, chewed on them once a week to keep her teeth in good shape. There were plenty of dowel choices, especially in Bunnyburrow, but Judy preferred maple dowels.

“Wait, your teeth never stop growing?” The book from Bonnie hadn't mentioned that little snippet of information.

“Yup,” Judy confirmed.

Thinking back on their time together, Nick realized he’d never seen Judy chewing on any wooden dowels in front of him. “I’ve never seen you use a wooden dowel.”

“I only use them once a week, and I missed last week, so I'm afraid I'm going to need to chew on one this evening. It’s why we give kits cute looking gnaw toys, to encourage them to chew often and keep their teeth healthy.” Judy didn’t really want to use her dowels in front of Nick, it wasn’t an attractive thing, munching away on maple wood, but she didn't want to stray any further away from her chewing schedule. Judy also figured that she and Nick were living together now, that once he graduated they would be around one another 24/7, so it was inevitable that he’d see her chewing on her dowels.

“Your sister has chewed this?” Nick looked a little more closely at the cloud, spotting small bite marks. He tried to hide his grimace. Judy’s sister had chewed it, and it had been in amongst his blueberries.

“Yeah. Don't worry though, you won't get cooties.” Judy snickered.

Snorting, Nick grinned at the doe. “I've probably already caught them from you.”

“Oh ouch, Mr. Wilde.” Judy let go of the wheel with one paw, gently swatting Nick as she laughed. Nick feigned hurt, rubbing the spot Judy had hit while he laughed with her. As his laughter died down, he kept his eyes on her, taking her in. He’d missed her, missed the sound of her voice and her scent, the way she was always reaching out to touch him.
Feeling Nick’s gaze on her, Judy blushed, flustered by the weight of his stare. “Focus on the road, Ju,” Jasmine complained loudly as the truck jolted over some potholes. On the best of days Judy always ended up finding all the potholes in the road, but with Nick distracting her it was even worse.

“Sorry, Jas.” Judy apologized with a sheepish smile, returning her attention to the road. She took the next right turn, the tarmac becoming a dirt path that led to their family home.

As the road surface changed, Nick moved his attention to his surroundings. Up ahead, the looming building of Judy’s family home made his jaw drop. “Holy heck…” he muttered. The building was huge, painted in a bright cherry red. It was protruding from a large mound of earth, a sprawling front porch wrapping around it. As they drew closer, Nick could see several windows emerging from the side of the dirt mound. The feature that caught his attention the most though was the cladding on the front of the building, shaped at the top like giant rabbit ears.

Judy pulled the truck to a stop beside the front porch. “You think this is impressive, wait until we get inside. All of our communal space is in the mound, and all the bedrooms are underground.” Judy couldn't stop her smile at the look of amazement on Nick’s face. Killing the engine, Judy grabbed the keys and her flowers, opening the door and sliding out of the driver's seat; her hind paws finding the grassy ground that surrounded her family home.

Jasmine jumped down from the bed of the truck, freeing Nick’s bag and bringing it with her. Nick was last to leave the vehicle, eyes still trained on the imposing structure before him. Judy rounded the car, truck keys now in her pocket. Reaching out for Nick she took one of his paws in her own, clutching her flowers in the other. “Ready?” She asked, knowing that the weekend would probably be a lot for Nick.

Broken from his admiration by the feel of Judy’s paw in his own, he glanced down to her, offering her a smile. “Born ready.” He turned to Jasmine, nodding towards his bag, holding his paw out for it.

“I’ve got it, don’t worry.” Jasmine shrugged, the bag not at all heavy. She had a feeling Nick would need his paws free. Besides, she’d run it down to Judy’s room for him.

“Thank you.” Nick offered Jasmine a small nod. If Judy’s 274 other siblings were like the brown-eyed doe, then he had a feeling things would be okay.

With a gentle tug, Judy led Nick towards the house. They climbed up the porch steps together, the front door ajar. No one locked their doors in Bunnyburrow, crime was virtually non-existent and everyone knew one another. Judy led Nick through the entrance hall, weaving through other hallways, past many family rooms, playrooms, and the library. Nick only managed to snatch the occasional glance into the rooms they were passing, but he already knew that he would have to follow Judy everywhere, else he’d get lost.

Deeper into the house, Judy came to a standstill in front of a large white door. Giving Nick’s paw a squeeze, she pushed the door open.

Noise. There was so much noise. Nick’s ears flicked, flattening as he tried to drown out some of the sounds. They were in the kitchen, a bright and colorful room, the walls covered in drawings done by the Hopps kits. Nick stole a quick glance around him. To his left was a railing in place of a wall, and Nick could see rows and rows of tables and bench seats on the split-level below, a massive staircase leading down. Lining the wall opposite the door sat countless industrial sized stoves, and the wall to Nick’s right was lined with cupboards. Before him, between him and the stoves, was the largest island counter he’d ever seen. It was cooking on a monumental scale.
Jasmine took the opportunity to disappear down the stairs to the dining room, slipping through one of the many archways off of it and towards the bedrooms. She’d leave Nick’s bag on Judy’s bed.

“Nick, it’s so good to see you.” Bonnie had turned at the sound of the kitchen door opening, hearing finely tuned from years of watching over unruly kits. Abandoning her post by one of the stoves, the pots and pans on a very low heat just to keep the food warm, Bonnie bustled around the island counter. Reaching up, she tugged Nick into a hug. The kitchen fell silent.

“It’s great to see you too, Bonnie.” Nick greeted the Hopps matriarch, letting go of Judy’s paw so he could return her embrace. Over Bonnie’s shoulder, he could see lots of wide eyes, at least twenty young bunnies all looking right at him. Swallowing, Nick gently pulled back from Bonnie’s embrace.

“How’ve you been dear?” Bonnie asked, taking a moment to look Nick over. She’d only seen him once, during her Muzzletime call on Judy’s birthday, but he looked well. During their embrace, she’d been able to feel how strong he was, and Bonnie had to hide her grin. He’d need that strength to keep up with Judy.

“I’ve been well thanks, how about you?” Nick was comfortable with small talk and comfortable around Bonnie.

“I’ve been good dear, no need to worry about me.” Bonnie offered the tod a smile, resting a paw on his arm. Turning her attention to Judy, Bonnie caught sight of her flowers. “Oh Judy, what beautiful flowers!”

The familiarity between her mom and Nick made Judy question just how many care packages Bonnie had sent her fox. “Nick brought them for me.” Judy spared a glance up to Nick, offering him a warm smile before she crossed to one of the cupboards, using her free paw to open the door and pull out a vase.

Bonnie gave Nick’s arm a gentle squeeze, pleased that he’d listened to her advice. “Good boy.” She mouthed, enjoying the light blush that tinged the inside of Nick’s ears at the praise.

Nick’s nostrils flared as he suddenly caught a new scent. “Sasha?” He asked, looking over the top of Bonnie’s head towards all the little faces that were still staring at him. Now he knew what Judy had meant back in the truck.

Bonnie turned, looking between Nick and her kits. “Sasha, come on sweet pea.” She held out a paw, gesturing for her baby to come forward. She had no idea how Nick knew Sasha’s name, or why he was calling it, but she trusted the fox.

With Bonnie’s back turned, and Sasha’s attention momentarily on her mom, Nick slipped the chew toy from his pocket up into his right sleeve.

Sasha’s gaze moved from her mom back to the strange fox in the kitchen, but as her mom offered out her paw, she skittered out from behind the island counter. “This is Nick, he’s a friend of Judy’s.” Bonnie introduced them, gently pushing her daughter towards the tod. Sasha was a little scared of the fox, he was so tall, and his scent was unyielding, but if he was a friend of Ju-Ju’s, then he had to be nice.

With her flowers in a vase, Judy watched as Sasha approached Nick. She’d worked out the meanings of the flowers while arranging them, and though she wasn’t sure if Nick knew what they meant when he’d picked them out, the sweet meanings of them all made her smile, made her heart swell with love for the fox.
“Hey, Sasha.” Nick knelt on the floor, bringing himself down to Sasha’s height. He was careful not to show his teeth when he offered the little bunny a smile. The young rabbit had brown fur with splotches of cream fur scattered across her body, she also had a cream stripe down her chin and throat, and her eyes were the same color as Jasmine’s. “I heard a rumor that you lost something recently.”

Sasha nodded shyly, wringing her paws in front of her. She’d lost her favorite chew toy a few weeks ago, and no matter how hard she looked she couldn’t find it, and none of her siblings said they’d seen it. Sasha wasn’t sure if she believed them.

“Oh…” Nick slowly lifted a paw to his temple, as if he were deep in thought. “Was it blue? No, wait…it was pink.” His dad might have been an awful magician, according to his mom anyway, but Nick’s years on the streets had taught him numerous ways to trick mammals. There was nothing malicious about this trick though. Stu ventured into the kitchen from the dining room, Jasmine by his side, figuring her return meant Nick and Judy had made it back to the warren too. He took in the scene before him, pausing at the top of the stairs to watch Nick and Sasha. Stu wasn’t sure what was going on, but he used it as an opportunity to observe the fox. He’d take all the chances he could get this weekend. The plan that had been concocted during dinner with Marian was still firmly in place, but Stu wanted to double-check that the fox was good for his daughter.

Bonnie kept her gaze on the scene unfolding before her, unsure as to what Nick was doing. Her confusion showed with a frown, but one glance at Judy, whose broad smile was almost splitting her face, told Bonnie that she didn’t need to worry.

Sasha gasped, nodding her head more vigorously. Her pink gnaw toy!

Nick pretended to think for a moment longer. “Was it shaped like a giraffe? No, wait, was it a cloud?”

“It was!” Sasha couldn’t remain silent any longer, and she rocked on the balls of her hind paws with excitement.

“Did you look everywhere for it?” Nick quizzed.

“I did Mister Nick.” Sasha couldn’t believe how much Nick knew about her gnaw toy.

“Are you sure?” Nick double-checked, lifting an eyebrow.

“Mhm.” Sasha hummed her confirmation.

Believing her, Nick smiled. “Well, I think you missed a spot…” He lifted his right paw, slowly bringing it to sit behind Sasha’s ear. With his palm shielding his actions from the other bunnies behind Sasha, he quickly hooked the toy with a claw, dragging it out of his sleeve. “It’s here!” He exclaimed, pulling his paw from behind her ear, the gnaw toy between his fingers.

Sasha squealed as her little paws shot out to grab at her favorite gnaw toy. She wasn’t afraid of how huge Nick’s paws were or that he had sharp claws. “You found it Mister Nick! Are you magic?” She asked in awe, taking the toy from Nick’s grip, reflexively bringing it to her mouth so she could use it.

“I might be.” Nick offered her a wink, suddenly finding himself with an armful of little brown rabbit as Sasha hugged him tightly. Chuckling, he wrapped her up in an embrace.
“Thank you, Mister Nick.” Sasha pulled back, giving Nick a toothy grin.

“No worries Sasha.” He gave one of her cheeks a quick and gentle brush with his thumb, already fond of the kit.

“Momma look! Mister Nick found Cloudy!” Sasha turned to her mom, showing her Cloudy before she shoved the toy back in her mouth, gnawing on it, reacquainting herself it.

Judy’s grip tightened on the counter. “Oh cheese and crackers.” She’d suddenly envisioned Nick as a father, how sweet he’d be with his kits. “Your kits.” Her brain tagged on. Judy’s heart skipped a beat at the sudden thought, a flush of heat coursing through her. “You said you don’t want kits yet.” The angel on her left shoulder pointed out. “Oh, but you’d happily have Nick’s right this second.” The devil on her right shoulder tempted her.

A light sweet scent had Nick turning his head, locating the source. It was coming from Judy, and he inhaled deeply, savoring it. The smell was incredible. He’d only smelt it once before when he and Judy had taken a nap after she’d cried to him about the Catstro mess. Nick found himself wondering again which perfume Judy used.

Jasmine and Bonnie shared a secret smile over the scent coming from Judy. Stu had caught it too, but he studiously ignored it. He didn’t want to think about his daughter having less than pure thoughts.

“That’s great sweet pea, I know you’ve missed Cloudy a lot.” Bonnie cooed, running a paw over Sasha’s head, smoothing down her fur. She’d bought a few other gnaw toys for Sasha since Cloudy had gone missing, but the little kit had refused them all. Sasha made a beeline for the stairs down to the dining room, her siblings chasing after her. She couldn’t wait to tell everyone that Nick was magic.

Spotting her dad across the room, Judy let go of the counter. “Hey, dad.” She hadn’t seen her father all day; he’d been too busy in the fields gathering the last of the produce for the family stall at the fair tomorrow.

“Hey, Jude,” Stu replied, giving his daughter a warm smile. He’d missed her since they’d last seen one another two weeks ago.

Nick rose back up to his full height, turning at the sound of Stu’s voice. “Mr. Hopps, Sir.” He greeted the buck.

“Nick, we’re glad you could join us this weekend.” Stu crossed the room, offering a paw out to the fox. Nick’s little interaction with Sasha had been endearing, and Stu could see the tod had a soft side. “Good, I’m glad he’s not afraid to show that side of himself.”

Giving Stu’s paw a firm shake, Nick offered him a small smile. His heart rate had escalated the moment Judy had addressed the Hopps patriarch, his nerves kicking in again. “It’s lovely to be here, thank you for inviting me,” Nick remembered his manners, knowing his mom would scold him if he forgot them.

Letting go of the fox’s paw, Stu glanced at Judy before his eyes settled on the tod. “Jude wouldn’t come home without you.”

Pushing off from the counter, Judy crossed the room to stand with Nick and her father. “It wasn’t like that, dad.” She rolled her eyes. She’d have come home without Nick, but she might’ve grumbled about it a little.
“Now, before I forget, we only have one rule in this warren, and that's no cussing in front of the little ones,” Bonnie remembered. Given how polite Nick was, and how lovely Marian was too, Bonnie knew the tod wouldn’t cuss in front of her babies. She still felt like it had to be said, though.

“Don’t worry Bonnie, I wouldn’t dream of cussing in front of your little ones. Is that why you say cheese and crackers?” Nick turned to Judy, teasing her.

Paw shooting out; Judy gave Nick’s shoulder a gentle thump. “Possibly.” She was a little embarrassed, but Nick laughed, tail flicking to wrap around her ankles. He thought it was adorable that Judy never cussed.

Bonnie watched as Nick’s tail wrapped around Judy, and she hid her smile at how cute the exchange was, noting how her daughter had boxed Nick. “Alright, dinner is ready, so if you want to take your seats in the dining room, I'll serve up.”

“Do you need a paw, Bonnie?” Nick offered. He didn’t want the older doe to struggle, and it was the least he could after she’d been so kind to him.

“Oh no dear, you’re too sweet. Please, go take a seat with Judy downstairs, and Stu will help me. I've put you both on the first dinner sitting. I can imagine after your training today that you’re hungry.”

“Starving. Thank you.” Nick had no idea what Bonnie was going to serve for dinner, but he was happy regardless. He wasn’t in any position to be fussy with his food.

“Come on Slick.” Judy took Nick’s paw in her own, passing her dad and leading him down the stairs to the dining room. The room was huge, twice the height of the kitchen thanks to the split-level. Four large tables ran the length of the room, bench seats on each side. The walls were a bright and cheerful yellow, the floor beneath Nick’s hind paws made of wood, keeping the warren cool. Massive archways in the shape of rabbit ears led to hallways off the dining room, and Nick could see the hallways sloped downwards, heading deeper underground. “They lead to the bedrooms,” Judy explained, coming to a stop at one of the tables. Climbing over the bench seat, Judy sat. Nick followed her over, sitting on her left, thighs pressed together. He couldn’t stop looking around, taking in the immense size of everything around him. For such small mammals, Judy’s family lived in a huge house.

“Overwhelmed yet?” Judy teased, nudging Nick’s shoulder with her own.

Jolted from his amazement at his surroundings, Nick offered Judy a lazy grin. “Nah, you know me Carrots, I’m as cool as a cucumber.” He flicked his tail around her waist, tightening it around her. Judy’s paw went for the end of it, stroking the soft fluffiness. Nick let out a small noise at the contact, but this time he wasn’t embarrassed. Judy was the only mammal he let touch his tail, and they were much closer now than when he’d taken her home after hustling Bellwether.

“Contentment, that was a noise of contentment.” Judy thought, her research proving useful. The sound, along with the flowers, the paw holding, and the kisses at the train station, gave her immense hope that this weekend would go well. “Not for long, Slick.” Judy’s grin was a little too wide for Nick’s liking, but the sound of a high-pitched alarm shocked him, making him jump. The floor beneath his hind paws started to vibrate, his emerald eyes searching the room as a thudding noise began to get louder and louder. “Three, two…” Judy whispered.

Through the archways leading to the bedrooms came hundreds of rabbits. Nick’s eyes widened at the sudden cacophony of noise, the room filling up with bunnies, all racing in for dinner. “Oh hell.
“Mister Nick!” It was a miracle Nick heard his name being called amidst the chaos. Ears twisting to locate the source of the sound, he saw Sasha barreling towards him. He only just managed to open his arms in time to catch her in a hug, the small doe having thrown herself at him.

“Hey there Sasha.” He lifted her up, bringing her over the bench seat to sit beside him. The kit grinned at him, Cloudy clutched in her paw. He could see a few more teeth marks in the toy.

“It’s the magic fox!” The sound of one of Judy’s siblings shouting from across the room set off a frenzy. Within moments a whole fluffle of bunnies was heading straight for them.

“Mister Magic!”

“Magic, can you help me find my toy bunny?”

“Can you make a balloon animal for me Mister Nick?”

“Mister Nick-“

“Can you show me a card trick?”

“Can you levitate?”

“Mister Nick!”

Judy had to hide her laughter behind her paws as Nick was swarmed by thirty or so of her siblings, all of them vying for his attention. Word always spread fast in the Hopps warren, and it seemed that it hadn't taken long for Sasha to tell the others that Nick had magically found her gnaw toy.

“Um, well, I used up all my magic for today finding Cloudy, I’m sorry.” He squirmed, stumbling over his excuse as he turned in his seat to look at the little ones, not used to so much attention and fuss, Nick gulped as he realized that he was surrounded. “I'll help some of you tomorrow.” He tacked on, not wanting to upset any of them. Thirty pairs of eyes were staring at him, little faces filled with curiosity and awe. “Note to self, whatever you do in this warren, everyone will know about within minutes.”

“Look how big Mister Nick’s paws are!” One of the kits squealed. Before Nick could stop them they were clambering all over him, Judy, and the bench seat, grasping at his paws and hind paws, lifting them and examining them.

“Look at his claws!” Another small voice interrupted, a couple of kits moving to touch them.

“Oh no no, careful!” Nick warned, terrified of them getting too close and ending up accidentally hurt. He wouldn't be able to cope if any of the sweet little kits ended up scratched by his claws. “You could kiss away any chance of Bonnie and Stu letting you date Judy, too.” Nick had filed down his claws a little, heeding Bonnie’s advice, but they were still somewhat sharp. Asking his mom to send him a claw file had resulted in Marian looking at her son like he had two heads. It didn't matter though; he’d do whatever it took to make sure he didn't hurt Judy.

“Be gentle,” Judy warned her siblings, watching as more and more kits started to join them, all clamoring to see Nick, all wanting to see his claws and his giant paws. She was trying to fight off some of her siblings who’d clambered all over her too, wanting cuddles after she'd been gone for so long.
“Why’re your ears so small Mister Nick?” Another kit asked, reaching up to tug on one of Nick’s ears. He winced a little in pain.

“I said be gentle.” Judy reiterated, shooing her brother’s paws away from Nick’s ears. She could see Nick was slowly starting to become overwhelmed, and all of his focus was on the kits that were fascinated with his claws, making sure none of them ended up hurt.

With Nick’s attention elsewhere, he didn't realize that a few kits had gone for his tail until it was too late. “It’s so fluffy!” Several kits all grabbed his tail, wanting to feel the softness of it. Nick let out a sudden sharp yip of pain, the kits not aware of how much their grip hurt, or that it wasn't common for foxes to have their tails touched.

Nick’s noise of pain was the final straw. “Enough!” Judy snapped, the sound of her voice making her siblings pause, the dining room falling silent. “Nick is not a climbing frame. Foxes aren’t as grabby as bunnies. You’re hurting him.”

“It's okay, Carrots,” Nick reassured Judy, knowing the little ones didn't mean to hurt him.

“No, Nick, it's not. I know what that sound means.” Her expression softened for a moment at the realization that he was willing to power on through the pain just so that he wouldn't upset her siblings.

The fact that Judy knew his vocal cue for pain only furthered Nick’s belief from the last time he'd been home, that Judy had been researching his species. It made him a little hot under the collar, thinking about her sat at home reading up about foxes, learning more about him, probably wrapped up in her blanket from his mom. “Wait, do you have a thing for Judy doing her homework now?”

Judy turned her attention to the kits around them, who’d all slowly let go of Nick and were now backing away. “You’re all going to apologize for mammalhandling him, and then we’re going to have dinner. Nick is here for the weekend, so you’ll get a chance to meet him properly later, okay?” She knew that her siblings hadn't meant any harm and that they'd just been excited to meet Nick. As a fox, he was novel to them. That didn't excuse their grabby behavior, though. While it was common for rabbits to grab at one another, her siblings knew better than to paw at guests.

“We’re sorry Mister Nick.” All of the grabby kits apologized, looking genuinely contrite.

“It’s alright. I promise I'll spend some time with you all this weekend if you all take your seats now so your mom can serve dinner, how does that sound?” Nick bargained, looking at the sea of small faces around them.

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, all the little bunnies started to scamper towards the tables, pulling themselves up onto the bench seats. Slowly, Nick exhaled, letting out a shaky breath. He'd been so worried that the little ones would hurt themselves on his claws; terrified they’d ask questions about his teeth and start pawing at his mouth.

“Hey,” Judy reached over, paw finding Nick’s arm. “It's alright.” She soothed, the shaky expression on Nick’s face making her gut twist. She knew her family could be a pawful, but if it was too much for Nick she’d insist they go home for the weekend.

Nick swallowed, sparing a glance at his claws before he looked at Judy. “I was just, I was worried they might hurt themselves.” He confessed, his tail curving around Judy’s waist again, finding comfort in touching her.

Offering Nick a soft smile Judy gave his arm a gentle squeeze. “Don't worry, we bunnies are made
of sturdy stuff.”

Bonnie and Stu stood together at the railings, looking down into the dining room. They'd witnessed the whole exchange, from all the little ones greeting Nick to now. “He’s a good boy,” Bonnie commented quietly, impressed with Nick’s patience and concern for her kits. She'd wanted to see how he acted without her around. She knew how trying her kits could be, and Nick had handled it like a champ.

Stu had had his doubts about Nick, not because he was a fox, but because Judy was so inexperienced. He wanted to make sure she gave her heart to the right mammal, someone who would take care of her and treasure her. Stu had agreed with Marian and Bonnie’s plan on the caveat that he would have the final say in whether Nick and Judy were suited for one another. Having watched Nick interact with his kits, the way he now interacted with Judy when he thought they weren't being watched, he realized his doubts had been for nothing. “That he is Bon, that he is.”

“Mister Nick?” The gentle voice from behind him had Nick tearing his gaze away from Judy, looking down at little Sasha. She’d moved away during the commotion her siblings had caused, but she wanted to be close to the fox again.

“Hey Cinnamon Bun.” he greeted Sasha, offering her a soft smile. The nickname had slipped off his tongue with ease.

"Cinnamon Bun?” Sasha's nose twitched, not sure why he'd called her that.

"Yeah, because your fur color is similar to the color of cinnamon, and you're a bunny. Hence, cinnamon bun." Nick elaborated. It made perfect sense to him. If he were going to remember the names of some of Judy's siblings he'd have to get creative with nicknames. Judy snorted, biting her lip at the atrocious nickname. She was grateful Nick only really stuck to Carrots and Fluff with her.

The nickname made sense to Sasha now that Nick had explained it, and she didn't mind it. If anything, she liked that he'd given her a special name. “Is it okay if I sit next to you?” She glanced at the vacant seat to Nick’s right, the rest of the table having slowly filled up. She was worried that by telling her siblings about how magic Nick was it had led to him being hurt.

“Sure it is, come on.” He offered her a paw, helping her up onto the bench seat. She took the spot to his right, offering him a toothy grin.

“Thanks.” She placed Cloudy down on the table between her and Nick, knowing he would be safe there. If her siblings tried to grab it, she had a feeling Nick would stop them.

“You can always come and sit with your sister and me, okay?” Nick didn't want Sasha to feel like she had to ask every time.

Sasha nodded, hind paws swinging under the table. She liked Nick, he found her gnaw toy, returned her hugs, gave her a nickname, and didn't mind spending time with her.

“Sorry for the slight delay with food, Nick. I run two sittings with 139 bunnies in each, and it can get a little crazy.” Bonnie apologized, appearing behind them. She reached over, placing down Nick, Judy, and Sasha’s plates.

“Don't worry Bonnie, it's fine.” Nick soothed, knowing that preparing so many meals was a huge undertaking for the Hopps matriarch.

Bonnie gave Nick a gentle pat on the shoulder before she disappeared back in the direction of
kitchen, Stu placing down more plates in front of hungry kits.

Nick turned to his meal, expecting a vegetarian dish of some kind. Instead, he was faced with a piece of smoked salmon on a bed of crisp salad. He blinked, gaze turning to Judy to question whether her mom had actually cooked him fish.

“Mom’s not the only one who knows how to cook,” Judy confessed with a shrug, leaning over to grab the salad cream from the middle of the table. She had to lift her butt off the bench to reach properly.

Surprised, Nick’s voice dropped to a whisper of disbelief. “You cooked? For me?” He'd never had any mammal other than his mom cook a homemade meal for him before.

Having grabbed the salad cream and now with her butt firmly back on the bench, Judy’s eyes found Nick’s. “Yeah, I've been practicing while you’ve been away. I don't know what it's like as I can't taste it, but it looks like the pictures in the recipe book so…”

Stunned into silence for a moment at the confirmation that Judy had cooked for him, that she'd been practicing cooking for him, Nick felt a swell of love for Judy consume him, and he found himself itching to kiss her. “You’re too good to me, Fluff.”

Judy dipped her head bashfully as Nick's tail tightened around her waist, offering her a quick squeeze. She dropped a paw to his knee, under the table. Lifting her gaze, Judy found Nick's eyes. The feel of Judy's paw on his knee made Nick swallow, heat coursing through him at the light touch. He yearned to reach out and touch her, to run his paws all over her body. "Stop it, Wilde. You can't think about Judy like that with her family around."

“Mister Nick?” The moment was broken by the sound of his name, and Nick turned, finding Sasha watching him and Judy. He had a feeling the kit would be like his shadow all weekend, and while that was endearing, he wanted some time alone with Judy. He needed some time alone with Judy.

“How come Ju-Ju can touch your tail?” Sasha questioned, innocently wondering why he was so comfortable with Judy stroking his tail when he'd been hurt by her siblings.

“Well you see Ju-Ju and I are best friends.” Nick couldn't resist using the nickname, and it was worth the clump he received under the table from Judy’s hind paws. The nickname list he had for his favorite bunny was growing.

Sasha thought about it for a moment. Judy was very protective of Nick, and he liked being touched by her. “Is Ju-Ju your girlfriend?”

The conversations that had been going on around them at the table suddenly stopped, multiple sets of eyes swinging to look at the tod. “No, but she's my girl friend. With a space in the middle. A girl who’s a friend.”

Judy’s snicker made Nick gently kick her back under the table with his own hind paws, memories of her trying to arrest him the first time making him smile. He had to admit that he'd been impressed with her, how she’d known all the laws he could've been breaking. Thankfully he’d covered his tail several months earlier after a tiger had tried to arrest him for the same offenses. It was only his ability to move quickly and silently that had allowed him to escape the cop and saved him from being cuffed and spending the night in a cell.

“Oh.” Sasha pouted, disappointed. She wanted her sister and Nick to be together. They were cute, and Nick was nice. Instead, she turned her attention back to her dinner, stabbing her food with her fork. Conversation at the table started back up again.
“Smooth, Slick.” Judy couldn't resist teasing the tod as he turned back to face her. She tried to hide how the idea of being Nick’s girlfriend made her feel, how her heart sped up, how her breath caught in her throat.

Nick tried his hardest not to laugh as he remembered the incredulous look on Judy’s face when he'd corrected her about the red wood. “Thanks, Carrots.”

“Did you just call her Carrots?” A deep voice from across the table broke into their conversation. Nick and Judy turned at the sound, though the doe was very familiar with the voice and its owner. Amongst the kit chaos, they hadn't noticed the buck taking his seat.

“Yes, he did. It's a nickname, Julian.” Judy moved her paw from Nick’s knee to rest it protectively on his arm. Julian had been acting a little cold towards her lately, ever since she'd phoned her parents to let them know she and Nick were sharing an apartment. Usually, she spoke to Julian every week, her littermate one of her closest siblings, but he hadn't returned her calls and texts for a while now.

Nick recognized the buck from Furbook, Julian had sent him a friend request the last time he'd been home. Given his ‘J’ initial, Nick guessed that Julian was Judy’s littermate. Judy hadn't told him much about her littermates, hadn't said much about her family as a whole if he were honest. Nick got the distinct feeling from the look in the buck’s eyes and the coldness of his tone that the mammal sat opposite him really didn't like him.

“Little insulting isn't it?” Julian commented. He’d watched the way the fox had interacted with his siblings, tried his hardest to not reach over and pull them away, scold them for getting so close to a predator. He didn't want the fox in his family home, didn't want him anywhere near Judy. She was naïve and too trusting, and foxes were nothing but sly and conniving. Julian believed that Nick was using Judy, letting her do all the legwork while he got a comfortable ride. After all, he’d overheard from his parents that it was Judy’s idea for them to live together, for the fox to become a cop. He was using Judy to further himself, and Julian believed Nick would ditch her as soon as he could. He and his siblings would then be left to pick up the pieces of their sister.

“No no, it's not meant that way at all. It's said with fondness.” Nick corrected the buck, sparing a quick glance to Judy. Was the nickname insulting? Judy had only told him once not to call her it, back when they’d first met, but along the way it had stuck and Judy hadn't mentioned anything since. Nick meant no harm whatsoever with the name.

Julian snorted, not quite believing what he was hearing. The excuse was weak, even for a fox. “Fondness, seriously? That's the line you’re going with?”

Not liking her brother's tone, Judy addressed him sharply. “Julian. What Nick and I call one another is none of your concern.” Since he'd been ignoring her calls and text, Judy figured her brother had no right to interfere. By ignoring her he'd hurt her, and Judy couldn't think of any valid reason for her brother's sudden nastiness. Besides, whatever did or didn't happen between her and Nick was their business, no one else's.

“Maybe when we were kits, but not now.” Judy shook her head. When she'd been younger Julian’s opinion had meant the world to her. He'd always been smart, but now that Judy was older and able to think for herself, to step away from the family unit and look at everything with an outsider’s
perspective, she realized it really wasn't a healthy way to live. She could still love her family, could
still keep them up to date and ask for their help, offer advice when they needed it, but she no longer
needed to live in their pockets.

Having been silent, observing the exchange between Judy and her brother, Nick felt like he had to
interject. “I’m pretty sure Judy can make her own decisions.” He knew Judy was an independent
doe, that she didn't like mammals telling her what she could or couldn't do - she'd made that very
clear to him – and the fact Julian felt like he had any say in Judy’s private matters irked the tod.

Hearing the fox talking, Julian’s eyes moved over to him. He would be trouble. Judy would end up
hurt. “Yeah, bad ones.”

“Julian.” Judy’s voice dropped an octave; fell into something a little more dangerous. A warning.
She wasn't an idiot; she could see that her brother didn't like Nick.

“What?” Julian switched his gaze to his sister, clocking her tone. She wouldn't start anything; she'd
never been good at verbally sparring with him. Judy was too sweet and kind. She could throw witty
phrases and puns around, be silly and funny all day long, but she’d never been good with insults
and put downs.

“If you have something to say, say it. Don't prance around it.” Judy had hoped nothing bad would
come from bringing Nick home, but she knew it had been foolish hope. While her parents and
Jasmine had taken to him, along with her younger siblings, Judy had guessed that her older siblings
would be harder to crack. They’d been exposed to her parent's old speciest way of thinking, been
brought up in that environment. They didn't know any better. It didn't excuse them, though.

“Fine. What the hell were you thinking bringing a fox into our family home?” Julian had no
problem coming out with it, gesturing wildly to the predator sat next to his sister. His sister was
playing house with a fox. It made his stomach churn.

Julian was unbelievable, and Judy hated the way he said the word fox as if it were dirty. “What I
was thinking, is that Nick is my best friend.” She placed emphasis on Nick’s name, reminding her
brother that the tod sat beside her was still a mammal, still had feelings and thoughts, and her
brother was being downright rude. “We live together, and soon we’ll be working together. He's
family.”

Nick had fallen silent again, not wanting to step in and risk making things worse. He’d had time
since accepting Judy’s offer to visit her family to think about everything that could go wrong.
Statistically, Nick knew some of Judy’s siblings wouldn't like him, it would be impossible for all
311 of them to think he was great, and even though Nick didn't know Julian he was strangely hurt
by how fast the buck had disregarded him, how he hadn't even given Nick a chance. He’d at least
wanted Judy’s littermates to like him.

Julian snorted, incredulous. “You were so quick to leave your family behind and run off to the city.
Then when you put your hind paw in it, you came scampering back and acted like nothing had
happened.”

Nick couldn't remain quiet any longer. Bringing up the press conference and the issues in the city
following it wasn't cool. Judy had been naïve, yes, and she'd been repeating the words she’d heard
in the asylum before they'd arrested Lionheart, but she'd learned her lesson. Nick knew the doe still
blamed herself for what happened, no matter how much she pleaded otherwise. Judy didn't deserve
such abuse from her brother when Nick knew his presence was the real problem. “That's not fair. If
you have an issue with me, that's fine, but don't attack your sister.”
Brown eyes rounded on Nick. “I wasn't talking to you.” Julian snapped, not wanting the fox to butt into the conversation. This was between him and Judy.

“How cute.” Julian sneered, giving the fox a once over. He looked strong, and the buck had to admit that his sharp teeth and claws frightened him, but he knew the tod wouldn't dare hurt him. His mom and dad would kick him out of the warren if he used them on anyone, Judy would abandon him, and he'd go back to wherever he came from. “Maybe you should provoke him a little more, see if you can get him to leave.” Julian had an idea. “I’m disappointed you picked him over us, Jude. I mean he's sneaky, sly, untrustworthy…”

“Julian!” Judy was up on her hind paws, leaning over the table towards her brother, paws spread either side of her plate. Ears pricked upright with anger, she started to grind her teeth. “I never picked anyone over anyone else. I moved to the city to follow my dream and meeting Nick was the cherry on top. Don't you dare start throwing around stereotypes.”

“Judith. Julian.” Stu boomed, crossing the room to break up the argument. “Whatever you two are bickering about take it outside. Now.” He hissed, looking between his kits. He hadn't heard the start of their argument, but he didn't want them to get into it around the little ones. Their disagreement concerned him. Stu knew that Julian had been ignoring Judy for a while, but it had never been clear why. Seeing the way his son was looking at Nick, though, gave him a rough idea as to what the argument was about.

Judy started to climb over the bench. She was going to have this out with her littermate. Nick was her guest, and she didn't want him feeling unwelcome. She loved him, loved him so much that it hurt her when someone insulted him. Nick was good and sweet, kind and funny, he was handsome and witty, and he didn't deserve any of her brother's hatred. Judy was ready to give Julian a piece of her mind, ready to fight Nick’s corner. She’d even tell her brother that she loved Nick. That'd probably shut him up; make him reevaluate his glaring speciesism.

“You actually want to have this out with me?” The buck couldn't hide his surprise. He hadn't expected his sister to argue with him so incessantly.

“Get up Julian. We’re dealing with this now.” Judy wanted her brother to let rip, to get all his misguided feelings out of the way. They could move forward then and enjoy the weekend. Plus, she wanted to make it abundantly clear to her littermate that Nick was here to stay, regardless of what he thought about it. Mom and dad both seemed to like Nick, and as it was their home, they had the final say in whether he stayed or not.

Julian shrugged, rising to his hind paws. Deftly he stepped over the bench. “After you, Jude.” He gestured towards the staircase up to the kitchen. He had a feeling his sister would lead them to the back porch. It wouldn't do to argue out front, too many nosy neighbors around. They'd already be gossiping about the fact Judy had brought a fox home to meet the family.

Not comfortable with what was happening, and not liking where it could possibly go, Nick reached out, taking Judy’s paw in his own. Shaking his head, he caught her gaze, implored her to rethink. “Let it go Carrots, please.”

“I won't have him talk about you like that. It’ll be fine, just give us ten minutes.” Her mind was made up, and though Nick could usually weaken her resolve, there was no way she was letting this
go. She wasn't going to let her brother push her around any longer, wasn't going to let him get away with being cruel to Nick.

Keeping Judy’s gaze for a moment longer, Nick realized that nothing he could do would change her mind. While part of him was in awe of her resolve, the defiant jut of her chin and how she stood tall, another part of him was worried, concerned, and angry. Angry at himself. He shouldn't have accepted the invitation, should've realized his presence would cause friction within Judy’s family. He'd hoped it wouldn't, but that had been foolish of him.

Watching the emotions flitting across Nick’s face broke Judy’s heart. She gave his paw a gentle squeeze, leaning down to whisper in his ear. “Wait here, I'll be back soon.” She pulled away, reluctantly letting go of Nick’s paw as she headed towards the stairs. She could feel Julian’s presence as he followed her, and she also felt Nick’s gaze as he watched her leave. As she passed through the kitchen, Judy caught Jasmine’s eye, her sister having been leaning against the counter chatting with their mom. Flicking her ear in the direction of the dining room, Judy silently asked Jasmine to keep an eye on Nick. Her sister caught on, excusing herself and heading for the stairs down to the dining room.

As Judy led her brother through the warren’s many corridors and towards the back door, she took a deep breath, steeling herself. Julian needed to understand that Nick was a good mammal, and he needed to learn that she and Nick were a package deal now, that they were inseparable.
Backyard Scrap

Chapter Notes

You know how I said I had to split the last chapter in two? Well, this is the second half, and it's 11,000+ words... #mybad

We surpassed 300 comments and 6000 hits! I'm crying! I love you all <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nick watched Judy and Julian leave the dining room, a ball of dread building in the pit of his stomach. “It was foolish to think you could just waltz into Judy's family home and everything would be okay.” He contemplated whether it would be better for him to head back to the city, leave Judy to spend the weekend with her family. He had his keys to their apartment in his bag, and he was pretty sure his mom had nothing planned. He could catch up with her, maybe even Finnick too. The fennec fox had sent him a letter a few weeks back, letting him know that Judy seemed to be doing fine. She was anything but fine now.

Rubbing his face with his paws, Nick shakily exhaled. He was used to being called names, used to having stereotypes about his species thrown at him. He’d grown a thicker skin over the years, learned to mask the hurt with a lazy grin and witty one-liner, hustle the unsuspecting mammal into thinking he wasn't bothered. This was no hustle though. This was Judy’s family.

Jasmine watched the fox as she descended the staircase, his distress evident. “Julian you idiot, what've you done?” She crossed the room, sliding into Judy’s vacant seat. Her sister had trusted her with this task, and her parents had trusted her to help them get Judy and Nick together. She wasn't going to let any of them down. “Julian’s always been a little overbearing, don’t worry about it.”

Familiar with the voice and scent of the doe next to him, Nick dropped his paws, plastering on his trademark lazy smile, masking his emotions. “I'm not worried. I’m as cool as a cucumber.”

Jasmine shook her head. The fox might think he was smart, that he could trick her into thinking he was okay, but Jasmine wasn't a fool. Her parents had briefed her quickly on the tod when they’d recruited her, and though they didn't know much, they'd passed along some tidbits from their dinner with his mom. Nick wasn't experienced in dealing with his emotions, and he masked his feelings with humor. “I don't know who told you that you’re a good liar, but they need firing, and you need acting lessons.”

Lifting a paw to point at himself, Nick kept his smile firmly in place. He'd hustled many mammals in his life. Nick was excellent at it. At least he had been, until Judy. He was probably a little rusty now. “I'll have you know I'm an excellent actor.”

“Yeah, and I'm the Queen of Bunnyburrow.” Jasmine shot back, shaking her head at the fox. He was amusing, but his inability to be honest about his feelings concerned her. She needed him to feel comfortable enough to open up to Judy, confess that he loved her. She'd need to work away at him a little more.

“If the crown fits.” Nick shrugged.
“Oh, it fits all right. Queens also don’t take mammals nonsense. You don’t have to pretend to be okay, Nick. I might not be Judy, but you can be yourself around me. You don’t have to try and win me over. I already like you. You can be my personal spy and tell me embarrassing stories about Ju’s adventures in the city.” Jasmine started to chip away at the armor Nick hid behind. She didn’t want to push her luck too much, didn’t want to risk frightening him off, so she finished with a touch of lightness.

“No embarrassing stories yet, I’m afraid. I’ll work on that though.” Nick offered the doe a smile, appreciating her openness. Though he didn’t know her well, he felt a little at ease around her already. Not comfortable enough to open up and tell her his life story, that level of comfort was reserved for Judy, but he could chat to her about this. “I didn’t want to cause any problems.”

Jasmine figured it was difficult for the tod to be around her family. He was like the proverbial cat amongst the pigeons. While some of her siblings would see him as fascinating and non-threatening, like Sasha did, others would see him as nothing more than his stereotypes. “I wouldn’t worry about it. Most of us ignore Julian’s antics. Like I said, he has always been overbearing. You mean the world to Jude, Nick. Don’t let Julian get to you. He’ll come around.” Nodding towards his plate, she stood. “Eat up. Jude spent an hour in the supermarket picking out the best piece of fish for you, and then spent all afternoon cooking.” Jasmine wasn’t afraid to sing her sister praise, let the fox know just how much Judy cared for him. With one last smile to the tod, she left him, heading back to the kitchen to help her mom.

Nick was still worried about Judy, nervous about what was currently going on between her and Julian. Knowing that worrying wasn’t going to get him anywhere, Nick turned his attention back to his dinner. Judy had worked hard cooking for him. It would be criminal for him not to try it. Knife and fork in paw he started to eat.

Judy reached for the back door, opening it for her brother. Julian had forced her paw and though she didn’t want to get into a fight with him, didn’t want to trade verbal barbs, Judy knew that it was the only way to get it through her brother’s thick skull that Nick was here to stay, that he was important to her. Julian needed to pull his head out of his tail, and Judy was more than happy to assist.

Julian passed his sister, crossing the back porch and taking the four small steps down to the grassy expanse behind the family warren. He didn’t want them to have this conversation on the porch, too many prying eyes and ears. He didn’t get very far, though.

Following her brother down the steps, Judy shot out a leg; hind paw catching her brother’s ankle, sending him sprawling onto the grass. The light thud as he hit the ground was satisfying.

Julian hadn’t expected Judy to get physical. They had fought as kits, playfully trying to pin the other, but his sister had never taken him down with any real intent before. Surprised, and experiencing a little pain from landing on the solid ground, Julian rolled over, springing up onto his hind paws. Ego and body a little bruised, he glared at his sister. “What the hell was that for?”

Incredulous, Judy wafted her arms through the air, paws splayed, unable to even comprehend her brother’s stupidity as she closed the distance between them. “For being rude to Nick! Jeez, Julian, you might as well of pulled a taser on him. There was no need for that.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Julian warned. He knew his dad had thrown out the fox taser they’d kept in the house since Judy’s departure, but he could pick another one up quickly.
Fury poured through Judy’s veins and her paws clenched at her side. She’d promised Nick no one would hurt him, and she always kept her promises. “You dare pull a taser on Nick, or any sort of anti-fox device, and I will beat you into the ground.”

“You wouldn’t” Julian was confident his sister wouldn’t lay a paw on him.

Judy didn’t even bother dignifying her brother with a verbal answer. He was so sure she wouldn’t start something that Judy wanted to prove him wrong. Light on her hind paws she crouched, shooting forward to grab at his legs, hoisting him up and then shifting her weight sideways, tackling him to the ground. Paw to paw combat at been part of her ZPD training.

Julian hit the ground with another thud, but this time he was winded. Gasping, he tried to pull in as much air as possible. Judy was fast, and he knew he wasn’t going to win in a fair fight. She was a cop and had been trained to fight. Thankfully, Julian had never liked to play fair. Paws finding Judy’s ears he yanked sharply. Judy squealed, pain shooting through her body as her ears were tugged. It gave Julian the chance to flip them. Pinning Judy beneath him, Julian sat all his weight across his sister. He went for her arms, trying to lock them to her sides so she wouldn’t be able to fight back, so she’d be forced to listen to him. Judy was faster, though. Grabbing her brother’s paws, she twisted them to an unnatural angle. Julian squealed, shocked by his sister’s willingness to play dirty too. With her brother distracted, Judy was able to overpower him, flipping them again.

“I’ve taken down rhino’s, Julian. You don’t want to fight me.” Judy hissed, trying to talk her brother down, wanting him to give in. The buck was having none of it. On his back beneath his sister, pinned and without the use of his paws, Julian lifted a hind paw, bringing his knee sharply and squarely into Judy’s lower back. The action made his sister let go of him, squeaking in pain as her paws shot to her back. He threw her off him, grabbing her in a headlock before she had the chance to regain her composure.

He didn’t want to fight her, he didn’t want to hurt her, but she needed to understand. Julian was worried about her, concerned for her. Foxes were known to be untrustworthy; there was a reason for stereotypes. His sister was giving the fox everything, trusting him with everything, and Julian just knew that somewhere down the line he’d hurt her. Somewhere along the line he’d abandon her, leave her with a broken heart, crushed dreams, and probably an empty bank account. He couldn’t understand why she trusted him so much. A fox had mauled her when she’d been a kit. They were dangerous. Judy was already living a dangerous life as a cop in the city, risking her life every day for mammals she didn’t know. Judy didn’t need any more danger in her life. He didn’t want to see his sister traipe home in a few months’ time, ears droopy and suitcase in paw, broken-hearted because her best friend had turned out to be fraud. She was too good, too sweet. He couldn’t let that happen to her.

Physical fights weren’t something Judy liked to get involved in. Where possible, she preferred conversation and discussion to brute strength, but her brothers’ thick skull made it hard for her to get through to him with words just how much his actions in the dining room had hurt. He hadn’t just hurt her, she could live with that after all, but he’d hurt Nick too. Julian didn’t even know Nick, hadn’t even uttered a word to the tod before he’d picked on him. Judy knew that some of her siblings might not like Nick, and she’d been expecting some hostility, but she hadn’t expected it from Julian. Jasmine had accepted Nick with no questions asked; their mom and dad had accepted him too. Why did Julian have to be difficult? Judy knew what she was doing; she wasn’t some dumb kit anymore who needed her paw holding. She knew life with Nick would be tough at times; that he could break her heart and tear her down, but it was a risk she was willing to take.

Trapped in a headlock, Judy wiggled, finding a little free room. She used it to her advantage, striking quickly. Teeth sinking into her brother’s arm, she soon found herself free.
“You bit me!” Julian squawked. He couldn’t believe Judy had resorted to such playground tactics. She hadn’t drawn blood, but he could see the imprint of her teeth in his fur.

Both of them up on their hind paws, Judy wanted it all to end. Reaching for her brother she grabbed his shoulders, pushing against him to try and take him down. Julian was strong though, and he pushed back, the siblings grappling. Judy’s training gave her an edge, and she used Julian’s own weight against him. As he struggled against her, trying to stay upright, Judy switched tactics. Pulling her brother towards her, she threw one of her legs out, sweeping it around his ankle and yanking it forward.

Julian fell, unable to stop his momentum as he tumbled. With Julian on his front, sprawled on the ground, Judy pinned her brother down; twisting his arms behind his back as if he were a perp. “I can’t believe you, Julian. I never thought you’d so nasty to another mammal.” She forced more of her weight on her brother.

Thrashing beneath Judy, Julian knew he’d lost. Judy had a tight grip on him, all her weight on his back, thighs squeezing his hips to keep him from moving too much, arms twisted behind him. He was helpless. “You brought a fox into our home, Judy, how the hell did you think everyone was going to react?” Julian snapped, shoulders slumping as he realized he wasn’t going to get out of this hold unless Judy wanted him to. “Damn cop training.”

“He’s not a fox, Julian. He’s Nick. He’s my best friend, my roomie, and soon he’s going to be my partner on the force. I expected more from my littermate.” Judy sniffed, trying not to get too emotional. Letting go of her brother she stood up. Her knees had grass stains on them, and her hind paws hurt, but thankfully her beautiful dress wasn’t damaged.

Free from Judy’s grasp, Julian hauled himself up too, grunting as pain flared in his chest from her last takedown. He was covered in grass stains, and he had a feeling he’d be sporting some serious bruises tomorrow. “None of us know him, and you expect us to be kind to him? That’s some poor logic. How do we know he’s not preying on you and using you? How do we know he’s not going to abandon you as soon as he’s got himself set up? How do we know Nick's not going to break your heart when he walks away once he’s got everything he’s after? You’re too attached to him. Josh and Jackie will agree with me.” He rounded on Judy, finding her stood with her arms over her chest, posture defensive. Jasmine had already decided Nick was okay and Julian thought it was irresponsible of her to make her mind up so quickly. Josh and Jackie would join them tomorrow at the fair and Julian would be sure to bring them up to speed.

“You didn’t even try to get to know him, Julian! You wrote him off immediately.” Judy shot back, exasperated. Paws flailing she growled at her brother. “Nick doesn’t open up too quickly; you have to be patient with him. He isn’t using me, and he’s not going to abandon me.” She shook her head, hurt by her brother’s misguided beliefs. Her left paw reached for her right wrist, for the bracelet that still sat there. The reactions from her canine friends, and the perp she and Wolford had had the displeasure of arresting, was enough proof for her that her bracelet was unique, that it meant something. She was going to get answers this weekend, but she knew in her heart that Nick wouldn’t abandon her. He wouldn’t give her something so important otherwise. “Jasmine likes him just fine, and I’m sure Josh and Jackie will too. You’re just difficult.”

“You don’t know that he won’t abandon you, and when he does who’s going to be left to pick up the pieces? That’s right, us. Mom and dad, Jasmine and Jackie, Josh and I. He’s going to hurt you, and I love you too much to let that happen.” Julian knew that Judy saw the best in everyone and that she wasn’t willing to see that mammals could be cruel and use one another. He didn’t want his sister to be used, he didn’t want his sister to be hurt and have her heart broken. There was a reason foxes were seen as sly and untrustworthy. Stereotypes weren’t plucked out of thin air.
“If you loved me you’d let me make my own decisions.” Judy shook her head sadly. “See this?” She lifted her wrist, pushing her cardigan sleeve up to show Julian her bracelet. “This is a canine token of affection. It’s a pretty big deal. Every canine I’ve met has reacted to it. They’re rare these days. The gifting of one is a ridiculously old tradition that goes back centuries. The two charms symbolize how Nick and I met. Nick gave me this on my birthday, Julian. If he didn’t care, if he was just using me, why would he give me something so meaningful?” Judy tried to get her brother to see reason, sought to make him understand that Nick wasn’t like other mammals.

“To lull you into a false sense of security! You don’t see it because you’re on the inside.” Julian grew exasperated with his sister. She was in too deep, too entangled with the fox. She needed to step away from him, make some new friends, preferably some doe’s that would help her and guide her, find her a nice buck that wouldn’t hurt her.

“There’s nothing to see! Nick isn’t using me. You can’t judge my relationship with him based on the ten minutes or so that you saw us interact.” Judy raged. Julian had only seen them sitting together at the dinner table. He hadn’t seen them embracing on train station platforms, hadn’t seen them in the gallery together on her birthday, and he sure as hell hadn’t seen how they were when they were at home, just the two of them, able to be open and honest with one another, completely vulnerable.

“He called you Carrots. He insulted you!” Julian didn’t need to see any more of Judy’s relationship with the fox. He’d heard plenty from his family and seen enough of their interactions to make his mind up about the state of their friendship.

Groaning in frustration, Judy rested her head on her paws. She couldn’t believe how stupid her brother was being. Lifting her head, she informed her brother that she actually liked the nicknames. “They’re not insults, Julian, cripes! He calls me Fluff too, and I love it. I love every time he uses one of those stupid nicknames because I know he says them with nothing short of fondness, regardless of what you believe.”

Fondness. It was the weakest line Julian had ever heard. You didn’t give someone a patronizing nickname out of fondness. You would call them something like sweetheart or darling, not Carrots or Fluff. “I’ve heard stories from mom and dad. You let him live with you, and he’s not even paying rent, you have to pay for everything, and you’re working three jobs to make ends meet. You helped him get into the training program with the ZPD, too. Without you, he’d have none of that. He’s slacking, letting you do all the work.” Julian didn’t want the fox to take advantage of his sister’s kind heart. Judy would run herself into the ground. There’d been a long standing saying in their family that Judy would give any mammal the shirt off her back, even if it were all that she owned.

“You think you know everything because of a few stories from mom and dad? Nick’s at the academy, Julian! He can’t go out and work to pay rent. Stop being so dumb. He’s begged me to stop working three jobs, but I told him no, I want to earn as much money as possible before he graduates, so we have a slush fund for rainy days.” Judy had opened up another bank account to store the extra funds in, keeping them separate from her wages. When Nick graduated, he’d have to come with her to the bank, to get his name on the paperwork so he’d have access to the account too. “But if you really want to talk about work, then how about this. Nick’s family owned a successful tailoring business in Zootopia, so successful in fact that predator kits are taught about it in school to this day. There are hundreds of Zoogle results for his family, maybe you should do some reading for once.” She couldn’t resist the barb, still smarting from her brother’s mean jibe at how she’d returned home after the press conference catastrophe.

Judy didn’t want to air Nick’s secret’s, he’d trusted her with them, but Julian needed to know the
truth, needed to see Nick as she did, understand why she did as much as she could for the tod. He deserved happiness, and if Judy could help him achieve it then she’d give her last breath for it. “Nick was seven when his dad was murdered, locking up their family business for the night. The ZPD has never caught the mammal that did it, but they think his father was killed either because he was a fox or because he stood up for pred rights. At seven years old Nick found out his dad had been murdered. Can you imagine what it would be like to lose our dad? Can you imagine what our kithood would’ve been like without him?” Judy played on her brothers’ emotions, forced him to think about what she was saying and to try and imagine what life was like for Nick.

“Not only did Nick have to grieve his father and Marian had to mourn her husband, but they also struggled financially, and their tailoring business collapsed. The money dried up, debtors were knocking on their door. When Nick was twelve he moved out, lived on the streets and did whatever he could to make some money, all of which he sent home to his mom. He lived on the streets, Julian. Can you imagine Poppy living on the streets of the big city? Can you imagine what it would be like, to be so young and alone, to be so afraid, having to put on a brave face? To not know whether some mammal is going to attack you simply because of your species? The animals in the city are just as mean, if not meaner, than the ones out here towards foxes. I’ve witnessed it first hand. I contributed to the problem when I carried about that stupid fox repellent that dad bought.” Judy used the example of their twelve-year-old sister to drill the point him.

“Nick has spent the past twenty years, twenty years Julian, working every damn day to make enough money so that his mom could live comfortably, at the cost of his own happiness and wellbeing. He hasn’t had the luxury of a day off, hasn’t had the luxury of being able to have nice things like we have. Nick didn’t have a home to go back to at the end of the day for goodness sake, he didn’t have somewhere safe and warm to sleep. He could’ve been hurt, attacked by another mammal, and no one would’ve known. He was cold and alone on the streets, but he powered through because he needed to take care of his mom.” Judy purposefully omitted the fact that Nick had slept in a box under her bridge. She could remember the shame on his handsome face, back in his childhood bedroom, when Judy had figured out his living arrangements. It wasn’t her place to reveal that much information about Nick to her brother.

“You know, he often went without food. Didn’t eat for days at a time to try and save every last nickel. He still struggles with eating now because he’s so used to not doing it. I have to keep reminding him to eat, and every time I do it breaks my heart because he should have an appetite like a horse. It’s why I’m learning how to cook fish and bugs, how to make food as interesting as possible for him.” It was the one thing that upset her the most about Nick’s past. Judy had grown up in a house where there was always food available, where she could eat whenever she felt hungry. It had helped her, and her siblings, grow strong and healthy. She always worried that Nick would one day develop problems associated with a lack of nutrition - a weakened immune system, heart disease, osteoporosis, the list went on. Judy had made it her personal mission to make sure he ate well every day for the rest of his life.

“He didn’t have anyone to turn to, he had no friends. He couldn’t turn to his mom because he had to stay strong for her, so he’s had no one supporting him for twenty years, no one offering him a shoulder to cry on, no one listening to him. He built up all these walls to try and protect himself, shoved all his emotions into a box in a desperate attempt to stay sane and never let anyone see that they got to him. I’ve been doing my best to tear down the walls and coax out the real Nick, the one suppressed for twenty years, and I’m getting somewhere. I’m making progress with him. He’s smiling and laughing more, he’s more affectionate with me, and he opens up to me about damn near everything now. He trusts me. Then you come along and throw unfounded accusations at him, to his face, and accuse him of things he hasn’t even done, use speciest slurs against him. You’re not helping, Julian.” Worked up, Judy hadn't even noticed that she was crying, hadn't felt the warm tears sliding down her cheeks, soaking her fur. Her ears had drooped during her speech. Knowing
everything Nick had been through was why Judy worked so hard for him, why she'd taken on Catstro, why she did everything in her power to make him feel comfortable, safe, and loved.

“I know that you’re acting like this out of some misguided but well-intentioned notion of protecting me, of keeping me safe and away from any heartbreak, but I’m willing to risk my all for him. Nick is the most important mammal in my life. Did mom and dad tell you the story of when I gambled my badge on the night howler case? Chief Bogo gave me 48 hours to find a missing otter, and I blackmailed Nick into helping me. He was my only lead, and he was a pain in my tail, but when Chief Bogo demanded my badge, with ten hours still to go of my allotted time, Nick stepped up. I was about to hand over my badge, and you know how much it means to me, how hard I worked for it, when Nick stepped forward. He told Chief Bogo that I wasn't going to hand it over and that we had ten hours left, that we were going to solve the case. Nick saved my job, Julian. He didn't have to, but he did. He's a good mammal, the absolute best.” The conviction in Judy’s tone left no room for argument.

“If you can’t accept that then so be it, but you will not talk down to him and belittle him, you will not make him feel like he’s unwelcome here. He’s my guest, and if you make him feel so uncomfortable that he wants to leave then I’m going with him, and I won’t come back.” Judy threw down her ultimatum, hoping it would be enough to make her brother realize that she wouldn't stand for any more insults against Nick, that if Nick went then so did she. It was a little extreme, threatening to never come home again, and Judy wasn’t sure if she’d even be able to follow through with it, but she needed Julian to see just how serious she was.

Julian had never seen his sister like this before. He'd never seen her so passionate, so driven, so emotionally invested in another mammal. She was crying and the sight of her tears hurt Julian’s heart. Judy had given him an awful lot of new information, information that made him question his initial reaction and judgment of the fox. Julian found himself overwhelmed, wondering if perhaps he’d jumped the gun a little. He only wanted what was best for his sister; he only wanted her to be happy and safe, loved and valued. Julian adored her, they'd shared their mother's womb, grown up together, had done everything together. It was ingrained in his very being to keep her safe and ensure she was happy. Julian battled with his conflicting emotions, his need to protect his sister and the realization that trying to force her away from Nick would only lead to pain for her. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place. He didn't know what to do. Underneath it all though, he came to a very sobering realization. “You’re in love with him.”

Julian’s voice was soft, no trace of anger or resentment. He was stating a fact, and though Judy's silence would be enough confirmation for him she took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. Meeting the eyes of her brother, she nodded. “Yes. I am.”

The confirmation came as no surprise to Julian, but it left him with a few more questions. “Why?”

“Why what?” Judy asked, not entirely following her brothers’ line of thinking.

“Why him and not some buck?” There was no heat to Julian’s voice, no aggression or demanding. He was genuinely curious. Their mom had sent plenty of suitable bucks Judy’s way; Julian himself had even sent some of his friends to her. Billy and George would be disappointed that they wouldn’t be getting second dates.

A million reasons ran through Judy’s mind, and she couldn't just pick one. There was something about Nick that called out to her, something that drew her to him, like a moth to a flame. “I could stand here all night and tell you why, but I won’t. Instead, I’ll say this. I love him because he accepts me just the way I am. He doesn’t try to change me, doesn’t try to make me into someone I’m not. He treats me like an equal, lets me make my own choices and supports me regardless.
He’s given me his all, and I’m giving him my all in return.”

Judy had never been in love before and Julian knew that. The thought of his sister falling in love was foreign to him. She'd been so focused on her career, so focused on making the world a better place that Julian had long ago assumed her only love was for the ZPD. However, Julian knew there was a difference between love and lust. Was Judy merely lusting after the fox? Was she confident that what she was feeling was love? He sought clarification. “Are you sure you love him?”

“Is the grass green?” Judy quipped.

“What?” Her question made the buck frown, confusion painting his features.

“I thought we were asking one another stupid questions. I love him, Julian. Nothing you say or do will change that.” Though Judy wanted her brother to approve, wanted all of her family to support her, she wouldn't let them stop her from living her life. She wasn't a kit anymore; she didn't need to be tied to her family's apron strings.

Julian swallowed, thoughts scattered and ideas shattered. It was a lot to take in. He couldn't imagine living on the streets at twelve years old, couldn't imagine spending twenty years being homeless, going days without food. “I need some time.” He told Judy, finding the violet eyes he knew like the back of his paw.

Judy didn't know whether to count her conversation with Julian as a small victory, but she knew she'd at least given him some food for thought. That was all that mattered. After all, her gran had once told her that you could lead a horse to water, but you couldn't make it drink. “I'm sorry for throwing you around, it wasn't kind.” She extended the olive branch.

“I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have said everything I did about you at the dinner table.” Julian accepted the olive branch, meeting his sister halfway. He knew it had been rude, to criticize his sister when his problem had been with Nick. The fox had pulled him up on it, defended Judy. Julian reasoned that if the tod were prepared to stand up to her family for her, he'd stand up to strangers too.

“It’s okay.” Judy offered her brother forgiveness. He hadn't meant to hurt her, not intentionally anyway.

Nodding, Julian glanced out at the land behind the warren, into the field of crops that had been harvested in preparation for the fair and the market. Night had settled in, but Julian felt like he needed some air, some time to think. “I won't say anything to anyone, I promise, but I'm going for a walk. If I don't see you before bed, I'll see you tomorrow.”

Relieved Julian wouldn't go around blabbing, Judy nodded. “Okay. Night, Juli.” She murmured, turning to make her way slowly to the back door. Nick was probably wondering where she was, and he probably needed rescuing from her younger siblings.

Julian watched his sister leave; brain a mess of information and his heart hurting. He hadn't meant to upset her, to make her feel like she couldn't be comfortable in their family warren. He hadn't realized just how important Nick was to her. “Night Ju.”

“Mister Nick.” Sasha had been quiet for most of their meal, but as Nick was nearly finished, she spoke up, curious eyes on what was left of the fish on his plate.

Indulging the small kit, and needing another distraction now that he was nearly done eating, he
turned his gaze to the bunny by his side. “Yes Cinnamon?”

“Why do you eat fish?” Sasha lifted her gaze from the food to Nick’s eyes. She’d finished her bowl of salad and rice, and it had only just occurred to her that Nick hadn’t had the same dinner. Did he not like salad? If he were living with Judy then he’d have to eat lots of it.

“Well, you know how you’re a prey mammal?” Nick didn’t want the conversation to sway too far into the differences between their species, and he didn’t want to scare the poor kit away by discussing the fact that he needed fish and bugs to survive, seeing as how his species no longer felt the need to eat hers. He watched as Sasha nodded. “I’m a predator, and I need to eat fish to stay healthy, just like you need to eat your greens to stay healthy.”

Sasha mulled it over for a moment. Nick’s explanation made sense. Her mamma was always telling her to eat her greens, or she wouldn't grow up to be a big and strong rabbit. Feeling brave, Sasha glanced back to the fish. “Can I try some, please?” She’d never eaten fish before; her mamma had never cooked it either. It smelt a little funny, and it looked a little odd, but Sasha was curious about its taste.

Though Nick found it adorable that the small bunny wanted to try his food, he wasn't entirely comfortable letting her try some. He didn't know what it would do to her, whether it would make her unwell or not, and he could only imagine the outrage from Bonnie and Stu if his actions led to Sasha becoming sick. He would need to do some more research into it. Reluctantly, he denied her request. “It might make you unwell Cinnamon, and I don’t want to risk you getting sick.”

“Oh.” Sasha couldn't stop her pout. She'd really wanted to try Nick’s food, but it probably wasn't worth her getting sick. Her mamma wouldn't be pleased if she missed the weekend because she was ill. “Oh well. I'll stick to my salad and rice.” She shrugged, idly playing with her cutlery now that her bowl was empty.

Relieved that Sasha hadn't had a meltdown over his refusal, Nick put the last piece of fish in his mouth. The meal had been excellent, on par with his mom's cooking. Nick couldn't cook to save his life, years on the street meaning he hadn't had the chance to practice. Perhaps he could learn now that they had a well-stocked kitchen in their apartment. Judy could make his dinner, and Nick could make hers. He knew he still had issues when it came to food, but perhaps being more involved in the kitchen would help.

Movement in the corner of his eye caught Nick’s attention, and he turned, watching as Judy came down the staircase. Julian was nowhere to be seen. Tail flicking up as he watched Judy re-enter the dining room, he frowned as she disappeared down one of the hallways. “You should probably go to Ju-Ju, Mister Nick.” Sasha had watched her sister’s return too. Judy looked sad. Sasha knew her sister smiled more when Nick was around.

“Yeah, you’re right. I'll be back soon.” Nick stood, stepping over the bench seat, thoughts entirely centered on his favorite bunny. As he crossed the room Nick noted several sets of eyes watching him – some belonging to the kits he'd met earlier, and some belonging to Judy’s older siblings. Ignoring them, he slipped into the hallway he’d seen Judy head down.

He didn't have to walk far to find her, leaning against the wall, one arm folded across her chest, paw propping up the elbow on her other arm. She had her face buried in the palm of her paw, and she was thumping the ground. “Carrots?”

Judy’s foot stopped thumping, and she lifted her head, offering Nick a small smile. She hadn't meant to reveal so much to her brother, and she felt guilty for airing Nick’s secrets. It had been the only way to get her brother to understand though, so she’d gladly take the heat from Nick should he
find out. “Hey Slick.”

Approaching Judy, Nick slowed to a stop before her. Her small smile concerned him. Standing closer now he could see the grass stains on her knees and the tear tracks on her cheeks. Her ears looked red and tender too. Nick couldn't help but feel guilty that his presence had caused her to fall out with her brother, that it was the cause of her forced smile. “You were crying, sweetheart. Are you okay, or do you want to talk about it?”

Judy shook her head, wanting to soothe Nick’s worry, but she couldn't stop herself from nodding quickly afterward. Julian had been so rude to Nick, had been so speciest towards him. She hoped their little chat would make her brother rethink, he'd only been acting out because he was worried about her.

Heart aching, Nick reached out. “Come here.” He took a step forward, encircling Judy in his arms. He tucked her under his muzzle, leaning down a little for her, not pulling her away from the wall. His tail wrapped around her ankles, offering her comfort.

Judy burrowed against Nick’s throat, her own arms reaching up to loop around his neck, to hold him close. “I'm so sorry about Julian.” She whispered, paws playing with the soft fur at the nape of Nick’s neck. “I talked it out with him, and I hope I managed to change his mind. He’s gone for a walk.” Judy sniffled, trying her hardest not to let any more tears fall. She didn't want to cry again, didn't want to live up to her emotional bunny stereotype.

“It's okay, Carrots. Your brother is entitled to his opinion.” Nick kept his voice quiet and soft, soothing the doe in his arms.

Judy shook her head as best as she could from her position under Nick’s muzzle. Julian’s opinion was wrong, misguided. “Not when it’s wrong he's not.”

“You can't force mammals to feel a certain way, no matter how much you might want to. I know that some of your siblings aren't going to like me, I accept that, but I don't want it upsetting you or causing friction in your family.” Paws moving to rub her back, Nick dropped a small kiss on the top of Judy’s head. “I'm sorry that my presence has caused so much fuss. I'm happy to go home and let you enjoy the weekend with your family if it makes things easier.”

Panic coursed through Judy and she pulled back sharply, violet eyes finding emerald ones, distraught at even the thought of Nick heading back home without her. “No, Nick! I want you here, please stay.”

Bonnie had watched as her daughter had returned from her chat with Julian, kept her eyes on her as she’d crossed the dining room and headed down one of the many hallways. Bonnie hadn't bothered to hide her smile as Nick had followed after her, but after a few minutes without them reappearing she’d started to worry. She’d followed them into the hallway, unable to stop the fluffle of bunnies that had traipsed after her. Seeing Nick kiss her daughters head, the way he held her in his arms, Bonnie felt her heart swell and had to stop herself from cooing. They were so perfect together, and she couldn't wait for them to finally come clean about their feelings. She’d have a word with Julian and ask him to back off. Bonnie was about to interrupt them, to insist on Nick staying, but Sasha beat her to it.

“Please don't go Mister Nick!” Sasha threw herself at the fox, wrapping her arms around one of his legs, clinging on for dear life. She didn't want Nick to leave. She liked having him around.

“Don't go!” The chorus of voices behind Bonnie shouted.
“Nick, dear, we’d like you to stay. Julian needs to pull his head out of his tail.” Bonnie put her paw down. She wouldn't have Julian chasing Nick away, wouldn't let him jeopardize the flourishing relationship between Judy and the tod.

Looking down at the small bunny holding his leg, Nick freed one arm from around Judy, reaching down to stroke across Sasha’s head, offering the kit a gentle smile. She was too sweet. Emerald eyes finding Bonnie’s, Nick let out a soft sigh. “I don't want to cause any trouble in your home, Bonnie.”

It was endearing, Nick’s concern, but Bonnie brushed it aside. She liked him, Stu was warming to him, and he was incredibly important to Judy. Nick was more than welcome in their home. “You’re no trouble at all, Nick.” She reassured him. “Stu and I love having you here, the little ones love having you here, Judy loves having you here.”

“I really do,” Judy whispered, Nick’s gaze flicking to her as she spoke. “Please stay.”

Fighting a losing battle, and feeling the weight of the conversation bearing down on him, Nick slipped back into humor. “Are you sure you can handle me all weekend, Fluff?”

Judy pretended to think about it for a minute, well versed in Nick now to know he was a little uncomfortable, and that he was masking it. “I don't know, I mean, you do like to hog all the bed.”

“Says the bunny who likes to sleep on me.” He fired back, not at all caring for their audience. Bonnie had seen Judy sprawled across him during their phone call, and the kits were too young to understand any implications that arose from sleeping together, or so Nick thought.

“You sleep together?” Sasha blinked up at Nick and Judy. They weren't related, as bunny siblings liked to sleep in big piles, and they weren’t married either, which meant sleeping together was strange.

Glancing down to Sasha, who had yet to relinquish her hold on his leg, Nick nodded in confirmation, dropping his voice to a stage whisper. “Your sister likes to use me as a giant pillow. She's a user.”

“Hey!” Judy protested, moving a paw from behind Nick’s neck to playfully punch his shoulder. The action made Nick laugh, and the sound drew a smile from Judy.

Pleased the tense situation had been diffused; Bonnie enjoyed the playfulness between her daughter and the fox. Wanting to try and return her warren to normalcy, she encouraged them back to the dining room. “Bun-bun you need to eat.”

“I’m not hungry, mom.” Judy had lost her appetite while sparring with her brother, and all she wanted to do now was run away with Nick to a quiet part of the warren and curl up with him.

“Carrots.” Nick protested, removing his paw from Sasha’s head to wrap his arm around Judy again. Emerald eyes found violet, and he held her gaze, silently imploring her to eat.

“Okay.” Judy conceded knowing Nick would win this battle of wills. Glancing down to her sister, who still clung to Nick’s leg, Judy sniggered. “Looks like you’ve got the start of a little fan club.”

“I’m like the pied piper.” Nick grinned, giving Judy’s sides a quick squeeze with his paws. “Come on, before your dinner gets cold.”

“I’m eating salad.” Judy deadpanned.
“Details, details.” Unwinding his arms from around her, Nick grasped one of Judy’s paws in his own. Reaching down, he offered his free paw to Sasha. The kit let go of his leg, reaching up to take his paw. Leading both doe’s back towards the dining room, Nick heard Bonnie bringing up the rear, hearding the other kits into the communal space. He returned to their table, the dining room now empty save for Jasmine, who sat waiting for them.

While Judy ate, Nick entertained the kits, telling them a story about the adventures of Robin Hood and Maid Marian, two foxes who’d fallen in love. Judy had shoved more lettuce in her mouth to stop her snicker, enjoying how the main characters conveniently had the same names as Nick’s parents. Jasmine stole some lettuce from her sister’s plate every now and then, deeply engrossed in Nick’s tale. Once Judy’s plate was clean, Nick brought his story to a close.

“Okay everyone, say goodnight to Nick, Judy, and Jasmine,” Bonnie instructed, coming down from the kitchen. She would hand the little ones over to Stu so he could help them settle down for the night, while she dealt with the second dinner sitting. She’d been listening to Nick’s story while cooking, enjoying the fact that the heroine shared the same name as his mother.

“Night Mister Nick, Night Ju-Ju, Night Jassy.” The chorus of little voices sang, earning smiles from the two does and the tod.

“Goodnight, sleep tight,” Judy started, glancing at her sister.

“Hope the bed bugs don't bite!” Jasmine finished, laughing as the little kits squealed, running off in the direction of their bedrooms.

Sasha had started to run off to bed, following her siblings, but she stopped midway to the corridor that led to her room. Turning sharply, she raced back to her sister and Nick. Flinging herself at the fox, she grabbed his legs in a tight hug. “Night Mister Nick.”

Surprised by the sudden baby bunny attached to him, Nick reached down, smoothing a paw over her head and down her ears. She was adorable, and Nick found himself seriously contemplating having kits, wondering what it would be like to have little ones of his own. He wanted Judy as his mate, knew she'd be a great mom, but he wasn't sure if interspecies couples could even have kits. For now, though, he'd just be grateful that he could dote on Judy's siblings. “Night Cinnamon.”

As Sasha scampered off, Judy, Nick, and Jasmine were left alone in the dining room. Judy reached over to start stacking plates, knowing her mom wanted to prepare for the second dinner sitting. Before she could pick up any dishes though, Jasmine swatted her paw away. “You two should catch an early night; it's been a long day for you both and tomorrow will be even longer. I'll deal with the plates.” Truth told, Jasmine had a feeling Judy’s confrontation with Julian had taken its toll on her sister, and she’d probably want to spend some time alone with Nick. “Night Cinnamon.”

Every kit pulled their weight in the Hopps warren that was the rule. Judy wasn’t going to let her sister pick up her slack. “Jas-“

“Nope, go. I’ve got this.” Jasmine argued, staring at her sister. Judy held her gaze but she eventually conceded, nodding her thanks. Taking Nick’s paw, Judy led him down one of the many hallway offshoots.

Deeper and deeper underground they went, twisting and turning through corridors, and Nick now fully understood the phrase 'like a rabbit warren.’ He’d have to stick close to Judy for a while. It would take him some time to accurately map out the vast Hopps warren, especially in areas filled with several scents.
Judy brought them to a standstill before a simple looking white wooden door. ‘Ju’ painted on the outside in purple paint, a few flowers drawn around it. “When we reach our teens, mom and dad move us out of the shared bedrooms and give us our own,” Judy explained. The door only needed a light shove to open, and Judy took the three steps down into her room with practiced ease, tugging Nick along with her. Nick’s bag sat on Judy’s bed, the beautiful flowers he’d bought her now in their vase on her desk. Jasmine deserved a sister of the year award.

Nick took in the room. Judy’s scent was strong, heady. The exposed underground walls were painted yellow, cheering up the place. Her furniture was white, a little loved and worn looking, but sturdy. A bed, nightstand, desk, chair, dresser, and floor length mirror were all she had. Judy’s bedsheets kept with the yellow of her walls, little daisies embroidered on the quilt cover. A soft cream rug had been placed on the floor beside her bed, which was pushed up against the far wall. Her phone sat on her nightstand, along with a long and thin plastic container and a small lamp. There was little on her desk save for a few notebooks, a pen, and the bouquet of flowers Nick had bought her. On top of her dresser were some photo frames, filled with pictures of her family, and looped over the edge of her floor length mirror was a small police officers hat. Nick didn't bother hiding his smile. Shelves had been put up on the walls, lined with trinkets and some rabbit teddies, a few trophies and books too. It was the posters on her walls that caught his attention though. Some were of the Zootopia skyline, while others were focused on the ZPD – recruitment and promotional posters. Nick had seen similar ones in the academy corridors. “I get the feeling you always wanted to be a cop, Carrots.” He mused, letting go of Judy’s paw to walk around her room, examine all the trophies - spelling bee, bunny scouts, judo, and a few more. Nick couldn't remember ever receiving an award as a kit. He moved to her mirror, gently picking up the small police officers hat.

“Ever since I was nine.” Judy shrugged, watching as Nick looked around her room. She knew it wasn't much, she’d never been a hoarder, but it was comfortable and clean and Judy was thankfully her parents had let her redecorate once she'd entered her late teens. It would’ve been embarrassing to show Nick her old bedroom.

“And look at you now.” Nick teased, playing with the small officer’s hat between his paws. Turning it over, he caught the label inside. ‘Officer Hopps’ had been scrawled on the tag, and the tod couldn't help but wonder what nine-year-old Judy had been like. He would’ve been seventeen when Judy had turned nine, having already spent five years on the streets and a year of that paying back Catstro. The realization made him briefly question whether the age gap between them would be a problem.

Judy moved towards Nick, reaching out to give him a gentle shove. “And look at you, too. You’ll have a shiny badge and a hat of your own soon.” She was so proud of him, how far he’d come in such a short space of time.

Nick still couldn't believe that he'd agreed to join the force. It all felt like a surreal dream to him. The idea that he'd soon have a badge, that he would be Officer Wilde, it was so foreign to him. He’d spent twenty years on the streets. He'd never imagined that on day he would have a home and a job, a best friend and potential mate. “Heh. I won't have to wear the hat all the time, right?”

“Ohh maybe.” Judy teased, enjoying the scowl on Nick’s face. She knew he wouldn't have to wear it unless it was a formal occasion, but she couldn't resist tormenting the tod. Prying the hat from Nick’s paws, she rose up onto her tiptoes, placing it on his head. Taking a step back, Judy looked her fox up and down, forcing a look of contemplation. “You know what, let's hope not.” She teased. Her hat was a little small for him, and he looked adorable in it, but Judy had other reasons for hoping Nick would never have to wear an officer's hat. It suited him. Judy hadn't seen him in his police blues yet, but she had a sinking feeling that it’d be even harder to keep her paws off him then. "Oh no, Jude. You’ve become one of those doe’s that have a thing for a mammal in
“Oh Carrots, you’re back to wounding me!” Lazy grin in place Nick lifted a paw to his chest, feigning hurt. His other paw went to the hat on his head, which he returned safely to the mirror. As Judy snickered, Nick seized his opportunity.

Paws shooting out he grabbed her by the waist, tickling her sides. Judy’s shriek of laughter was like music to his ears, and Nick set about doubling his tickling efforts, leaning down to better grasp her, keeping his hold on Judy as she tried to make him let go. Her hind paws skittered along the ground as she tried to get away. “This is what you get for wounding me.” He tutted, finding a particularly sensitive spot that caused the doe to squeal loudly, paws finding his as she tried to pry him off her. Her nose was wrinkled; eyes squeezed shut as she squeaked, tears running down her cheeks as she laughed. “Beautiful.”

“Mercy! Mercy!” Judy pleaded, laughing still as Nick’s paws slowed. Chest heaving from the sudden onslaught, Judy sought to catch her breath, resting her forehead against Nick’s shoulder. The vibrations of Nick’s chuckles shook Judy’s small frame.

Pulling back from Judy, Nick gestured down to his outfit. He’d put on his best shirt and pants before he’d left the academy, hoping to make a good first impression. They weren’t anything to write home about, but he’d wanted to make an effort. “Fancy showing me the little buck’s room? I can’t sleep in these clothes.”

Paws finding Nick’s shirt, Judy started to play with his tie. It was a habit now, and Judy wondered just how many ties she could buy him before he’d catch on to her obsession. “You don’t have to run away to the bathroom to change, Slick.” Judy figured they’d been through so much together that changing in front of one another shouldn’t be an issue.

“As lovely as that is, and I trust you’d turn around to spare my blushes, I don’t think your parents would be pleased with myself in relieving myself in your bedroom.” Nick glanced down, watching as Judy played with his tie. He’d only ever worn them to give off a more professional vibe when hustling, and now he was no longer living that life there was no need for them, but Judy seemed to like them.

Judy snorted, shaking her head, lips curving upwards. “I think you might be on to something there. Come on, I’ll show you the way.” Breaking away from Nick, Judy made a beeline for the door.

From his bag, Nick pulled out his sleep pants and wash bag. He’d brought a sleep shirt with him in case Judy had shared a bedroom with her siblings, but knowing now that it would just be the two of them made Nick abandon the shirt. His country bunny seemed to like sleeping on his bare chest, and Nick enjoyed the fur-to-fur contact their intimate sleeping arrangement gave them.

Following Judy, Nick was led down several more corridors until they came to another wooden door, this one painted with a blue bunny. “The little buck’s room.” Judy declared, glancing over her shoulder at the fox. “Think you’ll be able to find your way back?”

Nick gave the air a quick sniff, able to pick up Judy’s scent easily. There weren’t many other scents lingering at present. Bringing a paw up he tapped his nose, making his way through the bathroom door. “I’ll hunt you down, don’t worry.”

Judy made her way to the little doe’s room, where she proceeded to take care of her ablutions. She washed her knees as best as possible, removing most of the grass stains, washed her face, and brushed her teeth. Tasks done, Judy headed back to her bedroom, changing into her nightshirt. Judy knew her nightshirt left her stitched left arm exposed, and she knew Nick would panic the moment
he saw it. Sighing, Judy grabbed her maple dowel from its box on her nightstand, gnawing on it to
not only wear down her teeth but to help with her nerves. Using her free paw she flicked on the
bedside lamp, turning off the main overhead one, before she picked up her phone, checking her
texts and Furbook while waiting for Nick. She had no new messages or notifications.

With his business taken care of, and dressed in his sleep pants, Nick followed his nose back to
Judy’s room, easily tracing the doe’s movements. With Judy’s bedroom door ajar, Nick slipped
inside. Depositing his clothes and wash bag into his duffle on the bed, he tossed it onto the floor,
clearing the bed for them. Turning back to Judy, Nick caught sight of her gnawing on a wooden
dowel, teeth chewing along the length of it, her bracelet jingling as she moved the dowel around,
changing the area she was gnawing on. Nick knew he’d have to tell her about the bracelet soon, but
he was waiting for the right moment. For now, though, he enjoyed how adorable she looked in her
nightshirt, chewing on a wooden dowel. “*Oh Carrots, if you wouldn’t scold me I’d say you look
ridiculously cute right now.*”

“Don’t laugh.” Judy sighed, pulling the dowel away from her mouth for a moment, chewing her
lower lip. She knew chewing on her dowel wasn’t the most attractive thing she could be doing.

“I wasn’t planning on it, Carrots.” Nick crossed to her, plucking the wooden stick from her paw. It
wasn’t a huge piece of dowel, a few inches at most; Judy’s teeth marks were firmly embedded it in.
It had been stained red, and Nick lifted it to his nose to sniff. It smelt like radishes.

“I prefer maple wood, it’s a lot more durable. They make it in a lot of flavors.” Judy explained,
giving a quick shrug. She figured that Nick probably didn’t have a clue when it came to rabbit
customs and culture.

“Is radish your favorite?” He gave the dowel a tentative lick. There was no denying the flavor, and
the tod was surprised to find that it didn’t taste as awful as he’d thought it would.

Judy shook her head. “I prefer cherry, but they were all out at the store.” The stores in the city
didn’t have as many dowel variations as the ones in Bunnyburrow, and Judy figured she’d have to
raid the family stock before heading back to Zootopia. She watched as Nick stopped licking the
dowel, biting down on it instead, testing it. “And you were worried about getting cooties from
Sasha…”

Nick couldn’t help himself; the temptation to chew on the dowel and see what all the fuss was
about was too much for him. The wood gave a little under his sharp teeth, so he softened his bite. It
probably wasn’t doing his teeth any good, but it was strangely soothing. The radish taste was a
little stronger now. After a few seconds, he stopped chewing, offering the dowel back to his bunny.
“We live together, your cooties are my cooties now.”

Reaching out with her left paw, Judy grabbed her dowel. The action exposed the inside of her arm,
and the stitched wound there. Gaze dropping to Judy’s forearm, Nick’s heart felt like it stopped.
His eyes narrowed in on the wound, gut twisting. “Carrots.” He grabbed her left paw, ensuring her
arm remained outstretched. “You’re hurt. What happened? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s nothing, Nick. Don’t worry.” Judy brushed his concerns aside. The wound really wasn’t that
bad, and it would’ve been a lot worse if Wolford hadn’t have been with her.

Flabbergasted by Judy’s blasé attitude, Nick shook his head, frowning. “You have stitches, I
wouldn’t call that nothing.”

Judy had known this conversation was coming, but that didn’t make it any easier. “Remember the
drugs raid I mentioned? It didn’t quite go to plan.”
Nick swallowed thickly, looking up at her. Pushing Judy back gently, he forced her to sit on the bed. Dropping down to kneel on the floor, he kept his hold on her left paw, keeping her arm outstretched while he examined the wound. “What happened? You were only meant to be backup.” He dared to ask.

“The Chief had Wolford and me in an unmarked support van a block away from the drug den. We were only meant to engage if they needed help, so we were sat waiting in the back, radios on, listening to the others. Turns out Chuckles, the ringleader, had some of his mammals patrolling the area. They saw our van, and I guess they thought it looked out of place. Long story short, they threw open the back doors and caught Wolford and I off guard. They both had knives, and one nicked my arm as he lunged at me. I managed to kick him out of the van, and he hit his head, went down like a lead balloon. His accomplice jumped for me too. Wolford pulled me out of the way, though, grabbed his taser and sent 30,000 volts through the other mammal.”

Heart pounding, Nick tore his eyes from the wound on Judy’s arm to look into her eyes. Two animals had attacked her with knives, assumed because of her size she was weaker and more vulnerable. Nick wasn’t a fool, he was aware that being a cop was a dangerous job, that Judy’s small size made her a prime target for criminals. “I owe Wolford. His quick actions saved her.”

“We called for a medic before Wolford cuffed the two who’d attacked us, and we radioed through to the others. They carried on with the raid but went in heavier. Delgato still ended up with a broken hind paw, though.” They’d managed to arrest Chuckles and his team, had caught them moving tens of thousands of dollars worth of drugs. All the ZPD had suffered was a cut to Judy’s arm and Delgato’s broken hind paw. It could’ve been much worse.

Acting on instinct, Nick pulled Judy into his arms, wrapping her up, tucking her under his muzzle. Eyes squeezed shut he held her tight, moving a paw to cup the back of her head. “Always in the line of fire.” He whispered, smoothing his paw down her ears.

“It's okay, I'm fine. It was just a cut.” Judy soothed. Reaching behind her with a paw she flicked the quilt back, gently pulling Nick into bed. They moved together, Nick’s grip on her refusing to lessen. She’d expected him to be angry, to tell her to be more careful, to complain that he wasn't there to watch her six. Judy had never expected him to suddenly become so clingy, to hold onto her as if his life depended on it. Leaning over, Judy flicked her bedside lamp off, her eyes needing a moment to adjust to the dark.

Lying on their sides, Nick let out a shaky breath. “I know it was just a cut but if anything had of happened to you...” Paws tightening as Nick pulled Judy even closer, he tangled their legs together. Seeing her injured had spooked him, a cruel reminder that her job, their job, was dangerous. It had been bad enough when she’d injured herself in the museum, running away from Bellwether. Now though, now that Nick knew what his feelings for Judy were, knew that he loved her, the thought of losing her was unbearable, like a knife to his heart. “I need to tell her, she needs to know. We need to talk about the bracelet, too.”

“I’m okay,” Judy reassured him again, left paw moving to scritch and stroke his chest, reminding him that she was with him and that she was alright. “If Nick’s like this over a cut, I hate to think what he’d be like if I were ever shot. Oh gosh no don’t think about that, you’ll jinx it.” Nick lifted her left arm a little, bringing his muzzle to her wound before he pressed a kiss to the stitched injury. “Thank you, it feels much better now.” Judy cooed, finding the sweetness of the gesture endearing. Her mom had often kissed her cuts and grazes better when she’d been a kit. Seeing Nick do the same to her made Judy wonder again what he would be like as a father. “Don’t start thinking about that Jude. You can’t get worked up. He could smell it last time.”
Pulling back, Nick drew Judy in, tucking her under his snout once more. Arms around her he felt her nuzzle against him, cold nose rooting through the cream fur of his throat. Tail moving, he flicked it over them, draping it over Judy’s waist. “Promise me you’ll be more careful next time?” Nick knew it was futile asking Judy to take more desk-related jobs between now and his graduation, and he didn't want to be domineering, didn't want her to feel like he was asking her to change, or that he didn't think she was capable of holding her own.

There was nothing Judy and Wolford could've done to be more careful, they were caught by surprise, not expecting Chuckles to have mammals patrolling the area. Judy wondered whether someone had tipped them off. Knowing though that Nick’s worries needed soothing, she nodded as best she could, yawning as a wave of tiredness swept over her. “I will, don't worry.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads up, there might be a slight delay for the next chapter as I'm house hunting over the coming days. Going to try and stick as close to my schedule as possible though.
**Fairground and Feelings**

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this chapter is a few hours late in being posted but...YA GIRL PUT DOWN A DEPOSIT ON AN APARTMENT TODAY.
Oh gosh, it was crazy! I viewed a whole host of apartments, walked into one and my gut went 'this one'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Paw lifting to her mouth Judy stifled her yawn. “Remind me again why we got up at 6 am?” She asked, violet eyes finding Nick in the early morning light.

“Blueberries, Carrots. Stop slacking and get picking.” Nick bent down, plucking some more blueberries from one of the many branches of the bush he was stood next to. His body used to waking early, Nick had nudged Judy awake, remembering that she’d told him they’d pick blueberries this morning. The country bunny had grumbled, annoyed that her lie-in had been disrupted, but after some coaxing from Nick Judy had slipped out of bed, pulled on some jeans and a blouse, and proceeded to lead Nick up and out of the warren, to one of the many barns on the Hopps farm. She’d offered him a small basket, but the tod had snorted, reaching around her for a large one. They’d taken one of the farm carts, driving out to the blueberry patch they were now stood in.

“Jeez, slave driver. I’m picking, I’m picking.” Judy rolled her eyes, reaching down to pick some blueberries, adding them to her small basket. She grabbed a handful, slowly eating them while she watched Nick work. He’d dropped to his knees, basket on the ground beside him, rummaging in the lower branches of a blueberry shrub. Judy couldn’t hide her amusement as he added a pawful to the basket, then shoved the next pawful into his maw. Snorting, Judy shook her head. “Oh Nick, you’re too adorable.”

Though he was picking the berries from the lower branches, Nick could see Judy still from the corner of his eye. “You’re not picking.” He lightly reprimanded her. They’d bumped into Stu on their way to the blueberry patch, the buck starting his morning rounds. He’d promised Nick that if he picked enough blueberries, he could pass them on to Bonnie, who in turn would make him some blueberry cookies and muffins to take back to the academy with him. Nick wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Nick’s reprimand made Judy smile, and the doe moved to the next blueberry bush, plucking the berries off and placing them in her basket. Seeing Nick shoving blueberries into his mouth eased some of Judy’s worries. She knew he was still a little funny around food. Sometimes he’d eat without prompting, devouring the food, but most of the time Judy had to encourage him, and he’d eat slowly as if he was savoring it, unsure when he’d next get another meal. Seeing the voracious way he devoured her family’s blueberries gave Judy hope that she’d one day get Nick to have a more positive relationship with food.

An hour passed, the tod and doe chatting as they plucked blueberries from the bushes. Judy’s small basket had long since filled up, and now the pair were working on Nick’s large basket.

Nick took the opportunity to ask a question he’d been dying to know the answer to. “Hey, Fluff?”
“Mhm?” Judy hummed, reaching for a bunch of blueberries close to the center of the bush she was working on.

“What’re you doing when you make that strange grinding noise?” Nick inquired, throwing a few blueberries into his mouth, adding his next pawful into the basket.

“Strange grinding noise?” Judy frowned, pausing in her blueberry plucking to look over at Nick. She made a few noises, but not as many as Nick.

“Yeah, your jaw moves, and it sounds like you’re chewing.” Nick elaborated, finding a huge bunch of blueberries hanging near the center of the bush he kneeled before. He grinned, plucking them all from the branch. There probably wouldn't be any blueberries left by the time they were done.

“Oh. Oh that's...we rabbits don't purr, so we do a thing called tooth purring. We grind our back teeth together in a rhythmic pattern.” Judy explained, having figured out what it was Nick was referencing. Her species lacked the ability to purr, so over the years, they’d developed other ways to show their gratitude and happiness.

Pausing in his blueberry picking, Nick stole a glance over at Judy, not quite believing what he was hearing. “Purring?”

“Yeah, or at least trying too.” Judy put a blueberry in her mouth, enjoying the delicious taste. She hadn't had as many as Nick, but she wouldn't pull the tod up on his berry consumption. He needed to eat as much as possible.

Purring. Nick couldn't help his grin as he realized Judy had purred when he'd given her the bracelet. Knowing it had been a reflex action, the sound of her happiness, confirmed for Nick that it had been a great idea to gift her it. “That's adorable.”

“Shut up. I'd like to see you try purring.” Judy challenged, appreciating that Nick still didn't call her cute. Only bunnies were supposed to call one another cute, but Judy wasn't sure whether it was something she could let Nick call her later on in their friendship, or if they started dating.

Ace up his sleeve, Nick stood, brushing the dirt from his pants. “Actually, since we evolved, we foxes can purr.”

“No way.” Judy didn't believe him. She’d never heard of purring foxes before.

“It's not like you've had much contact with them, though.”

“Yup. Scratch here,” Nick closed the gap between them, gesturing to the side of his throat. It was a sensitive spot for him, one only his mom knew. “And now Judy, too.”

Judy abandoned her blueberry picking, wiping her paw on her jeans before she reached up, placing it on the side of Nick’s throat. Gently, she started to scratch.

It took a moment but the pleasant feeling of being petted swept through Nick, his eyes slipping shut as he enjoyed the light scratching. He'd had little opportunity to enjoy being scratched by another mammal. It didn't take long before Nick’s tail started to thump the ground, a little purr rumbling in the back of his throat. “Heck, that feels good.”

Judy watched, fascinated, as Nick did indeed purr. Floofy tail thumping the ground, Judy was tempted to abandon his throat to stroke his tail. She restrained herself, but only just. Mixing up her scratches with strokes, Nick continued to purr for her. “Well, I'll be darned.” Ears swiveling, Judy caught the sound of her father's farm cart approaching. Slowing her scratches she smoothed down Nick’s ruffled neck fur. “Okay, you win.”
Lazily, Nick opened his eyes, saddened by the loss of contact. He'd enjoyed the feeling, lost himself in the sensations. He could purr without the need for petting, but he'd felt greedy, had wanted to feel Judy's small paws on him. “You tell a soul that I purr, and your siblings may find out that you've been to a naturalist club.” He threatened playfully. Given how open Bonnie had been with him in her letters and notes, Nick figured they wouldn't really care if Judy had been to a naturalist club. It didn't stop him from threatening it, though. Word spread fast in the Hopps warren, and he could only imagine all the sniggers that would follow Judy if her siblings found out about her little adventure.

“On a case, because you tricked me.” Judy pointed out. She'd been pretty embarrassed when she'd first been faced with the naturalist club, and a part of her knew Nick had gotten a strange sense of pleasure out of her discomfort. It wasn't that Judy had an issue with nudity, she had 311 siblings after all, but there a marked difference between seeing someone you know and love naked, and seeing a complete stranger in the buff.

Tutting, Nick wagged a finger. “I helped you with a clue.” He reminded her, visions of the horror that had been on her face when Yaxley had opened the doors to the Pleasure Pool making him smile.

Folding her arms over her chest, Judy quirked an eyebrow. “And you knew exactly what you were doing.” Nick had warned her it wasn’t the place for a ‘cute little bunny,’ but she hadn't been smart enough to ask him what he’d meant.

“Eh, can't blame a mammal for wanting to see a sweet little country bunny venture into her first naturalist club.” Nick had been to the club several times on business, always remaining firmly clothed. He had no issues with being naked, being on the streets had opened his eyes to a lot of things, but there was something he found a little uncomfortable about bearing himself so fully to a group of strangers.

The sound of the horn from Stu’s cart broke the two mammals apart, and the buck parked up, making his way across the blueberry patch to them. “How we doing kits?” He took in Judy’s full basket, and Nick’s nearly full one. There were plenty of blueberries still in the bushes, but if Nick was such a quicker worker, the buck wondered whether he'd have any blueberries left by the end of the weekend.

Offering her dad a smile, Judy noted the mud stains already on his overalls. Her mom did so much laundry, and her father needed his own wash just for his overalls. He always managed to get them filthy. “Good dad, I think Nick’s plucked every bush in this area clean.”

Snorting, Nick shook his head. Judy had little faith in his ability. “I'm sure I can find some more.” He looked around, spotting a huge bunch on a nearby bush. “See, here.” Reaching over, Nick pulled the berries off, adding them to his basket.

Stu chuckled. “Here Nick, let me show you a trick.” The buck knelt down by a bush, finding another large bunch of blueberries. “Best way to pick the berries is to put your basket under the bunch, then roll them between your fingers.” Stu placed Nick’s basket under the bunch, cupping the fruit in his paw. “The ripe ones will fall off and into your basket, while the unripe ones will stay attached to the bush.” Stu rolled the fruit, showing Nick how it was done, and sure enough, the ripe ones fell into the bucket, the unripe ones remaining on the bush. “Now you try.” Stu rose back to his hind paws.

Moving the basket underneath another bunch on a nearby bush, Nick mimicked Stu’s actions, cupping and rolling the blueberries until all the ripe ones fell off. It was much easier than plucking each berry off one by one. “Sir, you've just doubled my productivity.”
Judy watched as her dad taught Nick the little trick, heart clenching at the sight. This was what she'd wanted, for her family to bring Nick into the fold, treat him like one of their own. Her father looked so at ease around Nick, and Nick, in turn, seemed comfortable around her dad.

“I'm glad to see you enjoy them, Nick.” Stu gave Nick’s shoulder a firm pat, pleased that the tod was happy to get dirty, willing to do some work on the farm. He'd thought as a city boy that Nick would dislike the countryside, wouldn't enjoy getting his paws mucky. The buck had been pleasantly surprised.

“Best blueberries I’ve ever had, Sir,” Nick answered honestly. Though he hadn't had much money over the last twenty years, he usually managed to snatch a handful of blueberries from street stalls, or his mom bought some whenever he went home to visit her. He'd sampled a lot of blueberries, but none of them were as delicious as the Hopps berries.

“Oh come on now, we’re past the whole Sir thing.” While Stu appreciated how polite Nick was, how respectful he was, the buck knew it time for the tod to use his first name. Stu knew there was no way in hell that Judy was going to let the fox go, that he was going to become a permanent fixture in his daughter's life, and he felt like letting Nick know he was considered family. “Grab your baskets and head on up to the warren, I think Bon’s about to make breakfast.”

Surprised by Stu’s request, Nick stood, dusting off his pants once more. “Thanks, Stu.” Getting the chance to use the buck’s first name was a positive sign for Nick; it was progress in integrating with Judy’s family. Now he just had to ask the buck for permission to date Judy, as custom dictated.

Clapping Nick on the shoulder, Stu picked up the large basket and handed it to him. “We’ll make a farmer out of you yet.”

Laughing, Nick and Judy headed back to their cart, loading up their baskets. Though Judy had driven them to the blueberry patch, she instead threw the keys at Nick. Reflexes honed from his training, Nick snatched them from the air. “You’re driving, Slick. Don’t get us lost.”

The corners of Nick’s lips quirked upwards, and the tod slid into the driver's seat, waiting as Judy took her place in the passenger seat. “Challenge accepted.”

Nick managed to get them back to the Hopps warren easily, the only issue being a fork in the road. Judy’s not so subtle cough as she’d tipped her head to the right had helped Nick make the right choice.

Cart parked and baskets in paw, they made their way through the back door, through the many common rooms, and to the kitchen. Bonnie was stood by the island counter, mountains of bowls stacked before her. Nick stole a glance down to the dining room and noticed there were large crates of cereal laid out, along with huge jugs of milk. “Hey bun-bun, Nick.” Bonnie greeted the pair, offering them a smile.

“Hey, mom,” Judy responded, moving around the counter to give her mom a kiss.

Watching Judy and her mom, Nick felt a pang of homesickness. He missed his mom, not used to being away from her for so long. He'd call her this weekend, before heading back to the academy. “Good morning Bonnie.”

Bonnie glanced between Judy and Nick, her smile still in place. “Did you have fun down at the blueberry patch?”

“Bonnie, your blueberry patch is my new favorite place,” Nick responded earnestly, lifting his
basket of berries and putting them on what little available space was on the counter.

“Oh goodness, look at all of those! You’re too sweet, Nick. I'll bake you some cookies and muffins this afternoon, and you can take them back with you on Monday morning.” Bonnie had a small window of opportunity to bake this afternoon, and she’d use it wisely.

“Thanks, Bonnie.” Nick appreciated the gesture and the tasty treats he’d get to take back with him. They'd keep him going for a while.

Bonnie moved to the stoves, returning to her cooking. The smell was undeniable. “Mom, you're making pancakes? What's the occasion?” Judy sniffed, feeling her mouth water. Her mom only made pancakes on special occasions; it was too much fuss otherwise. Breakfast consisted of toast and cereal for the Hopps kits. Easy and quick.

“Well, I figured you might like them with your blueberries.” Bonnie started plating up the pancakes she'd had going, creating two large stacks. When Stu had called her this morning to let her know Nick and Judy were heading to the blueberry patch, the doe had decided to break out the pancakes. Since her and Stu’s dinner with Martran, the doe and vixen had been exchanging letters, texts, and phone calls regularly. They kept the information from their kits, but it gave them the chance to conspire. Martran had mentioned how much Nick loved pancakes drizzled in lemon and syrup when Bonnie had asked if he had any dietary requirements, and knowing he loved the family blueberries too made pancakes a clear decision.

Handing over the two stacks, one with lemon and syrup and the other with just sugar, Bonnie also slid a bowl across the counter. Judy, taking the hint, placed several handfuls of blueberries into the container, grabbing that too. “I'll put the rest in the fridge, go eat while they’re warm.” Bonnie shooed them out of her kitchen.

“You’re the best, Bonnie,” Nick yelled back to the doe as he and Judy descended the stairs to the dining room. Eighty or so of Judy’s siblings were already having breakfast, the affair much more subdued than dinner.

Finding a quiet spot, Judy slid her plate of sugared pancakes onto the table, putting the dish of berries down next to her. Nick sat to her right as Judy reached over to the middle of the table, grabbing cutlery from the massive pot of utensils. Handing Nick his knife and fork, the doe let him have first dibs on the blueberries.

Paw dipping into the dish, Nick grabbed a handful of the berries, scattering them over his lemon and syrup-drizzled pancakes. The warm, fresh smell made him salivate, and his stomach growled. As Nick started to eat, Jasmine and Sasha slid into the seats opposite them with their bowls of cereal.

“Good morning Mister Nick!” Sasha chirped, Cloudy nowhere to be seen. The young doe had hidden him under her pillow.

“Good morning Cinnamon. Did you sleep well?” Nick paused in his pancake eating to greet his beloved baby bunny.

Mixing her cereal and milk a little more, Sasha nodded. “Yes thank you Mister Nick. Did you sleep well with Ju-Ju?”

Jasmine snorted, and Nick noticed a few ears flicking their way. “Yeah, we slept fine thanks,” Judy responded, trying to give off a casual air.
“That's good. I can't believe mom forgot to put out the spare bed. She's getting senile.” Jasmine didn't bother hiding her smirk, earning a blush from her sister.

Nick got a distinct feeling that Bonnie hadn't even attempted to put out the spare bed. Given the book he'd received from her, it wouldn't surprise the tod if Bonnie had planned to have them in the same bed all along. “Sly bunny.” He didn't really mind. He slept a lot better when he was curled up with Judy.

Sasha spotted the bowl of berries and licked her lips. “Mister Nick, could I have a blueberry please?”

“Sure you can Cinnamon.” Nick offered the bowel to Sasha, watching as she grabbed a small pawful, depositing them on her cereal.

“I'm impressed Slick, sharing your blueberries.” Judy gave Nick’s hind paw a nudge under the table. They’d picked so many blueberries that Judy couldn't be mad about the fact Nick would miss out on a slack pawful.

Tail flicking up to wrap around Judy’s waist Nick shrugged. “What can I say, Cinnamon has grown on me.”

“Thanks, Mister Nick!” Sasha returned to her cereal, spooning a large amount into her mouth, the odd blueberry mixed in.

Breakfast continued with idle chatter between the three does and the tod. Judy filled Nick in on the fair, Sasha interrupting every now and then to throw in her opinion. Once breakfast was over and their dishes cleared away, Judy led Nick back down to her bedroom so they could clean up and change.

Nick took his clothes to the bathroom once again, washing the dirt from his paws before changing. He’d brought his aviators with him, and after throwing on a clean shirt, tie, and pants, he added his gift from Bonnie. Heading back to Judy’s room, a little more familiar with the route now, Nick wasn’t surprised to see Judy had beat him back and left the door ajar.

Upon entering the room, though, Nick paused. Judy was stood checking her phone, her back to him. She was in another dress, this one yellow with a delicate white floral pattern to it. It was clinched at her waist, and Nick couldn’t help but tip his head to the side a little, eyes following the curvature of Judy’s waist. Feeling a little creepy after staring at her for a few seconds, Nick took the few steps down into Judy’s room.

“You ready?” He tossed his clothes onto his bag, still discarded on the floor near the bed. “Another dress from mom?”

“She’s made me several, I can’t pick which I like the best. I just need to grab my bag.” Judy turned to her bed, rummaging underneath it until she pulled out a little yellow bag. Slipping her phone and purse into it, she rounded to face Nick.

Face to face, Nick was able to admire the front of the dress, with its sweetheart neckline and large bow under the bust, the way it hugged Judy just so. “Damn. You’ve outdone yourself, mom.”

Too fixated on Nick’s aviators to notice the way his eyes raked over her, Judy took the few steps between them, rising up onto her tiptoes to pull the aviators from where Nick had propped them, on top of his head. Holding them in her paws, she examined them. “These are new, Slick. Where’d you get them?”
Finding his tongue, Nick stammered through his response. “O-oh, your mom sent them in one of her care packages.”

Judy’s jaw dropped a little, eyes widening. “Mom sent you them?” She couldn’t believe it, that her mom was sending Nick awesome things in his care packages. “All I got in my care packages was bandages, cherries, Sudoku puzzles, dowels, and birth control.” Judy continued to look over the aviators, unable to resist trying them on.

Eyes widening, a small noise of surprise escaped Nick before he could stop it. He’d known that Judy had received packages from her mom, but the contents of hers sounded vastly different to his. “Birth control?”

“Yeah, mom had it in her head that because we all shared a dorm, we were getting freaky with one another.” Judy shrugged, finding Nick’s aviators a little too big for her. She offered them back, Nick’s jaw slack. “Anyway, let's go.”

Shaking himself from his stupor, Nick took his aviator’s back, sliding them onto his head as Judy grabbed her bag. With the rabbit leading the way, the pair of them started the journey back to the surface. The problem with walking behind Judy, however, was that it put her tail right in Nick’s line of sight. It bobbed as she walked, tempting the tod. Nick found his mind wandering down less than pure paths as he contemplated whether Judy was still on birth control. “Why does it matter? You haven't even plucked up the courage to tell her how you feel yet.” He berated himself. “But, would rabbit birth control actually work for us? Would it prevent an oops?” Nick shook his head as his mind fell further down the proverbial rabbit hole. “Great, now you’re thinking about pregnant Judy. Marvellous.”

By the time they made it to the fair, it was lunchtime. “How long does this thing go on for?” Nick questioned, glancing down at Judy. They’d decided to walk to the fair; unsure whether they’d be able to find somewhere to park one of the Hopps family trucks. Nick had enjoyed the stroll through the countryside, arm in arm with Judy. As they’d approached the fair, he’d believed she’d let go of him. It was one thing for them to loop arms or hold paws in the city, but another entirely in the insular Bunnyburrow. Judy had surprised him, keeping their arms locked as they’d approached a small ticket booth near the entrance.

“Until 5 pm, then we have a barn party. We don’t have to stay for the whole time, though. We can leave whenever you want.” Judy wasn’t too fussed. She’d been to every Carrot Day Festival since she’d been born, but she appreciated that it could be a bit too much for Nick. Whenever he wanted to call it quits she’d happily head back home.

“A barn party?” Nick questioned, looking up at the large banner over the entrance – ‘Welcome to the 121st Annual Carrot Day Fair.’ To his right sat a large red barn, and to his left there appeared to be a maze made out of hay bales.

“Mhm. With food, music dancing...the whole nine yards.” Judy held her left arm out to the ewe manning the entrance, and the mammal quickly tied a colored wristband around her wrist. Nick mimicked her actions, reviving his wristband too. Parties weren't really Nick’s scene, dancing wasn't something he willingly partook in, but if it was part of the festival and would make Judy happy then he'd follow her anywhere.

Nick’s height gave him a slight advantage over all the rabbits. Peering over their heads, he could see stalls lining the dirt path they were about to walk down. The road seemed to fork further down, and Nick could see more stalls in the distances. “You really go all out.” He commented as Judy grabbed a map from the ewe manning the gate.
“Of course we do, it’s our biggest festival.” She shook the map out; holding it so both of them could see it. “So, we have a bounce house, carrot toss, carrot catch, spin the carrot, whack a carrot…”

“You can do all that with carrots?” Nick sassed, glancing at the map.

“Har har. What do you fancy doing first?” Judy wasn’t bothered, happy to simply stroll around the fair with Nick, but if there was something, in particular, he wanted to see or do she’d go along with it.

Nick took a moment to read the map. Along with the stalls that Judy had mentioned was a variety of others, though they were more food and produce related – lemonade, pies, fresh agricultural products, carrots on sticks, best in show produce, and flowers.

“There’s a talent show and a pie eating contest too,” Judy added.

“Please tell me you were in the talent show as a kit,” Nick begged. He could see little Judy now, spelling out ridiculous words like onomatopoeia or conscientious to prove how smart she was.

Hiding her smile at the memory of the talent show, Judy folded up the map. “I was nine, and my friends and I put on a play about what we wanted to be when we grew up. I wore the police hat that hangs over my mirror.”

“Oh Fluff, that is adorable!” Nick teased, free paw coming to his chest. He dropped it a moment later, lazy grin in place as he snickered. “Do your parents have it on tape?”

“Even if they did I wouldn’t let you watch it.” Judy shook her head. Nick would soon realize that Judy’s dramatics in the museum were lifted straight from her kithood play.

Humming in contemplation, Nick weighed his options. “I think I could convince Jasmine to let me see it.”

“Do you want those blueberry goodies from my mom?” Judy threatened, nudging Nick with her shoulder.

Playing along, the tod put on a look of mock horror before he grinned. He knew Judy well enough now to know she’d never withhold Hopps blueberries from him. “You know what, I don’t want to see it that badly.”

Judy laughed, paw holding the folded map coming up to lightly box Nick’s arm, still looped through her own. “That’s what I thought.”

Together they walked around the fair, stopping to chat to some of Judy’s friends. Nick felt a little uneasy with all the curious glances being sent their way, but with no open hostility, he tried his hardest to ignore it. It wasn’t like he was unused to getting strange looks – foxes were still disliked in the city – but being surrounded by hundreds of rabbits made him a little uneasy. They might have been prey mammals, but pack mentality was a very real thing.

“Step right up mammals! $2 gets you three throws. For each carrot ring you get onto the poles, you win a prize!” A stall owner called out to the crowd as Nick and Judy were passing. The Carrot Toss, according to the sign above the booth. The prizes were bright, colorful carrot teddies. An idea struck Nick.

With a gentle tug, Nick led Judy to the stand. Rooting in his back pocket, he pulled out his wallet. “Go on then, I’ll have a go.”
Surprised, Judy watched Nick pull out his wallet. “Nick, what’re you-”

“You’ll have to take an extra stride back from the stall, Sir. Longer arms and all.” The stall owner explained as Nick handed over the $2.

Figuring he had some advantage over rabbits, Nick shrugged. “I can live with that.”

“Nick, seriously?” Judy chuckled, watching as the stall owner handed the fox three-carrot rings. As instructed, Nick took an extra stride away from the booth.

“You’ve heard about my aim, now I’m going to show you.” Moving to stand front on to the stall, Nick felt the weight of the ring in his paw. Bringing his forearm close to his body, he snapped it forward letting the ring go. He watched as the ring sailed through the air, clipping the pole but falling just short. The stall owner watched on amused.

“Thought you said your aim was good?” Judy couldn't resist teasing Nick.

“It is. Now I know the trajectory of the ring based on its weight.” He repeated his stance, second ring in paw. Taking a deep breath he held it, snapping his forearm forward again. The ring sailed through the air, and this time it landed right on the pole, sliding down it to rest at its base.

“Well look at you!” Judy was impressed, smile wide and eyebrows raised.

Preening a little at the praise, Nick repeated the process, the third ring joining the second around the pole. The stall owner’s smile was a little forced as he handed over two carrot teddies.

“Oh I admit, your aim is very impressive, and I’m glad you’re putting your ZPD training to good use, even if it’s on winning teddies and not taking down perps.” Judy grinned. Nick had told her he was the best shot out of this year’s entire intake, and seeing him in action made her proud.

“I’m working myself up to the big stuff.” Nick pocketed one of the carrot teddies. “A carrot for Cinnamon Bun.” The other teddy in paw, he offered it to Judy “And a carrot for my Carrots.”

Judy’s expression softened, touched by Nick’s sweetness. Gently, she took the teddy from him, clutching it close to her chest. “Thanks, Slick”

About to respond, Nick was sidetracked by the most incredible smell. Sniffing, Nick scanned the surrounding stalls, looking for the source of the warm and fruity scent. “What is that amazing smell?”

Having to suppress her laughter at how adorable Nick looked, tipping his head to try and inhale more of the fruity scent; Judy stole a quick glance around, immediately locating the source. “That's Gideon’s pies.” She tucked the fair map into her handbag before gesturing to the stall manned by the portly fox.

“Gideon, as in clawed-you-as-a-kit Gideon?” The corners of Nick’s mouth turned downwards, frowning. Why did the incredible smell have to come from the pies that Judy’s kithood bully had made?

“Yeah. Gid's different now, though. Come on, I'll introduce you.” Judy knew that the variety of species in Bunnyburrow was limited, and it had probably been a long time since Gideon had seen a fox outside of his family. Judy wasn’t sure whether Nick socialized with many foxes apart from Marian and Finnick, but it was worth introducing the two, if only so that Judy could purchase some pies.
“I’m not sure I want to know the fox that mauled you.” Nick retorted, paw grabbed by Judy as he was dragged through the crowds and towards the pie stand.

Confident that Nick and Gideon would get along, or at least be civil to one another, Judy tugged the fox towards the stall. If all else failed, she’d ply Nick with pie. “Once you try his blueberry pie, you’ll want to know him.”

It was hard for Gideon to miss the approach of another fox, their scent undeniable. Ears forward and tail up a little, Gideon searched for the other vulpine. Finding him, his curiosity was piqued. Judy Hopps was tugging the other tod towards his stall. As they drew close enough, Gideon stepped out from behind the stall. “Well howdy there Judy!” He took in the rabbit, noting that she looked well. “Hey, you brought along a friend!” His gaze flickered to the other fox while he wiped his one of his pie-covered paws onto his apron, offering the same paw out to the tod. “Gideon Grey, it’s a pleasure.”

Taking Gideon’s paw, Nick gave it a firm shake, falling back on his old con-mammal persona. Lazy smile, relaxed posture, charm offensive. Back in Zootopia Nick knew everyone, knew exactly how to act around each mammal, but here? Here it was all new.

“Nick Wilde.” Nick introduced himself, pulling his paw back. Judy had let go of his other paw, instead opting to hold onto his arm, watching the exchange.

Tendrils of familiarity gave Gideon pause. He wasn't the brightest crayon in the box, but the name rang a bell... “Now hold on a second, Wilde as in Wilde & Son?”

Judy felt Nick stiffen, posture tense for the shortest of seconds before he relaxed again, easy smile never faltering. Judy knew it was a sore spot for Nick, and that he'd perhaps hoped no one in Bunnyburrow would recognize his family name. “The very same,” Nick confirmed.

Surprised that a member of the Wilde family was in Bunnyburrow, Gideon grinned. “Well, I'll be darned. My grandpappy will be all shook up knowing I got to meet cha. Your grandpappy made him a coat a long time ago. He stills wears it today. Says it's the best thing he ever bought save for grandmamma's bonding bracelet.”

Nick’s whole body tensed. “Don't you dare say anything else about the bracelet, country bumpkin.”

Feeling Nick tense again when Gideon mentioned his grandmamma's bracelet, Judy frowned. “Bonding bracelet?” She stole a glance down at her right wrist, mind racing. “Is that what this is?”

Mollified by the compliment, Nick gave a quick bob of his head. His father and grandfather’s clothes had always been well made. Nick still had several items they’d made for him when he’d been a kit, but they were tucked away in a box at his mom’s. “Well, I'm glad it's stood the test of time.”

Before Judy could think about her bracelet some more, she was pulled back to the conversation as Gideon reached for one of the pies. He took a slice, putting it down on a paper plate. “Rumour 'round here is that you’re a fan of the Hopps blueberries. Here, I baked a few pies with them. Try some.” Gideon offered the plate to Nick, along with a plastic fork.

Waging an internal battle for a few seconds, Nick reached for the plate when Judy let go of his arm. He wasn’t too comfortable with the idea of eating right now, but the look on Judy’s face of excitement and hope pushed him to at least try a bite.
Breaking off a small piece with the fork, Nick speared it, popping it into his mouth. Immediately the taste of tangy blueberries burst onto his tongue, the warm goodness of the delicious pastry made him close his eyes for the briefest of moments. It was good, so good. “Oh jeez, I’m gonna need all of these.” Nick knew it was impolite to speak with his mouthful, but all sense of decency left him.

Chuckling, Gideon breathed a sigh of relief. Though he was confident in his pies and ability, he still held his breath every time a new mammal tried them. “I’ll box some up for ya Nick. I’m sure Mrs. H will be able to warm ‘em up for you later.” Gideon’s gaze moved to Judy while she watched Nick eat, and the sun caught something shiny around her wrist. Finding the source, Gideon almost let out a noise of surprise, eyes widening. “Well, I'll be darned. Lil’ Judy Hopps datin’ a fox.”

“Judy! Oh my goodness, is that you?” The sound of a female’s voice grabbed the doe and both tods attention. Locating the source, Judy was surprised to see Sharla and Gareth approaching. The two sheep hadn’t changed a bit from when they’d been kits.

As her old friends pulled Judy away, Nick shook his head fondly, watching as his favorite bunny placed her carrot teddy in her handbag for safe keeping. A lot of mammals had approached them during the day, all of them wanting to catch up with Judy now that she was living in the city.

“You two are tighter than peas in a pod. Y’know, I’m real glad Judy ain’t scared of foxes no more.” Gideon commented, boxing up an apple pie for a young doe that’d since approached the stall.

Plate and fork still in paw, Nick broke off another piece of pie. “Hm, I have heard that incidents in kithood can have a scarring effect in later life.” He commented, putting the pie piece into his mouth. He chewed while Gideon waved goodbye to the doe that had bought the apple pie.

Gideon might’ve been a bit slow, not altogether too smart, but Nick’s comment told him that Judy had shared the fact Gideon had clawed her when they’d been kits. He’d bullied a lot of mammals when he’d been younger, said a lot of nasty things, but Judy was the only one he’d ever used his claws against. It had taken several sessions with his therapist to talk through his use of violence. “I’ll be first to admit I was a major jerk. My therapist has been helpin’ me sort through my issues. I find solace in baking. It was real good of Judy to forgive me. What I did to her was wrong. I’m just glad she's over it. Y’know, you’re the first mammal she's brought home. How long you two been together anyhow?”

Pleasantly surprised by Gideon’s willingness to share, Nick spared a moment to feel a little sorry about his jibe. The other fox seemed genuinely contrite. “A few months now, we’re living together.” Nick didn’t bother correcting Gideon’s assumption. Besides, it wasn’t like he’d asked how long they’d been dating, just how long they’d been together. They’d been together since the start of the night howler case if one were pedantic.

“Cripes didn’t think lil’ Judy would get so serious so quickly. Well, I’m glad you’re dedicated enough to her to ‘ave bought her a bonding bracelet. Not many folks carry on the tradition these days. My grandpappy says it’s a shame.” Gideon spent many nights talking with his grandpappy, even encouraging the old fox to help him bake pies. They hadn’t had much of a relationship when he’d been a kit, he’d been a ball of rage and aggression, but he’d mellowed out now.

Nick was torn. Part of him wanted to tell Gideon that Judy was blissfully unaware of the bracelets meaning, ask him not to open his mouth and ruin it, but the other part of him was selfish and liked the idea of the other tod thinking Judy was his. Nick decided to stick with neutral territory. “She’s the best doe I know.”

“Amen to that.” Gideon agreed, turning his attention back to his stand and the few mammals
milling around, wanting to purchase baked goods from him.

Judy returned, her smile wide and eyes bright, a flurry of yellow and gray. “Sorry, that was Sharla and Gareth. We went to school together, but I haven't seen them in years. Gosh, they’ve changed.”

Finishing up his pie, Nick tossed the used plate and fork into a nearby bin. “I'm sure you have too, Fluff. Big city cop now.”

“With my big city partner.” Judy reached up, giving Nick’s shoulder another playful box. She couldn’t stop herself from constantly thumping him, and no matter how many times she told her brain to stop it, that every rabbit in the area knew what it meant, she couldn’t refrain.

A loud crash broke through the usual sounds of the fair, and quick reflexes had Nick and Judy honing in on the sound, eyes locating the source. Stu had been carrying a large crate of carrots to the family stall, and the box had split on him, crashing to the ground, spilling the contents. Judy made to move, to help her dad, but Nick’s paw on her arm stopped her. “I got this.” He crossed to her family stall with ease, bending down to help Stu collect the spilled carrots.

Watching as Nick helped her father, cleaning off the carrots and placing them in a different crate, Judy’s features softened, affection in her gaze.

“You done picked a good one, Judy,” Gideon commented, having been watching the commotion while he finished serving the last customer of the sudden rush.

“Huh?” Judy’s response was ineloquent, eyes focused on her dad and Nick while one of her ears swiveled to listen to Gideon.

“Nick. You picked a good one.” Gideon repeated, stepping away from his spot behind his stall, wiping his paws on his apron. “Not many foxes these days too willing to help a bunny in need. They're worried they'd be accused of somethin’” He knew his kind were still widely seen as untrustworthy, and it would take more than a few kind foxes to change the opinion of the masses. Gideon hoped other mammals would soon see his kind as more than shifty, sly, and untrustworthy.

The line at her family stall had built up while Nick and Stu had been collecting the carrots, and Judy watched as Nick offered to help her dad out. Her father clapped him on the shoulder, giving him a quick explanation of how the stall was run before he put Nick to work.

Gideon watched the scene too. When Bonnie and Stu had first approached him, shortly after he’d set up his business, he’d been apprehensive about partnering with them. Gideon had worried that they were trying to pull a fast one on him, get some sort of revenge for how he’d treated Judy. Once they’d explained how Judy had opened their eyes, he’d been more comfortable partnering with them. Gideon’s business had flourished since. “Looks like your dad has warmed to him. That’ll make your bonding easier.”

“Bonding. There’s that word again.” Judy decided to steal the opportunity to dig for more information. She felt a brief moment of guilt as she hoped Gideon would be loose-lipped compared to Wolford and Bandit. After all, Gideon had never been the sharpest tool in the shed. “Yeah, about that...”

“Don't worry about it Judy, it doesn't bother me.” Gideon wafted a paw through the air. “No real surprise that a family like the Wilde’s still carry on the bonding bracelet tradition, though.”

“You’ve never bought a cute vixen a bonding bracelet?” Judy looked down at the carrot and pawpicle charms. Gideon’s grandpappy had purchased a bracelet; it stood to reason that Gideon
might have bought one too.

Gideon shook his head, the idea absurd. He wasn’t that fortunate, no vixen had come near him in a long time. “Aw heck no. Only suppose to buy ‘em if you intend to follow through and form a bond.”

“Form a bond?” Judy was now even more confused, but she kept her cards close to her chest. She couldn’t risk Gideon knowing that this was all new information to her. “You mentioned your grandpappy bought one for your grandmamma?”

“Oh yeah. He saved up for months; them things cost a pretty penny y’know. He traveled to the city for it, had it made special. He told grandmamma she had to be careful with it, for if she lost it, he couldn't get her another one. She was always losing things. Never lost that bracelet though. Guess the fact a tod can only ever have one made in his lifetime reminded her how important it was.” Gideon chattered away, enjoying the fact his relationship with Judy was so much better now. Looking back, he admired how brave she’d been squaring off to him all those years ago.

Judy had to stop her squeal of delight. Gideon was a goldmine of information, and he didn’t seem to have any problem sharing things with her. “You can only have one made?”

“Yeah, they’re custom, so don’t you go losing it, Judy. Mr. Jackson keeps a detailed record of who buys ‘em. Stops us canines buying another; otherwise, it cheapens the meaning. Gotta be absolutely sure before you buy.” Gideon started to rearrange the pies on his stall, moving them forward, so they were more accessible to his shorter customers.

Nick was still working the booth with her dad, and Judy's heart flip-flopped at the notion that Nick had bought her such an important bracelet, a bracelet he could only ever buy one of in his life. “I didn’t realize he felt that much affection for me.”

“Affection?” Gideon snorted. “Gosh Judy, bonds need more than affection to take.”

“Bonds?” Judy threw caution to the wind and tossed down her cards, needing answers. The book she’d borrowed from Marian hadn’t said anything about bonds.

“Mhm. We foxes mate for life you know; we form a bond, usually during claiming and all that, and it can’t ever be broken. You’re real lucky, Judy, with Nick being so forward with his intentions to bond with ya, claim you for life.”

“Claiming? Bonding?” Judy’s mind raced. She’d thought it was just a beautiful trinket at first, and then had surmised from Wolford and Bandit that it was a token of affection, a symbol of their friendship, but now...

Looking down at her bracelet, Judy worked through everything Gideon had just told her. She was still unsure about what bonding was, but from the sounds of it, it was linked to claiming. Judy remembered what the book from Marian had told her about claiming, that it was related to knotting, which in turn only occurred when a tod took a mate...

Judy felt like a freight train had hit her. Swaying, she reached for the edge of Gideon’s stall, using it to steady herself. “Nick gave me this because he wants me as his mate. Which means he must love me. Oh, holy cheese and crackers. Nick loves me.”

Judy’s eyes widened, heartbeat picking up as the realization stole her breath away. Nick Wilde, the charming, witty, street smart, handsome fox, loved her. Casting her mind back, Judy recalled everything between them since Bellwether’s arrest. “He looked after me when I was injured, wraps
his tail around me, and let me stroke it. He opens up to me, agreed to live with me, and signed up to join the ZPD with my encouragement. He holds my paw all the time, is always reaching for me, he kisses my head and cheeks, he holds me while we sleep, calls me every week, gave me a bonding bracelet, took me to a gallery and for dinner on my birthday – oh cripes that was like a date! He fought off the fox at the station hitting on me, brought me flowers with beautiful meanings, and he agreed to meet my family.” Overwhelmed, Judy sought out Nick amongst the crowd of mammals around her family stall, needing to see him, to ground herself. As if he sensed her gaze, Nick looked up. Violet and emerald met, and everything fell into place for Judy. Nick loved her, loved her so much that he wanted her as his mate. Her fear that he wouldn’t feel the same melted away replaced instead by hope and joy, the possibility of a future where she could call Nick hers, introduce him to everyone as her mate.

Looking at Nick now, knowing that he loved her back, Judy could finally see it. She could see it in the way his lips parted ever so slightly when he looked at her, how his gaze would try to stray down her body but he’d force his eyes up, to hold hers, as if he were stopping his mind wandering. Judy flushed at the thought. Whenever their gazes met Nick’s features would soften, shoulders dropping as he relaxed. Judy thought back to the book she’d borrowed from Marian. Nick had followed her around for a while now, letting her make all the decisions and going along with whatever she wanted. “You’ve been such an idiot, Judy. How did you miss all of that? You’re such a dumb bunny! It was staring you right in the face the whole time. You’ve been acting like a couple for months. Julian was right; I didn’t see it.” Offering her fox a soft, affectionate smile, she watched as he returned it before his attention was pulled back to the stall and the mammals clamoring to be served. “Nick loves me. Oh, sweet cheese and crackers!” Judy’s teeth sank into her lower lip, trying and failing miserably to stop her wide grin.

Her mind continued to race, but this time she thought about all the ways she could tell Nick that she was madly, irrevocably in love with him too. “Hey, Gid?”

“Yeah, Judy?” The portly fox started to serve some customers, cutting up pie slices for them.

“Have I ever told you how great you are?” Judy would need to send the tod a huge thank you basket when she returned to the city. Not only had he helped her crack the night howler case, but he’d also just told her about her bracelet, helped her realize that Nicholas P. Wilde was in love with her. Part of her wanted to be mad at Nick for not telling her how important her bracelet was, that it’s meaning held so much weight in the canine world, related to something so serious as taking a mate. Another part of Judy, though, found it so heart-achingly sweet that Nick had gifted it to her. It wasn’t just a token of his affection, but of his deep love for her, and he’d had it made just for her, held her in such a high regard that he wanted to make a lifelong commitment to her.

Gideon blushed at the praise, ears flattening in embarrassment. “Aw shucks, Judy. You’re too kind.”

Nick had offered to help Stu run the stall while the crowds were crazy. He figured it was an opportunity to show Stu that he was prepared to help out, ready to integrate with the buck’s family, and he hoped it would put him in good stead for when it came to asking him for permission to date Judy. If he could show that he was capable and reliable, Stu might see him as an advantageous mate for Judy.

The fur on Nick’s neck prickled, the feeling of being watched all too familiar. Lifting his gaze, his eyes locked on to Judy, finding her looking at him. Fur flattening in relief, he held her gaze, lips parting. The rest of the world fell away as he focused on the beautiful bunny. Eyes drifting down to her dress and the way it hugged her oh so sweetly, Nick forced his eyes back up. “Don’t be creepy, Wilde. Ogle her only when her backs turned when you can enjoy her adorable tail and the way her
hips sway and…”

Nick mentality berated himself for wandering down a less than pure path, again. It was getting more and more difficult not to picture what Judy would look like without her little dresses on.

As Judy offered him an affectionate smile, Nick felt his heart clench, breath coming a little bit quicker as he returned it. He was still so unsure about her feelings, so many mixed signals – she snuggled with him, yes, but her hold was familiar rather than intimate, she kissed his cheek but never strayed near his lips, she would be pawsy with him but she was a rabbit, and they were physically affectionate creatures. It made his head hurt.

A ruckus in front of him pulled Nick away from staring at Judy, and the tod was roped back into helping, bagging up carrots and rhubarb, celery and his precious blueberries. When he next looked up, scouring the crowds, he saw Judy swamped by a sea of bunnies, helping Gideon serve the sudden surge of mammals at his stall. Unlike Bandit, Nick didn't feel threatened by the portly country fox. It was apparent he and Judy had patched things up, but the doe showed friendly concern for him and that was all. Besides, Nick figured she'd never run off with the mammal that had mauled her when she'd been a kit, no matter how forgiving she was.

“Hey Mr. H. Is Judy around?” The mention of his bunny had Nick dropping his gaze to locate the source. Two bucks stood at the stall, looking up at Stu. Ones fur was black, and the others were cream. Nick disliked them immediately. His years on the streets had made him good at reading shifty mammals.

Though elbow-deep in customers at Gideon’s stall, Judy still heard her name being mentioned nearby, large ears proving useful. Turning them, she located the source. “Oh no.” She withheld her groan of annoyance, channeling her efforts into helping Gideon’s customers, though she kept her ears on the conversation at her family stall.

“Hey Billy, George. Afraid I haven't seen her, but Nick here was with her a moment ago.” Stu was surprised to see the two young bucks at his stall, especially without Julian around. They were his friends, after all.

Billy and George turned to the fox helping Mr. Hopps, giving him the once over. “Fancy helping a mammal out and letting us know where she is?”

As Stu uttered the buck’s names, Nick’s mind reminded him that he'd heard them before. “Judy's awful dates…oh, Wilde, it’s your lucky day!” He shifted back into his con-mammal persona, lazy grin, and relaxed posture, leaning forward over the stall a little so he could talk directly to the pair of bucks. “Billy and George as in, the bucks who went on a date with Judy, Billy and George?”

Billy puffed out his chest, smug smile on his face. “Yeah, that's right. Seen her around? We want second dates.”

“She’s so going to pick me over you.” George mimicked his friend’s posture, the two mammals standing a little taller, trying to make themselves look impressive.

“You wish.” Billy retorted, giving his friend the stink eye. They may have been friends, but not when it came to winning over Judy. There, they were competitors.

Nick thanked every deity he could think of for dropping such a golden opportunity into his lap. He had a promise to keep. “Actually, you both wish. See, here’s the thing. I know exactly where Judy is, but I'm not telling you. Why I hear you ask? Well, because you’re idiots.”
Unable to stop a paw from clamping over her mouth, Judy’s eyes widened. Quietly excusing herself she moved from behind Gideon’s stall, standing a little to the side, eyes and ears on the conversation Nick was having with Billy and George. “Cheese and crackers, he actually did it!”

Oblivious to Judy’s eavesdropping, Nick enjoyed the indignation and anger that flared across Billy and George’s faces.

Stu’s eyes widened, not believing what he was hearing. “Oh, Bon is going to want to hear about this! Marian too!”

Rolling on without giving the bucks a chance to respond, Nick’s grin morphed into a smirk. “You won’t be getting second dates. I mean, when Judy told you about her hopes and dreams you rained all over them, rather than encouraging her to pursue them. Who the hell does that to another mammal? It says a lot about your character. If you really cared and genuinely wanted to date her you’d want her to peruse her passion, want her to be all she can be, not demand that she be barefoot and pregnant her whole life so you can puff your chest out and feel pleased that something came from being a two pump chump.” It was below the belt, mocking another mammal’s stamina, but the reminder that these two imbeciles had made Judy upset, had laughed at her hopes and dreams, made his blood boil. Nick didn't know much about relationships, had no experience with them, but as a kit, he'd watched his parents, observed the way his mom and dad had built one another up. Relationships were supporting your other half, through thick and thin, encouraging them to do whatever makes them happy, being there for them when things went wrong, not forcing your will on them.

Judy leaned against a nearby flagpole, constructed to string bunting over the stalls and walkway. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Nick was scolding Billy and George, standing up for her, fighting for her. It gave Judy butterflies.

Stu stood by in awe, watching as Nick ripped into Billy and George. True his daughter had come home angry after her dates with the two bucks, Bonnie had complained about it to him one night when they'd been getting ready for bed, but he'd never even thought about what could've happened to make her so angry. He'd assumed it was simply because Judy hadn't wanted to date when in actuality, her dates had been misogynistic fools.

Nick was on a role, fired up and enjoying the way Billy and George looked gobsmacked that someone dared slap them with some home truths. “Judy’s a cop, and she's a damn good one. It's what she's always wanted, and she's out there living her dream, making the world a better place. She doesn't need negative mammals in her life telling her what she can and can't do, wanting her to give up her hopes and dreams.”

Stu started to see the tod in a whole new light. Sure he'd been warming to him, he was a good mammal who wasn't afraid to pitch in, Nick played well with his family, and he had Judy’s back, but Stu had had some final reservations. Nick had just shattered them. The older buck could see now how driven Nick was, how he wouldn't tolerate anyone crushing Judy’s dreams. Nick would support his daughter, would build her up and encourage her. He would look after her and ensure her happiness. That was all Stu wanted, for his little girl to be happy. If Nick gave her that, who was he to try and stop them?

“So, unless you’ve miraculously changed your minds about Judy working and now respect her and her decisions, consider her happiness and her wants in the grand scheme of things, you can kiss away any chance of a second date with her.” Nick smoothed out his expression, having felt himself scowling through most of his monolog, losing his con-mammal cool. “You’re getting rusty.” He plastered back on his lazy grin. “What's it gonna be?”
Spluttering, Billy and George glared at the fox, highly insulted. George was first to find his tongue. “We’re rabbits, fox. We’re more than two pump chumps.”

Nick snorted in disbelief, shaking his head. They really were idiots. “Out of my whole little spiel that’s what you’re focusing on? Wow, Judy had a lucky escape. You don’t give a damn about her, you only care about yourselves. Probably explains why she never called you back.”

Indignant, Billy chipped in. “What? Think she’d ever call you back? You’d be lucky to get a first date.” He scoffed.

“Actually.” Nick’s smirk was back as he leaned forward a little more as if he were about to share a secret. “You might want to log on to Furbook, take a glance at Judy’s page. Think you’ll find we’ve already been on a date.” He winked. When he’d been en route back to the academy after his visit home for Judy’s birthday, his phone had exploded with notifications. It had been so overwhelming that after seeing what the fuss was about and liking the photo Judy had uploaded, he’d turned his phone off. Since turning it back on yesterday, he hadn’t dared to look at his Furbook. They’d celebrated Judy’s birthday, and it technically hadn’t been a date, but the bucks didn’t need to know that. An afternoon at an art gallery followed by dinner out sounded believable enough as a first date. “Here’s the kicker. Judy and I? We live together now. Yeah, bummer. For you, that is.”

“Nick!” Judy mentally screamed, clamping her paws over her mouth to stop herself from howling with laughter. She’d been close to crying when Nick had passionately stood up for her, told Billy and George they’d never have a chance with her, but Nick’s little lie about their date and the way he baited them with the information that she lived with him was too much. It was taking all of her strength not to fall over laughing at the way Billy and George looked at one another in surprise, caught completely off guard by Nick’s revelation of their living arrangements. Now that Judy could look at their relationship with fresh eyes, so to speak, she could see how her birthday celebrations could’ve been perceived as one long date. Breakfast in bed, jewelry, paw holding, the art gallery and Nick’s need to whisper information in her ear, and the dinner they’d had afterward. “You’re going to have a hard time topping that, Slick.”

“What?! Urgh.” George’s face took on a look of utter disgust once the shock wore off. “You know what, I can’t believe I even wanted to date that predo. You can have her.”

Billy grimaced, the corners of his lips turned down in contempt. “So wrong.” He shook his head, sneering, as he looked Nick up and down.

Seething at hearing them use such a slur against Judy, Nick contemplated reaching across the stall and throttling them. Instead, his grip on the stall tightened while his jaw clenched. Forcing himself to relax, to let it go, for now, he plastered on a cocky smile, dropping his voice to a low, somewhat husky tone. “Oh no, trust me, it’s so right.”

Judy’s anger flared as Billy and George insulted her, and she barely stopped herself from marching over and giving them what for. Nick’s response, though, had the doe gasping, paws still clamped over her mouth, eyes widening. Nick was making it sound like they were sleeping together! “You are sleeping together, idiot. Just, not in that way….yet.”

Billy opened his mouth to fire back an angry retort, but George grabbed his sleeve. “Come on Bill, we’re not wasting our time dealing with this when there are plenty of pretty non-predo does to woo.”

The two bucks stormed away from the stall, Nick’s grin seemingly never ending as he mockingly waved them off. The clearing of Stu’s throat, though, felt like the buckets of ice water Major
Friedkin had thrown over Nick. Frozen with fear, Nick mentally cursed himself. “Wonderful, you stupid idiot. You’ve just gone and blown it. That's it. Stu isn’t going to let you date his daughter now you’ve made lewd comments.”

Seeing Nick freeze, watching as his body tensed, Stu knew the tod had forgotten about his presence while he'd been fighting Judy’s corner. Stu wasn’t bothered about the fact that Nick had alluded to him and Judy being intimate. If anything, knowing now how the two bucks had treated his daughter, seeing the shock on their faces as Nick slapped them down was marvellous. Their open dislike for Judy working and their speciest comment only cemented to the buck that Billy and George were bad choices for his daughter. “Where did all that come from, Nick?” Stu’s curiosity got the better of him.

Nick remembers Stu’s presence. “I’m sorry Sir, that wasn't polite of me. It's just, Judy told me about her awful dates with them. They were idiots, wanting her to give up her dream so she could be a housewife. That's not what Judy wants, at least not right now.” Nick’s apology was contrite, but the silence from the buck unnerved him. Worried, he flew into another apology. “I didn't mean to allude to anything, Sir. I'm sorry. Pants have stayed firmly on like I promised.”

Stu knew it was cruel, remaining silent and stony while Nick panicked, but he enjoyed watching the usually calm and smooth fox lose his cool. “It's fine, Nick. Thank you for looking out for Judy.” He clapped the tod on the back, offering him a grin. Nick visibly relaxed, smiling in return.

Watching Nick and her dad interact, Judy felt a wave of contentment wash over her. She still couldn't believe that Nick had followed through and called Billy and George idiots, even when he'd assumed she hadn't been listening in. Head still swimming with the information she'd received from Gideon, thank goodness the country fox was loose-lipped and hadn't put two and two together, Judy felt an indescribable amount of love for Nick. He wanted her as his mate. Nick loved her too.

Chapter End Notes

- Domestic foxes have been known to purr, look it up on youtube, it's so cute :-D
- Also, FINALLY SOME INFO ON THE BRACELET. Figured it was time. I hope it was worth the wait! x]
As the afternoon progressed, Nick and Judy explored the rest of the fair. Now, knowing Nick loved her, Judy found it even harder to keep her paws to herself. She grabbed at his paw as they walked, lacing their fingers together, refusing to let go of him. When 5pm rolled around, and the fair came to a close for the day, Judy led them home so they could quickly shower and change, dress for the evening’s celebration. Once ready, together they’d set off for the barns where the evening celebration was taking place. They’d left their phones at home, not wanting to be distracted from the evening’s celebrations. Again they’d decided to walk, and after trekking across a few well-maintained fields, they could see a cluster of barns lit up in the distance.

“Remind me again why we’re walking through fields?” Nick griped. He was playing the part, pretending to be disgruntled. In actuality, Nick was enjoying their trip across the countryside, the fresh air, and the earth beneath his hind paws. He loved the city, would always be a city fox, but the country was rapidly growing on him.

“There's a party, Slick. Food, dancing, music…remember?” Judy gave Nick’s paw a gentle squeeze. She’d grabbed it the moment they’d left the house, lacing their fingers together. Knowing he loved her, she figured she’d get away with it. Besides, she was hoping it was another hint to him about her feelings. Judy knew they’d have to talk soon, but she wanted Nick to figure out on his own that she loved him back.

“I don't dance.” Nick quickly shot the idea down. Lazily, he started to swing their paws between them, enjoying the way Judy’s smaller paw was dwarfed by his.

Scowling, Judy objected. “But-“

“Don't think for a second Fluff that I'm going to be dancing this evening,” Nick warned. He could remember his mom and dad dancing together around their store – ballroom and jazz had been their favorites. Nick could remember the music they’d play, the way his father would sweep his mom up into his arms, the way his mom would tip her head back and laugh happily. His parents had tried teaching him how to dance, and through the few lessons Nick had been given, he’d been able to pick up a little bit. He hadn’t had the chance to use it in years, but he got a distinct impression a dance floor in a barn during a country festival wasn’t the place to indulge in some ballroom dancing.

Stopping suddenly, and having to yank Nick to a standstill, Judy’s ears drooped. Looking up at her fox, Judy pushed out her lower lip a little, widening her eyes. “Please, for me?” She batted her eyelashes, not above using her feminine charm to get Nick to cave.

The look on Judy’s face, the sweet way she asked him to dance with her, it was all too much. “She’s going to be the death of you. Your epitaph will read ‘killed by his adorable bunny’” Sighing, Nick knew he was going to lose. He figured it was better to concede. He could deal with dancing to one song, just for Judy. “One song, that’s all.”

Dropping the act, Judy grinned, continuing to lead Nick the last few hundred yards to the cluster of barns. “I'll take that small victory.”

“She hustled you. Again.” Nick snorted, fondly looking down at his favorite rabbit. Gaze returning
to his surroundings, he took in the cluster of barns they were now stood amongst. They were cherry red, illuminated by thousands of fairy lights and lanterns, and set out in a rough circle shape. The barn doors had been pushed open and the insides cleared. Long tables had been laid out, chairs lining each side. In the centre of the cluster, around where Nick and Judy stood, a huge space had been cleared. Nick noted a DJ booth had been set up nearby, along with a stage and band equipment. Behind the DJ booth, Nick was surprised to see a cougar. What surprised him, even more, was that when the cougar spotted them, Judy lifted a paw to wave. The cougar returned the gesture with a grin before returning to his job sorting out his decks.

As Judy led Nick into one of the barns, taking their seats at one of the large, long tables, she explained how Bobby Catmull, the cougar DJ, had been her friend in school. Judy elaborated, noting that during her performance at the festival when she’d been nine, he’d been the sound mammal for her. As the barn had started to fill up, Judy had placed her paw on Nick’s arm again, violet eyes scouring the crowds for familiar faces.

Looking down at Judy’s paw on his arm, Nick took a deep breath. His mind went back to his earlier musings, about how pawsy Judy was with him now. He’d been letting her lead regarding physical affection, only returning whatever she was willing to give him. He didn’t want to overstep, to misread something. Rabbits were physical creatures by nature, and Nick didn’t want to risk taking Judy’s natural need for contact as a sign that she wanted something more from him. While the book from Bonnie had been very useful, and he’d even brought it with him this weekend in case Tony or Randon decided to sabotage his bunk, it hadn’t explained what typical rabbit affection looked like compared to romantic attachment. Was paw holding standard?

Realizing rabbits surrounded him, Nick took the opportunity to look around and gauge the levels of affection shared between them. A lot of rabbits seemed to be holding paws, but it was hard to distinguish whether they were family members or romantic partners. \textit{“That's not helpful.”} He scowled.

He and Judy shared a bed, often falling asleep together. Was that common for rabbits? Nick recalled Judy mentioning that when she’d been younger, she’d been in a shared bedroom with her siblings. \textit{“So I guess bed sharing is normal for them too.”}

Sighing, Nick felt so lost and confused. It was like he’d boarded a train that had derailed and now he was just along for the ride, waiting for the inevitable crash at the end. Nick had settled on mimicking Judy’s affection levels, letting her lead the show. Nick was taking all he could get from Judy, savoring every scrap of physical affection from the doe. Twenty years on the streets had seen him starved of any meaningful relationships, starved of any meaningful touch. There hadn’t been any affection with his flings, just the need to scratch an itch. Nick had almost forgotten what it was like to feel care from someone other than his mom. Nick craved the feelings, the sense of warmth and attention, value, and love that he experienced when Judy took his paw or when she brushed against him, and when she touched him to grab his attention.

Nick wasn’t an idiot; he realized how their pawsy behavior looked to outsiders. During the day a large number of mammals had given him strange and sometimes judgemental looks when they’d noticed he and Judy holding paws. Though uncomfortable with the attention, conditioned from his years on the street to try and blend in with his surroundings, Nick knew it was easier to go along with Judy’s paw holding than address the issue and risk Judy pulling back. He enjoyed holding her paw, enjoyed the way she now linked their fingers together, and it wasn’t doing anyone any harm.

Nick watched as a large group of rabbits brought food over, lining the middle of the table with it. They placed down paper plates and plastic cutlery, too. Hundreds of dishes were brought out, and though Nick wasn’t hungry, he knew he had to eat something. It would be rude not too, and
suspicious.

As the mammals around him started to eat, Nick grabbed two plates and two lots of cutlery. He and Judy began to load up their plates, Judy’s stomach growling. “Ju! Oh my gosh!” The high pitch exclamation had Nick’s ears flattening, wincing at the sharp sound.

Abandoning her plate of food, Judy turned to the sound. Grinning at the sight of her siblings Judy was enveloped in an intense hug. She gave her sister a squeeze back. “Hey, Jackie.” She glanced over her sister’s shoulder at her brother, who elbowed Jackie out of the way so he could steal a hug too. “Hey, Justin.”

“Mom said you might be coming back for the festival, and here you are!” Jackie and Justin had started their own families and had their own warrens, and though they kept in regular contact with their mom and dad, they were both out of the loop when it came to most of the goings-on in the Hopps warren.

“Here I am, Jackie.” Judy laughed nervously. Justin and Jackie had been a bit more vocal about how much they disliked Judy living in the city, always finding a reason to complain about her never coming home to visit them. It wasn’t that Judy didn’t like coming home; it was just the expense of it, and the fact she always left more exhausted than when she’d arrived. She had no idea how she was going to deal with work on Monday morning, and she wondered how Nick would cope with his training on Monday too.

Nick listened as Judy spoke to the two rabbits. He figured they were Judy’s littermates, and the tod clenched a paw. Nick hoped they’d take to him like Jasmine had. Though he’d tried not to let Julian’s outburst get to him, Nick couldn’t deny that he’d been hurt by the mammal’s stereotypical comments. Julian hadn’t given Nick a chance to prove him wrong.

Having spotted the fox sat beside his sister, Justin gestured with a thumb towards him. “Want to introduce us to your friend, Ju?”

“Oh sure, sorry! Justin, Jackie, this is Nick. Nick, this is Justin and Jackie, my littermates.” Judy introduced them all, paw going to rest on Nick’s arm once again.

Justin and Jackie both spotted their sister’s possessive grip on the fox but neither of them said anything. Julian had grabbed them as they’d arrived for the event, taking them to one side to give them the low down on Nick. Justin hadn’t been surprised that his sister had formed a bond with a fox; she was always willing to give any mammal the benefit of the doubt. Jackie, though, had her concerns.

Nick offered out a paw to Jackie first, and after giving it a gentle shake, he offered the same paw to Justin, who shook his paw with surprising strength. “Pleasure.” He offered them both a smile, unable to resist elbowing Judy. “Any more littermates I need to be aware of?”

Rolling her eyes, Judy used a hind paw to nudge Nick under the table. “Har-har. Nope, you’ve met them all now.”

“So Nick, how long have you known Ju for?” Justin observed their interactions, noting the familiarity between them. Judy looked comfortable, entirely at ease around the tod, and Justin had never seen her acting in such a mammal around a male who wasn’t part of their family before.

Surprised that Justin was asking him questions, and not making accusations like Julian had, Nick offered the buck a grin. “A couple of months now. We met when she first moved to the city.”
“You’re a cop too?” Jackie questioned, giving the fox a quick once over. He didn’t look like trouble, but Jackie couldn’t shake the feeling that Judy was making a mistake. For a prey mammal to be so attached to a predator was largely unheard of, and if there was something more between them then how would Judy have kits? Every doe got the urge to start a family at some point.

“Training to be one at the moment. Your sister managed to cajole me into joining.” Nick joked, earning himself a light shove from Judy.

“Hey, all I said was that it would be nice to have a partner.” Judy clarified. Turning her attention back to her siblings, Judy expanded on her statement. “When Nick graduates we’re going to be partners.”

“So any information on ways I can annoy and embarrass your sister would be greatly appreciated.” Nick grinned, getting the distinct feeling that Justin might be willing to share a tip or two with him.

“Oh I have a whole host of information, how long have you got?” Justin returned the fox’s grin, chuckling as Judy gasped.

“Just!” Judy protested.

Though Jackie felt a little uncomfortable about her sister having a predator for a partner, she couldn’t deny that the easiness between her and Nick would no doubt translate well into the work environment too. Jackie was also pretty confident that most of the other mammals working for the ZPD were much bigger than her sister, and it would be impractical for her to be partnered with them. “I’m sure it’ll be wonderful for you to have a partner, Ju. Keep my sister in line, will you?” She directed her question to Nick. Indeed, Jackie hoped Nick would keep Judy out of trouble. Her sister was known for going into things gung-ho without stopping to think things through.

“More like she’s keeping me in line if I’m honest.” Nick quipped.

Justin laughed, his whole body shaking. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?” He shook his head. He could remember Judy being a bossy kit, making sure all of them were doing as they were told. Some kits grew out of their annoying habits. Judy wasn’t one of them.

Another bunny approached the group, quietly letting Justin and Jackie know that Lukas was looking for them. “Oh gosh, let’s hope he’s not got his paw stuck in the dang mayonnaise jar again.” Jackie sighed. “It was lovely to meet you, Nick. Justin and I will come back later and catch up with you two properly.” Judy’s littermates offered Nick and Judy a wave as they departed, leaving the doe and tod alone again.

Judy’s paw was still resting on Nick’s arm as she turned back to the tod. “You know, I could always ask your mom for ways to annoy or embarrass you in return.” She teased.

“You wouldn’t.” Nick was pretty sure Judy wouldn’t ask his mom for any information. The fox prayed she wouldn’t. Nick had a feeling his mom would be more than happy to give Judy as much information as she wanted, at the expense of Nick’s pride.

“You never know, Slick. I’m full of surprises.” Judy gave Nick’s arm another gentle squeezing, giving him a broad smile.

Unable to stop himself from broaching the subject any longer, Nick spared a glance down to Judy’s paw on his arm. “You’re feeling very pawsy today, Fluff.” Nick had no issues with her paws on him, craved her touch if he was honest, but her increased physical affection was confusing the tod.

Judy froze. Was she being too forward? Was she making her feelings too obvious? Was she
overstepping and making Nick uncomfortable? Pulling her paw back quickly, Judy let it rest in her lap, offering Nick an apologetic smile. “Sorry, physical bunny and all.” She tried to laugh it off. She couldn’t shake her worry, though. The fact Nick had gifted her a bonding bracelet, only exchanged between mates, had made her believe that he loved her. It stood to reason if he loved her that he wouldn’t mind her being a little pawsy with him.

Frowning as Judy pulled away, Nick reached out to her, grabbing her wrist. He missed the contact, didn’t want Judy to think it was unwelcome. She could put her paws all over him whenever she wanted and he wouldn’t mind. Bringing her paw back to his arm, he placed it there. “I didn’t tell you to pull away, Carrots.”

Letting Nick put her paw back on his arm, Judy sought out the emerald eyes she knew so well. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.” She dropped her voice to a whisper, expression softening.

“You couldn’t make me uncomfortable even if you tried. I was just wondering what’s happened. You’ve never been this pawsy before.” Nick reassured her, digging a little for some information. She didn’t have hormone cycles so he couldn’t blame it on that and considering they’d been together all day it wasn’t like she’d missed him and was making up for lost time.

Judy swallowed. It wasn’t the right time or place to talk about their feelings, to have the chat they’d agreed to have. She couldn’t tell him, in front of a barn full of people that she knew he loved her, that he’d gifted her an important canine present. Knowing all of that, Judy settled for a different answer, though she remained truthful. “I’m just happy you’re here, with me.”

 Caught off guard by her response, Nick leant towards her, pulling her close. Pressing a kiss to her forehead, he offered her an affectionate smile as he pulled back. “No place I’d rather be, Carrots.” Lifting a paw, he ran it across Judy’s cheek.

Judy’s heart skipped a beat, her breath catching as Nick pressed a kiss to her forehead, as he ran a paw over her cheek. She leaned into his touch, longing for the day when he’d not only kiss her forehead but her lips too.

The arrival of Jasmine, Sasha, and Hazel interrupted their little moment, and Judy had to stop herself from snapping at her sisters. Forcing herself to smile, she turned to them, breaking apart from Nick. “Hey Jas, Sash, Haze.”

The arrival of Judy’s sisters made the tod sigh. He’d been hoping that he could broach the subject of their talk, ask Judy if he could speak with her this evening. That looked less and less likely now her sisters had found them.

“Mister Nick!” Sasha’s happy greeting made Nick feel sorry for wishing they’d leave he and Judy alone. Turning to his favorite baby bunny, he offered her a warm smile, remembering that he’d left the carrot teddy for her back at the warren.

“Hey Cinnamon. How was your day?” Nick asked, remembering the plate of food before him. He started to eat, picking at his food. Judy tucked into her own food, keeping her ears on the conversation. Beneath the chatter that filled the barn, Nick could hear the band out on the stage playing covers of popular songs with a country twist. “Country music. Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“It was good thank you, Mister Nick. Jas and Haze took me around the fair. I got to play some of the games and eat lots of yummy food.” Sasha had a plate in front of her piled with greens, and the small rabbit munched happily on some celery.
“I’m glad you had a lovely day,” Nick responded sincerely, watching as Sasha ate her celery stick. Jasmine took the opportunity to pipe up.

“Nick, this is our sister Hazel. Hazel, this is Judy’s future partner, Nick.” Jasmine introduced the brown bunny beside her. Nick took her in, the same brown eyes as Sasha and her fur a few shades darker. Offering his paw over the table, he shook Hazel’s paw.

“Nice to meet you, Nick. Sasha hasn’t stopped talking about you.” Hazel greeted the fox. When she’d met up with Jasmine and Sasha in the morning to head out to the fair, Sasha had talked avidly about ‘Mister Nick the fox’ and hadn’t shut up about him all day. Hazel had found it endearing, while it had driven Jasmine crazy. Jasmine had briefed Hazel on the tod, on his connection to Judy.

“That makes two Hopps sisters, then.” Jasmine muttered under her breath as she loaded up some rice onto her fork. The sharp kick from Judy under the table had Jasmine wincing.

Gaze flitting to her Judy, Hazel admired her dress. “Your dress is beautiful, Jude. Where’d you get it?” Hazel didn’t have the funds to buy new clothes all the time, so she’d taken to making her own. She would spend hours behind her sewing machine, losing herself in mountains of fabric and stitching. She loved it, loved using her paws to create beautiful things.

“Oh, Nick’s mom made it for me.” Judy smoothed a paw over the soft green fabric. Marian was churning out dresses for her like there was no tomorrow, and Judy had a feeling she’d need to get another wardrobe soon.

Shocked, Hazel gasped. “This is her paw work? Dang, I’m even more grateful now that she’s teaching me dressmaking over Muzzletime.”

Nick looked at Judy and Hazel, eyes wide and surprise painted on his face. His mom was showing Hazel how to make clothes? She hadn’t mentioned it to him, and neither had Judy. Had Judy put them in touch with one another? “My mom’s teaching you?” Nick had long since lost his love for tailoring and dressmaking, the passing of his father sapping the passion and drive from him, but if his mom were happy to teach another mammal, then Nick would support it. His mom was talented, and knowing that talent was being put to use not only in making Judy clothes but also in teaching another mammal made Nick happy. Besides, it wasn’t like tailoring and dressmaking were in his future anymore. He was going to be a cop, protect and serve, make the world a better place.

“Oh yeah, I’m sorry it totally skipped my mind amongst all the raid stuff. My parents came to the city to look at farm equipment and wanted dinner, but it was a Wednesday when I usually have dinner with your mom. Long story short, your mom joined me for dinner with my parents and Mom mentioned Hazel’s love of dressmaking. Your mom offered to teach her a few things.” Judy explained feeling sorry that she’d accidently kept Nick out of the loop. With all of the raid planning, and the unexpected attack from the henchman on her and Wolford, along with Delgato’s broken hind paw during the raid, it had totally slipped her mind.

Nick was still stuck on the fact their parents had already met. His mom had never been one to meet new mammals, had always preferred sticking to her tried and trusted small social circle. It was difficult for a fox to trust another mammal these days; too many out there had it in for them. “Our parents have met?!”

“Mhm, mom says they had an excellent time. Your mom mirrored the sentiment when I met up with her the following week.” Judy elaborated, popping a piece of cucumber into her mouth. She’d been slowly working her way through the food on her plate, trying her hardest not to keep reminding Nick to eat. She didn’t want to point it out to him in front of others, unsure how he
would react if another mammal were to start picking up on the fact he had issues with food.

Still surprised that his mom had agreed to meet Bonnie and Stu, Nick pushed away his feeling of annoyance at the fact he’d been out of the loop. Judy had been occupied with work, and his mom had probably assumed that Judy had told him about it. That was the one thing Nick hated the most about being away at the academy, the fact he was missing so much at home. He wasn't used to being out of the loop. For twenty years he'd known everything about everyone, knew about anything going on in the city. The academy was isolating, and while Nick understood it had to be like that to make cadets focus, to remove all distractions, he couldn't help but feel lonely while there. Sure he had his fellow cadets, mammals he could chat to every day, but away from his home and without his mom and Judy he felt a little lost. Nick was happy, though, that his mom had gotten along with Bonnie and Stu, that his mom was teaching Hazel all the tricks of the trade. He’d heard plenty of horror stories about in-laws hating one another, about them driving a wedge between couples. Once he mammaled up and came clean about his feelings, asked Judy to be his mate, he wouldn't have to worry about their parents getting along. It was a weight off his shoulders.

Their conversation was interrupted by Julian’s arrival. The buck placed a paw on Judy’s shoulder, dropping his voice to a gentle tone. “Ju, you got a moment, please?”

Glancing around at her companions, they all gave her a quick nod. Excusing herself, Judy followed Julian out of the barn and around the corner, to a quieter spot. Hay bales were stacked against the side of the barn and Julian sat on one, gesturing for his sister to sit beside him. He’d spent Friday night and today thinking through everything Judy had told him, working out his feelings and where he stood on the matter. Julian had come to some sort of conclusion, and he felt it was only right to share it with Judy. Julian was aware that his opinion probably mattered little to his sister, that no matter what he said she’d still hang out with the fox, would still work with him, and would invariably ask him to be her mate.

Taking a seat next to Julian, Judy wrung her paws. She had a feeling her brother wanted to talk to her about Friday night’s events.

“I know that whatever I say probably won’t matter.” Julian broke the ice, starting the ball rolling.

Sighing, Judy shook her head. “Don’t be silly, Julian. You’re my brother, my littermate, whatever you have to say matters to me.” Julian’s opinion had always mattered to her, it was why it had hurt so much when he’d written Nick off without getting to know him, thrown unfounded accusations at him.

“It might matter when it comes to most things, but I get the feeling it doesn’t as far as Nick is concerned.” Julian knew now how deep his sister's feelings went for the tod. He had a feeling nothing would ever change Judy’s mind about Nick, nothing would get her to see him in a different light. It was futile for Julian to try and roadblock them. Judy would just find a way to batter through.

“I love him, Julian. I can’t just switch it off or ignore it.” Judy didn't want to ignore her feelings, didn't want to stop loving Nick. He was everything to her.

“I know, and I’m not asking you to.” Julian took a deep breath. “What I did was wrong, throwing accusations at Nick without getting to know him first, and I promise I’m going to apologise to him later.” Julian planned to find the right moment to speak to the tod alone, to let him know he was sorry for stereotyping him. “I haven’t had the chance to talk to Nick personally, to get to hear the story from him, but based on what you’ve told me, I can see he had it rough for a long while.”

Judy remembered Nick’s angry words in his mom's kitchen, the way his emotions had shifted so
quickly. “Nick doesn’t want pity, Julian.”

“I know, and I don’t pity him. If anything, I admire his strength. You were right, I can’t imagine what it would be like to have lost dad when we were kits, I can’t imagine Poppy living on the streets, feeling so scared and alone. I can’t imagine spending twenty years without a home, going days without food.” Julian sighed. Judy’s spiel had given him a lot to think about. It had made him feel guilty that he hadn’t bothered to get Nick’s side of the story, hadn’t bothered to get to know him first before judging. Hearing that Nick had spent twenty years surviving on the streets had impressed Julian. He had a feeling so few mammals made it that long. “I spent today observing the pair of you at the fair. You’re very pawsy with one another, comfortable together. I also overheard Nick defending you to Billy and George, defending your hopes and dreams. I can see that he cares a great deal for you, that he values you, that he’d protect you.”

Judy smiled at the memory of Nick berating Billy and George. It had been unexpected, hearing Nick follow through with his promise to call them idiots, but Judy couldn't deny how great it had felt to watch the two bucks be put in their place. “Can I tell you something? Right before Bellwether was arrested, she had her hench-mammals push Nick and me into a pit in the Natural History Museum. We couldn’t escape. She shot Nick with what she thought was the night howler serum, hoping he’d kill me. Nick though, being so smart, had swapped the serum for some of our family blueberries. He had to pretend to go savage so we could get a recorded confession out of Bellwether. I put all my trust in him, in his plan, and it worked perfectly. He’s pulled me out of so many tight spots, Julian.”

The information was new to Julian, and though he was shocked to learn the particulars of the case, he couldn't deny that Nick’s quick thinking had saved his sister's life. “So you returned the favor by asking him to sign up to the ZPD? Moving in together?”

“I guess. But it’s more than returning the favor. I want Nick to be happy, I want him to have everything he missed out on while he spent twenty years on the street. He deserves so much, Julian. I have the ability to help him.” Judy had known, the moment Nick had told her about his situation, that she wanted to help, wanted to do something to make life a little better for him. Nick was the best mammal she knew, he didn't deserve to be on the streets, didn't deserve to be cold and alone, hungry and scared.

Judy had always had a big heart and Julian didn't bother stopping his small smile. “And falling in love with him?”

Snorting, Judy shook her head, lifting her gaze to look up at the night sky. The inky blackness was filled with thousands and thousands of twinkling stars, no city lights for miles. “That wasn’t planned, and while I usually hate it when things don’t go to plan, I can’t find it in me to be mad about it.”

“Do you know if he loves you too?” Judy had mentioned that the bracelet Nick had given her was important, and while it obviously meant a lot to his sister Julian needed to know if her love was returned. He didn't want her being hurt, didn't want her giving away her heart if she wouldn't get anything back.

Judy glanced down to her bracelet, playing with the charms. Knowing the weight it now held, how meaningful it was, Judy had no doubts in her mind. “Yeah, he does.”

“You’ve talked about it?” Julian hadn’t seen them doing anything other than paw holding. Surely if they were in love, if they’d talked about it, they would be all over one another. Julian spared a moment to grimace at the thought of seeing his sister making out with another mammal.
“We’ve agreed to talk this weekend. I’m waiting for the right moment.” Judy clarified. She knew time was running out if they didn't talk this evening, then they'd have to tomorrow. She wanted, no, needed, to talk things through with Nick before he went back to the academy and they were separated again for a few months.

“Don’t wait too long, okay?” Having observed them all day Julian could see how much Nick cared for his sister, could see that whenever Nick looked at her his whole body relaxed. If Julian were a betting mammal, he'd say Nick had it pretty bad for his sister. “I’m going to be honest, I’m still not 100% okay with the idea of you dating him. You’re going to get a lot of abuse for it, Ju. A lot of mammals are going to be offended and I know it’s none of their business, but it could make you a target.”

Judy had taken down rhino’s and regularly took down perps much bigger than her. A few bigots didn't scare her. “I can handle it, Jul.”

“I’m not saying you can’t, I just want you to be careful, okay? You’re my sister, my littermate, and I love you so much. I want you to be safe, but I want you to be happy too. I see now that Nick makes you happy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile as much as you have today.” Julian took another deep breath. “I’m not totally convinced he won’t leave you, and I’m still not happy that you’ve done all the leg work in your relationship so far. However, I know how much he means to you, and I want to support you.”

“He won’t leave me, Jul. I know that for certain.” Judy’s paw went to her bracelet and she ran her fingers over the warm metal. Nick had given her a bonding bracelet, had chosen her as his mate, wanted to claim her and make her his.

“Perhaps, but it’s a worry for me. Just, be careful okay?” Julian grabbed his sister’s paw, holding it tightly

“I will don’t worry,” Judy vowed as Julian pulled her close, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“I miss you.” He whispered. Life with his sister in the city was hard. Julian was so used to having her around, to having her in the warren with him. They’d never been apart until Judy had left for the academy.

Judy loved the city, loved the vibrancy of it, the mix of mammals she met on a daily basis, but she missed Bunnyburrow too. She missed the familiarity, knowing every face around her, and how no one seemed to have any cares in the world. Judy missed having her siblings on call, too. She missed being able to pop to their rooms whenever she needed something or wanted to chat. It was part of growing up, though, striking out on her own. “I miss you too, Jul. Living in the city is so different.”

“You’re happy there, though?” Julian asked, hugging his sister tightly.

“Yeah, I have a great job, some wonderful friends, and a lovely home.” Judy was happy in the city, happy with how her life was shaping up.

“And Nick.” Julian tacked on, grinning.

“Yeah, and Nick.” Judy agreed. Though Julian had told her that he wasn’t 100% sure when it came to Nick, Judy could see that her brother had made some progress and that their scrap in the backyard along with her monolog had forced her brother to reconsider. It was a small victory, and she’d take it. “It’s a day for small victories, it seems.” She knew change would take time, and she hoped once Julian got to know Nick that all his worries would be washed away. Judy was aware that when she and Nick came clean to one another, started dating, that they’d be targeted for it. So
long as they had one another, though, Judy would take all of the abuse thrown at her. Nick was worth it.

“Come on, he’s probably wondering where you are.” Julian untangled himself from his sister, standing and offering her a paw. He led her back to the barn he’d collected her from, returning her to her seat. Giving a small nod to Nick, the buck disappeared to re-join his table.

As Judy sat down, Nick found himself taking her paw, linking their fingers together while his tail curled around her waist. He’d been worried the whole time Judy had been away, concerned that she’d end up in another fight with Julian because of him. “Everything okay?”

Offering her fox a smile, Judy gave his paw a gentle squeeze. “Everything’s perfect, don’t worry.” She reassured him. Before she could ask what they’d talked about while she was away, the sound of the band playing her a slow song made Judy gasp. “Oh gosh, this is my favourite song! Come and dance with me Slick, please?”

Ears flicking in the direction of the music, Nick had to stifle his groan. More country music. Of course, his bunny would like country music.

“You promised one song. This is the song.” Judy pointed out, standing up. She started to tug Nick up from the bench, wanting him to dance with her. She knew it was a slow song, and Judy felt a thrill at the thought of slow dancing with her fox.

Sighing, Nick resigned himself to having to dance. He’d promised, and he’d hate to break a promise to Judy. “Alright, go on.” Rising from his seat, he let his excited bunny pull him out of the barn and out to the dance floor.

It took a moment for Nick to pick up the song, but as Judy tugged him to the centre of the busy dance floor, he had to stifle another groan. It was a slow song, a romantic song. Judy brought them to a standstill in the middle of the dance floor, turning to face Nick. Holding up her right paw, she lifted her left arm, looping it around the back of Nick’s neck. She had to stretch up a little more to reach him. Taking Judy’s right paw in his left, Nick laced their fingers together. Sliding his other paw around Judy’s waist, he let it settle on her lower back, paw splayed possessively.

Starting to dance with Judy, Nick recognized the song. He’d heard it coming from one of the bars he’d been scoping out on a hot summer afternoon, wondering how many unsuspecting fools he could hustle some money out of. “Didn’t think you were a Justin Timberwolf fan,” Nick commented, emerald eyes finding violet ones.

“You're not a fan?” Judy teased. Nick didn't strike her as a Justin fan. He didn't strike her as a fan of pop music full stop.

Shaking his head, Nick grinned. “I'm more of a Guns N' Rodents and Fleetwood Yak kind of mammal.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Rolling her eyes, Judy kept her eyes on Nick’s. There was a lot about the tod that surprised her, but his music choice? He looked like a classic rock kind of mammal.

Curious and hoping he could somehow bring their conversation to their impending chat Nick leaned down a little. “What would surprise you?”

Breathing a little quicker as Nick dipped down, Judy couldn't help but think about how close they were. She was slow dancing with her best friend, the mammal she loved, and who she was sure loved her too. “Well, I’m pretty surprised you know how to dance.” Judy stuck to neutral territory.
She'd had plenty of other things that she would've loved to say – you telling me that you love me, you kissing me, you coming clean about my bracelets meaning – but instead, the doe stuck with something simpler, less emotional. Now wasn't the time, in the middle of the dance floor surrounded by lots of large ears and curious bunnies.

A little disappointed that Judy hadn't given him the chance to switch their conversation, Nick masked it with a chuckle. Gently he twirled Judy, lifting one of her paws above her so she could spin. Her dress fanned out around her as she turned and Nick felt like he'd had his breath stolen from him. “Look at you. Twenty years on the streets, over two decades of not letting mammals see that they get to you, and this one beautiful bunny came along and changed it all.” Pulling Judy back towards him, Nick wrapped his arm around her waist again, holding her paw so that they returned to their previous position, slowly dancing to the music.

Her height meant Judy couldn't rest her cheek on Nick’s shoulder, so instead she settled for his chest, dropping her ears so as not to smack the tod in the face with them. The position enabled her to listen to his heartbeat, the reassuring thud reverberating against her eardrums. They let the music carry them for a few beats as they continued to dance, pressing their bodies as close together as they could. “I used to watch my parents dance when I was a kit. Dad would put on some Whitney Horseton songs and dance around the store with mom after closing each Saturday. It was a little ritual they had.” Nick’s kithood memories were patchy at best, but the memory of his parents dancing together would always stay with him.

Nick didn't talk about his dad very often, he only gave Judy the odd tidbit of information every now and then, but the doe felt an ache in her heart that she'd never gotten the chance to meet Robert Wilde. “I wish I could've met him.”

Touched by Judy’s comment, and crestfallen that his dad would never meet Judy, at least not in person, he smiled sadly. “He'd have liked you.” Nick knew in his heart and soul that his dad would've adored Judy, just like his mom did. Perhaps one day he'd take her to visit his resting place, introduce them. Nick hadn't been to see his dad in over twenty years, it was probably time he changed that. “He would've clipped me around the ear for how rude I was to you initially.” His dad hadn't suffered fools gladly, and rude mammals had been his pet peeve.

Judy snorted, giving Nick’s left paw a squeeze. “It's part of your charm.”

It was Nick’s turn to snort, and the tod couldn't resist giving Judy's waist a gentle squeeze in return. “Now you're just sparing my feewings.”

Lifting her head from Nick’s chest, Judy looked up at her fox. Laughing quietly, Judy marveled at how far they'd come. “You’ll have to start filling in your tax form honestly now.”

“You mean, **you're** going to fill in my tax forms honestly now.” Nick corrected. He didn't really know how to honestly fill the form in. He'd simply entered in his personal information and put a zero in every box requiring a figure. Job done.

Free paw moving to light thump Nick’s chest, Judy tried to dwell on the fact his chest was a lot firmer than the last time he'd been home. Come to think of, Judy realized that Nick’s arms felt stronger holding her too. While pleased he was evidently gaining weight and muscle mass, the doe mentally cursed. Nick’s new muscles were making him even more attractive. “As if he wasn't attractive enough to begin with.” Bringing her paw back to its former position around the back of Nick’s neck, Judy maintained eye contact. “You’re hard work, Slick.”

“You wouldn't have me any other way, Carrots.” Nick was confident of it. It was what drew him to Judy, what kept him coming back. She liked him exactly as he was, ugly backstory and all, and
instead of trying to shape him into her vision of him, she was giving him the tools to build a better future for himself. “A better future with her by my side, hopefully.”

Head tilting sideways a little, Judy’s expression softened into one of fondness, the corners of her lips pulling up into a gentle smile. “Dang straight.” She held Nick’s gaze for a moment, drilling the point home, before she returned her cheek to his chest, letting them sway to the music. The song would end soon, and Judy wanted to cherish every second she got to spend dancing with her fox. Eyes slipping shut, she lost herself in the rhythm of his heartbeat and the music.

Nick watched as she held him while they swayed, her eyes closing. He contemplated whether it was the right time to tell her that he loved her, that she drove him crazy with love and want and need. Opening his mouth, ready to ask Judy if they could find somewhere private to talk, he struggled to get the words out. Unexpected fear took over and left him speechless. He’d be bearing his whole heart and soul to Judy, and though he trusted her with his life, trusted her with his heart and soul, it had been so long since he’d last let a mammal get so close to him that the fear was hard to shake. Nick was used to being alone, to not letting any mammal get too close, not giving them the power to destroy him. Swallowing, he resigned himself to bringing it up at a later date, once they were alone and he could let himself be as emotional as he needed to be.

Instead, Nick held Judy close, enjoying the feel of her in his arms. In the glow of the thousands of fairy lights and lanterns around them, the shine of Judy’s bonding bracelet drew him in. Seeing it still around her wrist, knowing every canine who saw it would know Judy was loved and desired, off the market to them, made a surge of possessiveness flow through him, followed by a quick wave of heat. Seeing Judy wearing something he’d bought her did all sorts of things for his instincts. Content with the comfortable silence between them, Nick relished their closeness. Tuning out the rest of the crowd, he focused in on the song, figuring it was about time he paid attention. If this was Judy’s favorite song, he wanted to know it off by heart.

“‘Cause I don’t wanna lose you now
I’m lookin’ right at the other half of me
The vacancy that sat in my heart
Is a space that now you hold
Show me how to fight for now
And I’ll tell you, baby, it was easy
Comin’ back into you once I figured it out
You were right here all along.

It’s like you’re my mirror,
My mirror staring back at me
I couldn’t get any bigger
With anyone else beside me
And now it’s clear as this promise
That we’re making two reflections into one
‘Cause it’s like you’re my mirror
My mirror staring back at me, staring back at me.”

As the song drew to a close, Nick couldn’t help but notice how it seemed to reflect his own feelings. While art had been his dad’s thing, music had been his mom’s. “Music says the words we can’t, Nicky. It comes from the heart.” Tipping his head down to look at Judy, he found her gazing up at him, head tilted back so she could see him properly. Their noses were dangerously close and as Nick inhaled his nostrils were flooded with Judy’s scent – sweet and addictive, calling to his very soul. All it would take would be for him to lean down the last few centimeters, and he’d be able to kiss her, to taste her. Nick’s body tried to disobey him, tried to lean down and steal a kiss
from the doe in his arms, but he fought it tooth and claw. Just as he was about to win the battle, the sudden loudness of the next song starting broke his concentration and stole the moment from them.

Not ready to let go of Judy, and somewhat enjoying his time on the dance floor, Nick leaned down to speak into Judy’s ear, the music a little louder now. “Think you could keep up with some more dancing?”

The pair stayed out on the dance floor for another hour, recognizing song after song. Bobby had mixed it up, interspersed fast and slow songs, and Nick and Judy danced to them all.

Hind paws hurting and grin fixed in place, Judy finally pulled Nick back to their table. She needed some water, and to rest her hind paws for a moment. Sasha and Jasmine were still sat on the other side of the table, and the former was trying to stifle her yawn. “Someone’s sleepy,” Jasmine commented as Nick and Judy sat down.

“I’m not,” Sasha whined, pouting.

Jasmine was used to the battle of wills with her younger siblings, used to their mood swings when they were tired. “Yes, you are, moody pants.”

Sasha stomped one of her hind paws, rubbing at her eyes. She was trying her hardest not to fall asleep. The day’s activities had caught up with her. “Don’t be mean!”

Sighing, Jasmine stood. As an older sibling, it was part of her job to take care of her younger siblings, and that included getting them home at a reasonable time and tucking them into bed. Her mom and dad had so many kits that it was impossible for them to do everything themselves. “Alright, come on, I’m taking you home. It’s time for bed.”

“No!” Sasha struggled as Jasmine tried to lift her up and remove her from the table. “Mister Nick!” Sasha cried out, arms outstretched towards the fox. She didn’t want Jasmine to take her home. Lower lip wobbling, Sasha’s eyes started to fill with tears.

“Shh Cinnamon, it’s okay.” Nick soothed, standing and reaching across the table to pick up the baby bunny. The sight of her watery eyes tugged at Nick’s heartstrings and he felt a compulsion to soothe the little kit. Lifting her over the table, he brought her close, holding her against is chest. Sasha wrapped her legs around his waist, arms looping around his neck as she let her head rest against his shoulder. “Tell you what, why don’t Ju-Ju and I take you back home and get you tucked up in bed?” He offered, gently bouncing the baby bunny. One of his arms was underneath her, supporting her, while the other moved to stroke the back of her head, smoothing down her ears. Sasha nodded sleepily against Nick’s shoulder.

Watching Nick cradle Sasha, the way he soothed her, Judy felt a flush of heat course through her. Nick was displaying fatherly tendencies again, and the doe found it ridiculously attractive. Judy had no doubts in her mind that Nick would one day be an incredible father, and she felt a new ache, a new yearning, to one day have kits with him. “Oh cripes. You’ve gone from not really wanting kits to a broody mess.” The warmth that spread through her at the idea of having kits with Nick was unstoppable.

Nick’s nostrils flared, the sweet scent he snatched on occasion making him inhale deeply. Gaze turning to Judy, he took another deep breath. The heady scent drove him crazy, and Nick vowed to ask Bonnie what perfume Judy used. He’d buy her an endless supply; ask her to wear it every day.

Wishing Jasmine goodnight, Nick and Judy made their way back to the warren with a sleepy Sasha. The gentle motion of walking sent the baby bunny to sleep. With both of Nick’s paws occupied,
making sure Sasha wouldn’t fall, Judy found herself picking flowers on the walk home, needing something to fill her paws. Their walk home was conducted in silence, neither mammal wanting to risk disturbing Sasha. When they made it back to the Hopps warren, Judy led Nick down to one of the shared bedrooms.

The room was huge, and Nick was grateful for Judy’s directions as she led him past many beds to the far end of the bedroom. A small pink bed was tucked in the corner, Sasha’s name painted on the footboard. “I’ll change her into her PJ’s, don’t worry,” Judy whispered, aware that some of her other younger siblings were sleeping in the room.

Gently placing Sasha down on top of her bed, Nick turned to face the room while Judy changed Sasha into her PJ’s. “Slick.” Judy’s whisper had him turning around. Sasha was now in a little pair of cream PJ’s with carrots on them. Nick gently picked up the baby bunny while Judy flicked the covers back, and together they tucked Sasha in. Before they left, Judy dropped a small kiss on Sasha’s forehead, and Nick couldn’t help but copy her. Sasha snuffled, turning over in her sleep, smushing her face into her pillow.

Quietly they tiptoed out of the room and Judy drew the door shut behind them. “We could always head back to the party if you want?” She whispered as they headed down the hallway, throwing the idea out there.

Nick mulled over the offer, but he saw their current situation as a golden opportunity. Most of the Hopps kits were out at the celebration, and the younger ones were zonked out. Nerves had Nick swallowing, but he felt it was time to mammal up. “Perhaps we should have that talk?”

Stunned by Nick’s suggestion, but figuring they couldn’t put it off much longer, Judy agreed. “Sure, I want to go and grab a bottle of water though. Meet you back at my room?”

Nodding, Nick and Judy split up once they reached the dining room. Nick followed the route to Judy’s room, knowing the way off by heart now, while Judy climbed the stairs to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water.

Entering Judy’s room, Nick took a deep breath, steeling himself. “This is it. You’re going to mammal up and tell her what her bracelet means, you’re going to come clean and tell her how much you love her.” He gave himself a pep talk as he removed his tie, chucking it onto his bag.

“Heavy lift is on the way. You’ve hustled mammals for twenty years, dealt with mob bosses and loan caracals. You can have this conversation with Judy.”

A flashing light caught the tod’s attention and he turned, seeing the screen of Judy’s phone light up. Concerned it might be something important, that Jasmine might be asking if they got back okay or if Bonnie and Stu were asking for a paw, he crossed the room, stealing a glance at the screen. Judy had received a new text message, and the sender made Nick’s blood boil.

**Bandit:**

*Hey Judy, was nice having lunch together a few weeks back. I’ve found the most amazing taco place, so let me know when you’re next free and we can check it out. Hope you’re having fun back home!*

With her bottle of water in paw, Judy made her way back to her room. Her heart was thudding, her paws feeling a little sweaty and she found herself using her old yoga breathing techniques in a desperate attempt to calm herself. They were finally going to have their talk, at last, and clear the air. She’d have to come clean and tell Nick she loved him, tell him that she knew now what her bracelet meant.
Pushing her bedroom door open, Judy took the few steps down. “Okay, so—“ Judy stopped mid sentence. Nick was sat on her bed, her phone in his paws. His jaw was clenched, his eyebrows furrowed, and his posture stiff. “What’s the matter?”

Turning Judy’s phone, he pushed the button to light up the screen again. “Bandit.” He spat. “You had lunch with him a few weeks ago.”

Judy had to hide her groan. She’d worried that keeping her lunch with Bandit a secret would come back to bite her, and now it seemed it was. Quickly reading the text, Judy spared a moment to feel angry about the fact Nick had read it. He shouldn’t have been messing with her phone. “Yeah. He knew this café near work so we went for lunch. Why were you going through my messages?”

“I wasn’t going through them. Your screen lit up with a message so I read it, I thought it might have been Jasmine checking we got back okay, or your parents asking for a paw.” Nick explained. He’d had no malicious intent when checking her phone, and he figured given how comfortable Judy was in stealing his phone and using it, that looking at her phone was fine for him to do in return. “Why didn’t you tell me you had lunch with him?” Nick placed Judy’s phone back on the nightstand, standing.

Putting her water bottle down on the desk, Judy sighed. Lifting a paw, she pinched the bridge of her nose. “I didn’t mention it because I know you don’t like him. Honestly, we just went for food, nothing major.”

Judy’s ease at keeping things from him made the fur on the back of Nick’s neck bristle. They were meant to be partners, best friends, and they were living together. They were supposed to be able to share everything with each other. “If nothing major happened, you would’ve mentioned it.”

Folding her arms across her chest, Judy pulled her elbows tight to her body. “No Nick, I wouldn’t have. You always get so worked up when it comes to Bandit.” Even the slightest mention of the arctic fox upset the tod. Judy still couldn’t understand what Nick’s issue with Bandit was.

“Because he has ulterior motives!” Nick exclaimed, paws animated as he threw his arms out in aggravation.

Clenching one paw, he pointed at Judy with the other, nostrils flaring as he took a step forward. “You. Making you his.” The thought of Bandit taking Judy from him, of Judy leaving him behind once she realized he wasn’t as great as she thought he was, those were Nick’s biggest fears. He hadn’t had many mammals in his life that he was terrified of losing, just his mom and dad. When his father had died, the fear of losing his mom had crippled the tod. Now, the fear of losing Judy was paralyzing. He couldn’t lose her; he couldn’t go back to his old life without her. He knew it was foolish, putting all his happiness in another mammal’s paws, but Nick loved her, loved her so much that he wanted her as his mate, wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Even the idea of another mammal having her, of another mammal loving her, was enough to drive the tod crazy.

Reining in her anger, Judy took a few deep breaths. It wouldn’t do to get angry with Nick. Words screamed in anger were harder to take back. “He doesn't! Cripes, Nick. I don't know what the hell you think he's after.”

Clenching one paw, he pointed at Judy with the other, nostrils flaring as he took a step forward. “You. Making you his.” The thought of Bandit taking Judy from him, of Judy leaving him behind once she realized he wasn’t as great as she thought he was, those were Nick’s biggest fears. He hadn’t had many mammals in his life that he was terrified of losing, just his mom and dad. When his father had died, the fear of losing his mom had crippled the tod. Now, the fear of losing Judy was paralyzing. He couldn’t lose her; he couldn’t go back to his old life without her. He knew it was foolish, putting all his happiness in another mammal’s paws, but Nick loved her, loved her so much that he wanted her as his mate, wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Even the idea of another mammal having her, of another mammal loving her, was enough to drive the tod crazy.

Reining in her anger, Judy took a few deep breaths. It wouldn’t do to get angry with Nick. Words screamed in anger were harder to take back. “He doesn't want that, Nick.”

“I wouldn't put it past him.” Nick scoffed, the corners of his mouth pulling down as he scowled.

“He’s crazy about Akita,” Judy reassured him, repeating her words from the last time Nick had been home. Their landlady had been on several dates with the arctic fox, and things were going
great for them. Bandit had asked Akita if they could go steady, and the pair of them were exploring their new relationship. Judy was happy to cheer them on. After the loss of her parents, Akita had withdrawn into herself, or so she’d told Judy when they’d grabbed drinks together after work one night. Dating Bandit was doing some good for her, and he treated her well.

Nick wasn’t entirely convinced. The arctic was still a competitor until he took a mate of his own and was off the market. The way Bandit was seemingly fawning over Judy made Nick growl. “Are you sure? He randomly approached you in the supermarket, he runs to help you at the drop of a hat, and he seems to know your schedule.”

Judy wasn’t getting through to her thick-skulled best friend. Raising her voice, she started gesticulating wildly, fed up of trying to reassure Nick. Judy had never given him any indication that she was interested in the arctic, had never even suggested it because it wasn’t true. The dumb red fox she was arguing with held her heart, but she’d be damned if she screamed that to him in the middle of their disagreement. “Because he saw that I was struggling! I told him I was coming home, Nick. I said that you and I were meeting up here for the weekend!”

It didn’t matter if Judy had told Bandit that she was coming home with him, Nick knew the arctic was unaware how he felt about Judy, believed they were simply friends who would soon be work partners. Something about the arctic fox rubbed Nick the wrong way. He didn’t like Bandit skulking around Judy. “He’s bad news!” Nick shouted, paws clenching, ears pinned back, hackles rising as his tail swished angrily.

That was the final straw for Judy. With a yell of frustration Judy squared off to the fox, one of her hand paws thumping the ground quickly. “For heaven's sake, Nick! You’re acting like some irrationally jealous boyfriend. You haven't even met him and you're judging him. You’re almost as bad as Julian. Do you want to know why I asked him to lunch? I wanted to talk to him about my bracelet!” The look of surprise on Nick’s face as Judy yelled at him made her feel victorious for a split second, but the rabbit was on a roll. For months she’d been filled with frustration at not knowing what her bracelet meant, annoyed at her canine friends for refusing to tell her anything. It all came rushing out. “No one would say anything, least of all you. I figured Bandit might be more forthcoming, but he wasn’t. He outright refused to tell me anything. If anyone had the ulterior motive at lunch, it was me!” Judy exploded. Refraining from saying any more, Judy knew she had to get away from Nick before she said something she’d regret later. “Screw this.” She spun on her hind paws, stalking out of the room.

Blinking in surprise, it took Nick a moment to realize Judy had left the room. “Wait, no, Carrots!” Nick raced after her, leaping over the steps up to the door, head snapping left to right as he looked down the hallway. Catching her scent, he let his nose lead him. “You stupid idiot. This is your fault. You should've listened to mom, should've told Judy what the damn bracelet meant when you gave it to her. Your ridiculous fear stopped you though, didn’t it? Now, look where its gotten you, having a shouting match with the mammal you love. Idiot.” He cursed himself. Judy’s scent was getting harder and harder to follow the deeper he went into the warren, hundreds of other scents muddling together.

Nick was terrified that he’d lose Judy, that another mammal would snatch her from him. “Your own actions are pushing her away. You could lose her because of your own stupidity.” Nick felt his heart race, sudden pain blossoming in his chest. Reaching for a wall, he pressed a sweaty palm to the exposed stone as a wave of dizziness overcame him, the ringing in his ears deafening. “Air, I need air.” Stumbling back the way he’d come, Nick retraced his steps to the dining room. Oblivious to Bonnie and Stu stood in the dining room, having come back to put some more of their kits to bed only to hear the explosive shouting match between their daughter and the fox, Nick hauled himself up the stairs to the kitchen with the aid of the pawrail. Spotting a door he opened it,
struggling for breath. He felt lightheaded, the tightness in his chest crippling him as he burst out onto the back porch. Paws grabbing the railings, the cold night air washed over him. Gasping, Nick pulled in as much air as possible, the trembling of his body subsiding. Screwing his eyes shut, Nick let out a little whine of distress. “Damn it all to hell.” The last time he’d had a panic attack he’d been fifteen, terrified of being caught in the middle of a serious hustle. Pulling his tail close to his body, Nick heard the wooden railings beneath his paws creak with the force he was exerting on them. He needed to slow down his breathing, pull it under control.

A paw on his shoulder spooked the tod, but the scent filling his nostrils didn’t belong to the one mammal in the world he wanted to see more than anything else. It was comforting nonetheless. “It’s okay, Nick. Breathe. It’s alright.” Bonnie soothed, rubbing the tod’s shoulder. Her paw moved to rub his back as she tried to comfort him, tried to help him get his breathing under control. “It’ll be fine, just breathe. There’s plenty of air, dear.”

Chapter End Notes

If you want to listen to the song they danced to, search for Boyce Avenue - Mirrors (Justin Timberlake cover). It’s such a great, slow cover.
Rubbing Nick’s back, Bonnie gently soothed the agitated fox. Stu disappeared into the kitchen, returning with a bottle of water for Nick. Slowly, and with more of Bonnie’s back rubs, Nick was able to pull his breathing under control, his body relaxing and his grip on the railings loosening. “Better?” The doe murmured, slowing her rubs.

With a shaky nod, Nick gratefully accepted the bottle of water from Stu. Taking a few sips before he screwed the cap back on, Nick took a deep breath, which he exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry. I haven't had an attack like that since I was a teenager.”

Leading Nick to the bench on the porch, she encouraged him to sit, taking the seat next to him. Stu stood, leaning against the railings. “Don't apologize, dear, it's fine. Do you want to talk about what set it off?” Bonnie lifted a paw to rub Nick’s shoulder, motherly instincts kicking in. Seeing Nick’s distress had broken the doe’s heart.

Avoiding Bonnie and Stu’s gaze, Nick looked at the floor, placing the water bottle down between his hind paws. With his paws now free, he rubbed his face. “I couldn't find her.” He whispered, feeling pathetic for having freaked out over something so minor. Judy wouldn't have gone far, she wouldn't have left the warren, but the panic had set in before Nick could think rationally.

“Judy?” Stu sought clarification. He figured no other mammal could pull such a reaction from the tod.

Nodding, Nick sighed. “She disappeared down one of the hallways, and I lost her scent. I'm sorry if you overheard our disagreement. I hope it didn't wake any of your babies.”

“Don't be silly, all couples fight.” Bonnie brushed away his concerns. While Bonnie and Stu had heard the disagreement, none of their younger kits had been disturbed.

“We’re not, we aren't-” Nick stumbled, wide eyes looking to Bonnie. No matter how many hints Bonnie dropped, no matter how much she seemed to want them together, the doe had to know they weren't an item.

“We’re aware, but we also know you love her very much. We have 312 kits, Nick. We know what love looks like.” Stu broke in. Leaning against the railings, Stu found a comfy position. He had a feeling this conversation could take some time.

Swallowing, Nick looked between Bonnie and Stu. Bonnie’s care package had been enough confirmation that the doe was aware of Nick’s feelings, but hearing that Stu was aware of them too had the tod nervous. “It's fine. I was concerned at first, worried, but you’ve eased those concerns. What happened?” Stu soothed. Having watched the way his daughter and the fox interacted, how Nick stood up for Judy and encouraged her to follow her dreams, Stu knew his little girl had found her perfect mate. The tough part was getting them to talk about it, to take the next step.
Licking his lips, Nick sighed. Bonnie and Stu had been nothing but warm and welcoming. Judy trusted his mom, and Nick found himself trusting the doe and buck on the back porch with him in return. It was a foreign feeling, but then being around Judy was stirring up all sorts of feelings and memories he thought he'd long since beaten into submission. “She has this friend, Bandit.”

“The arctic fox, yes?” Bonnie withdrew her paw from Nick’s arm, letting it rest in her lap. Judy had mentioned Bandit a couple of times, how he'd helped her pick out some predator food for Nick, how he'd helped her buy essentials for the tod from the drugstore.

Not at all surprised that Bonnie was aware of the other fox, Nick nodded in confirmation. “They went for lunch a few weeks back, and Judy didn't tell me. She usually tells me everything. Judy thought I'd overreact if she said anything. Guess she was right.”

“What is it you don't like about them spending time together?” Bonnie kept her tone gentle, soothing. The doe had a feeling that Nick needed to get it all out into the open before he could work through it, overcome the feelings he was dealing with.

“I just.” Nick paused, giving himself a moment to think before he spoke again. “I'm worried that Bandit will take her from me, that she'll realize I'm not as great as she thinks I am and that she'll leave. I've been burned countless times. I've never trusted another mammal as much as I trust Judy and it terrifies me, giving her that power over me.” Nick rubbed his muzzle with a paw, feeling vulnerable. The only mammal Nick trusted as much was his mom, but she had created him, carried him, loved him, given birth to him. He knew that no matter what the world threw at him, he'd always have his mom to fall back on, that his mom would love him no matter what he did or didn't do. She'd been the one constant in his life.

Bonnie and Stu knew little of Nick’s upbringing apart from the fact he'd lost his father at a young age. Marian had been willing to share that little bit with them over dinner. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the tod was carrying some heavy baggage, and Stu found himself wanting to help him shed it. “Judy would never abuse that power, son.”

The term of endearment had Nick's head shooting up, surprised emerald eyes finding Stu. “Don't look at me like that, Nick. Judy brought you here because you're the most important mammal in her life. I know you've been forcing yourself to act a certain way around us all weekend, putting your best hind paw forward. While we appreciate it, you don't have to pretend. Judy cares for you enough to bring you here. You're the first mammal she's ever brought home. You’re family. It terrifies me, knowing I'm no longer the only male she relies on. I can be in the same room as my little girl, have her full attention, but the moment you walk in it's like I'm invisible. While that should upset me, it doesn't. Why? Because when the roles are reversed, when I see you without Judy around, the moment she walks back into the room your entire focus shifts to her. Bonds like that are rare.” Stu pushed off from the railings, closing the gap between them. Crouching so he was level with Nick, the buck held the tod's gaze. “The power and role you have in my daughter's life strikes more fear into my heart than I've ever been prepared for. You have the ability to help her flourish and have the capacity to crush her. Do you understand how scary that is for a father? Knowing his little girl trusts someone other than him that much?”

Nick swallowed, fighting back sudden tears as he nodded slowly. Hearing Stu call him son had stirred deep feelings in the tod; it was a term he hadn't heard in a terribly long time.

“I know my little girl, and I know she's not a fool. She wouldn't throw away her friendship with you, she wouldn't abandon you, betray you. You’re inseparable. You mean the world to her. I've never been a mammal of faith. I believe in this life we make our own luck, our own fortune, but I do think that sometimes karma or destiny, fate, whatever you want to call it, steps in to push us
onto a particular path. I have a feeling she pushed you and Judy together. Judy needs you to keep her grounded, to remind her that life isn't always rosy; to stop her being overzealous and ending up hurt. I get the feeling that you need my daughter in return to remind you that things get better, that happiness can be found even in the darkest of times if one only remembers to turn on the light. My little girl brought you home, brought you into the fold, trusts you implicitly. I trust her judgment, so, to me, that's enough to warrant calling you my son, if that's okay with you.” Stu knew he'd never replace Nick's father, and the buck never wanted to, but he knew Nick lacked a fatherly figure in his life, had gone so long without having another male to turn to. If he could offer Nick that, if he could give him the support and love he needed, then Stu would.

Unable to stop his low whine, Nick gave up his fight against his tears, letting them soak his fur as they fell. His heart hurt, the box he'd used to contain his emotions since he'd left home as a kit disintegrated. He'd never properly grieved his father, had never let himself feel the immense weight of his loss, but he'd carried with him every day the loss of no longer having a male to turn to. His mom was fantastic, incredible, but even she couldn't understand the bond between males. The last time a mammal had called him son, Nick had been seven. It had been the last thing his dad had ever said to him, as he'd affectionately ruffled his fur as he'd left for work. “I'll see you after work, kiddo. Don't get into too much trouble at school. Be good, son.”

Opening his arms, Stu offered Nick comfort. Without giving it a second thought the tod dove into the offered embrace, seeking reassurance from the buck. “I got you, it's okay.” Stu soothed, stroking the back of Nick's head. Their size difference made things a little awkward, but the buck couldn't find it in him to care. Nick needed the comfort, and he'd be damned if he'd stop offering it.

Clinging to Stu, Nick felt like a lost little kit. “Thank you.” He croaked, sniffling. Bonnie placed a paw against his back, rubbing again in a soothing gesture. “I love her, and every time I think about the possibility of her leaving me it feels like I can't breathe.” Nick pulled back, paws rising to wipe at his wet fur, to remove his tears from his face. He hadn't meant to have such an emotional outburst, but it had all come flooding out.

Arms empty now that the tod had pulled back, Stu let them fall, though he remained in his crouch. “Perhaps you’re letting the past cloud your future? I know that Judy has accidentally hurt you before, your mom told us over dinner, but she'd never intentionally hurt you. She learned her lesson. Is giving her that much power over you scary? Yes, I'm not saying it isn't. That's part of life, though. While it's easier to close yourself off and remain withdrawn, hide your emotions, all it leaves you with is a lonely existence, and that's no way to live. We have a finite amount of time on this earth, and we shouldn't waste a second of it. Those three months you were apart when Judy came home? She was a mess, son. Judy was in a constant state of sadness that it was getting to the point where Bon and I were going to call a doctor, or a psychiatrist, whichever would've helped. She was beating herself up every day for having hurt you. It's not something I know Judy will ever repeat. She wouldn't turn her back on you or leave you. You’re too important to her.”

Bonnie took over, having been quiet for some time. “You know, Judy spoke to me on Friday afternoon while she was making you dinner. It took some coaxing, but she finally confessed that she really wanted you two to live together and that she encouraged you to sign up and be her partner. Not only does she want to make life better for you, to help you, but she wants to keep you in her life, have your lives entwined so that you won't leave her.” She'd made no promise to her daughter to keep the information quiet. If it helped Nick see how much he meant to Judy, Bonnie would gladly share their conversations with him.

“I'd never leave her.” Nick’s quick response, the horror marring his face, was an indication that the thought of leaving Judy was unthinkable, a no go.
Offering the tod a gentle smile, Bonnie placed her paw on his arm, giving it a reassuring rub. “Does she know that? You worry about her leaving you, but have you ever stopped to think that perhaps Judy feels the same way, that she worries about you leaving her? As Stu said, you’re the most important mammal in her life, and while our daughter may be tough and strong, while she may be able to take down rhinos and elephants, she still has her insecurities. She's never had someone as good as you in her life before. Before you, her entire life revolved around her job. She has only a few friends, no family in the city. As a kit she used to set goals, being a cop was always at the top of the list but right underneath it, Judy wished for a best friend. She has you now, and so long as there’s breath in our baby girl’s body, I know she's not going to let you go. I know it, I can smell it.”

“You can smell it?” Nick frowned, perplexed.

The ace up her sleeve, Bonnie had to stop herself from grinning like a fool. “That sweet scent I've seen you chasing a few times? The one you can smell is coming from Judy? That's not perfume, at least not the kind you can buy…”

It took Nick a moment, but soon his frown was replaced with surprise, eyes widening as he grasped what Bonnie was alluding to. “It’s…?” He couldn't believe it, wouldn't believe it. There was no way on earth Judy was attracted to him.

Bonnie nodded, enjoying Nick’s surprise. “You pick up on it during your interactions with Sasha because of how we does are wired. The whole ‘good at multiplying’ thing isn't just a joke, Nick. It's true. Our motherly instincts are some of the strongest in the world. The sight of a male we find attractive taking care of a kit is enough to stir those instincts in us. A lot of us have experience controlling them, take medication for it. Judy is my only kit over the age of consent not on suppressants. She's never shown an interest before, too consumed with her job.”

Baffled by the new information, it took Nick a moment to fully process it. “So wait, the sight of me taking care of Sasha makes Judy want kits?”

“It’s something like that. It's a primal thing, something years of evolution has yet to take from us.” Bonnie didn't bother telling Nick that it was his kits Judy would no doubt be yearning for. There was only so much paw-holding Bonnie could do. Nick would have to figure it out for himself. “I'm surprised you find rabbit pheromones so attractive, but then again the pair of you are just full of surprises.”

Snorting, Nick shook his head. “I wouldn't just use attractive to describe how I find it.” The scent, Judy's arousal, called to Nick, demanded that he pay attention, ordered him to find her and make her his. Thinking back, Nick recalled the lazy morning in bed he and Judy had indulged in, before calling Bonnie and Stu. He'd caught a snatch of the same scent then, but Nick hadn't been looking after a kit at the time. Instead, Judy had been staring at his teeth...

“I'm still here you know. I don't need to hear about the scent of my daughter's arousal, thank you.” Stu piped up jokingly, standing back up. His bones creaked, as he stood, moving to lean against the railings once more.

Bonnie and Nick laughed, the tod feeling lighter than he had in a long time. Judy was attracted to him, which Nick hoped would work in his favour when it came time to tell her he loved her. As their laughter died down, Nick felt it was only right to come clean. Bonnie and Stu trusted him with their daughter, trusted him to keep an eye on her and keep her happy. He needed to return that trust.

Taking a deep breath, Nick launched into his story. “I guess mom told you about dad?” Nick looked between Bonnie and Stu, both of them nodding solemnly. “We had a tailoring business. My
father made the most incredible clothes in the city. After he died, mom tried to keep the business afloat and keep food on the table with only her diner wages. Mom could sew yes, but she'd never been as good as dad.” Nick could remember his father trying to teach his mom how to make a suit, how his mom had put more pins in her paws than the fabric on the mannequin. “I left home when I was twelve. Mom didn't need the worry, she didn't need to question whether she'd have enough money to feed or clothe me. I started hustling, conning mammals out of their cash and sending it home. I was good at it, for a kit.” Nick avoided Bonnie and Stu’s gaze, focusing instead on the outline of a tree he could see in the distance. “When I was sixteen I decided to go straight, or at least as straight as possible. I wanted to open a theme park for predators, call it Wilde Times. It would've been a place where predators could go without fear, without worrying they'd accidentally offend a prey mammal and end up behind bars. I went to every bank in the city, but none of them wanted to invest. In the end, I went to a loan caracal.”

Listening to Nick talk about his kithood, Bonnie’s heart broke. She would never have guessed that he'd had such an upbringing, that he'd gone to such extremes to make money to send home. He had that entrepreneurial flair, she could see that, but she'd never thought that he'd used it in such a way, that he had honed his skills on the streets. Bonnie couldn't imagine any of her babies out there, alone, doing such dangerous work. She knew foxes got a raw deal; Gideon had opened her eyes to that. Picturing a young Nick out on his own, without safety and love, made the doe reach over, pulling the tod towards her. She tucked him into her side as best she could, smoothing her paws over his fur. “Oh, Nick.”

Nick let himself be pulled in by Bonnie. He hated pity, hated how it would make him feel guilty and ashamed, but he knew Bonnie’s actions weren't done out of pity, but out of concern. As Bonnie had mentioned, a does motherly instincts were hard to ignore. “I know, not my smartest move. He liked the idea, gave me $200,000 to go and buy the warehouse that needed to be converted. He promised me the other $200,000 once I'd secured the location.” Nick had spent every night under the bridge staring at the crumbling warehouse, dreaming of what it would've been like to own a business, to be successful. “I went home to tell mom, to let her know that once the park was running, she'd never have to work again. I found her crying, bills and letters piled up, debtors threatening her. I couldn't leave her. I took the money and paid off the mortgage, used what was left to buy some stocks and shares and have a lawyer tell her that dad had left her them.”

“Nick…” Stu was unable to even comprehend what he was hearing. Judy hadn’t mentioned anything about Nick’s past to them, but the buck assumed his daughter knew. When they'd had dinner with Marian she hadn't raised the subject either, and Stu mentally questioned whether the vixen was aware of what her son had done, the lengths he'd gone to to look after her. It wasn't his place to say anything to Marian, and Stu knew it was taking a lot for Nick to trust them with this. The buck would take this story to the grave. It did, however, only further Stu’s resolve. Nick had taken care of his mom, put her needs above his own, and Stu prayed Nick would do the same with Judy. This time, though, Stu knew his daughter would put Nick’s needs above her own in return. After all, when she'd been a kit, he'd told her that that was what love was.

Lifting a paw, Nick shook his head. “Please.” He'd already told Judy the story, opened up to her about it. Bonnie and Stu deserved to know, deserved to know what they were letting their daughter get into by being friends with him. “The loan caracal wasn't pleased, and after taking a beating, I managed to convince him into a payment plan. I had to give him $1000 a month, or he’d go after mom.”

Bonnie gasped, grip on Nick tightening. That was a lot of money for a mammal on the streets to find each month, a lot of money for an individual to have to scrounge up when they had no stable job. “Oh, dear boy…”
Nick powered on, feeling lighter the more he shared. Judy was the only mammal he’d told so far, and the years of keeping everything to himself were starting to weigh on him. A few months ago he never would’ve considered telling another mammal his story, let alone the parents of the mammal he wanted to pursue. “So I hustled, and I continued to trick animals out of their money. I cut back on everything, did everything I could think of to save money to make my monthly payments. I did that for sixteen years, and then your daughter came along and blew my routine to smithereens.” Nick smiled, remembering the moment he’d met Judy, how she’d stood up for him, and he'd repaid her kindness by hustling her. His smile fell. “Before Judy, I had nothing, I was nothing. I was crippled by debt, homeless, and a con-mammal. Judy has given me a home, a purpose, an honest job. I owe her my everything.”

“That’s not true, Nick. You still had your good heart, and your kindness, your strength, and courage.” Bonnie soothed, pressing a kiss to Nick’s temple. The tod closed his eyes, relishing the affection from Bonnie.

“You don't owe her anything. Judy doesn't like gathering favors, son.” Stu interrupted, watching his wife soothe the fox.

Lazily, Nick opened his eyes. “I know, but now you see why she's so important to me. I had nothing before her, and she's helped me gain everything I ever wanted. I'm scared that if she leaves, I'll lose everything again.” Nick voiced his fear, looking at the buck.

“Judy’s not going anywhere without you, I know it. She’ll prove it to you soon enough.” Stu had every ounce of faith in his daughter. Her care for Nick was undeniable, the pair of them practically joined at the hip. Though they’d argued, Stu knew his daughter would come around quickly, would apologize and ask for forgiveness. She was inherently good, she always had been.

“Are you still paying off your debt? Stu and I can help.” Bonnie offered. Nick was family, and if he were in trouble, then they would do anything to help him. They didn’t have a lot of money, owning a farm and having 312 mouths to feed meant a lot of their cash went to keeping everything running, but they could spare some money every month to ensure Nick’s debt was being paid, to keep him and Marian from being hurt. Given how Nick spoke about his debt, the doe got the feeling that he hadn’t told his mom about his situation.

Touched by Bonnie’s kind offer, Nick gave the doe a small smile. Even if he still had his debt looming over him, he wouldn’t have taken any money from Bonnie and Stu. He knew what it was like to just be making ends meet, and he wouldn’t put Judy’s parents through that by letting them shoulder some of his debt. “I appreciate that Bonnie, I really do, but Judy took care of it.”

Surprised, and now concerned about what her ambitious daughter had gone and done, Bonnie gulped. “Took care of it?” She questioned. “Oh heck, what has Judy done now?”

“She renegotiated and saved my tail,” Nick explained, omitting any further details. Bonnie and Stu didn’t need to worry. Catstro was gone, and Judy was safe, along with his mom. Turning his gaze to Stu, Nick arranged his thoughts. “You said the role I have in Judy’s life terrifies you, but the role she has in my life is just as terrifying. My home had consisted of some ramshackle second-paw furniture and a cardboard box under a bridge before Judy came along. My life revolved around hustling from the moment I woke up to the moment I went to sleep. I have hardly any belongings, no money, no qualifications, no friends and only my mom for family. When Judy came crashing into my life, dragging me on her wild otter chase, it was the start of everything. She's given me a warm and safe home, and a future working an honest job. Judy’s given me a whole new circle of friends, and a huge family. I don't deserve it, but I'm not going to waste it.” Nick knew a gift had fallen into his lap, that it was a miracle he’d met Judy and been able to turn his life around. He
wasn’t going to squander it, he wasn’t going to throw away what could be his only opportunity to turn his life around and make something of himself. Living on the streets and hustling hadn’t been his dream, and Nick knew he was lucky to have lived for so long out there. Many mammals on the streets didn’t make it more than a few years before they were found dead in an alley somewhere.

Lifting a paw, Bonnie cradled Nick’s cheek. Hearing that her daughter had given Nick so much made the doe proud of Judy, she’d raised her to always treat other mammals the way she would want to be treated. “You’ll always have a home here, Nick, no matter what. Even if, goodness forbid, you ever part ways with Judy, you’re always welcome here.”

Stu agreed with his wife. Nick was family now, and even if he and Judy parted ways that wouldn’t stop him and his wife welcoming the tod into their home. Once you were part of the Hopps family, you were in it for life. “I know you’ll do the right thing, that you’ll talk to her about your disagreement.”

Nodding, Nick felt the tendrils of fear at the impending conversation he’d have to have with Judy, but he knew there was no avoiding it now. They’d clashed, butted heads, and they needed to talk it through. Nick knew he needed to apologize for his reaction to the message from Bandit. It had been impulsive, his emotions leading him. He’d given Judy the bracelet not only because he loved her, but to stop other canines from hitting on her. If they found out, though, that she was unaware of the bracelet’s meaning, then she would be back to being fair game. It was that which worried him the most. “I will.”

Pulling her paw from Nick’s cheek, the doe rubbed his shoulder. “When Judy was assigned to precinct one, Stu and I were so frightened. Judy had never left the borough before, and she was about to go and live in the big city. We lay awake each night she was away wondering whether she was being taken advantage of, whether her sweet, naïve nature was getting her in trouble. We worried about her not making friends, getting too engrossed in her work and missing out on the other important parts of life. Then she met you. We trust you to take care of her, to love her and treat her right. She’d be hard pressed to find a better mammal.” Bonnie and Stu had been worried about Judy wanting to join the ZPD, had tried to convince her to become a carrot farmer, stay safe in Bunnyburrow, but there had been no stopping their daughter. Judy had set her heart and soul on being a cop, so Bonnie and Stu had decided to support her. They loved her, and if they tried to hold her back, they’d worried they would lose her entirely. Though they’d rarely ventured into the city, Bonnie knew life there was much different than out in the country.

Listening to Bonnie and Stu speak about him and Judy, Nick smiled sadly. “You’re talking like Judy and I are together. I haven’t even told her how I feel.” It was a topic of conversation he needed to broach, hoped it would help explain to her why he was so possessive, why the thought of Bandit stealing her away pulled such a volatile reaction from him.

Bonnie and Stu shared a glance, knowing they now had an opportunity to get the Nick and Judy Train back on track. Clearing his throat, Stu made a suggestion. “Tomorrow night is the closing ceremony, with music and fireworks, and the whole borough gets together for it. Each year we ask some of our kits to stay at home and watch the fields, make sure no stray fireworks set the place alight. It’s a small lie, the fireworks no longer get close enough, but we’ve been assigning the job to our kits for so long now that it’s a habit we can’t break. Why don’t you and Judy watch the place tomorrow night? Everyone will be out; you’ll have a few hours of uninterrupted peace. Use the time to tell her how you feel, explain to her how much she means to you.”

Blinking, surprised by Stu’s kind offer, Nick felt his palms become a little sweaty, the nerves creeping in. “You think that would work?” He questioned, surreptitiously wiping his paws on his pants. If they were alone and guaranteed not to be interrupted, Nick reasoned that it would be
easier to talk to Judy, to explain his feelings and the bracelet that had caused most of their problems.

Bonnie broke in, a soft smile on her lips as she recalled her mom. “When I was a kit my mom told me that the first simple rule of life is that if you don’t go after what you want, you’ll never have it.” Her mom had been full of wisdom, always giving Bonnie little sayings to help her see the bigger picture, help her navigate her way through life. When her mom had died, Bonnie had passed many of her sayings on to her kits, wanting her mom to live on through her babies.

“I think my dad used to say something similar, ‘what would life be if we had no courage to attempt anything.’ I believe he stole it from Vincent van Goat, though.” Nick mused. His dad’s fascination with art had never quite rubbed off on Nick when he’d been a kit, but now that he was older he was starting to appreciate it more, especially when he got to share his knowledge about the subject with Judy. Their afternoon in the city gallery was one of Nick’s favorite memories, and he hoped to take her back there one day, take her back to her favorite painting, and explore the rest of the gallery with her.

Bonnie and Stu chuckled. The buck offered the tod a grin. “I wouldn't worry too much about it, son. Everything will work out how it's supposed to.” He reassured.

Nick bobbed his head. He and Judy had a lot to work through, but they’d come so far already. Everything they’d been through had made them stronger. Nick prayed this would be the same. “Sir?” He asked, realizing he still had one question for the Hopps patriarch. Stu quirked an eyebrow, believing they were over such formal address now. Nick cleared his throat, catching Stu’s gaze. “If Judy returns my feelings…”

“Yes?” Stu prompted, not knowing what Nick’s question was about.

“Are you asking for permission to date her, or marry her?” Surprised, and impressed again by Nick’s manners, Stu threw the tod a curveball.

Eyes widening, Nick stammered over his response. “D-date, we’re not - marriage is a while off.”

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“Oh, so you’ll be asking me if you can marry her at some point in the future then?” Stu knew it was cruel to tease Nick, especially as he could tell it took a lot of courage for the fox to ask for his approval, to grant permission. He knew Judy was an independent doe, that regardless of his own wishes she would date Nick if she wanted to, but the buck appreciated Nick’s politeness and the old school tradition. “He may have spent twenty years on the streets, but Marian still raised him right.”

Flustered, Nick tried to regain control of the situation. Did he want to marry Judy one day? Of course. Was it appropriate right now? No. While Nick stammered, grasping for a response, Stu chuckled. Helping his wife up from the bench, he smacked a paw down on Nick’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “I’m messing with you.” He revealed. Nick sighed, his whole body sagging in relief. “She’s all yours.” He parted with a wink, taking Bonnie’s paw in his own as he led his wife back inside.

Exhaling, Nick laughed quietly. Stu had pulled another fast one on him. Leaning forward, he let his elbows rest on his knees while he ran his paws over his face. He felt better, if not a little emotionally raw, for having spoken so openly with Bonnie and Stu. Knowing they saw him as family filled Nick with a sense of belonging, of acceptance. He had his mom, and she would always mean the world to him, but knowing he had such a huge extended family soothed the lonely part of Nick, the part that had been denied any sort of affection and care for the last twenty years. Reaching down for his bottle of water, Nick took another sip, depositing it at the side of the bench once he’d screwed the cap back on. Bonnie and Stu had made a lot of sense. He knew Judy wouldn’t leave, knew she cared greatly for him, but deep down he still had those insecurities, still
had that worry. Once she understood what her bracelet meant, would her feelings change? Before Nick could dwell on it any longer, the sound of the back door opening captured his attention. Turning, emerald eyes found violet.

Judy hadn’t meant to run, but fear had taken over and she’d fled the scene before she could talk things through with Nick. The fear of saying something again that would upset him, like she’d done at the press conference, had driven her to seek solace in the little doe’s room. Sat on one of the benches in the huge shower room, Judy had calmed herself, worked through her emotions and feelings, and had then proceeded to head back to her bedroom, ready to apologize and explain herself. Instead, she’d been faced with an empty bedroom and the return of her fear. It wasn’t hard to track Nick through the warren, the smell of fox was so prominent compared to that of rabbit, and as Judy had been climbing the stairs to the kitchen, she’d bumped into her parents. “He had a panic attack, bun-bun. He couldn’t find you. Be gentle with him.” Her mom had advised, kissing her on the forehead as they’d passed. Her dad had offered her an encouraging smile.

Out on the back porch, Judy’s first thought had been on Nick’s panic attack and how she could make it better for him. As he turned to look at her though, as their eyes met, all she could see was the dampness on his fur, the way his eyes were rimmed with red, how his ears were pinned back and his tail limp. Guilt consumed her, and she launched herself at her fox. Throwing her arms around Nick’s neck, she stepped into the space between his legs, pulling him close as she buried her nose in his throat fur. “Mom said you had a panic attack. I’m sorry, Slick, I’m so sorry.” She clung to him, pushing back her own tears. This wasn’t about her. This was about Nick.

With an armful of country bunny, Nick held Judy tightly, pulling her as close to him as possible. Relief coursed through him as he embraced her, the tension in his body dissipating. Breathing in her scent, Nick’s confidence grew. He could do this; he could talk to her about his feelings. Pulling back so she could talk without her voice being muffled by Nick’s fur, the doe kept hold of him. “I shouldn’t have run away, that was cowardly and unfair. You need answers.” She started. While working through her feelings in the bathroom, she’d kicked herself. Judy had never run from anything before in her life, but arguing with Nick was the most terrifying thing for her. She’d knocked out rhino’s, been chased by a savage jaguar, taken on Bellwether and defeated Catstro. None of it held a candle to hurting Nick, though.

Bonnie and Stu had eased some of Nick’s worries, their conversation having proved enlightening. He guessed that Judy hadn’t meant to run away, knew that she usually faced everything head on. There had to be a valid reason for her running away from their disagreement. “It’s alright, Fluff.” He soothed, giving her a gentle squeeze.

“No, no it’s not.” Judy wouldn’t let Nick sweep it all under the rug, wouldn’t allow him to let her get away with it. “I hate fighting with you, look where it got us last time. Rather than sticking around, I ran.” Judy had hated how things had ended between them when they’d last fought, hated that they’d spent three months apart. She didn’t want that to happen again. “I was worried about saying something in anger that would upset you. I never even thought about the fact that running would upset you too. I’m so sorry.” She looked into the emerald eyes she loved, keeping her arms around Nick’s neck. “I shouldn’t have kept lunch with Bandit a secret. I should’ve told you. I realize now how keeping it a secret looked, but I promise you on my life and my badge that nothing happened. All I wanted were answers.” Judy poured her heart and soul into her apology, contrition painted on her features. She’d tried to get information out of the arctic fox but he hadn’t been forthcoming with it, and it had driven her crazy. No matter how much Judy had pouted, no matter how much she’d begged and bribed him with picking up the lunch bill, Bandit hadn’t budged.
Knowing he had his own apologizing to do, Nick held Judy’s gaze. “I’m sorry too. I shouldn't have overreacted, shouldn't have been so overbearing. You’re allowed to do whatever you want, to have lunch with whoever want.” Nick didn’t want to come across as controlling, didn’t want to seem like the irrational jealous boyfriend Judy had accused him of being like. She wasn’t his yet; he had no say in what she did. Heck, even if they did get together he’d have no say in what she did. Judy was an independent bunny. If she wanted to have lunch with her friends, he wouldn’t stop her.

“I'll stop talking to him.” Judy offered. If Nick had a problem with her spending time with Bandit, then the obvious solution was to stop spending time with the arctic.

Shaking his head, Nick disagreed. “No, sweetheart. Don't do that.” He moved a paw from around her waist, running it down Judy’s smoothed down ears. He wouldn’t let her give up a friendship because of his inability to work through his emotions, because of his irrational fear of losing her. “He's your friend.”

“And you're my best friend.” Judy pointed out, little paws grasping the fur on the back of Nick’s neck. Nick’s feelings were important to her; there was no other mammal she cared for as much. If cutting her ties with Bandit, who for all intents and purposes was only a casual friend, would save her friendship with Nick, then she’d do it.

“While I'm flattered that you hold me in such a high regard, I don't want you to miss out on having other friends.” Nick wrapped his paw back around Judy, splaying it over her lower back. Taking a deep breath, he figured now would be a good time to start opening up. “My problem isn’t with you, or even Bandit. It’s just some old baggage, that’s all.”

“Then let me help you. Talk to me. Let me support you. You lock everything up, Nick.” Judy kept her tone soft, not wanting to upset the tod. She knew most of their problems stemmed from miscommunication, on both their parts, but it was so hard for Judy to try and understand Nick and his reactions to things when he didn’t let her in, when he hid his feelings from her.

Sighing, Nick’s lips curved downwards, closing his eyes. “I know. It’s an old defense mechanism.”

Letting go of the fur on the back of Nick’s neck, Judy brought one paw forward to cup his muzzle. “You've left that life behind, you're starting a new one. You don’t need to be so defensive and closed off anymore, least of all to me.” She murmured, rubbing her paw along the length of his muzzle in a slow, soothing gesture.

“I overreacted because the thought of you abandoning me is terrifying.” Nick threw it out there before he could think about it, before he could change his mind, pulling courage from his chat with Bonnie and Stu. “So many mammals have ditched me over the years, once they saw that I'm not as great as they thought I was. I’m so used to it now that I hide behind the whole con-mammal persona, never letting anyone get close enough, never letting them see that they get to me. I thought I was doing pretty well, living like that, until a sweet gray bunny came along and dragged me into a wild otter chase.”

The thought of Nick being left behind by so many mammals during his life made Judy’s heart ache. Judy knew he hadn’t had many animals to rely on in his life. Bringing her other paw away from the back of his neck, she cupped the other side of his muzzle. Pulling his snout down, she let their noses rest together. The wetness of Nick’s nose felt strange, but Judy didn’t let it bother her. Closing her eyes, she inhaled his scent. “I'm not going anywhere, Slick. You're stuck with me. No matter how many arguments we might have, I’m not going to walk out on you. I might need to go and cool down for a while, but I'm always going to come back.”

Nick panicked briefly as Judy pulled his muzzle down, wondering if this would be the moment
he’d get to kiss her. Instead, she’d brought their noses together. The sweetness of the action made the tod close his eyes, his tail wagging. Paws rubbing her back, he smiled at her words. Being stuck with Judy didn’t sound bad at all. No matter how sweet her words were though, no matter how much she meant it, Nick knew it would take more than that for his insecurities to be dealt with. Judy had told him countless times nothing was going on between her and Bandit, and yet look at what had happened. “I appreciate that, but-“

“I know.” Judy interrupted. “Just saying it isn't enough.” She would have to find a way to show Nick she wasn’t going to leave, to let him see for himself that she was here to stay. The bracelet around her wrist gave her hope, gave her an idea.

“I’ve never put as much faith and trust in another mammal before you, and it's scary Fluff. The thought of losing you, of losing my new life.” Nick shook his head, inadvertently giving Judy an Eskimo kiss. With his eyes still shut, Nick found comfort in the darkness. He could feel Judy holding his muzzle still, could smell her all around him. It soothed his nerves. She wanted him to open up to her, to talk to her. He’d start now. “Everything changed after dad died. Before, we had a great life; we were comfortable, happy, and complete. Then dad was taken from us and my life just spiraled from there, until you came along. You’ve given me back some of the stability I’d lost, and the very idea of losing that, of ending up back on the streets.” Nick inhaled sharply, sucking in more air and more of Judy’s scent. He didn’t want to end up back on the streets, didn’t want to return to the loneliness, the cold, the hunger and the fear. “Those first few years out there were the worst. I hardly slept, too consumed with terror, too frightened that someone would harm me. The guilt of conning mammals out of their cash was crippling and the shame of being on the streets… sometimes it was too much.”

“You’re safe now. No one can hurt you.” The thought of Nick being hurt, especially when he’d been a kit, made Judy’s blood run cold. She’d had a lot of nightmares after Catstro had been iced, and some of them had included the caracal hurting Nick. Those nights had been the worst. “You did what you had to to take care of your mom.”

“I know that now.” Nick knew there were several mammals out there that still had a grudge against him, but he’d been able to avoid them and not anger them further. Once he graduated and become a cop, they wouldn't be able to touch him. “I should've found a better way to take care of mom, though.”

Opening her eyes, Judy pulled back a little. Nick, losing the contact with Judy, opened his eyes too. Emerald and violet met. “You were twelve, Nick. The fact that at twelve years old you felt you had to go and do all of that breaks my heart.” Judy felt like no twelve-year-old should ever feel like they had to hustle on the streets to make money.

“Mom didn't have dad anymore, I had to mammal up and fill his boots.” Nick’s father had been the leader of the house, and when he’d died Nick had felt the need to prove to his mom that he was capable and responsible, that he could be just as good a mammal as his dad.

“You were a kit, Nick. No one expected you to fill your father’s boots, least of all your mom.” Judy's shoulder’s dropped, expression softening. Bringing their noses together again, she shut her eyes once more. “You’ve turned everything around, though. In a few short months, you’re going to be Officer Wilde.”

Nick chuckled nervously, mirroring his bunny by shutting his eyes again too. It was a massive undertaking, becoming a cop, and though Nick was excited for the next chapter of his life, he was worried too. Nick would be the first fox officer. The mammals that he had lived on the streets with would be even more apprehensive of him now. Nick had dirt on them all and though he’d told
Finnick to spread the word that he wouldn’t spill any secrets unless he were given a reason to, Nick knew that plenty of mammals out there would see him as a threat, and might try to harm him, to remove him from the picture. “That terrifies me too.”

“Nah, you’re made for it.” Judy stroked the sides of Nick’s muzzle. Nick had proved to her during the night howler case that he had the skills to be an officer, and Judy knew he had the heart for it too. Bringing their conversation back to the main point, Judy stopped smoothing her paws over Nick’s muzzle, instead ducking away from their current position to tuck herself under Nick’s snout, wrapping her arms around him. “Is there anything I can do, to prove to you that I’m not going anywhere and that you won't lose everything you’ve gained?”

Resting his muzzle atop Judy’s head, Nick appreciated Judy’s offer, but he knew there was little she could do to help. “No, it's something I need to work through.”

Disagreeing, Judy pulled back from their embrace enough to look up at the tod. “It’s something we need to work through. We’re a team, Nick, partners. We have each other's back. If there's anything I can do just tell me and I'll do it, no matter what it is.” Judy would walk to the ends of the earth for Nick, and she would do whatever it took to make him realize that.

“That's a dangerous thing to say.” Nick knew how powerful words were. On the streets, when mammals had nothing to their name, their word was the most important thing they had.

Holding Nick’s gaze, Judy refused to back down. “I trust you.”

Feeling the weight of Judy’s words, Nick thought about it. There wasn’t really anything she could do to make him realize that she wasn’t going to leave. Thinking rationally, she was already doing an awful lot for him. She’d stuck around so far, had brought him home, which Nick now knew was a big deal, and had done everything in her power to make life easier for him. However, there was one thing that might help. Nick took a deep breath. “There's one thing…”

“Name it.” Judy’s quick response left no room for doubt or questions.

Licking his lips, Nick thought about his request. It wasn’t a lot, and he didn’t believe it was unreasonable, but perhaps it would help him work through his insecurities. “Can you be honest with me, about everything? Don't hide things from me, even something as inconsequential as grabbing lunch with Bandit, or our parents having dinner. I trust you, I do, but having things hidden from me hurts and makes those old defense mechanisms rear their ugly head. I wish it didn’t, but until I can work through it all, wrap my head around it and start dismantling those old mechanisms, knowing you’re not hiding anything from me will help. I don't need a play by play of your day, I don’t need to know where you are every second, that’s not healthy, but if something might have an effect on me, then I’d like to know about it.”

Judy knew Nick’s request wasn’t unreasonable, figured if she were in his position she’d want the same too. Nodding, she agreed. “I promise. I'm sorry again. It was so stupid of me to hide lunch from you. I never meant to hurt you, but I know you don't like him. I thought it would be easier not to say anything, to not mention it, I guess I didn't really consider how that would look.” Judy’s lips pulled down, small frown lines marring her face. “This is all new to me, having a best friend. I've cared about mammals sure, but never as much as I care about you. I don't know what I'm doing half the time, I'm winging it, trying to work out what I'm supposed to be doing. I've spent my whole life focusing on my career, crossing it off my goals list, wanting nothing more than to be Officer Hopps and make the world a better place, have mammals see that a bunny can do everything any other mammal can do. I've never had the chance to make a proper connection with someone, to have a best friend. I know it doesn't excuse my actions, but I hope it helps you understand why I did what I did.”
Nick nodded. He could relate. “That makes two of us. I was so engrossed in hustling, in making enough money to keep Catstro away from my mom, that I never bothered making any actual friends.” It had been hard to make friends when his life had revolved around making money. No mammal wanted to be friends with a fox, let alone a fox who could possibly take their money from them because they were desperate. Nick had never stolen from the mammals he’d worked with, though. They always received their fair share.

“You know everyone.” Judy reminded the fox, remembering how he’d smugly informed her of the fact when she’d hustled him.

“You’re right, I know everyone, but none of them are my friends.” Nick clarified. He’d worked with Finnick for a while, had a stronger bond with the fennec than he’d ever had with any of his previous partners, but he couldn’t really call the other fox a friend. He was a business partner, not a confidant.

Knowing Nick’s concerns, knowing he’d confided in her, Judy felt it was time to return the favor. “You know how you said that you’re scared of losing me? Sometimes, I'm afraid of losing you too, that once you have your life in order, you’ll ditch me.” It was a very real issue for Judy. She was putting a lot on the line to give Nick a chance, to give him everything he’d missed out on during his twenty years on the streets. Though her fear was nowhere near the same level as Nick’s, it was still there.

Moving a paw, Nick stroked it down Judy’s ears once again. Bonnie and Stu had alerted him to the fact that Judy might feel the same, so he was prepared for her to raise the issue. Responding in the same way Judy had to his need, Nick soothed her. “Then what do I need to do in return, to make you see I'm not going anywhere either?”

“You’re here, that’s all I need.” Judy knew Nick’s continued presence in her life would be a huge reassurance and that once he graduated and stayed with her, then her fears would ease.

“Carrots…” There had to be something the tod could do to ease Judy’s worries, and the fox needed her to tell him so they could move forward.

“Just, tell me how you’re feeling, come to me when you're upset or confused, when you’re angry or happy. That's all I want, for you to confide in me. I know trusting someone is hard for you, but you need to open up too. We both need to work on communicating with one another.” Judy found something Nick could do for her.

Nodding, Nick figured it was something he could try and do for her. It wasn’t some ridiculous request, and Nick knew that if Judy was going to try and be honest with him, keep him in loop, then the least he could do was open up to her in return. “I think you’re right. A lot of our issues could've been solved had we talked it out.”

Offering Nick a reassuring smile, Judy moved her paws to the back of Nick’s neck once again, playing with the fur there. The tod kept his arms around her waist, keeping her close. Judy had an idea, and though she wasn’t sure how Nick would take it, whether he’d agree with it, she offered it up anyway. “I know that your issues with Bandit are rooted in your fear that I'll leave, that he'll snatch me from you. While that's nowhere near the truth, I know you can't just turn those feelings off. But, would you consider meeting Bandit, getting dinner with Bandit, Akita, and I next time you're home? Perhaps meeting him yourself might help, let you see for yourself that nothing is going on, that he's so totally enamored with Akita and that you're stuck with me.”

Rolling the idea around, Nick wasn’t sure how comfortable he felt meeting Bandit. “Do you think that would help?”
“That's for you to decide. I'm not a psychiatrist, I can't say for sure. I don't think it would hurt to try, though.” Judy didn’t want to make the decision for Nick. This was important, something that could help him overcome his fears. Judy hoped that once Nick met Bandit for himself, he would no longer see the arctic fox as a threat.

Taking a deep breath, Nick continued to think about it. On one paw, meeting Bandit would help him gain a better understanding of the mammal, scope him out for himself, but on the other paw, he was concerned about how he’d react to the sight of the arctic, whether it would just further cement his issues.

“You don't have to make a decision now, there's plenty of time.” Judy gave Nick an out. She knew it was an important decision, and it would probably be a while until Nick would be allowed home again.

Not wanting the moment to pass, not wanting to risk forgetting about it when he was back at the academy, Nick made his decision. “No, you're right. I pulled a Julian and judged him before knowing him. I'm not sure whether it would help or not, but there's no harm in trying, right?” Judy opened her mouth to respond but the tod cut her off. “I swear if you quote Gazelle right now…”

Judy laughed, and the sound pulled a snort from the tod. Both mammals appreciated the momentary relief, and soon Nick found himself laughing along with his country bunny. He hadn’t been a big Gazelle fan before Judy had shoved her way into his life, but now he couldn’t escape the pop star’s music. Laughter subsiding, Judy was the first to speak. “Thank you for keeping your promise, by the way. I heard you calling Billy and George idiots.” Judy willingly gave up the information, not wanting to keep it from Nick. She was going to start actively trying to keep him informed.

Nick swallowed. If Judy had heard him calling Billy and George idiots, then it stood to reason that she’d listened to the rest of the conversation too. “You did?”

“Big ears, remember?” Judy removed a paw from behind Nick’s neck, gesturing to her ears. She’d kept them down, not wanting to smack Nick in the face with them. That, and when they were smoothed down, he was more likely to stroke them. Hearing Nick tell Billy and George that they wouldn’t get to date her, that they’d been fools for tearing down her hopes and dreams instead of encouraging her, it had been the single sweetest thing any mammal had done for her. “I would've throttled them if it weren't for you shooting them down.”

Recalling how he’d gripped the stall when Billy and George had thrown the offensive slur at Judy, Nick grit his teeth. “I was close to, when they…”

“Called me a predo. I could see you refraining.” Judy finished Nick’s sentence. The slur still hurt, but the doe knew that if she and Nick were to get together, she’d be hearing it a lot more. Judy was trying not to give the word power over her. There was one other element of Nick’s smack down that the doe wanted to touch on. “You let them think we’re together, alluded to it.”

“Yep, she heard the rest of the conversation.” Nick swallowed, feeling nervous. He’d been trying to get them to back off, to leave Judy alone, and he figured the one guaranteed way to get that to happen was to let them think he was dating her. “I’m sorry. That was high-pawed of me.”

“Don’t apologize. It made them give up. Besides, it’s not the first time I’ve had that slur thrown at me.” Since the incident with the coyote, Judy had been subjected to it a few more times. Once when she had been grabbing coffee one morning for her and Wolford, before they went out on patrol, and again in the aisle of the local supermarket, when she’d been reaching with her right paw for some rhubarb.
Guilt swept through Nick, and the tod kicked himself again for not realizing the abuse she’d receive for wearing it. “I’m so-“

“I swear if you apologize one more time I’ll kick your butt.” Judy cut him off. Nick needed to stop saying he was sorry. She wasn’t angry with him, not in the slightest. He’d managed to get Billy and George to leave her alone, and it didn’t matter to her if they thought she was a predo.

“I’d like to see you try, Fluff.” Nick appreciated the change of mood, and he offered his bunny a grin. He’d seen the video of her taking down a rhino, knew she was more than capable, but he was a sly fox, a former street mammal, if there was one thing Nick was good at it was evading cops.

“I took down a rhino, Slick. You’d be a piece of cake. Though, you have filled out a little since I last saw you.” Splaying her paws on Nick’s chest, she enjoyed the way his muscles felt under her paws. Sliding one paw up to his shoulder she swept it down his arm, admiring the quiet strength she could feel there.

Judy’s paws on his body were doing wicked things to Nick’s imagination, and he had to stifle a groan as she felt him up. She really would be the death of him. “Is that your way of calling me fat?” He aimed for humor, hoping to distract Judy from her current fondling.

Snorting, Judy grinned up at Nick, her paws stopping their exploration. “No, Slick. More like healthy, and strong. Don’t think I haven’t noticed how shiny your fur is, either.”

Years on the streets had taken their toll on his body, but knowing that Judy had spotted it too served as a reminder that the doe was keeping an eye on him. She thought she was smart, filling the freezer with his favorite food, gently encouraging him to eat all the time, but the tod knew Judy had cottoned on to his odd eating habits, that she was trying to fix them. It was another reason he loved her. Judy noticed the little things and tried to fix those too. “She’d probably try and singlehandedly fix every mammal’s problems if she was given a chance.” He shook his head fondly. “Three square meals a day will do that to a mammal, Carrots.” Nick had noticed the changes too. He was sleeping better; feeling better, had more energy and a spring in his step. After he had graduated, when he got to sleep in his own bed and eat more of Judy’s cooking, he knew it would get even better.

Bringing her paws to his chest again, Judy started to play with the collar of his shirt. “Now for the tricky part.” She took a deep breath, hoping to lead them back to the topic of Nick making Billy and George think they were a couple, back to the subject of them. “You know, this whole trust and honesty thing is a two-way street, right?”

Perplexed, Nick nodded. “Of course, I wouldn't expect it to be any other way.”

“Now or never, Judy. Time to pull on your big bunny panties.” Raising her right arm, Judy brought her bracelet into the line of sight between them. “You should’ve told me about this, Nick. I wish you had told me how important my bracelet is when you gave it to me. I wish you hadn’t kept something so serious from me.” Judy felt Nick tense, watched as he looked at her bracelet, his eyes widening as his pupils contracted. “It’s been driving me crazy for months. No one would tell me anything. Wolford was surprised, but he kept shhtum. Bandit laughed, said it was about time. It was infuriating, knowing I was wearing something that was obviously important, that held a deep meaning, but being completely unaware of what it was.” Dropping her arm, Judy placed her paw on Nick’s arm, holding him. He still had his arms around her, and the doe was grateful she had him penned in against the bench. Nick was looking decidedly twitchy, agitated, and she could see his chest rising and falling quickly. Violet met emerald, and Judy came clean. “Gideon told me what it is this afternoon, what it means.” Nick’s reaction was instantaneous. He started shaking, borderline hyperventilating, and Judy could hear his heart pounding.
Judy knew. She knew what the bracelet meant. “This is it. Judy might be attracted to you, but she might not love you enough to feel comfortable wearing it anymore.” The panic set in before Nick could stop it. Already strung out from the evening, it didn't take much to send Nick spiraling again. Screwing his eyes shut, he tried to stop himself, tried to halt the yip of distress. He failed.

Spurred into action, Judy let go of Nick’s arms, lifting her paws to cup his muzzle. “Nick. I'm here. Breathe. It's okay.” Tipping his head down, Judy felt his paws tighten on her back. Wincing as his claws dug in, she forced herself to continue reassuring him. Resting the underside of her chin on the end of his snout, she hoped her strong scent there would help. Paws rubbing along his muzzle she continued to coo softly. “You're alright, it's okay. Breathe. Nice and slow, take deep breaths.” Judy lifted a paw from Nick’s muzzle, reaching around. Grabbing one of his paws she gently pried it from her back, bringing it to rest on her chest, over her heart. “Breathe with me, come on.” She took a deep breath in, chest rising, and then let it out slowly, chest falling. She repeated the action several times, encouraging Nick to mimic her, to feel what she was doing.

Slowly, Nick’s breathing began to mirror Judy’s, her heartbeat beneath his paw, the rising and falling of her chest, and her scent in his nostrils all helping him, until the tod eventually pulled his emotions back into line. “Thank you.” He whispered, clearing his throat once he felt able to talk.

“I've got your back, remember?” Judy lifted her chin from Nick’s muzzle, pulling away so she could look at him. She kept his paw on her chest though, just in case he started to panic again.

“You can take it off. I understand. I shouldn't have kept its meaning from you.” Nick continued to whisper, eyes still screwed shut. No longer seeing it around her wrist would be torture for the fox, but Nick didn't want her to feel obligated now she knew it's meaning. It had been beautiful while it had lasted.

“Why on earth would I take it off? It's a gift from you.” The thought was so absurd to the doe that she wasn't she whether to be offended or not that Nick thought she'd be so callous. Even if she didn't return his feelings, she'd still wear it. Nick had bought it for her, had put love and time and thought into it. It was the most precious thing she owned.

Eyes opening, Nick shook his head, features soft and sad. “It's not just a gift, Carrots, it's-“

“A bonding bracelet. I know.” Judy put it out there, finally called it by its name. Nick inhaled sharply and, worried he would fall into another panic attack, Judy carried on, not giving him the chance. “I also know that you can only have one made in your lifetime and that you had it made for me. I know it holds an awful lot of weight for your species. I know too that it acts as a symbol to other canines, that the wearer is off the market, which we’re going to have a nice long discussion about later, but I'm not taking it off, Nick. I just want to understand why you felt like you couldn't tell me how important it is, why you hid that from me. It hurt me, knowing you were hiding all that.” While Judy had been ecstatic to learn that her fox loved her, that she was so important to him, when she’d been changing for the barn party she had time to think. Knowing now what she did about the bracelet, she was hurt that Nick hadn't felt comfortable telling her about it, telling her what it really meant. She still would’ve worn it, would’ve probably pounced on Nick right then and there and smothered him in kisses. They'd lost so much time already because they hadn't talked about their feelings, had been stuck in some weird mating dance.

Watching Nick flounder as he struggled to give her answers, seeing the fear in his eyes, Judy pressed a kiss to the side of his muzzle, dangerously close to his lips. She never wanted to see that fear in his eyes again. “We’ll shelve this conversation for now because it's late and I know you’re feeling emotionally drained. We’ll pick it back up tomorrow because I'd like some answers. For now, though, sleep is calling.”
Grateful for Judy's thoughtfulness, and dizzy from her kiss, Nick nodded. He wanted to talk to her about the bracelet, knew he needed to, but he couldn't right now. Letting her help him up from the bench, he followed her back into the warren, back through the kitchen and the dining room, twisting and turning down the hallways until they reached her bedroom. He was tired, emotionally drained, and he needed to clear his head for tomorrow, think about how he was going to tell her everything about the bracelet. Ditching his shirt and swapping his evening pants for his sleep ones, Nick didn't even stop to consider the fact he was changing in front of Judy. The doe had done the same, turning her back to him while she removed her dress, slipping on her PJ's. Yawning as he climbed into bed, Nick soon had his favorite bunny in his arms, snuggling close. Paws stroking her smooth ears, Nick closed his eyes, focusing on her scent. He was exhausted, so many feelings and emotions coursing through him that he'd thought he'd long since boxed away. Tightening his hold on Judy, he felt her nuzzle against him. It would take him a while to properly sort through his feelings, but tomorrow he'd give her answers, tomorrow he'd tell Judy that he loved her, that he wanted her as his mate. “No more secrets, Wilde. No more running away from your feelings.”
Now or Never - Part One

Chapter Notes

Here's part one of the chapter you've all been waiting for. No funny business anymore, no roadblocks. Hand on Judy's badge it's happening.

I commissioned The Winter Bunny over on deviantart to make a cover for this fic, and I gave her a very basic idea of what I was looking for. She blew it out of the water. Ohmygosh I'm in love. Honestly, go check out her deviantart and leave her some love, she worked so hard on this for me and it's BEAUTIFUL.

I hope y'all love the cover as much as I do! :-D

Stretching, Judy felt sleep fading away. It hadn't taken her long to fall asleep after crawling into bed with Nick last night, their disagreement and subsequent discussion exhausting her. Nick was a pretty great pillow, too, though the doe would never tell him that. Reaching out as she woke, Judy felt around for her fox. Coming up empty, she snapped to attention. Sitting up, anxious violet eyes searched the bed. Nick was nowhere to be seen. As Judy prepared to get up and find him, worried he'd had another panic attack and disappeared, the new addition to her nightstand stopped her in her tracks. There, next to her phone, sat a bouquet of white tulips and hydrangeas, with a small scrap of paper propped up against the vase. Reaching for the note, Judy snatched it up, bringing it closer so she could read it.

"Flowers are pretty, and I'd never say no to them."

Underneath her quote from one of her many phone calls with Nick, a heart had been scrawled, followed by an ‘N.’ Unable to stop her stupid grin, and her ears from drooping at the sweetness of the gesture, Judy slipped out of bed, leaning over her nightstand to bury her nose amongst the sweet smelling flowers. "Oh Slick. You’re such a gentlemammal." Tucking the note in her suitcase for safekeeping, Judy changed quickly, throwing on some jeans and a blouse. Paw brushing across the soft petals of the beautiful new bouquet, Judy forced herself to go and find her fox.

Bounding through her family home, she followed her nose, tracking Nick’s movements. It was still early, too early for her siblings to be awake yet. Judy briefly wondered how long Nick had been awake, and where he'd managed to find such beautiful flowers. “He probably knows someone.” Moving through the dining room, Judy could hear her mom and Nick in the kitchen. Taking the stairs two at a time, she found Nick stood by the island counter, her mom making breakfast while the pair of them chatted.

“Hey, bun-bun.” Bonnie had heard her daughter’s approach, a benefit of having large ears. Turning from her spot at the stove she crossed to Judy, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

“Hey, mom.” Judy accepted the kiss, watching as her mom returned to the stove before breakfast ended up a burnt mess. Eyes turning to Nick, she found the tod looking at her without his usual lazy grin. Instead, there was a new softness to the expression he wore. “Hey Slick.” Judy moved around the counter as Nick took a step towards her. He’d swapped the plain shirts he’d been wearing all weekend for one of his usual Pawaiian ones, throwing on a tie to go with it. Judy
smiled, having missed seeing her fox in his trademark shirts. Reaching up, she pulled him down for a hug, arms wrapping around his neck.

Returning Judy’s embrace, Nick inhaled deeply, enjoying the way her scent flooded his nostrils. Her scent was so much stronger in the mornings. “Hey Fluff, sleep well?” Paws rubbing Judy’s back, Nick kept her in his embrace.

“I did, thanks. Didn’t like waking up without you though.” Voice muffled slightly by the fur peeking out of the collar of Nick’s shirt, Judy tightened her hold on him. She’d been worried, waking up to find him gone. Nick’s panic attacks were a new thing to Judy, and she had to question whether he’d alerted the medics at the academy about it. Once he graduated and joined her at precinct one, he’d have to keep the on-site doctor updated, have it noted on his record that he occasionally suffered from them. Judy only hoped that it wouldn’t become a cause for concern and that it wouldn’t leave her and Nick saddled with desk duty. Having a panic attack out on the beat or in the field wasn’t ideal, regardless of the fact that Judy seemed to be able to calm him relatively quickly.

“Sorry, I woke up early and then bumped into Julian, followed by your mom.” Nick explained, soothing Judy’s worries. Nick had been awake for a few hours, thoughts of the impending conversation about Judy’s bracelet making it difficult for the tod to fall asleep again. Rather than driving himself crazy in bed, Nick had decided to get up and start the day. As he’d stepped out onto the back porch and looked out over the fields surrounding the Hopps warren, he’d had the idea of getting Judy some flowers, recalling their phone call when she’d mentioned delivering flowers to a deer who’d gotten into an argument with her partner.

Having started to descend the steps off the porch, ready to go and search for a nice bouquet, Nick had been surprised by Julian’s sudden appearance behind him. “Rumour has it you and Ju got into a doozy of an argument last night.” The buck had opened the conversation. Sadly confirming it, Nick had explained that it had all been down to miscommunication, but that they’d talked about it and now he was hoping to find her some flowers to make her smile. Julian had thrown a set of farm cart keys at him. “Four fields over, mom has a flower patch. Choose wisely.” With that the buck had disappeared back into the warren, leaving Nick with the sense that they’d never be the best of friends, but they would be civil to one another for Judy’s sake. When Julian had first joined him on the back porch, Nick had half expected him to pull a taser, to threaten him and demand he leave, especially considering the fact he knew about his disagreement with Judy the night before. It had been a pleasant surprise not to be threatened, not to have an anti-fox device wafted in his face.

As he’d returned from his excursion to the field, flowers in paw, Nick had found Bonnie in the kitchen. The doe had offered him a vase, given the fur on his head an affectionate ruffle, and then had gone back to her cooking. Nick had appreciated how she hadn’t brought up last night. He was feeling better this morning, lighter for having shared his story with Bonnie and Stu, for having come clean with Judy about how he bottled up his feelings, how he was frightened of losing her. Nick knew there was still a long way to go, that he’d probably still suffer from the fear of losing Judy for quite some time, but he could work through it with her now.

The mention of her brother put Judy on edge. “Julian?” Julian had seemingly come around a little last night, had said he was willing to try and be civil with Nick because he wanted Judy to be happy. However, the doe hadn’t factored in how the two would act around one another without her there to mediate. Julian could be hot-tempered when it suited, and Judy knew that Nick relied on jibes and sarcasm when faced with situations he wasn’t comfortable in. Putting the two of them together could only spell trouble.

Feeling the tension in Judy’s body, Nick sighed. It hadn’t been the worst encounter Nick had ever
had, but it certainly wasn’t the best either. While picking the flowers for Judy, desperately trying to remember the meanings so he wouldn’t screw it up, Nick had tried to formulate a plan, a way to get Julian to like him a little more and be more accepting. In the end, he’d settled on simply showing Julian that he was a good mammal. After all, actions spoke louder than words. If Julian could see how much Nick cared for Judy, how he looked out for her and loved her, then the buck wouldn’t have a leg to stand on. “Don’t worry; we didn’t kill each other.”

“Please don’t joke about that,” Judy begged, shaking her head. Her father’s prejudice had been bad enough, but she’d believed Julian to be better than that. Her brother had threatened to hurt Nick on Friday night. Judy wasn’t sure she could live with the guilt if any of her family members decided to harm her fox. As it stood, she was grateful her mom and dad had ensured Pop-Pop wasn’t staying with them for the weekend. When she’d arrived on Friday morning to find him sitting in his usual chair in the living room, she’d been terrified. Judy hadn’t wanted Nick to experience her Pop-Pop’s hatred, hadn’t wanted her fox to feel unwelcome or unsafe in her family home. Bonnie had pulled her aside, informed her that he was only with them for the morning before he would be heading back to his own warren, where he’d stay for the rest of the weekend. So far they hadn’t run into him, the barn party wasn’t really Pop-Pop’s scene, but she had a sinking feeling in her gut that he’d turn up for the closing ceremony, that seeing Judy with Nick would send the old rabbit off on an angry tirade.

“It’s cool, we’re cool. I think. It was a very short conversation.” Nick clarified. Julian had been a little hostile towards him, but it hadn’t been anything major. The force with which he’d thrown the keys had been a little excessive, and his aim had been decidedly below the belt, but Nick’s quick reflexes had meant he’d been able to snatch the keys before they’d connected with his groin. The news that the disagreement between him and Judy had already spread to a few members of the Hopps family didn’t surprise the tod, but what had surprised him was how he hadn’t been chased out with pitchforks yet. “Maybe I’ve actually won a lot of them over.”

Thankful that her brother hadn’t attacked Nick, that he seemed to be all in one piece, Judy settled against him, tucked securely under his muzzle. “Thank you for my flowers.” She whispered, shutting her eyes as she enjoyed the sound of his thudding heartbeat. It had been a lovely surprise, to wake up to a bouquet of white tulips and hydrangeas, the flowers of forgiveness and gratefulness. Not only that but to know that Nick paid attention to everything she said in their phone calls and was able to quote it back to her filled her heart with joy.

Shrugging as best as he could with his country bunny in his arms, Nick gave her a gentle squeeze. “Eh, you’re welcome. I had to walk all the way to town for them.” He lied, a little embarrassed that he’d spent an hour on his paws and knees in a field picking the best ones for her. “Do you think Major Friedkin would count that as my morning cardio?” He mused, distantly aware of the fact his training regime had been slipping over the weekend, and he’d been eating a very different diet than the one provided at the academy. Major Friedkin would probably make him run a marathon when he got back, just to make sure he could still do it, all the while looking pleased with herself for finding something to torment him with.

As a cop, Judy had been taught how to be observant, how to eye up a mammal and deduce clues from their appearance. “Nick.”

“Yeah?” Nick spared a glance down to the rabbit against his chest.

Pulling back just enough so that she could look up at the tod and remain in his embrace, Judy smiled, trying her hardest not to laugh. “There’s dirt on your pants and your paws. You didn’t go into town.”
Grumbling as Judy caught him out, and unable to stop his grin as she started to laugh, he shook his head fondly. “Okay, you caught me, Officer. I found a field of flowers and picked a few for you.” It was still a partial lie. While Julian had recommended going to the flower patch and picking some for Judy, the tod wasn’t sure now if that were something Bonnie would be best pleased to hear. Though the doe was going about her business, fixing up breakfast ready for her kits, Nick knew she had her ears tuned in to their conversation.

As Judy’s laughter subsided the doe reached up, pushing herself onto the balls of her hind paws as she gently grasped Nick’s muzzle. Pressing a light kiss to his cheek, she gave the underside of his muzzle a light scritch. “You’re adorable. Thank you.” No mammal had ever brought Judy flowers before, not even the few bucks she’d been on dates with. Nick was the first mammal to give her flowers, and he’d given her two bouquets this weekend. “You’re setting a dangerous precedence, Slick.”

Heart thudding at Judy’s kiss, Nick smoothed a paw down her ears. “Don’t mention it, Carrots.” If bringing her flowers made her happy then Nick would bring her flowers every time he came home, and when he graduated he’d be sure to gift her a new bouquet every week.

Having been quietly listening in to the conversation between Nick and her daughter, Bonnie was grateful she was facing the stove as she grinned. Nick and Judy were back to being affectionate with one another, and Bonnie was preparing to lay the foundations for their talk this evening. She’d sent a quick message to Marian last night, and the vixen had called her back immediately, wanting to know everything that had gone on. Safe out of earshot, Bonnie had filled her in on the weekend’s events thus far, including Nick and Judy’s little tiff. The vixen had sighed sadly at the news of their argument, but hearing that they’d talked it out on the back porch had reignited the excitement in her that her baby would soon pull his head out of his tail and tell Judy that he loved her.

“Breakfast’s ready.” Bonnie didn’t want to interrupt, but she felt it was best to have Nick and Judy eat first, alone, and then spend the morning together. Though she was sure Sasha would ask for Nick when she woke, Bonnie knew Judy and Nick needed some alone time to gather themselves a little more after last nights fall out.

Taking their seats at the barstools at the island counter, both doe and tod licked their lips as Bonnie pushed a huge stack of pancakes towards them, along with their cutlery and all the accoutrements. “You’re spoiling me, Bonnie.” Nick complimented, letting Judy grab a pancake first before he followed suit.

Leaning against the counter, Bonnie watched as Nick and Judy loaded up their pancakes with fruit and sugar. She noticed that Judy kept stealing glances at Nick’s food before she leaned across, picking up another pancake, which she deposited onto his plate, along with another pawful of blueberries. Nick turned to Judy, lifting an eyebrow. Judy simply grinned in response before returning her attention to her own food. As Nick put a piece of pancake into his mouth, Bonnie turned back to the stoves. Keeping her tone serious, she couldn’t help but tease the fox. “We’re fattening you up for the slaughter, dear. We need the main dish for the ceremony this evening.”

Caught off guard by Bonnie’s comment, Nick ended up inhaling the piece of pancake that had been in his mouth. “What?” Nick wheezed as he violently coughed, choking.

Reaching over, Judy started to thump Nick’s back, pushing her glass of water towards him. “Mom’s joking.” Judy shot a glare at her mom’s back while Nick took a sip of water, clearing his throat. He coughed a few more times, Judy’s thumps turning into slow rubs.

“I am.” Bonnie conceded, grabbing some plates from a cupboard. “We’re serving up Gideon instead.”
No longer choking on a piece of pancake, Nick set Judy’s glass of water back down, shooting her an appreciative look as she withdrew her paw from his back. “You’re an awful liar, Bonnie.” He shook his head as he turned to glance at Bonnie, who was now stacking plates on the island counter in front of them.

Pausing in her work, Bonnie looked up, catching Nick’s gaze. Lifting a paw, she pointed a finger at him, a playful smile on her lips. “Yeah, but I had you for a minute there, didn’t I?”

Chuckling, Nick graciously conceded. “You did, well done.” Nick was 99.9% sure that the rabbits of Bunnyburrow wouldn't serve up fox for dinner, they were vegetarians after all, but this whole experience was new to him. They could've told him they danced naked through the streets and indulged in mass orgies, and he'd probably have fallen for it. As Bonnie’s focus shifted back to preparing breakfast for her other kits, Nick turned his barstool so he could better see Judy, returning to his pancakes and blueberries. “So what’s the plan for today?”

“Well, there’s a parade this afternoon, followed by the closing ceremony,” Judy explained after swallowing her mouthful. The parade consisted of floats made by all the different families, and lots of treats were thrown out into the crowds. As a kit, Judy had collected as much candy as possible, having bags of it by the end of the parade. Unfortunately, she’d had to share the candy with her siblings most of the time.

“You want to go?” Nick asked. Personally, he didn’t mind what they spent their day doing; he’d happily follow Judy anywhere. It wasn’t like Nick knew what to expect either, with this being his first Carrot Day Festival. The tod silently hoped it wouldn’t be his last and that it would become a tradition for him and Judy to visit from the city every year for it. Maybe next time he’d ask if he could bring his mom along too. She’d love it.

“We could put in an appearance if you’d like?” Judy offered. The doe wanted to show her face at the two events, but she was very aware that she and Nick needed to talk, and the longer they spent at the day’s events, the less time they’d have to chat. Judy also knew that the weekend was busy, and though she was used to be constantly on the go and attending everything, she was worried Nick might burn out. It wasn’t like he could recover once he made it back to the academy, as Major Friedkin would no doubt force him straight back into training the moment he arrived tomorrow morning.

“Oh, bun-bun, before I forget, your dad and I would like you and Nick to come home and watch over the warren during the closing ceremony.” Bonnie set the plan into action, remembering how they’d suggested the idea to Nick the night before, even though she and Marian had been cultivating the plan for weeks now. She figured Judy would be more likely to go along with it if she was the one to suggest it. Bonnie kept her back to Judy though, busying herself with her prep work. If she turned around, she knew her observant daughter would be able to tell that she was plotting something.

Groaning, Judy pouted. “Are you kidding me? Mom, the fireworks are the best bit!” She protested. Bunnyburrow went all out for the closing ceremony, and the fireworks were the most spectacular part of the evening. Judy felt like a little kit again every time she watched them, oohing and ahhing as they exploded above her in a cacophony of color.

“You’ll be able to watch them from the back porch.” Bonnie pointed out. Though there was a line of trees in the distance, behind the fields that bordered the warren, Nick and Judy would have an unobstructed view of the night sky and the fireworks.

“But Nick’s here, he should get to experience the closing ceremony,” Judy argued. It wasn’t fair on Nick, as their guest, to be forced into watching the warren with her instead of joining in the
Realizing that Bonnie was following through with the idea they’d hatched the night before, Nick seized the opportunity to reassure Judy. “It’s alright Fluff, I don’t mind. We still get to watch them from the back porch.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Judy put down her cutlery, her plate now clean as she looked at her fox, gauging his reaction.

“Nah, not at all,” Nick reassured his country bunny, throwing a pawful of blueberries into his maw. Judy sighed, conceding with a nod. “So long as you’re happy.” She watched as Nick finished his mouthful of blueberries, putting his own cutlery down now that his plate was clean too. Rising, Judy collected their dishes, crossing the kitchen to the many dishwashers. With Judy suitable distracted, Nick cleared his throat, making Bonnie turn around. He caught her gaze, mouthing his thanks. The doe smiled warmly, nodding her head.

When the dishes had been put in the dishwasher, and Judy was sat back on her barstool, Bonnie wiped her paws on a kitchen towel. “Now bun-bun, your dad and I picked you and Nick up a little something.” Surprised, Judy turned to her mom, watching as she started to make her way to the stairs down to the dining room. “Mom, you never buy presents for us on the last day.”

“Shush. We wanted to treat you both.” Bonnie admonished. Truth told, she and Stu had wanted to get Nick and Judy a little housewarming gift. Marian had explained to them about the blankets, how she’d purposefully gifted them blankets in the others fur colour. Not wanting to appear like she didn’t care, Bonnie had insisted on getting something for them too. It was better for her to give them their presents now before the rest of her kits woke and started to question where their presents were. Opening one of the tall cupboards in the dining room, Bonnie pulled out a medium-sized dark green box.

“Presents?” Nick whispered to Judy, not sure he was following.

“It’s tradition to give gifts to loved ones on the last day of the festival. With 312 of us, mom and dad don’t usually get us anything. It’s too expensive.” Judy explained, watching as her mom climbed back up the stairs to the kitchen, box in paw.

“Now it’s not a lot but…” The doe shrugged, offering the box out to Nick and Judy. Judy let Nick take it, wanting him to be the one to open it. Judy wasn’t sure how many presents Nick had received in the past two decades, but the doe knew she was going to make it her personal mission to make up for all the birthday and Christmas treats he’d more than likely missed out on. She knew Nick wasn’t a material mammal, that things held no real value to him, so instead, she was planning on adventures, experiences they could share together, things Judy hoped would put a smile on his face and let him know just how much she loved him.

Nick placed the box down on the counter, curious as to the contents. Lifting the lid while Judy and Bonnie watched, he pushed aside the paper tissue hiding the gifts inside. Reaching in, Nick pulled out the first item – it was a shallow dish, the edges sloping upwards, and painted in the center was a carrot and a pawpsicle.

“I have a friend who makes pottery, and I took some inspiration from Judy’s beautiful bracelet when I asked her to make a little key dish for you both. It’s not a lot, but I figured it might stop you from losing your keys.” Bonnie explained, watching as Judy’s ears drooped, expression softening.
“Mom…” Judy breathed, turning to look at the doe.

“Your dad and I realize that we didn’t get you housewarming presents. Now we weren’t sure what you already have, so we played it safe.” Bonnie elaborated, gesturing to the box. There was still another gift in there, but she could see Nick would need a moment.

Faintly aware that Bonnie was speaking, that Judy moved to hug her mom, Nick continued to stare at the dish in his paws, thumbs running over the smooth surface. Bonnie had gone out of her way to have this made special for him and Judy before he’d even met her in person. Setting the dish down, Nick dipped his paw back into the box, this time removing a silver photo frame. Turning it over, the photo inside was what struck Nick the most. Bonnie had somehow managed to get hold of the photo of Nick and Judy in the entrance hall of the city gallery, and she’d slipped into the frame. Smiling, and touched by the doe’s kindness, Nick noted that the detail on the frame matched the detail along the bottom edge of the purple dress his mom had made for Judy, the dress she was wearing in the image. “Thank you, Bonnie.” Nick handed the frame to Judy as she drew closer, giving him the opportunity to embrace the Hopps matriarch.

“Oh, it’s no problem dear. They’re just small little things.” Bonnie returned Nick’s embrace, pleased that he seemed genuinely happy with the two gifts. Pulling back from their embrace, Bonnie grasped Nick’s forearms gently, looking between the fox and her daughter. “Now, why don’t you two go and enjoy your morning while I take care of the fluffle?”

Liking the idea, Nick helped Judy gather up their gifts, offering Bonnie another thank you before they headed back to Judy’s room. Nick contemplating starting the ball rolling, getting the conversation about Judy’s bracelet out of the way now, but Bonnie and Stu had given him the perfect opportunity this evening, and the tod would feel bad letting it go to waste.

Placing their gifts in her suitcase, Judy wondered how she was going to get everything home. She had her two flower bouquets also. While at work tomorrow Judy could leave her bag in the locker room. She’d have to find somewhere else for her flowers, though. Perhaps Clawhauser could look after them for her, they’d brighten up his workspace, and he’d ensure they were kept in water. As she went to close her bag, Judy remembered the note and key from Mr. Big. Producing the letter and the pouch she’d slipped the key into, she offered them out to Nick. “Okay, so as mom started the gift ball rolling, this is for you.”

“Carrots, you didn’t have to get me anything.” Nick gently scolded. He hadn’t been aware of the gift giving tradition and therefore had nothing to give his country bunny in return.

“Oh, it’s not from me. It’s from Mr. Big.” Judy enjoyed the look of shock on Nick’s face as he sat in the middle of her bed, folding his legs beneath him.

“What?!” Wide emerald eyes looked between the letter, pouch, and Judy. As the doe sat opposite him on the bed, folding her legs beneath her too, he gently took the items from her. Curious as to why Mr. Big had sent him a gift, and a little nervous as he tried to recall whether he’d done anything to wrong the arctic shrew recently, Nick started with the pouch. Opening it, a key tumbled into his paw.

“The letter explains it all.” Judy could see the confusion clouding Nick’s face, and she took the key from him when he held it out to her, his paws going for the note.

Unfolding the piece of paper, Nick began to read. He couldn’t stop the widening of his eyes as he mouthed the words written on the paper. Nick couldn’t believe it. Mr. Big had found a chunk of the money he’d paid Catstro, and he was giving it back to him. “I have a safety deposit box. With money in it.” The thought was so foreign to Nick, the words strange on his tongue. Looking up, he
caught Judy’s gaze as she hummed in confirmation. “How much is in it?” Nick had paid Catstro nearly the full $200,000 he’d borrowed, before the caracal’s demise.

“I don’t know,” Judy answered truthfully. She’d had the time to go look, and the key, but she’d refrained.

Blinking, Nick couldn’t understand why Judy didn’t know the amount in the safety deposit box. She had the key; surely she’d gone and checked? “What do you mean you don’t know? Didn’t you go and look?”

“No, Slick. It’s your account, your money. It’s none of my business.” Judy hadn’t wanted to risk standing on any hind paws by going and looking. The account wasn’t in her name; she didn’t have anything to do with earning the money that was in it. Sure she was curious, any mammal would be, but she wanted Nick to be the first mammal to open the box and count the contents.

Baffled by Judy’s response, Nick leaned forward towards the doe. “We live together, Carrots, what’s mine is yours. Of course it’s your business.” While endearing that Judy hadn’t been to look, that she didn’t think it was any of her concern, Nick wanted her to know that he would share everything with her, including the money. As Judy went to shake her head, to protest, Nick cut in and silenced her. “Whatever I have, I want to share with you.”

“You worked hard for this money, Nick. It’s yours.” Judy didn’t want to take anything from Nick. For so long he’d gone without, barely had any money to take care of himself. He could use the funds to buy all the things he’d ever wanted or save it for a rainy day. She didn’t want to influence his decisions in any way.

“Ours.” Nick corrected “We’re a team, remember?” Judy liked to peddle that line, and Nick was more than happy to use it against her now that the tables had been turned. “Will you go and check what’s in there when you get home, please? Let me know how much it is?” The thought of having any money, having some savings, was hard to process. He’d been living on a pittance for so long, and now he finally had some cash. Nick didn’t get ahead of himself, he still didn’t know how much was in the deposit box, but it was probably more than he’d ever had to his name before.

“Sure, I can do that.” Judy held the key tightly. She wasn’t sure about the protocol for gaining access to a safety deposit box, whether she’d be able to or not given that the box wasn’t in her name, but she had one of two keys needed for it, so surely that would be enough. If not, she’d simply ask Mr. Big.

“However much there is, can you draw out half of it for next time I come home, please? I want to give it to mom if that’s okay with you? We’ll save the other half.” Nick made up his mind. He knew his mom no longer had a mortgage, as he’d paid it off for her, and that her job made her enough to pay the bills every month and keep her fridge stocked, but Nick had borrowed a fair amount from her over the past few months that he needed to repay. He also wanted her to have a little nest egg of her own, maybe treat herself to a nice holiday, buy something she’d always wanted, or redecorate the house.

“Such a mommy’s tod.” Judy teased, reaching over to gently shove Nick’s knee. In all honesty, the fact Nick looked after his mom and did everything in his power to keep her warm, safe, and happy made Judy’s heart clench. The love and care he had for Marian made Judy wonder what it would be like should they start dating. What would it feel like to be on the receiving end of Nick’s love.

Folding the letter, Nick handed it back to Judy so that she could keep it with the key. He watched as Judy slid both into the pouch. “Says the daddy’s doe.”
“I can’t argue with that.” Judy chuckled, placing the pouch down on the bed next to her. “Now then.” Judy leaned down over the edge of her bed, rummaging around underneath it until she found the blue box she’d stashed under there when she’d arrived on Friday. Pulling it out, she lifted it up onto the bed as she sat back up. Holding it out, she offered it to the tod.

“Carrots, I didn’t get you anything,” Nick whined, taking in the big silver bow on top as he reached out for the offered item, pulling it onto his lap.

“You’re here, that’s all I need. Besides, we’re trying this whole not hiding anything thing.” Judy took a deep breath, knowing that the item inside had the power to cause another argument or bring them closer. She wasn’t sure how Nick would react, but she silently prayed the outcome would be good.

“You can keep surprises from me you know, they’re not surprises otherwise.” Nick pointed out, paws smoothing over the blue box as he plucked the bow from it. Leaning over, he placed it on Judy’s head. The bunny stared at him with an un-amused expression, and she looked so adorable that Nick couldn’t stop his grin, which in turn made Judy smile.

“Surprises are new bed sheets, or a freezer full of your favorite food. This is a lot more than that.” Judy reached up, plucking the bow from her head, wincing as the sticky underside of it tugged at her fur. With the silver item now in her paws, she played with it, swallowing nervously.

Perturbed by Judy’s demeanor, Nick lifted the lid from the box only to be met with a sea of shredded silver paper. Pushing it aside he found a photo album. The cover of the album was black, and embossed in silver scripture right in the middle sat the words ‘The Wilde Family.’

Judy had ummed and ahhed for ages about what to do with the front cover but in the end she’d kept it simple, wanting the focus to be on the photos inside and not the writing on the front.

Smoothing a paw over the cover, tracing the lettering, Nick looked up to find his favorite violet eyes. With a gentle nod of encouragement from his bunny, Nick opened the cover. Gaze falling to the page Nick inhaled sharply, caught off guard by the image he was seeing. His parents and his grandparents were stood together, right outside their family store. Dressed in their finest clothes, they were all smiling for the camera. Overwhelmed, Nick couldn’t pull his eyes from the picture. “Where did you get this?” He whispered, lifting a paw to trace over the image of his family, protected by a thin film of plastic.

“Remember when I mentioned that Wolford wouldn’t tell me anything about my bracelet? He made a comment about your family. I didn't know what he was talking about so when my shift ended and I got home, I did my homework.” Judy kept her gaze focused on Nick, watching his micro expressions, judging his reactions to her words. “1437 Dune Street, Sahara Square. I ended up a little lost trying to find it, but I got there in the end. I only went to have a look outside, it's still boarded up, but as I circled the building I spotted a small open window on the third floor. I shimmied up a drainpipe and managed to get in through it.” Judy came clean. She truly hadn’t intended to go inside, was content to simply look at the outside of the building and imagine what life would’ve been like all those years ago, how busy the store would’ve been. The building had looked structurally sound still, but Judy wasn’t an expert. The open window at the back of the building had proved too good an opportunity though, and Judy wasn’t sure if she’d have the chance to look around again. Her police training had helped her shimmy up the drainpipe, and with ease she’d slipped inside. Judy had briefly wondered whether it was considered breaking and entering, and when she’d later sought clarification online she’d discovered that by crossing the threshold without permission, even though the window was wide open, it was technically classed as breaking and entering.
“You went inside?” Nick looked up, a rush of emotions coursing through him. On one paw he was surprised Judy would do such a thing, that she’d break the rules to know more about his family, that she was so interested, but on the other paw, he felt as if she’d entered somewhere sacred to him, without at least letting him know first. It left him confused, unsure where he stood. He was touched that she wanted to know more but hurt that she’d gone behind his back and hadn’t simply asked him for information.

“I hadn't intended to, but I was curious. All I did was walk around, peek into a few rooms. It's like it's stuck in a time warp.” Judy recalled the layout, remembered how everything had been covered in thick layers of dust. Sewing machines and mannequins had been scattered around the back rooms, the front of the building still set up like a store, clothes hanging in the display cabinets, a little moth eaten but otherwise still fine. The office had been Judy’s favorite room, the big wooden desk taking centre-stage, the countless photos on the walls and the journals on the desk adding a more personal touch. Judy watched as Nick flicked to the next page, revealing a picture of his grandparents stood together inside the store. “I know it was wrong. Rather than Zoogling your family I should've asked you, should've been content with whatever information you’d give me, but Wolford’s comment got me thinking. I didn't want to upset you by asking too much, didn't want you to relive painful memories. I know it's hard for you to open up, and I just wanted to understand a little better.” Judy knew it was a pathetic reason, that she hadn't had any right to go snooping, but there hadn’t been any malicious intent behind her exploration.

“I would've told you, Carrots.” Nick murmured, pulling his gaze from the photo long enough to look up at the rabbit sat opposite him. He appreciated that Judy hadn't wanted to risk hurting his feelings and that she hadn’t wanted to possibly make him relive painful memories. However, he would’ve happily shared some of his better memories with her, told her everything she needed to know about his family. Nick couldn’t help but wonder what it was Wolford had said to Judy, and what she’d uncovered about his family. Nick knew that his family didn’t have a squeaky clean image.

“I know that now.” Judy dropped her head, paws continuing to play with the bow. “I should've spoken to you about it rather than looking into it alone. But we’re being honest with each other, and I want you to know that I did go inside the building, that I did look into your family.”

“You’re gung-ho, I know.” Nick flipped over the page, and all thoughts of being a little annoyed by Judy’s need to go snooping were eradicated. There, in the middle of the page, was a photo of him as a kit, being cuddled by his dad. The wave of sorrow that crashed over him contrasted with his excitement that Judy had found such a photo. The feelings had him fighting back tears. “Where did you get this?” He croaked, a paw moving to trace the outline of his dad's face. Nick hadn't had the chance to grieve once his father had passed. He’d locked up all of his feelings, shoved them into a box and forced himself to carry on. He’d had to be strong, had to be there for his mom as she’d fallen apart. It was a demon he knew he needed to face soon.

“It was in a frame, on the desk in the office.” Judy had noticed it on her second visit, and she'd recognized the emerald eyes of the sweet little kit the moment she'd picked up the frame. It had made her smile, and then it had made her cry. Nick had been so carefree back then, so unburdened, and Judy only hoped that she could help him get back to that, that one day he'd look as happy and carefree as he did in the photo. She couldn't bring his dad back, no matter how much she wanted to, but she could help him work through his baggage, help him free himself of it all. “After the first time, I went back regularly. All I did was walk through the rooms initially, but then I noticed photos scattered around. Some were a little damaged, so I started to collect them. I didn't want to risk them getting any worse, for them to be lost to time. I don't think I got them all, but I grabbed all the ones I could see. There were some pinned on notice boards, some in frames on the walls, and a few were in the safe.”
“You opened the safe?” Nick asked in disbelief. It was one thing to slip in through an open window, another entirely to crack the safe. Nick didn’t even think Judy knew how to break into one, and he didn’t feel like telling her it was a skill he’d acquired on the streets. Shuffling, he moved to sit with his back to the wall, stretching out his legs across Judy’s bed, using them to prop up the album.

“It was wide open, I promise. There was a stack of photos left inside.” Judy vowed. Breaking and entering a building was one thing, breaking into a safe was something she’d never feel comfortable doing. “I gathered as many photos as I could find and found a reputable mammal to restore them as best as possible for you.” Judy had tried not to disturb the inside of the building too much, hadn’t wanted to go rooting through the place. She’d only picked up the photos she could see. Judy was pretty confident there were others hidden away in drawers and boxes, though. It was why she’d had a few albums made, tucked them away for the future, and she’d left some space in the back of the one Nick held in his paws. Moving, Judy sat beside him, thighs touching as she glanced down at the album.

Nick continued to flick through the album, eyes drinking in all of the photographs, the pictures of his parents and grandparents, of his mom when she’d been pregnant. There were quite a few of him as a kit too. “I feel like I should be mad that you researched my family yourself, that you didn't think to ask me about them, but you found all these photos and had them restored for me.”

Sighing softly, Judy put down the bow, the once lovely decoration now a mangled mess of ribbon. “I know, and again I'm sorry.”

“I said that I feel like I should be mad, but I'm not. You found these photos, photos I thought were lost, and you had them restored for me, placed them in this album so I’d have them forever.” Moved by Judy’s gesture, Nick reached out, pulling her flush to his side so she could rest her head on his shoulder. Turning the page again, Nick found another photo of him and his dad, the pair of them sat at the desk that had been in his dad’s office. Smoothing his paw over the picture, Nick smiled sadly. “You know, I almost forgot what dad looked like.”

Head resting on Nick’s shoulder, Judy gazed at the photo. “I can see a lot of him in you.” She’d looked through all the photos when she’d been sorting them into piles, preparing them for the album once they’d been restored. She’d sought to create a theme, tried to come up with some sense of order, but in the end, she’d placed them where she’d felt they naturally went.

Nick had inherited his mother’s eyes, but he knew he took after his father more. It had been painful for his mom over the years, to look at him and see parts of her deceased husband. “You know, dad used to take me to the city gallery when I was a kit. It’s why I knew so much when we went. Dad was always talking about art, always telling me stories and giving me information about the artists. One time, when we went...”

Judy settled, making herself comfortable. She wanted to hear Nick’s story, wanted to learn more about his family from him, not from some Zoole result. Judy knew they would still have some issues, knew that one conversation wasn’t going to solve it all, but Judy knew where Nick’s problems stemmed from now. She could actively try and help him, try and reassure him, prove to him that she would never leave. Paw moving to her bracelet as Nick continued with his story, lost in the memory, Judy smiled. Tonight, when they were alone, she’d drop the mother of all confessions on him, prove without a shadow of a doubt that she’d never leave him, that Nicholas P. Wilde was stuck with her for all eternity.

The morning passed quickly. Once Nick had told the story of one of his trips to the gallery with his dad, Judy had asked multiple questions – What was your dad’s favorite painting? What’s your
favorite painting? Can we visit the gallery again when you’re next home? After, they’d headed out to the street parade. Jasmine and Sasha had met them there, and the fact Sasha was so small that she couldn’t see the parade floats had made the baby bunny cry. Hating her tears, Nick had scooped her up, sitting her on his shoulders so she would have an unobstructed view of the floats. Sasha had happily squealed her way through the parade, catching all of the candy thrown her way. Nick had even caught a few, passing them down to Judy. Judy had tucked herself against his side, and Nick had thrown his arm around her, pulling her in, holding her close and accepting the candy she kept plying him with.

Jasmine, phone in paw, had snapped a few pictures of the parade, and when she’d spotted her sister and Nick stood so close together, with little Sasha on Nick’s shoulders, she’d snapped a few photos of them together. Watching as her sister and Nick interacted, as Sasha sat happily on the fox’s shoulders, Jasmine had wondered what her sister’s kits would look like in the future. Would they be gray like her or reddish-orange like Nick? Would their ears be round or pointy? Would they have long, fluffy tails, or short cottony ones? Would they have a mix of all of the above? Ultimately, Jasmine didn’t care. She’d love her future nephews and nieces regardless. “Now if only the stupid idiots would confess their love.” Jasmine had thought, crossing her fingers, silently praying that everything would go to plan this evening.

When the parade had ended, and darkness had begun to fall, Nick had reluctantly handed Sasha back to Jasmine. The baby bunny had asked if they would be at the fireworks, to which Nick and Judy had exchanged a look. “No Cinnamon. Your mom asked us to keep an eye on the warren and the fields.” Nick had explained. Sasha had pouted, lower lip wobbling. “Hey.” Nick had soothed, tracing a finger down Sasha’s cheek. “Ju-Ju and I are going to watch the warren, make sure no fireworks get too close, but I’ll still be here in the morning if you’re up early.” Head bobbing happily, Sasha had promised to wake up early so she could say goodbye. Taking Judy’s paw in his, Nick had started to lead them back to the warren, the pair of them waving at the various members of the Hopps family that they passed en route.

Now, as they approached the Hopps warren, their pace slowed. “So, that talk we were going to have last night…” Nick broached the subject first. It was time to mammal up, to face the music and the conversation the pair of them so desperately needed to have. There was still a lot left unsaid between them, some issues that needed rectifying and Nick knew that he’d have to spill his feelings this evening, would have to tell Judy that he loved her. The idea made him want to run away and hide. After decades of not sharing his feelings, showing any vulnerability, he was about to open up entirely to the small bunny by his side.

“You want to do that now?” Judy didn’t want to rush Nick, didn’t want to force him to talk about it. Last night had been a lot for him, for both of them, and Judy wasn’t sure how much emotional conversation Nick would be able to deal with this evening.

Biting the bullet, Nick nodded. “No time like the present.” He wanted to get it over and done with, not sure how much longer he could contain his feelings. “Do I want to? No, not really. Do we need to? Yes, I think we do.”

“Back porch?” Judy asked as they climbed the few steps up to the front door. Nick nodded, not at all bothered where they had the conversation, but at least the back porch would enable them to watch the fireworks once they were done. Nick had no idea how long the conversation would go on for, or what the outcome would be, but the tod hoped that by the end of it he and Judy would come to an understanding, that the doe would know why other canines called her a predo and why the bracelet held so much meaning.

Paws wringing, Judy led them through the warren and out onto the back porch. They’d have an
unobstructed view of the fireworks from here later. In the distance, behind the fields that bordered her family home, the line of trees masked the chaos of the closing celebration, affording them some privacy, but the fireworks would travel up much further than the tops of the trees. Needing some light, Judy lit a few of the lanterns her mom liked to keep out on the porch. The soft, warm glow from them provided the doe with enough light to see Nick and pushed away the clawing darkness of the evening.

As Judy lit the lanterns, Nick made a beeline for the railings. Arms resting on it, he looked out over the fields behind the Hopps warren. “This is it, Wilde. You promised her you’d be more open with your feelings. You can do this.” Nick’s tail swished in agitation, palms feeling clammy as he swallowed, fighting back the chance of another panic attack. He had to keep it together, couldn’t afford to lose it again. Not only was it embarrassing, but Nick didn’t want Judy to have to soothe him through another episode. This evening was about her, about giving her the answers she deserved, answers Nick had purposefully withheld from her for months now. Fear started to creep in, the very real possibility that he’d overstepped and everything would fall apart, that he’d lose Judy for good.

Sensing Nick’s tension rising, Judy crossed to stand beside him at the railing. Lifting a paw, she let it rest on his arm. “Nick.” Judy called his name, pulling the tod’s attention to her. Nick looked down at the rabbit by his side and emerald met violet. Nick exhaled, body relaxing. “It’s okay.” Judy soothed, paw rubbing along Nick’s arm. “If you need a break at any point, if you feel like it's getting too much, please tell me.” The last thing she wanted was for Nick to suffer another panic attack, for it to stress him out more than necessary. It was something Judy would have to keep an eye on, but now that she’d witnessed it first hand, had helped soothe him through one; Judy knew what to look for.

Touched by Judy’s concern, and a little embarrassed that she’d been able to read him that quickly, Nick slapped on his usual lazy grin. “Nah I'm good, cool as a cucumber.” He lied, not ready to face the fact that his sudden onset of panic attacks, after years of suppressing them and controlling them, was freaking him out. Judy held so much power over him, enough power to tug at things Nick thought he was long since over. However, Stu was right. Nick knew that Judy would never abuse that power, and while giving her it was scary, it was part of life, part of sharing himself with her and opening up. The bracelet around her wrist was a symbol of his intentions, his plans to woo her and ask her to be his mate. He couldn’t hide things from his mate, couldn’t hold himself back and hide parts of himself.

Not believing him for a second, Judy was a little disappointed that Nick felt the need to lie, to cover up how he was feeling. Hadn’t he listened last night when she’d asked him to be more forthcoming with her about his emotions? She knew it would take some time for Nick to share everything with her, that sharing his feelings with another mammal was a new concept for him, but she’d hoped he’d start now. Giving his arm a gentle squeeze, Judy shook her head. “Slick…”

The faint lilt of disappointment in Judy’s voice made Nick’s heart clench. He’d vowed to be more open with her, to tell her how he was feeling, and here he was hiding things from her. Smile faltering, Nick sighed. Now wasn’t the time for games, for pretending that he was okay. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I’m a little nervous is all.”

Pleased with Nick’s eventual willingness to come clean about his feelings, Judy offered him a reassuring smile. She had no idea what the upcoming conversation would entail, but she already knew that Nick, without a shadow of a doubt, loved her. All she wanted was some answers about her bracelet, and then she could tell him that she loved him too. “Don’t be nervous, it’s just me.”

This wasn’t some hustle; this wasn't territory Nick was familiar with. This was Judy and his
confession of his love for her. There wasn’t a mammal on the earth who could paw on heart say they weren’t nervous when telling someone for the first time that they loved them. It was part of nature, to be scared about being so open and honest with another animal, and for Nick, it was even harder. All the years of keeping everything to himself, the years of hiding his feelings, it all made the upcoming conversation much more difficult for him. “The fact it’s you makes me even more nervous.”

Not wanting her fox to feel nervous, and hoping to distract him long enough so that he could calm down a little, Judy employed a tactic that she hoped would work. “What’s your favorite movie?” She blindsided him, picking a topic far removed from their impending conversation. Pulling her paw away from Nick’s arm, Judy grasped at the railings, looking out over the fields behind her family home.

Judy’s sudden shift in conversation left Nick blinking in confusion as he looked at her, head tipping sideways a little as he tried to work out why the doe had decided to change topic. They were supposed to be talking about her bracelet, about his feelings, not about his favorite movie. “Um, Fur Wars. You?”

Having guessed that Nick would be a fan of the Fur Wars franchise if the conversations with his mom were anything to go by, the tod’s answer didn’t surprise Judy in the slightest. She could see that she’d thrown him off balance, though, successfully shifted his mind to a lighter topic. “Not an awful pick, I’ll give you that.” Judy teased. “Bad Bucks is mine.”

Groaning at Judy’s answer, Nick rolled his eyes, turning his focus back to the field. “Of course you’d like a cop movie.” Living on the streets with virtually no money meant entertainment was hard to come by. Nick had stolen a few bits over the years – a deck of cards, some books, and a skateboard amongst other things – but there’d been a few times when he’d managed to sneak into a cinema and watch a film. He hadn’t been able to see Bad Bucks, but he’d seen a trailer for it.

“Hey! It’s a good film.” Judy protested, reaching out to gently thump Nick’s shoulder with a paw. Getting to watch any movie in the Hopps warren was a miracle. With so many kits, there were many disagreements about what they were in the mood to see. Judy had managed to steal away with her littermates one night when their mom and dad had been out on the back porch enjoying the evening with some elderflower wine, and they’d piled into one of the warren’s many living rooms to watch the cop film. Judy had fallen in love with it. “We’re watching it next time you’re home.” She decided, paw returning to the railings.

“No, please. A weekend away from cop training won’t be spent watching cop movies.” Nick didn’t want to think about anything police related on his occasional weekend home. He knew that as soon as he graduated he’d never get away from it. During one of their classroom sessions Major Friedkin had informed them that though they would leave the precinct at the end of every day, they’d never switch off being an officer.

Spying an opportunity to get them back on track now that Nick seemed a little calmer and more collected, Judy lifted her arm to show her bracelet. “Then I’ll make you a deal. We won’t watch it if you give me a little more information about this.” She knew it was a little under-pawed, but it would hopefully get Nick talking.

As Judy brought the conversation back to her bracelet, Nick no longer felt as nervous. “Sly bunny.” Now her sudden conversation shift made sense. Though the nerves started to creep back up on him, Nick took a deep breath, able to better control them. “Mammal up Wilde, you can do this.” Licking his lips, Nick lifted his paws, rubbing his face as he nodded. He turned to look at Judy beside him, still leaning heavily against the railings. “Okay, deal. What do you want to
know?”

Chapter End Notes

The second part of this chapter and the next treat shouldn’t be too long a wait *fingers crossed*
Here it is! The chapter you've all been waiting for! This isn't the end of the road for our dynamic duo, this story still has some way to go.

In the meantime though, I'd like to thank everyone who has commented, bookmarked, offered ideas, left kudo's and engaged with this little fic. We've reached over 10,000 hits, 400 lots of kudos, and nearly 600 comments! You've all turned this (once tiny) story of mine into something much more than I ever could've hoped for. I joke that we're like a family, but I genuinely feel like we are, and I value and treasure you all, so I hope this chapter makes you happy :)

I dedicate this pivotal chapter to you all!

Judy had plenty of questions for Nick, and she tried to put them in some order, to make some sense out of them. She made sure both she and Nick could see the bracelet around her wrist while she gave herself a moment to think. Finally, Judy settled on her first question. "Where did the tradition come from?"

Recalling the many conversations he’d had with his mom over the past few months, Nick kept his gaze on the bracelet around Judy’s wrist, enjoying the way the warm glow from the lanterns illuminated the carrot and pawpaw charms. “It's a New World tradition. In the Old World, according to my mom, they use something called promise rings. The rings are a sign of commitment, but the gifter can promise anything they want, which makes the meaning ambiguous to other mammals. A bonding bracelet, though, only has one meaning. It’s why we prefer them over rings.”

Judy was unsure as to which finger a promise ring would be worn on, but if it went where an engagement ring should go, she figured it could raise a lot of awkward questions. A bracelet made much more sense. “The bracelets mean that the gifter wants to bond with the giftee, right?”

Swallowing as the nerves started to creep back in, Nick fought to control them. He knew that the information he was giving Judy would help her realize just how much she meant to him and how much he loved her. With a nod, he answered Judy’s question.

With her suspicions confirmed, Judy turned to her next question. “What’s bonding? I mean, the way Gideon was talking about it, it sounds like it’s linked to claiming?” Though Judy’s research had been pretty extensive, she hadn’t come across anything to do with bonding. Given the hush-hush around the bracelets the doe guessed that bonding, as a whole, was something the canine community didn't like to talk about to those outside of their own species.

“Yeah. I don’t know how much you know about our customs, but claiming is where we leave a physical mark on our mate.” Nick had been ten when his mom had sat him down and given him the talk, wanting him to know early on so that he wouldn't get himself into a stupid predicament. Looking back at it now, Nick wondered if his mom had known he'd leave home at a young age, that he'd try and make it on the streets and end up getting himself into all sorts of trouble. Given
the very private and intimate nature of claiming a mate, the only claim marks Nick had ever seen were his parents. His mom's, located on her shoulder, was neat and tidy. His dads had been nearer his collarbone, a little more ragged. Nick could remember his dad explaining why it looked that way; his father's voice had been full of fondness and love for his mom. “Your mom was nervous Kiddo, it was so endearing.”

Deciding that being honest with Nick would be best, Judy bobbed her head. “I know that much.”

Surprised, Nick tipped his head sideways a little, emerald eyes finding violet in the lantern glow. “You do?”

“Homework, remember?” The book from Marian along with Judy’s subsequent online research had mentioned claiming, and it's importance in the canine world. She'd looked up several photos of claim marks and though the whole idea was sweet, a visual you’re mine, and I'm yours, Judy couldn't help but be a little frightened about the fact that if she and Nick were to become mates, she'd have to bite him. Judy didn't mind the thought of Nick leaving a mark on her, if anything it excited her, but she wasn’t exactly built for biting anyone. The idea of Nick’s bite, of carrying with her a permanent sign of their bond, did all sorts of funny things to Judy’s insides. True she was an independent doe, but she loved the idea of being Nick’s too.

Nick snorted, shaking his head fondly. “That doesn’t surprise me.” He turned to look back over the fields behind the Hopps warren, finding comfort in the growing darkness. Nick's sharp night vision picked up on the row of trees at the end of the fields, and the ever so faint glow of the closing ceremony lights behind them. Nick had no idea when the fireworks would start. Around them, firefly’s hummed, little specks of light flitting through the rapidly darkening sky. The evening air was crisp and for the first time in his life Nick questioned whether he'd like to move out of the city. The countryside offered space and freedom, and Nick already knew that the fresh air and earthy smell helped him think, helped him clear his mind and focus on the important things. “Claiming is usually a bite somewhere around the shoulder area. It breaks the skin so that it'll leave a scar, and both mammals have to exchange bites for the claim to be complete; otherwise, it's seen as illegitimate.”

“When does claiming happen? Is there some special celebration or something?” Judy rattled off some more questions. Though the book and research online had helped her it had apparently missed out a lot of things. Judy briefly wondered whether it would've been easier to ask Nick all of her questions rather than doing her research. "Would he have told you, though?" Judy had a feeling their relationship had taken a giant leap forward after their disagreement last night and that their discussion afterwards had opened the door for more serious conversations, such as the one they were having now.

“No special ceremony as such but,” Nick nervously licked his lips. The whole conversation was new to him. He'd only ever been with vixens, and even then the endgame had only been a quick tumble. It was all he’d been interested in before Judy. “It's done during, um, knotting.” Nick felt the flush of his blush, ears flattening as he tried to hide it. “Now I'm going to have to explain knotting to her. She's going to run for the hills.”

Halting her mind from its wandering at the mention of knotting, Judy hummed. “Don’t worry, I know about that too.” She threw Nick a lifeline, enjoying the way the inside of his ears had turned pink.

Surprised, Nick let out a sigh of relief as his posture relaxed. He was grateful he didn't have to explain it to her. “The bites are a visible symbol of commitment, they can't be washed away like a scent, or taken off like a bonding bracelet.” Nick explained. In their current era, where fidelity
wasn't something taken very seriously between most mammals, Nick was grateful that his species had evolved in such a way as to ensure that every canine would be able to tell when another was mated or not.

Judy wondered what it would be like to feel Nick’s teeth on her again, this time with a little more force and effort behind his bite. Would he even be willing to bite her? It had taken some quick convincing to get Nick to agree to pretend to bite her in the museum pit, but the doe trusted him explicitly. “Does claiming hurt?”

Shrugging his shoulders, Nick knew he couldn't speak for all couples. He was aware that pain levels varied from mammal to mammal. As he'd never taken a mate, Nick couldn't pull from his experience. “I don’t know. Mom says it didn’t hurt when dad claimed her, but I guess it varies. I can’t say for sure whether it does or not.”

Given that sharp teeth were breaking skin, Judy surmised that it had to hurt a little. However, she didn’t really give it much thought. If it meant Judy would get to carry Nick’s claim mark then she’d happily accept a little pain. Looping back to the topic of bonding and hopefully to her bracelet, Judy asked her next question. “So how does bonding link in with claiming?”

Shuffling on the spot, Nick sighed. Needing to do something with his paws he wrung them together, trying to fight off the nerves. Bonding was a huge commitment and Nick was pretty confident it was solely a canine thing. Would Judy want to commit so much? Would she want to tie herself to him for the rest of time? “We foxes mate for life. We can claim a mate and tie them, but bonding is an additional step. Most foxes don’t bother with it these days, but it forms an unbreakable bond between them. It’s not a tangible bond we’re creating, though. It’s confirmation that our mate is ours and ours alone. It involves a lot of reassurances, promises, and muzzling. It’s finalizing the emotional tie. We can only bond while knotting and claiming.” The concept had confused Nick when his mom had first explained it to him. While claiming left a physical mark, bonding was supposed to leave a more symbolic intangible mark on the heart.

While not entirely sure she understood, Judy did realize that it was more an act of affirming love. She got the distinct impression that muzzling was the canine version of her chinning. If Judy were to bond with Nick, she'd have to do more research and give it her all. His trust issues would make any attempt at assuring him about her love, assuring him she’d never leave, that much harder. However, Nick’s explanation raised an interesting question for her. “So wait, can foxes cheat on their mates?”

The mention of cheating put Nick on edge. She’d spent last night reassuring him she wasn’t going anywhere, that he was stuck with her, but his old insecurities still liked to make themselves known. “Sure, every mammal has free will, but because we mate for life, it’s highly frowned upon to cheat. Like I said before, not every mated couple bonds, but if a couple decides to go ahead with bonding then once the bond is complete, cheating isn’t do-able. Don’t ask me how because I don’t know. I don’t think any of us know.”

Rabbits mated for life too, but their unfortunately high sex drives often led to many marriages breaking down when partners decided to play the field. Judy was grateful that her mom and dad were highly compatible and had remained together. Unlike foxes, rabbits didn't have anything like claiming. They had a similar idea to bonding, but it was more to stop a couple from hating one another over time and to ensure that they were well matched for producing kits. Judy wasn't a fool, she knew Nick had experience, had probably been with many vixens, but the thought of him possibly having wanted to claim any of them made her paws clench. She barely stopped herself from grinding her back teeth together in anger. “This might be a highly personal question…”
Snorting, Nick shook his head. Eyes still focused on the fields in the distance; he tipped his head to look down at Judy. Noticing her clenched paws, he frowned, wondering what could pull such a reaction from her. “Carrots, I think that ship’s already sailed.”

“Fair point.” Judy conceded, forcing herself to relax as she looked up at Nick. Capturing his gaze, she took a deep breath. “Have you ever wanted to claim a vixen and…” She trailed off, hoping Nick would catch on.

If the conversation hadn’t been so serious Nick would’ve laughed, trust Judy to ask him the most personal question that a tod could ever be asked. He had to suppress his smile as their eyes met. “No. It’s not possible until we fall in love and find our mate. I never loved any of them.” Though Nick had years of experience and numerous encounters under his belt, none of the vixens had been mate material; none of them had captured his heart and pulled at his soul like Judy did. He’d asked his mom during one of their calls how she’d known that dad was the one. Her expression had softened, eyes misting over as she’d recalled the moment she’d known. “We went for a walk through the park, Nicky. My parents weren’t happy we were courting; too much history with the Wilde surname, but it didn’t bother me in the slightest. There was a group of kits crying in the middle of the park. They’d been playing with their ball when it had burst; it had been caught on one of their claws. Your daddy, goodness bless him, ran all the way to the other side of the district to buy them a new ball, just like the one that had burst. When he returned and gave it to them, their little faces lit up, and for those few moments your daddy was their hero. That’s when I realized he was mine, too.”

Nick thought back to the moment he’d known Judy to be the one. It hadn’t been some huge revelation, it hadn’t happened suddenly or with fanfare. It had crept up on him slowly, the idea of loving her wiggling into his heart and growing roots, anchoring itself and flourishing the more he thought about it, the more he spoke to her, the more he saw of her, until eventually he’d been unable to ignore it any longer. He’d accepted her as the one with ease, and when he’d thought about why it had given him pause. Judy was the only mammal to have ever made Nick feel at peace when he thought about the future and it felt right to envision her by his side. She was the first mammal he’d ever loved, the only mammal to ever make his confident and cocky mask slip. Being around her made him want to be a better version of himself, and their time away from one another while he was at the academy had made Nick realise just how much he needed her in his life. The days were meaningless without her around. He was drawn to her, to her kindness; to the way she only ever saw the good in him. Judy’s faith in him astounded Nick, and he found himself craving a mate who would help show him the right way, who would love him with all of their might and soothe the wounds of his past. Judy was such a mate. Nick knew that if Judy returned his love, as he so desperately dared to hope, then his battered and lonely heart would be in safe paws.

Judy’s homework had given her a very in-depth look at fox anatomy, but it seemed odd to her that no tying could occur until they found their mate. “How’s it not possible?” Judy quizzed.

Squirming a little, Nick averted his gaze, finding a dent in the wooden railing beneath his paws far more interesting. He was an open mammal, years on the streets meaning no topic was off limits, but talking about knots with Judy, knowing the doe was probably thinking of his, sent a flash of heat coursing through Nick’s body, lust barrelling through him. “No one’s entirely sure. Some believe that it’s down to survival. We end up tied to another mammal for thirty minutes or so, which can be dangerous if you don’t know them well. Others think it’s an evolutionary thing. Knots ensure that the female has the best possible chance of getting pregnant. An unstable environment with parents who don’t love one another isn’t the best environment to raise kits in.”

Bobbing her head in understanding, Judy started to play with her bracelet again. She could see
Nick’s discomfort so decided to move back to her original topic. She could always try and do some more research about claiming, bonding, and knotting later. “Wolford mentioned the bonding bracelet tradition had all but died out.”

Offering Judy a grateful smile, Nick hoped his explanation would let her know just how much she meant to him. Nick was too worried to spell it out for her, so he hoped his answer would allude to his feelings. “Males traditionally give them, and they have the connotation of the gifter promising to always look after the giftee – physically, emotionally, and mentally. Times are changing now though, a lot of females don’t like the idea of being looked after anymore, so most canines find them archaic and a little sexist.”

With the uprise of independent females across all species, Judy understood that some mammals might find the tradition out-dated and a little sexist. In her mind, though, it wasn’t. To Judy it felt like a promise that the gifter would always be there for the giftee and support them, no matter what. The fact that Nick promised those things made the doe smile fondly at her favorite fox. They were both highly independent mammals, but even an independent mammal needed to know someone had their back. “You don't think of them that way?”

Nick shook his head. “I can see why some canines do, but no, I don’t think of them like that. I don't know how much you read into my family, but we stick close to old traditions. My grandpa bought my grandma one; my dad bought my mom one, and now…” His gaze dropped, emerald eyes finding the porch floor.

“You bought me one.” Judy finished his sentence; watching as Nick bobbed his head, gaze still on the floor. She knew it was taking a lot for him to be this open and honest with her after years of hiding his feelings and thoughts.

Nerves had Nick looking down at the porch floor, ducking his head. He knew Judy was physically attracted to him, her pawsy behavior and Bonnie’s scent explanation the night before made that abundantly clear, but whether she loved him or not was another matter entirely. Could Judy love him given their species difference? Could she accept all of the little quirks and traditions of his species? Would she continue wearing her bracelet now that she knew how deep his feelings went? Nick knew he’d willingly try to adapt to Judy’s traditions, that he’d give it his all. He’d already tried to emulate some of them by bringing her flowers, paying close attention to their meaning.

Reaching out for Nick, Judy slid her right paw under his muzzle, smoothing her palm along the slightly coarse fur there as she brought his head back up. She didn’t want him looking down, didn’t want him to be embarrassed or nervous around her. This was a conversation they needed to have; these were things Judy needed to know before she could tell Nick just how much she loved him. “Why doesn't your mom wear hers anymore?” As she’d been going through the salvaged photos, Judy had spotted a bonding bracelet around Marian’s right wrist. Though the doe had contemplated asking Marian about it the next time she went for dinner, Judy had decided that as Marian was no longer wearing it, then it was something she probably didn’t want to talk about.

Forced to look up, emerald eyes found gentle violet ones and Nick relaxed. There was no trace of resentment in Judy’s gaze, no displeasure at the fact he cared for her so much. There was only softness and warmth, and Nick felt like he could lose himself in those feelings for the rest of his existence. “She’s a widow and traditionally widows move them to their left wrists, to let other canines know they had a mate but lost them, and that they’re still no longer available. We mate for life after all, even if our mate dies. Mom was so upset over dads passing that she couldn't bring herself to keep wearing it, to stare at it every day. It's in her jewelry box now. Well, the beads are. You’re wearing her bracelet chain.”
Pulling her paw back, Judy gasped quietly at the information, eyes finding the gift around her wrist. Bringing her left paw to touch it, she ran her fingers over the silver chain. “This was your mom’s?” From the photo’s she’d found Judy hadn’t been able to make out Marian’s bracelet that well. She’d been able to see the rough outline of the charms, but that had been it.

Seeing the reverent way Judy stroked the chain, how she appeared touched by the fact it had been part of his mom’s, Nick knew he’d made the right decision. “Yeah, when I told her that I wanted to get you a bonding bracelet she offered me hers, as a sort of heirloom. I wasn’t sure at first, given how much meaning they carry, but mom wanted us to have it.” Nick explained. He’d worried about whether he would inadvertently curse Judy, gifting her with a bracelet that had once been gifted by his now deceased father. Nick had quickly shoved the thought aside and had accepted his mom’s kind offer. It felt right for a piece of his parent’s love to be wrapped around the wrist of the doe he was so enamoured with. The spare bracelet chain he’d had made was stored in his bedroom, tucked in his nightstand, just in case something happened to the one Judy was wearing.

Making a mental note to thank Marian for it the next time they had dinner together, Judy ran her fingers over the two charms. “Wolford mentioned that the charms represent how we met.” Judy found herself curious now as to what charms Marian had and made another mental note to ask her. Perhaps she’d even ask the vixen to tell her the story of how she met Robert if it wasn’t too painful for her.

As the conversation shied away from questions about bonding bracelets as a whole and focused more on Judy’s bracelet, Nick felt the nerves starting to creep back in. Pushing off from the railings he headed over to the stairs down to the back garden and surrounding fields. Turning, Nick leaned against the support beam, back against the wood, eyes fixed on the support beam opposite. Paws jammed into his pockets, he hummed in confirmation. “They’re supposed to serve as a reminder of how far the gifter and giftee have come. It also helps that it makes every bracelet highly personal.” Nick and Judy had come a long way since he’d hustled her out of a jumbo pop and since she’d dragged him on a wild otter chase. If a mammal had of told Nick a year ago that he’d one day find himself on the back porch of a warren in Bunnyburrow, talking about his feelings with a little gray bunny he was madly in love with, he’d have laughed. He’d have then called them an idiot, made a rabbit joke, and hustled them out of $50. “I hustled you to get a jumbo pop to make pawpsicle’s with, and you hustled a tax evasion confession out of me and recorded it on your carrot pen.”

Following Nick across the porch, Judy leaned against the opposing side beam. Their height difference was magnified now, Judy having to crane her neck up a little to catch Nick’s gaze while the tod had to tip his muzzle down to see her. The position wasn’t comfortable, the wooden support beam digging into Judy’s back, but the doe didn’t want Nick running away, didn’t want to be out of his line of sight. Though Nick was a smooth talker, his body language was most telling and his paws jammed in his pockets spoke of his discomfort. “I’m surprised they have pawpsicle beads.” She mused.

“They don’t have them, Carrots. Both beads were custom made. I designed them and sent over the drawings.” Nick couldn’t blame Judy for not knowing considering how much information he’d kept from her. The bracelets were relatively unknown outside of his species. “Mr. Jackson understood what I was after and made them for me. Mom checked everything met my specifications when she collected it for me.” Nick elaborated. His mom had used one of their regular calls to show him the bracelet and had given it the seal of approval. Mr. Jackson was a master at his craft, so the tod had never doubted him for a second. When he’d collected it from his mom’s the last time he’d been home he’d spared a moment to check it over himself, concurring with Marian’s assessment that it was perfect.
Shocked, Judy made a small noise of surprise. “You designed this?” She asked in disbelief. Nick’s nod of confirmation pulled at all sorts of emotions in Judy. She felt overwhelming love for the tod that he’d gone to such lengths for her, but at the same time she felt a deep sadness that he’d withheld such valuable information from her. “Nick, why didn’t you tell me that when you gave it to me?”

Nick didn’t see the big deal, all of the bracelets were custom made and had been since the tradition had started. “Would it have made a difference?”

“Yes!” Judy exclaimed, feeling the tears gathering in her eyes. “It makes all the difference.” She sniffled, lifting a paw to rub at her eyes, not wanting to cry. The fact he hadn’t felt the need to tell her hurt. It wasn’t like the information would’ve been a huge red flag when he’d gifted it to her, it wouldn’t have told her that it was a bonding bracelet. Judy knew she was an emotional bunny, and she was probably overreacting a little, but the hurt was there.

Judy’s sudden sniffles made Nick feel like a monumental jerk. “Aw no, don’t cry sweetheart, please.” He pushed off from the beam he’d been leaning against, crossing the short distance between them to stand before Judy. Reaching down, he cradled her face, gently wiping her eyes. “I didn’t think it would be important. I’m sorry.” He apologized, smoothing his thumbs over her cheeks. If there was one thing in the world Nick hated, it was witnessing Judy cry. When she’d come to him under the bridge, when she’d started crying during her apology, it had taken every ounce of Nick’s strength not to turn around right away, not to fall to his knees and brush away her tears.

“It is important, Nick.” Judy sniffled; leaning into Nick’s touch as he took care of her. “You put so much thought into it and made something so beautiful for me.” While her bracelet had been important to her before, it was irreplaceable now. Judy had known the piece was beautiful in its craftsmanship, and as a gift from Nick it had automatically been important to her, but it was even more meaningful to her now that she knew Nick had designed it with her in mind.

“I’m glad you like it.” Nick had drawn out the beads several times, changing the design over and over until he was finally happy. He’d wanted something unfussy yet beautiful, just like Judy. Nick knew she wasn’t a jewelry mammal so he’d purposefully kept the piece simple.

Bring the conversation back on track, Nick’s explanation about what exactly her bracelet meant helped Judy understand the reactions from the canines she crossed paths with. “Well, now I know why every canine I come across, who isn’t already my friend, avoids me like I have fleas.” The reactions from other canines had both upset and angered Judy. They didn’t know her, didn’t know her situation with Nick, and yet they were openly judging her and moving away from her. The males had often fled, retreating to a safe distance as if they would catch something from her if they stood too close. The females had looked down their noses at her.

“I’m sorry, Carrots. I didn’t even stop to think about the fact you could be mistreated for wearing it. The bracelets are a symbol, to other canines, that the mammal wearing it is out of bounds and off the market. However, if the animal wearing it doesn’t know it’s meaning then they’re still fair game.” Nick’s paws dropped from Judy’s face as he took a small step back. That was the crux of the matter. Nick had worried about Judy being taken from him, and his worry had been partly his own fault because he hadn’t told Judy about the bracelet. The thought of Judy being snatched from him because he’d been a dumb, scared idiot and not told her about her bracelet’s meaning was unbearable. If it had of happened, Nick would’ve kicked himself for the rest of his life, would’ve spent his days berating himself for being such a coward.

Connecting the dots, Judy’s shoulders sagged as it all suddenly made sense. “Which is why you
were worried that Bandit would try and take me from you, even after I reassured you nothing was
going on.” Nick had given her the bracelet in the hope that other mammals would leave her alone,
that someone wouldn’t take her from him, that he wouldn’t be abandoned again. However, because
Judy hadn’t known about the true nature of the bonding bracelet, her placations had been for
nothing, she could still have been taken from him. Not that Judy would’ve let that happen in the
first place, but for a mammal with abandonment issues like Nick it made sense for him to feel that
way.

Nodding, Nick brought a paw up to rub the back of his neck. “You asked Bandit for information,
and that told him you were unaware of its meaning, so technically you were still available.” It was
that which had scared Nick the most. Judy was the most important mammal in his life, and the very
idea of her being taken away from him, that another fox could possibly woo her and win her
affections before he could, drove him into a pit of jealousy, unlike anything he’d ever experienced
before.

“I don’t ever recall agreeing to be spoken for in the first place.” Judy pointed out, crossing her arms
over her chest. While the bracelet was a beautiful gesture of Nick’s love, now that Judy knew the
weight it carried and the message it gave to other canines she felt a little angry. He hadn’t consulted
her before deciding to let the world think they were a couple. If Nick had explained everything to
her, let her know what the bracelet meant, she would’ve worn it anyway. She loved him, loved him
like no other, and if it would’ve eased his worries, then that was all the more reason for her to wear
it. Instead, he’d withheld information from her, left her to deal with the fallout when other canines
saw it.

Head dipping like he was a scolded kit, Nick dropped his tail, the fluffy appendage falling between
his legs in submission as his ears flattened back against his head. “I know. It was under-pawed of
me. It’s just that we can only gift one in our lives and I wanted you to have it. A small part of me
wanted to use it as a way to keep you safe while I’m gone, to stop other canines hitting on you
because you’re all I have. The bigger part of me wanted you to have it so that you’ll always know
how important you are to me and how much you mean to me.”

Seeing Nick’s submissive body language, the pain on his face as he explained himself, made
Judy’s heart break. Nick hadn’t had anyone before her, had spent his years on the streets, living a
different life to those who had homes and 9-5 jobs. His social skills were honed for hustling, not
honesty. Being honest made him vulnerable, and Judy never wanted him to feel like he couldn’t tell
her anything for fear of being seen as weak. Reaching out once again, Judy used a paw to bring his
head up. She didn’t want him to feel so small around her. Nick was the most animated mammal she
knew. Keeping her voice soft, she held his gaze. “Why didn’t you tell me all of this when you gave
it to me, Nick? I’ve gone months not knowing and its been driving me crazy. Wolford and Bandit
wouldn’t say anything, and I only managed to get some information out of Gideon yesterday
because he’s a little slow.”

There was silence between them for a moment as Nick forced himself to work through his feelings,
to voice them. He’d agreed to try for her, decided to be more forthcoming with his feelings. Now
wasn’t the time to go back on that promise. “I was scared,” Nick confessed, feeling the weight of
the secret lifting from his shoulders. “I thought that if I told you how much it means to me, what it
means, that you might not want it because you don’t feel the same way, that you would reject it.”
Nick paused, gulping. “That you would reject me.”

A small, sad noise left Judy. Nick had been abandoned so many times, left by so many mammals
that he’d come to expect it now. He did everything he could to try and protect himself from having
it happen again. Judy knew there was no quick fix for Nick’s issues and that she’d have to work
every day at building him up again, but it was something she was willing to commit to because she
loved him. It would be her new goal. Judy thought back over their relationship and there had only been one time where the possibility of Judy rejecting him had come into play, and that had been after the press conference. They’d dealt with that though, and Judy had come back for Nick, smoothed things over and they’d moved forward together. Curious, Judy wanted to know more. “Why would you think that?”

Anger was not the response Judy had been expecting to her question, but as Nick ripped himself from her grasp and took a step back towards the support beam behind him, it was the exact emotion she saw painted on his handsome face. “Because look at us, Judy.” He gestured wildly between them, lips curled into a snarl. “I have nothing to offer you. I’m in my early thirties and still technically without a job until I graduate. I don’t own my home, I don’t own a car, heck I don’t even have a bank account. I had no money until you gave me the deposit box key from Mr. Big; I’ve no friends, and have little family. I have a surname that used to mean something but is now sneered at, and I have a past that’s chequered with awful things. But you, you have so much – a large family, friends, an honest job that you love, a steady income, the means to take care of yourself, no skeletons in your closet. I have nothing to offer you.” It all came tumbling out before Nick could stop it, all of his insecurities and doubts, all of the negatives he’d had drilled into him during his years on the streets. Judy was perfect, had everything she could ever dream of, and though Nick knew she was at least physically attracted to him, he couldn’t offer her security or the life she deserved, at least not yet. Realizing his outburst might have spooked her, and hoping to salvage their conversation before it turned into a replay of last night, Nick briefly pinched the bridge of his snout with one paw, screwing his eyes shut for a moment. He shoved his other paw into his pocket, slowly letting go of his snout. With a resigned sigh, emerald eyes opening to find a spot on the support beam just above Judy, afraid of what he’d see if he looked into her eyes. “It was high-pawed of me, and I never meant to hurt you. I never meant for it to drive you crazy and upset you. You can take it off if you want. I understand. It’s a lot to ask you to keep wearing it just to soothe me.”

Nick’s sudden anger made Judy angry. The way he couldn’t see how good he was, how he spoke down about himself and thought so little of himself wasn’t fair. Nick was the best mammal Judy knew, regardless of the fact he believed he had nothing to offer her. Judy didn’t need all those material things, she didn’t need a flashy car or a fancy house, and she didn’t need a prestigious surname or a full bank account either. All she needed was Nick’s love, for him to love her as much as she loved him. They could be broke and homeless, and it wouldn’t matter to her as long as Nick was by her side. “You’re a dumb fox, you know that?” Judy snapped, paws shooting out to grab at Nick’s tie, yanking him as close as possible, pulling him to her until they were pressed together up against the support beam she had her back to. Angrily staring up at her fox, she found pleasure in his shocked expression and the way he placed his free paw above her on the beam, supporting his weight as he looked down at her with those wide emerald eyes she loved so much.

“I’ve spent the past few months doing everything to try and make you see how important you are to me. I started making our home, our den; somewhere you’d be comfortable. I bought furniture and purposefully left it so we could build our home together. I went down the predator aisles of the supermarket and ignored all the hurtful comments I could hear because I read online that you need taurine from fish, or else you’ll go blind or have seizures. I stole a book on fox customs from your mom and read it in a night, and then I followed it up with hours and hours on the internet doing more research. Heck, Nick, I even ended up watching fox porn for goodness sake! I tried to follow vixen behavior, sought to drop hints, because I needed you to figure it out, you big dummy. I’m not taking my bonding bracelet off because, damn you, Nicholas Wilde, I’m in love with you.” As Judy’s anger tapered away her features softened, her ears drooping.
Nick’s shock at suddenly being jolted forward turned to surprise as Judy spoke. Eyes widening further, his tail swished, jaw slackening at her confession as his heartbeat picked up, pure elation coursing through him as Judy tightened her grasp on his tie. “Did she just...? Judy just said she’s in love with me. Son of a...” Emerald eyes searched violet as Nick prayed this wasn’t all some big cosmic joke, but all he could see was Judy’s openness and honesty.

Paw’s loosening on Nick’s tie, Judy reached up, her right paw finding purchase on his shoulder while her left traced along the edge of his muzzle, stroking the soft fur beneath his lips. She dared not break eye contact. She wanted, no needed, Nick to know that everything she was saying was the truth, that she meant every single word. “I love the way your ridiculously fluffy tail wags when you’re happy and that you’re always wrapping it around me. I love the way you give me a lazy grin when I say something amusing and the way you always look at me with such tenderness. I love the way you believe you’re oh so clever when you take sly photos of me, but I know you’re taking them because I can hear the shutter on your phone. I love the way you tip your head sideways when you’re confused, or how your beautifully expressive eyes widen when I surprise you. I love the way you hold me when we sleep, how I’m permanently covered in your scent now, and the way you’re no longer afraid to hold my paw in public. I love those absolutely awful nicknames you have for me, how you’re so polite to my parents and indulge my siblings when they test your patience. I love how you listen to everything I say even if it’s stupid or I’m prattling on like I am now. I love how you hustled me, how you always tell me you miss me, how your phone wallpaper is a photo of us. I love how loyal you are, how you don’t judge me, and how you always whine about the sun being too bright. I love your voice and your ridiculous shirts, and the way you touch me and hold me. Most of all, though, I love that I could never run out of things to love about you because you’re my Nick, the mammal I am completely and utterly head over hind paws in love with and none of that mundane stuff matters. I don’t want any of it. All I want is your heart and your soul, your love and your care. You’re it for me, Nick. I love you.”

Nick felt like time came to a standstill, like the whole world stopped spinning. He couldn’t get his body to move, couldn’t think of anything other than Judy’s words, of her love and the feeling of fulfillment that consumed him, hearing that his love was reciprocated.

Terrified after a few beats of silence, Judy couldn’t bear it anymore. “Say something, please...” She whispered, praying she hadn’t just messed everything up, hadn’t read it all wrong and ruined her relationship with the only mammal she entrusted her heart to.

Snapped from his daze by the pleading tone of Judy’s voice, Nick inhaled sharply. It was instinctive, his body pressing Judy firmly against the beam behind her, the paw that had once supported him looping around her waist, clawed fingers grasping at her, pulling her against him. The scent of honeysuckle and violets flooded his nostrils, and his vision was filled solely with her. “Carrots. Judy. My mate. She wants me.” The final thought crashed over him. Subconsciously, his tail wrapped around her ankles; tightening, protecting, staking his claim.

“Judy.” Her name slipped from his lips like a benediction, a whispered prayer. She rose up, pushing up on the balls of her hind paws to give her that little bit of extra height. Leaning in, Nick closed his eyes as he covered the final few millimeters between them.
Finally, after months of waiting and yearning, of dreaming and hoping, Nick pressed his lips to Judy’s. The loud bang from the first fireworks of the closing ceremony broke through the still night air, but Nick paid them no mind. He could watch fireworks any time. Right now, he was too busy feeling them. As he pressed Judy further against the support beam, all he could think about was her. Judy consumed his thoughts and tore down those final walls he’d built around himself, and the tod willingly gave himself over to her. She was freedom and hope, safety and comfort, love and happiness. Judy beckoned him like a siren’s song, and Nick was powerless to resist. Kissing her, holding her, filled him with a profound sense of completion.

Judy’s heart hammered, its already quick pace ramping up as Nick pressed himself against her. Her paw on his shoulder pulled and tugged, keeping him as close as possible, the other remained on his muzzle, caressing his face. She could feel the thudding of his heart, the strength in his newly acquired muscles, and his musky, comforting scent surrounded her. As their lips met, she too closed her eyes, savoring the feel of finally, finally, getting to kiss Nick. Kissing her fox was unlike
anything Judy had ever experienced before. The few bucks she'd experimented with couldn't hold a candle to Nick. The world narrowed until Nick was all that mattered, the faint sound of the fireworks in the distance muted compared to the thudding in her ears from the rush of blood through her body as she poured all of her love and care into their kiss. It was slow and gentle, mouths exploring, lips caressing. Judy desperately tried to pull him closer, to suffocate the minimal space between them. She needed more, wanted more.

Feeling the tug of his bunny as she tried to draw him closer, Nick stooped a little, sliding both of his paws down Judy’s frame, mapping her curves before he found the backs of her thighs. Never daring to break away from their kiss, he lifted her with ease, bringing her up until she was that little bit taller than him. Judy’s legs wrapped around him and her ankles crossed to keep her in place. With one paw on Judy’s back and the other resting on her butt, close to her cottony tail, Nick kept her pinned to the support beam. With her additional height came the need for him to tip his head back so he could keep kissing her, and the tod’s chin came to rest on Judy’s small chest. Losing himself in their kiss, Nick barely remembering to breathe through his nose, and even then her scent made him feel lightheaded. It was floral and feminine but with a tang that was uniquely Judy. The underlying sweetness of her arousal was hard to miss, and the scent drew a low groan from him.

Judy’s paws couldn't stay still. They grasped at the fur on the back of his head, stroking every inch of him, until finally her right paw came to a stop on his cheek, blunt fingers digging into soft fur, pulling him impossibly closer. Emboldened, she parted her lips, her small tongue flicking forward as her fox groaned.
Giving Judy a gentle squeeze, Nick was desperate for more of her touch. He granted her access, parting his own lips while his brain tried to warn him about his teeth, that sweet little bunny’s like Judy weren't used to canines. However, as Judy’s small tongue ran over the sharp points it felt like his brain short-circuited. A low rumble escaped him before he could stop it as he tightened his hold on her. “Mine!” His mind snarled, demanding he claim her, demanding that he love her.

Needing to taste her, Nick’s tongue met Judy’s; longer and more agile, sending shudders through the small bunny. Instead of fighting for dominance, their tongues brushed together with ease, Judy giving herself over to her fox. The taste of her ignited a hunger in Nick that he’d never experienced before in his life. She was sweet and pure, untainted by the harshness of the world. He wanted more of her, wanted to taste every inch of her, wanted to be greedy for once in his life and keep her all to himself. He wanted to love her endlessly and acquaint himself with the sounds she made in the throws of pleasure. He wanted to protect her from any mammal that dared to harm her, wanted to claim her and bond with her, make her his mate in every sense of the word. No other mammal
had ever pulled such deep desire from him. The mix of her gentle, slowly exploring tongue and the rough, grasping nature of her paws excited him, but before he could push things too far, before he could ruin something as important as their first kiss by giving in to his unbridled lust and desire to claim her, Nick dragged his mouth from hers, panting heavily as he kept his chin on her chest, noses centimetres apart, the warm exhales of Judy’s breath fanning over him.

Eyes still closed Nick didn't dare break the moment, but slowly the outside world started to filter back in – the sounds of their heavy breathing and of the fireworks exploding in the distance overpowered the thudding of his heart. Unable to resist, Nick pressed his lips to Judy’s again in a series of small, affectionate kisses. As he pulled back and opened his eyes, he watched with unrestrained joy as dazed violet eyes opened, the softest and most beautiful of smiles gracing Judy’s kiss-swollen lips.

“I love you too.” Nick watched as Judy’s whole face lit up, and he didn't stop himself from pressing their lips together once more, stealing another kiss. He couldn't get enough, couldn't get enough of the feelings coursing through him – love and hope, passion and elation, unbridled happiness and an underlying current of possessiveness. Knowing she accepted him and loved him for who he was lifted a weight off of the tod’s shoulders, made Nick feel important, like he was worth something, like he could do anything. Nick knew he had issues and that he carried a lot of baggage, but Judy accepted that, accepted it all. It gave him hope.

“I love the way you thump your hind paws when you’re mad or lost in thought, the way you always see the good in everyone, and how you want to make the world a better place. I love the way you smile at me like I hung the sun and the moon and the stars, the way you never give up on me, how you believe in me even when I don’t believe in myself. I love how beautiful you are, the way I can’t picture a single day without you in it. I love the way you reach for me, how you make me feel complete and like I’m worth something, like I can do anything. I love the way you tease me, and how you always do your homework, how yououthusted me, and how you’ve brought me home to meet your family. I love that you have dinner with my mom every week without fail; how you wear the clothes she makes for you, and you take her flowers every time you go. I love how you sound over the phone during our calls, and how we fit together when we sleep. I love waking up in the morning to find you in my arms, and that your scent is so much stronger then, so intoxicatingly good that it drives me crazy with the need to protect you and love you and make you mine. I love how you smart you are, how every time you look at me you take my breath away, and how you inspire me to be more than I am. I love the way you ignore what other mammals say about us, and the way you defend me even against your own brother. I would do anything in this world to make you happy, and it frightens me, it scares the hell out of me, but I don’t care because it’s you. You’re the most important mammal in my life, Judy. I love you.”

Judy felt like butterflies had taken over her stomach. She’d figured out yesterday that Nick loved her but hearing him say it to her, seeing the love on his handsome face as he confessed his feelings to her, captivated Judy. Nick’s words filled her with warmth and joy. He was everything to her, and Judy felt like she could weather any storm so long as she had Nick by her side.

Judy swooped in and stole another kiss from her fox. “I’ll never get tired of hearing him tell me that he loves me.” She cupped his face, tipping his head for better access. Nick submitted, letting her kiss him senseless, letting her lead as he kept her pinned to the support beam, still holding her up. Boldly sweeping her tongue into his mouth, Judy could now taste the faint remnants of the pawful of blueberries he’d snagged from the kitchen as they’d left for the parade, along with the candy she’d fed him during the procession. Slowing their kiss, Judy slipped her paws around his neck, reluctantly pulling back a little to witness the blissful smile gracing Nick’s muzzle. “I’m still mad at you, for not telling me how important my bracelet is, and how much it means to you.” She whispered against his lips.
A low chuckle reverberated through Nick, his body gently shaking. “I love the way you get mad at me, too.”

Unable to stop herself from sniffling, eyes watering as she tried to fight back her tears again, Judy gave the back of Nick’s neck a gentle squeeze. “You’re an idiot, Nicholas Wilde.” The sound of the fireworks echoed through the night. Judy spared a moment to feel sad that she was missing them, they were her favorite part of the festival, but she knew she’d just experienced something so much better than watching those old fireworks.

As Judy’s tears rolled down her cheeks, Nick kissed them away, peppering her face with even more soft kisses afterward. He felt like an addict, unable to stop himself from kissing her over and over again now that he could. She was moreish, all-consuming, and his willpower was nonexistent. “That I am. I was going to wait until after graduation to tell you how I feel, but I guess that backfired.”

Disbelief marred Judy’s face. She couldn’t imagine them having held back their feelings any longer. They’d already pushed it as far back as possible, already wasted so much time when they could’ve been enjoying one another. The bracelet around her wrist stood as testament that Nick had loved her way before her birthday back in May. “Why would you want to wait that long?”

“Because you’re distracting, and having kissed you now I have no idea how I’m going to survive my remaining months at the academy without getting to kiss you every day.” The confession came easily. Nick had shown his paw, opened his heart up to Judy and she hadn’t thrown it back at him, hadn’t laughed or sneered, hadn’t disregarded his feelings. Judy had accepted him and his feelings, and it filled the tod with a level of confidence he’d never experienced before. Nick had a long way to go before he’d be comfortable being open with every mammal he met, but with Judy by his side, Nick knew he could overcome anything.

Feeling a little kittenish, Judy’s teeth sank into her lower lip. “It’ll give you something to look forward to, to come home to.” She bargained. Truth told Judy didn’t know how she’d survive without her fox by her side. She’d miss his kisses, miss being held in his arms, and miss the sounds he made when she kissed him. “Oh cripes. I’m going to need suppressants.”

Enticed by Judy’s offer, Nick hummed his approval, chest rumbling as he brought their snouts together, closing his eyes as he rested his wet nose against Judy’s. “Mhm, so long as you promise that I can kiss you senseless when I come home.”

“You can do whatever you want to me,” Judy promised, voice dropping to an unexpectedly low and sultry tone as her paws moved to stroke the coarse fur on Nick’s ears. “Jeez Judy, you might want to grab those suppressants sooner rather than later.” Lust was a new feeling for the country bunny, the desire to let Nick have his way with her throwing her off balance. She’d never felt such a yearning for another mammal before. Sure, she’d made it to third base with a few bucks in her teenage years, but it had been more out of a sense of duty, like it was expected of her, than because she actually felt any sort of desire or attraction.

Red-hot lust burnt a trail through the tod and with a growl he buried his snout against Judy’s throat, eyes still screwed shut. “Don’t make promises like that unless you intend to keep them.” He begged, voice hoarse. The thought of having his way with Judy stirred up all sorts of possessive, primal feelings in him. Her relative inexperience concerned Nick but getting to show her the ropes excited him. Scattering kisses across Judy’s neck; he voiced his delight as she tipped her head back, exposing more of her throat. The light thud as her head met the support beam was only just audible under her gasp. Wanting to test a theory he let his canines press gently against the soft skin of Judy’s throat, biting lightly. The loud moan that left Judy, followed by her squeak of
embarrassment, made the tod laugh. “I knew it. You have a pred kink.” He teased, pulling back to lock eyes with his bunny.

A bright red blush colored the inside of Judy’s ears, and she glanced away quickly, feeling embarrassed that Nick had pulled such a sound from her and had uncovered her secret love affair with his sharp teeth. Judy wasn’t sure if it was normal to be turned on by the feel of teeth around her throat, but the momentary feeling of helplessness it gave her was intoxicating. “I don’t have a pred kink, Nick.” She deflected.

Seeing Judy’s embarrassment, Nick gently set her back down on her hind paws. He could’ve continued to hold her up all night but he needed to put a little space between them, lest he try to have his way with her this evening. He wanted them to take their relationship slow; he wanted to do this right. “It’s not a problem, Fluff. If there’s something you like then you need to tell me.” He figured her inexperience would see her shying away from voicing her likes and dislikes.

Knowing that communication was essential to any relationship, or so her parents had told her, Judy bobbed her head while she nibbled on her lower lip. “Then I like it when you bite.”

Offering her a reassuring smile, Nick made sure that Judy could see that he wouldn't tease her. She needed to be comfortable talking to him about these things, and the only way to achieve that was by being open and accepting. “Then I'll be sure to do it more often.” Nick reached out, unable to stop himself from smoothing a paw down Judy’s ears.

“Well, I don't put out until at least the third date, so steady on okay?” Judy went for humor, fleetingly realizing that it was Nick’s usual tactic. She wasn't scared of being intimate with Nick, even with their obvious size difference and the addition of his knot, but she was worried about doing something wrong, about messing up. Nick was the most important mammal in her life.

Accepting the gentle reprimand, Nick hid his smile as he pulled Judy to him, wrapping his arms around her to hold her close. The doe’s arms snaked around his waist, and she let her head rest against his chest. “I’ve been keeping my feelings to myself for so long now that I got a little carried away, I’m sorry. I’m sure I can come up with two incredible dates for when I next come home to make up for it.” Nick knew he’d have to pull out all the stops. Judy wasn’t fussy, but after the bad dates she’d been on with the idiots Billy and George, Nick wanted to really wow her and show her what a proper date was like.

Holding onto her fox, Judy snorted. “I said three, Slick.”

Looking down at the doe in his arms, Nick frowned. “Surely your birthday counted as the first one, no?” It had been an incredible day as far as Nick was concerned, and they’d been acting like a couple then – breakfast in bed, jewelry, paw holding, the city gallery, and dinner at a nice restaurant. In Nick’s books that constituted a pretty amazing date.

“We weren’t together then.” Judy pointed out, lifting and tipping her head so she could look up at Nick, chin resting on his chest as the tod was forced to tip his muzzle further down so he could see her. Their differences would become more apparent the further into their relationship they went, and Judy idly wondered how creative they’d have to be to overcome them.

“But we are now, right?” Nick double-checked. They'd just made out on the back porch of her family home and confessed their love to one another. Nick was pretty confident they were together.

Feeling mischievous, Judy brought her arms around to Nick’s front so she could splay her paws over his chest, enjoying how much firmer he now felt given that he’d spent several months having his tail kicked into shape by Major Friedkin. She enjoyed that he’d filled out a little more and had
gained some weight, but Judy was still monitoring his eating habits. Looking up at her fox, she grinned. “Nah, I like to kiss every handsome fox who gives me a deep and meaningful bonding bracelet for my birthday….”

Nick snorted, paws tightening around Judy in a quick squeeze. “Out of that entire list I gave you back at the precinct all those months ago, you’ve finally picked a way to describe me.” He teased, closing the distance between their muzzles, stealing a quick kiss, hoping to calm his nerves. “For the sake of formality, though, would you, um…” he floundered, not entirely sure how best to phrase his question. Did ‘will you be my girlfriend?’ sound like something kits would say or was it appropriate for adult usage?

Nick's floundering made Judy coo, and the doe fell even more in love, if that were possible. “Is my cool as a cucumber fox nervous about formally asking me to be his girlfriend?” It was only fair that she could tease him back.

Nick averted his gaze, suddenly feeling shy. It was a new feeling for the street smart fox. “I’ve never asked anyone before.” He confessed. “I’ve never cared for another mammal as much as you, haven’t wanted to date someone before you.” Emerald eyes finally finding Judy, Nick groaned at the stupid smile on her face. “You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

Nodding eagerly, Judy couldn't contain her grin. Though she felt inexperienced compared to the tod, knowing there were some elements of their relationship that were new to him soothed her. “Yup. It’s a rite of passage. I’m not having you miss out.”

Sighing, Nick rolled his eyes playfully. Offering the doe in his arms a soft smile, Nick brought a paw to her cheek, caressing her. “Carrots. Judy.” He cleared his throat. “I love you, only you, and it would mean the world to me if we could be exclusive, if I could call you my girlfriend, please?”

“Oh Nick, you’re too adorable.” Judy’s grin softened into a loving smile, and she brought one of her own paws up to stroke down his muzzle. Heart thudding, Judy felt the tingle of butterflies in her stomach once again. “I love you too, my silly fox. Of course I’ll be yours, so long as you’re mine.” She whispered, gently guiding Nick’s muzzle down to hers.

Letting Judy guide him down, Nick didn't bother containing his smile. “I can live with that.” He whispered back, closing the distance between them once again to capture Judy’s lips in a tender kiss. “I can most certainly live with that.”

Chapter End Notes

Much love to TheWinterBunny for creating such beautiful art to go with this chapter.
YOU KNOW I LOVE YOU SWEETIE.
Back to Reality

Chapter Notes

I'm absolutely blown away by the response to the last chapter - wow! Thank you all so much for your lovely words and for your encouragement, it means the absolute world to me. Your sweet responses are the best kind of payment for writing this fic :)

A few points real quick before we jump into the chapter:
- I've had a few messages from people both here and on FF raising concerns about perceived plot holes and all I can say is don't panic, everything will be dealt with in the fullness of time, everything will be explained, and all loose ends will be tied up. I have everything planned. Trust me.

- I'm taking part in a writing challenge organized by our very own Cimar/WildeHopps. It's essentially a whole bunch of writers creating short stories based off of a list of prompts, and then they'll all be posted in a huge story for everyone to read! It's an exciting project to work on. That said, we're low on people willing to write for us. So if you're interested, be you a seasoned writer or a complete newbie, drop me a message and I'll put you in contact with Cimar! It's a great little project and I'm so pleased to be a part of it ^_^

- Finally, our very lovely Drummer has done a write-up on Safe Paws for ZNN (I know, I can't believe it either!). I'll let you know when it's posted. I'm dying to read it. I also found out the other day that Safe Paws is going in the r/Zootopia Hall of Fame! My little baby is all grown up! Never in my wildest (harhar) dreams did I ever think either of the aforementioned things would happen to my little fic, and it's all because of you guys. Thank you so much for all the love <3

Judy woke well before her phone alarm. Cocooned in Nick’s scent, she inhaled deeply, unable to get enough of his musky, comforting smell. They’d been like a pair of hormonal teenagers last night, making out on the back porch until Judy had heard her family returning from the closing ceremony. They’d then broken apart, quietly agreeing not to say anything to her family just yet. They wanted the chance to explore their new relationship and enjoy one another before they were bogged down with having to inform their families and inevitably face a barrage of questions.

Nick hadn’t been sure on what to do when they’d headed to bed, and Judy had been forced to lead, making Nick the big spoon as she’d curled up, gently bringing his tail over her. Nick had taken the hint, wrapping her up in his arms, pulling her to his chest while his muzzle rested on the top of her head. Judy had scooted back a little; wiggling to get comfortable, and Nick’s low rumble of contentment as he'd held her tightly had made the doe smile.

Now, in the early hours of the morning, Judy enjoyed the silence and the feeling of Nick holding her. She was due back at work in a few hours and Nick would have to return the academy. The doe sighed sadly at the thought of not getting to see him again for a few months. Cautiously reaching over for her phone to cancel the impending alarm, Judy tried not to jostle her fox, but she knew the movement had woken him when his grip on her tightened and the tip of his tail started to flick. The light kiss pressed to the top of her head made Judy smile. “Hey, Slick.”
“Morning Carrots,” Nick mumbled not quite ready to start the day. It was earlier than his usual wake up time, and after the rush of emotions last night the tod wanted to sleep some more.

Turning off her alarm, Judy placed her phone back on the nightstand, rolling over so she faced Nick. “Sleep well?” She whispered, not wanting to break the morning peace as she lightly sratched at the cream fur on his throat.

Judy’s action drew a low purr from Nick, and he tipped his head back ever so slightly to give Judy better access. “It’s a miracle how well a mammal sleeps when he has a stuffed animal to cuddle.”

Stopping her sratching, Judy pulled her paw away, making Nick frown. “If you’re going to be like that, I’ll go back to my box.” She teased, no heat behind her words. At the time Judy had been reasonably insulted by Nick’s jibe, but now she found it hilarious, especially as it reminded her of the fact that she’d ousthled him.

Eyes still closed, Nick tightened his hold on his bunny, inhaling deeply. Her scent was so much stronger, and the tod found it intoxicating. A lazy smile fixed firmly in place, the tip of his tail flicked in amusement. “Room for two in your box, Carrots?” He slipped his paws under Judy’s nightshirt, lightly sratching her back, being mindful of his claws.

Making a small noise of contentment at the impromptu back scratch, Judy ran a paw down the side of Nick’s muzzle, pursing her lips together in contemplation. “Hm, I don’t know. Your fluffy tail takes up a lot of space.” She grinned, eyes twinkling with mirth.

Nick opened his eyes, finally able to see his favorite bunny. Slowing his sratches, Nick dropped his voice to a whisper. “You love my fluffy tail.”

“I do.” Judy was unable to lie, and her confession made the fluffy appendage in question thump against her hip.

Pleased at Judy’s response, Nick couldn’t stop his tail from wagging. “You love me, too.” He carried on in a whisper, paws no longer sratching at Judy’s back but instead holding onto her waist. The memory of Judy telling him last night that she loved him ran through his mind, and Nick didn’t bother concealing his joy.

“Yes, yes I do.” Judy barely got the words out before Nick’s strong arms were lifting her, pulling a surprised squeak from the doe as he rolled them. On his back, Nick settled Judy on his chest; her smaller frame sprawled over him as he closed his eyes, drawing her muzzle closer until he could finally kiss her. The tod didn’t spare a thought for morning breath as he licked along the seam of Judy’s lips, requesting access, which the doe gave happily. Nick couldn’t resist gliding his paws down Judy’s body to cup her behind, giving the firm flesh a gentle squeeze before his paws slid up to rest on her lower back, holding her against him.

Lips parting to grant Nick access, Judy tried her best not to let out another squeak as Nick’s paws wandered. Instead, the doe let out a short gasp of pleasure; the sound muffled against Nick’s lips. One of her paws went to Nick’s muzzle to keep him in place; the other came to rest on his chest. Losing herself in their kiss, Judy savored the way Nick held her, how his tongue brushed against hers with certainty, and how unexpectedly soft his lips were. Judy could’ve spent all day kissing him, but life wouldn’t slow down for them, and they had a busy day ahead. Reluctantly pulling back, the doe spent a few seconds regaining her breath before she opened her eyes. Violet found emerald and Judy could see Nick’s contentment. Saddened that she had to ruin the moment, she kept her voice to a murmur. “We need to get out of bed Slick; we have a train to catch.”

Nick grumbled under his breath at his girlfriend’s practicality, his paws caressing up her body.
Gently he brought a paw to her cheek, and the doe leaned into his palm. Thumb brushing over the soft fur across her cheekbones, Nick admired the bunny sprawled on top of him. He couldn't believe she was his and that last night had happened. Judy loved him back and loved him enough to keep wearing her bonding bracelet. It was more than he'd ever hoped for. “Just one more minute, please,” Nick whispered, wanting to commit the moment to memory, to tide him over during their time apart. Judy’s eyes slid closed as she gave herself over to the moment and Nick inhaled deeply, losing himself in her scent.

They remained silent for another couple of minutes, enjoying the stillness of the morning, of being in their little bubble. “Why did I let you talk me into becoming a cop?” Nick whined quietly. He could’ve happily stayed in bed all day with Judy.

“Because you love me.” Judy’s response was instant, the words filling her with a profound sense of happiness. She’d had high hopes last night given Gideon’s little slip-up, but hearing Nick confess his love and experiencing his kisses first hand was far better than the doe had anticipated.

“Yes, yes I do.” Nick parroted Judy’s earlier words, bringing her muzzle to his so he could steal another kiss. He kept the sweet press of their lips chaste; knowing that time wasn’t on their side. Nick would save their more passionate kisses for when he was next home, giving himself something to look forward to.

Reluctantly they pulled apart, leaving the cocoon of Judy’s bed. Grabbing her clothes from her bag, Judy turned so that her back faced Nick as she started to pull her sleep clothes off. “You’re adorable.” Nick couldn’t help the playful tease as he watched Judy change, unabashedly staring. He figured that their quick change of clothes in front of one another on Saturday night had been a fluke, and Nick was almost disappointed that he’d been half asleep for it. He only hoped in the future that Judy wouldn’t feel the need to turn around to change.

“And you’re not dressed yet.” Judy sassed, the inside of her ears burning as she felt the weight of Nick’s gaze on her back. She wasn’t a prude, she was used to having to change in front of all of her siblings, but she wasn’t quite ready to let Nick see her like that just yet.

Making a small noise of amusement at Judy’s playful admonishment, Nick’s eye’s raked up and down Judy’s frame, following the planes of her body, enjoying the way her uniform clung to every curve. “I’m admiring the beautiful view,” Nick stated as he grabbed his clothes, changing quickly. The tod had never thought he’d find a rabbit attractive, but everything about Judy called out to him. Flushing at Nick’s open admiration, Judy brushed down her ears. “Smooth talker.” Her tail bobbed as she finished dressing. She’d carry her belt and vest in her bag and put them on when she arrived at work.

“But I’m not a liar.” Nick tacked on, wanting his bunny to know that he meant it. Sure part of his previous life on the streets had been smooth talking mammals out of their hard earned cash, and he’d been damn good at it, but now he wanted Judy to know that he genuinely found her beautiful.

Unable to stop her grin Judy turned around, and suddenly found herself incapable of formulating a response. Nick had changed into his ZPA issue shirt and pants, and though the uniform wasn’t intended to be good-looking, the color did wonders for her fox. “Blue suits you, Slick.” Judy swallowed, finding her voice.

Enjoying the way Judy eyed him, Nick preened, purposefully standing a little straighter as he gestured with a paw down his body. “Why thank you Carrots, I’m glad you approve. I can see a lot of blue in my future.”
“I’ll have to make sure the ladies stay away.” Judy masked her concern with a smile. In the backs of their minds, all mammals were worried that they’d lose their partner to someone else, no matter how much they said otherwise. Though Judy felt the same tendrils of worry, she rationalized that the bracelet around her wrist was an unyielding reminder that Nick wouldn’t be going anywhere.

Recalling his conversation with Bonnie and Stu, Nick relaxed his stance, crossing the short distance between them to cup Judy’s face in his paws. “Oh Carrots, I only have eyes for you.” He reassured her.

Head tipping back, Judy was forced to look up at her fox, and the soft expression on his handsome face had the doe leaning into his touch. “You better, or I might be forced to arrest a few vixens.”

The thought of Judy going around arresting vixens because they dared look at him was equal parts amusing, endearing, and a little bit hot. He’d pay good money to see Judy cuff a few vixens and make up some ridiculous thing to charge them with. Seeing her possessive streak also stirred a deep, primal feeling in him. Foxes were possessive by nature, and witnessing Judy return such possessive behavior pushed all the right buttons for him. “And what would be the charges?”

“I don’t know, but I’d think of something.” Judy found Nick’s lack of tie frustrating as she reached for his shirt, needing something for her paws to play with.

“You seem awfully confident about that.” Nick knew Judy was good; she’d been valedictorian and had solved the night howler case, with a little bit of his input, after all.

Lips curving up, Judy snickered. “I outhustled the hustler, didn’t I?”

With a sharp intake of breath, Nick’s lazy grin made an appearance. “Touché.” He leaned down, stealing a kiss. He’d been terrified when she’d threatened him with arrest for felony tax evasion, angry with himself for not having considered that she might’ve been recording the conversation. If he had gone down for five years, no one would’ve been paying off Catstro, and his mom would’ve suffered. Now though, the fact she had managed to outhustle him was a blessing. He’d met his match, and subsequently fallen in love with her. “Come on; I’m craving some decent food.” Reluctantly Nick pulled away, his paws falling from Judy’s face. The doe grasped one of his paws in her own, gently tugging him along as she led him out of the room and to the kitchen. Nick’s admission of being hungry gave Judy hope that they were slowly working through his issues surrounding food.

The kitchen was empty, no sign of Bonnie anywhere. It was too early for the Hopps matriarch to start making breakfast. Judy hadn’t expected her mom to be up and she was more than capable of making breakfast for her and Nick. As the fox took a seat on one of the barstools at the island counter, Judy set about gathering ingredients. “Please tell me you’re making me pancakes.” Nick licked his lips.

“I’m making us pancakes.” Judy corrected him; setting down the dry ingredients on the counter before she crossed to one of the many fridges, ready to gather the wet ingredients.

“With blueberries?” Nick clarified, watching as Judy all but disappeared into the refrigerator, rummaging at the back of the shelves.

Rolling her eyes at Nick’s predictability, Judy shook her head, gathering the ingredients she needed. “No, strawberries.” She turned around in time to see Nick’s look of disgust; one of her hind paws closing the fridge door. “Yes blueberries, you goof.” She laughed, setting the final few ingredients down on the counter.
Gasping in mock hurt, Nick brought a paw to his chest, over his heart. “Back to wounding me, I see.”

Padding over to one of the many wall-mounted cupboards, Judy opened the door, looking for a mixing bowl. “You’ve missed it, don’t lie.” Truth told, Judy had missed being able to tease the tod, had missed throwing playful jibes at him. Though they spoke to one another every week, their calls had been a little awkward recently, lacking in natural ease. As Judy had been slowly driven crazy by the lack of information about her bracelet she’d become less and less chatty, feeling more annoyed and frustrated.

Nick felt a flash of guilt. He’d noticed the subtle shift in their conversations over the past few months, and now the tod understood why. His inability to be honest with his feelings and tell Judy about her bracelet had driven a small wedge between them. “You know, I might need a kiss to soothe my wounded heart.” He opted for humor. He’d told her about her bracelet now, and it had culminated in them confessing their feelings. It wouldn’t do to dwell on the past.

Rolling her eyes, Judy pushed up onto the balls of her hind paws, moving dishes out of the way as she searched for a mixing bowl, silently cursing her mom for reshuffling the cupboards again. “You’re insatiable.”

“I’m merely gaining a stock of them because I’m going to be working on limited rations over the next few months.” Nick made a valid argument, or so he thought. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told her last night that he wasn’t sure how he’d go months at the academy without getting to hold her and kiss her.

Looking up to the top shelf of the cupboard, Judy spotted the mixing bowl. Letting out a small noise of triumph, she reached up for it. Voicing her displeasure at it being out of reach, and cursing her shortness, Judy grabbed the step stool from the corner of the kitchen, placing it on the floor in front of the cupboard. Stepping up, she reached for the bowl. “Oh for cripes sake!” She growled, the bowl still just out of reach.

Sliding from his barstool, Nick crossed the room to his bunny. She looked so inviting, stretching up to reach the bowl, arching her back. Alighting the few steps up, Nick pressed himself against Judy, dropping his muzzle so he could whisper in her ear. “Can’t reach it?”

Only just withholding her squeak of surprise as Nick pressed against her, Judy’s teeth sank into her lower lip at the feel of him pressed so snugly against her. “I don’t know if you’re aware of this, but I’m quite petite.” She managed to come up with a suitable response, mind on less than innocent things. “Suppressants. Goodness gracious, grab some when you get home so that you don’t pounce on him next time he’s back.”

“Really? I had no idea in our months of companionship that you’re shorter than me.” Nick’s left paw trailed down Judy’s side, following the curvature of her body. He enjoyed how little Judy was in comparison to him, how she held so much strength and power in her petite frame. She could probably overpower him if she put her all into it. In the back of his mind, Nick knew that things were skirting into dangerous territory considering that he wanted to take things slow. Having gone months craving her, he was finding it difficult to hold back when she was so inviting and saying such tempting things. Reaching up, Nick grasped the bowl, though he kept it aloft. “I’ll give you the bowl in exchange for a kiss.” He bargained.

Tipping her head back, Judy let it rest against Nick’s shoulder, looking up at the bowl before she tilted her head sideways, catching Nick’s gaze. “You don’t have to bargain for kisses, Slick.” She murmured, realizing he’d now asked for kisses twice in the space of ten minutes.
Shrugging, Nick’s left paw tightened on Judy’s waist. “But will it get me an extra kiss? Yes, yes it will.” The tod wanted to make up for all the lost time between them, all the kisses and caresses they’d missed out on. Nick still couldn’t believe that Judy loved him, had agreed to be his girlfriend, and refused to take off her bonding bracelet. Holding her and kissing her was tangible proof to Nick that she’d picked him and that she loved him.

As Judy captured Nick’s lips in a soft kiss, the fox absentmindedly set the bowl down on the counter, his now free paw coming up to cup Judy’s face, keeping her head tilted towards him. His paw on her waist tightened further as the doe wiggled her butt. Grunting, Nick pulled back from their kiss, eyes still closed as he took a deep breath. “You need to stop that, Fluff. I don’t want your family coming in and questioning why I won't move from behind waist-high counters.”

Judy had to hold back her snicker. “Then let me take care of it.” She offered, feeling brave. She’d done plenty of homework, how hard could it be? “Oh Judy, don’t say that.”

Pressing a chaste kiss to Judy’s lips, Nick shook his head. “No, don’t worry.” He let go of his bunny; stepping down and making his way back to the barstool. It was taking all of his willpower not to give in, but Nick was sticking to his guns.

“Nick…” Judy stepped down from the stool after closing the cupboard, crossing to stand opposite him at the island counter. She’d purposefully teased him, and now he wouldn’t let her follow through.

Reaching over, Nick offered his paw to Judy, palm up. The doe took his outstretched paw, placing her own in it. “I’m not rushing this, you’re too important to me.” He could be serious when necessary. Nick wanted nothing more than to claim her, to throw her down on the nearest flat surface and make love to her, but she was too precious to him, and he loved her too much to risk messing things up by being intimate so early on. He’d acted on autopilot when he’d pressed against her, and though Nick didn’t regret the action, he admonished himself for being so hasty.

“Don’t be silly. Let me take care of you.” Judy tried again, earnest violet eyes pleading with Nick.

“Next time I’m home, sweetheart.” Nick bargained, voice soft, knowing Judy won’t let it drop otherwise. What exactly they’d get up to the next time he came home was still up for debate, but Nick wouldn’t let it go too far.

Disbelief marred Judy’s face as she realized what they were doing. “Please tell me we’re not planning…”

Laughing, Nick grinned at his bunny. “I mean, that does sound like something you’d do.”

“Oh, I see, now who’s wounding who?” Judy pulled her paw away from Nick’s; giving him a playful swat before she turned back to the ingredients and her newly acquired bowl, ready to make them breakfast.

Unbeknownst to both rabbit and fox, their entire exchange had been witnessed by Bonnie. The doe had woken early to tend to the carrot patch with her husband and had just been about to come through the back door when she’d overheard Nick and Judy entering the kitchen, chattering away. Though she knew it was wrong of her, Bonnie had peeked in through the slightly open kitchen window, watching and listening to the exchange between the two. She’d had to hold her breath a few times, bite her tongue at others, and when they’d kissed Bonnie had thought that her heart was going to explode. Finally, her daughter had found someone and not just any old someone. Bonnie felt an enormous swell of pride that Nick had listened to her and Stu on Saturday night and had taken advantage of the empty house last night. She’d have to call Marian as soon as Nick and Judy
left, let the vixen know that their kits had finally pulled their heads out of their tails.

As it stood at the moment, however, Bonnie knew she'd have to make an entrance. Composing herself, she fell easily into the role of oblivious mother. Making sure she made some noise as she crossed to the back door, Bonnie hoped it was enough to alert her daughter and Nick to her presence.

“Good morning you two.” Bonnie went to Nick first, dropping a kiss to his forehead before she did the same to Judy. Both mammals greeted her warmly, and she ushered Judy away, taking over the cooking. They made idle conversation while she cooked until Bonnie plated up a huge stack of blueberry pancakes for them. “Now, I know you’re heading back to the academy today Nick, but you’re welcome here whenever you want.”

Looking across to Bonnie, Nick gave her a warm smile. He was due back at the academy at 8 am, and though their 6:30 am train would mean he'd be back earlier than scheduled, it would ensure that Judy would make it to work for 9 am role call. “Thank you, Bonnie. I'd love to come back.” Though there had been a few rocky moments during his first visit to Bunnyburrow, the district and its residents were growing on the tod. This was Judy’s real home, no matter how long she spent in the city. Nick knew she'd always be a country doe at heart, and getting back to her roots with her was an enjoyable experience. Besides, Nick had a feeling Sasha would have a lot to say about the matter if he didn't come back soon.

Conversation lulled while Nick and Judy ate, and Bonnie set about preparing breakfast for her other kits. It was still a little early, but she didn't want to waste time. As Nick and Judy finished their pancakes, the sound of another rabbit joining them had both mammals turning to look at the top of the stairs.

“Julian.” Judy greeted her brother, noting the way the buck looked between her and Nick.

Nodding his greeting to his sister, Julian turned his attention to Nick. “You got a minute, Nick?” He gestured towards the back door, crossing over to it.

Concerned, Judy reached out to grasp Nick’s wrist as her fox stood. “You sure?” Judy questioned. Julian had seemingly come around a little when they'd spoken to each other on Saturday evening, but the doe hadn't had the chance to chat with her brother since.

“I’m sure, Carrots. It’ll be fine.” Nick reassured her, moving to grasp her paw, giving it a quick squeeze. He wanted to kiss her, but with her mom and brother looming that wasn't an option. Reluctantly letting go of his bunny, Nick followed Julian out onto the back porch.

Nick watched as Julian moved to stand by the rails, the buck leaning against it as he looked out over the fields behind the warren. “Thank you for the flower advice yesterday.” Nick opened the conversation, moving to stand at the railings too, leaving a moderate amount of space between them.

“It wasn’t for your benefit.” Julian had known his sister would need soothing, and there was nothing she loved more than receiving surprise bouquets.

Nick shrugged, having guessed from the way the buck had thrown the keys at him yesterday that Julian had been a little sour with him. “Still, I appreciate it.”

“What flowers did you end up choosing?” Julian turned his head to look at the fox, surveying his body language.
“White tulips and hydrangeas, the flowers of forgiveness and gratefulness.” Nick had thought about his choice carefully, knowing the seriousness that the Hopps family attached to plant husbandry.

“Good choice.” Julian nodded, pleased with the tod’s decision and the obvious thought he’d put into it. “Look, I’m not going to beat around the bush with you. I know you’re in love with my sister, but I’m still not 100% okay with the idea of you two dating. I’m aware that my opinion probably means nothing to you, but I worry. Both of you are going to get a lot of abuse for it, a lot of mammals are going to be offended and bothered, and it could make you both targets. I know you’ve spent time on the streets, so you’re probably better equipped to deal with any fallout, but Judy isn’t. She’s not used to mammals having beef with her.” That was the main issue for Julian. The last thing he wanted was his sister ending up hurt or worse because she decided to date a fox.

Julian mentioning Nick’s time on the street surprised the tod, and he wondered just how much Judy had told her family. He’d trusted her with some very private details, so the thought that she’d told her brother a few things left a bad taste in his mouth. He’d trust the issue with Judy at a later date, once they were alone, as for now his focus needed to be on the conversation with Julian. “I’ll protect her. She’s the most important mammal in the world to me.” Nick vowed. He wasn’t the strongest fighter, preferred to outmaneuver his opponent and slip away, but he’d picked up a few tricks during his time on the streets, he knew how to read mammals, and knew which ones would be trouble.

The conviction in Nick’s tone left no room for argument, and it eased Julian’s concerns hearing how much the fox genuinely cared for his sister. “I admire your willingness to take that on. I may not be 100% comfortable with the two of you dating, but I’m mammal enough to admit that I was wrong. I shouldn’t have thrown accusations at you without getting to know you first. I apologize for that. I’ve spent the weekend observing the pair of you, and I overheard you defending Ju to Billy and George. I can see that you care a great deal for my sister, that you value her, and that you’ll protect her.”

“I appreciate the apology, Julian, thank you. I love your sister more than anything, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her safe. I know you have your doubts, any good brother would, but I’m going to show you that I only have the best of intentions towards Judy.” Nick knew actions spoke louder than words.

“Have you told her that you love her yet?” It was impossible for a mammal not to see how much Judy affected the tod, and how much he doted on her and cared for her in return. As Nick shifted his weight, Julian grinned. “You did. Good. She loves you too, you know.”

“I know.” Nick’s response came quickly. He’d never get tired of hearing about how much Judy loved him.

“Don’t worry; I won’t say anything. It’s up to you two to decide when you want the rest of the world to know.” Julian had noticed the restraint between Nick and his sister before they’d headed out to the back porch. The way the tod had looked at Judy had been different compared to yesterday.

Body having tensed as Julian confessed to knowing about their change in relationship, Nick relaxed at the buck’s unexpected kindness. “Thank you. I’m not going to risk screwing up and throwing it all away, so how about I make you a deal?” Nick wanted to make inroads with his ‘actions speak louder than words’ idea.

“You want to make a deal?” Julian blinked, confused, as he turned sideways to look at the tod.
“Sure. If I royally screw up, I will personally hand you a taser and let you use it against me.” It wasn’t the most appealing deal to Nick, being hit by a taser was excruciating, but if such a deal were what it would take to get Julian to see just how serious he was then Nick would make it.

Stunned, Julian wasn’t sure what to make of the offer. On one paw getting to taser Nick should he hurt Judy sounded great, but on the other paw, he knew it would only upset his sister and make her angry with him. “That sounds like a pretty raw deal for you.”

Nick’s mind drifted back to his encounter with Catstro when he’d been sixteen, when the caracal and his gang had beaten him to a bloody pulp once they’d learned that he’d spent their money keeping a roof over his mom’s head, the tod swallowed. Looking back at it now, his payment plan idea had been ridiculous. $1000 a month had been a stupid figure he’d plucked out of thin air, hoping it sounded good. He hadn’t factored in how he’d make that $1000 every month though. “Eh, I’ve made worse ones.”

“Do I want to know?” Julian was cautious; Nick’s tone suggested that the fox had been involved in some dodgy deals before.

Though Nick had opened up to Bonnie and Stu on Saturday night and had filled them in on some of the major events in his life, he didn’t want to share that information with Judy’s siblings just yet. Nick wanted to win Julian over first, and then he’d gauge whether it was appropriate to tell the buck more about his past or not. “Probably not. Your sister has me on the straight and narrow now though.” He reassured Julian. It hadn’t taken much convincing from Judy for Nick to sign up to the ZPD. The chance to leave the streets behind and start a new, honest life had been too good an opportunity to pass up. Nick knew he owed Judy for all of her help, for all of the things she’d done for him. She’d helped him rebuild his life, had saved him and his mom from Catstro’s wrath. He had no idea how he was going to pay back her kindness, but in the meantime, he’d make sure that he told her every day how much he loved her, he’d take care of her, look out for her, and cherish her.

Julian snorted, shaking his head with a smile. “Alright, but in return, if you come through, I’ll encourage the others who disapprove to change their minds.” He’d had a conversation with some of his siblings last night about Nick, and while Julian was trying to give Nick the benefit of the doubt, he knew some of his siblings weren’t fans of the fox given that they’d heard about the fight between him and Judy.

“There are others who disapprove?” Nick frowned, uncomfortable with the thought. Statistically, he knew that he wouldn’t win over all 311 of Judy’s siblings, but he’d thought that he’d done a good job of winning over the vast majority.

“News travels fast in the warren, and a few of my siblings were on the fence, but after the blowout between you and Ju the other night they’re firmly in the ‘we don’t like Nick’ camp.” Julian elaborated, offering Nick an apologetic smile. He’d asked his siblings to at least give Nick the benefit of the doubt, but they’d all firmly stood their ground. If Nick came through, Julian would make more of an effort to bring his siblings over to the ‘we like Nick’ camp.

“Well, then I’d appreciate your help in bringing them around, lest I end up being chased out of here with pitchforks next time I visit.” Nick had visions of being chased by a fluffle of angry bunnies, pitchforks in paws as he tried to escape through the rolling hills and fields of Bunnyburrow.

Snickering, Julian grinned. “Don’t forget the flaming torches.”

“And the flaming torches.” Nick reiterated, making both the buck and tod laugh.
As their laughter subsided, Julian extended a paw towards Nick. “I’m trusting you with my sister’s happiness, okay?”

Realizing this was a crucial moment; Nick forced himself to remain serious. Taking Julian’s offered paw in his own, Nick gave it a firm shake. “Don’t worry; I wouldn’t do anything to upset her.”

“Good, or else I’ll be waiting for that taser.” Julian grinned, messing with the fox as he took his paw back. “I hope the rest of your training goes well. Maybe next time I see you you’ll be an Officer.”

“That’s a terrifying thought.” Nick deadpanned. He would have responsibility; he would have to keep other mammals safe. “Officer Wilde. Never imagined I’d end up being called that.”

Clapping Nick on the shoulder as he moved towards the stairs, Julian chuckled at the small expression of terror on Nick’s face. “You’ll be alright. You’ve got Ju on your side. Anyway, I’m needed out at the cabbage patch, so I’ll see you around Nick.” Julian offered Nick one last smile as he stepped down to ground level.

“See you around, Julian,” Nick called out after the buck, watching as he disappeared into one of the many farm carts parked nearby. Once Julian was out of sight Nick’s shoulders dropped, and the tod let out a sigh of relief. He and Julian seemed to be getting along a little better. Turning, he made his way back inside.

“Nick?” Judy broke away from her conversation with her mom as her fox returned. Crossing the short distance to the back door, she stood in front of him as he shut the door behind him, her worried gaze checking him over.

Able to read Judy like a book, Nick lifted a paw to stroke across her cheek. “It’s good, we’re good. Don’t worry, Fluff.” He knew that things between he and Julian had been tense over the past few days and that Judy was concerned, but Nick had a gut feeling that the doe needn’t worry anymore.

A sharp knock on the back door had Nick turning, his paw reaching for the handle. In a fluid motion, he pulled it open, greeted by the sight of another fox. “Good mornin’” Gideon stood with a smile on his face, a large tub in his paws, dressed in his usual plaid shirt and jeans with his striped apron on.

“A morning.” Nick greeted, curious as to why Gideon was stopping by so early. Stepping aside, he gestured for the other fox to enter the kitchen.

A loud bang had all heads turning to the dining room and the sound of crying kits that followed after it had Bonnie abandoning her prep work. “Oh for cripes sake.” She muttered, taking off towards the stairs and down to the dining room.

“There’s never a-a dull moment in the Hopps warren.” Gideon grinned, taking a few strides into the kitchen.

Having stepped aside with Nick to let Gideon in, Judy offered the portly fox a smile. “Morning Gid.” She glanced at the plastic tub in his paws, and her small smile widened into a grin. She would gladly bet $10 on the contents being for Nick.

“Well, h-heya there Judy.” Gideon greeted the bunny, offering her a smile. Turning his attention to Nick now that the other tod had closed the door, he offered out the tub he was carrying. “I-I thought I’d drop by this mornin’ with some baked treats for ya Nick, to take back to the academy
Surprised by the unexpected act of kindness, Nick was lost for words. Reaching out he gently took the tub from Gideon and lifted the lid. The scent of freshly baked blueberry goods, warm from the oven, made Nick groan. “These smell incredible. Thank you, Gideon.” He closed the box, not wanting to let out any more of the amazing aroma.

“Bun-bun, I need a paw!” Bonnie’s shout from the dining room had Judy rolling her eyes, excusing herself to attend to the issue.

Nick and Gideon watched her leave, and once she was out of sight, the country fox turned to his city counterpart. Paws wringing, he glanced nervously to the floor. “I also want to ‘pologise. I was a bit slow the other day but lookin’ back at it I believe Judy managed to use her police skills on me to get some information that weren’t mine to share.”

Having placed the tub of treats down on the island counter, Nick turned to look at Gideon. He could see the contrition on Gideon’s face and in the way he stood. Part of Nick wanted to make Gideon squirm, to get back at him for opening his mouth and spilling the beans to Judy. However, Nick guessed that if Gideon hadn’t got the ball rolling, if the other tod hadn’t have told Judy about the bracelet, Nick would’ve continued to delay their conversation and it would have done them more harm than good. “Yeah, so I heard.”

“I-I know, it wasn’t right o’ me. She kept asking all these questions though and sounded so curious, thought she knew the basics at least, so I opened my maw. Weren’t ‘til I told my grandpappy ‘bout meeting ya that he smacked me ‘round my head and told me I’d broken a canine pact.” Gideon explained. When he’d gone home and excitedly told his grandpappy that he’d met Nick Wilde, of Wilde & Son Tailoring, his grandpappy had wanted to know everything. Gideon had filled him in, told him about their conversation and how much Nick liked his blueberry pie, and then he’d mentioned Judy’s bonding bracelet and how the doe had asked him a lot of questions. As her friend, he’d told her some more, assuming she knew what it was already and just wanted a bit more information. Gideon’s grandpappy had been furious, had smacked the tod around the back of the head and scolded him for blabbing, for giving Judy information that Nick should’ve been giving her. Gideon didn’t have it in him to be mad at Judy for asking questions, for using her police skills on him. He guessed that she’d been frustrated and saw him as a way of getting answers. However, he was mad at himself for falling for her tactics and opening his maw.

Taking pity on Gideon, who’d been nothing but nice to him all weekend, Nick offered the other tod a reassuring smile. Though the mammal across from him had hurt his mate when they’d been kits, had left her scarred physically and mentally, Nick could see that Gideon was a better mammal now. He could forgive him, but only because Judy had. “Don’t beat yourself up over it. Judy can be sneaky when the need arises. While I want to be mad that you stole that moment from me, it was probably for the best. I’ve been putting off telling her, and that’s slowly been making her angry.” Nick thought back on how difficult their conversations had been on the phone, how Judy had resorted to asking Wolford and Bandit for some information.

Relaxing, Gideon was grateful for Nick’s understanding. His therapist had encouraged him to actively seek out a life without confrontation and without arguments and aggression, at least until he was better and they’d thoroughly explored his kithood issues. Gideon knew he’d been in the wrong, and he appreciated Nick’s ability to forgive him for it. Bonding bracelets were important, the most important thing a tod could gift another mammal, and Gideon had kicked himself like crazy once his grandpappy had scolded him and he’d worried that he’d messed everything up for Nick and Judy. “You talk about it now though?”
Wanting to ease Gideon’s worry, but at the same time not wanting to reveal too much as he and Judy had agreed to keep their relationship under wraps, for the time being, Nick made a noise of confirmation. “Mhm. We’re good, don’t worry.”

Gideon grinned, pleased as punch that Nick and Judy had talked. Gideon had only given her a small amount of information after all. “Well shucks, that’s great Nick. I-I’m glad I didn’t mess it up too badly for ya.”

“Mess what up?” Judy came bounding back up the stairs, taking them two at a time. She’d only caught the tail end of the conversation between Nick and Gideon, but the doe was pleased that they seemed to be getting along, that Nick hadn’t started posturing and acting like he had been at the train station all those months ago. “I guess he doesn’t see Gideon as a threat.”

“The cookies. Gideon was just telling me that he’s tried a new recipe and is glad he didn’t mess them up.” The lie slipped off Nick’s tongue with ease, his years of coming up with off the cuff cover stories proving useful.

Though confused about why Nick was lying, Gideon decided it would be best to roll with it. The city fox knew what he was doing, Gideon was sure of it. Besides, the last thing he wanted was to say something that would cause some friction again. “Yeah, thought I’d try ‘em out on Nick.” He explained to Judy before turning back to Nick “Well anyhow, I-I hope you enjoy ‘em all and that ya come back to Bunnyburrow soon.”

“Thanks, Gideon. I have a feeling I’ll be coming back soon.” Nick glanced to Judy, watching as her expression softened.

“Let me know if you’re in the city at any point Gid, I can show you around or we can grab lunch.” Judy offered. The doe hoped that Nick and Gideon might even become good friends. Judy knew Nick didn’t have many friends, and she wasn’t sure how many other foxes he knew, but she figured it wouldn’t hurt to try and push them together.

Touched by Judy’s offer, Gideon offered the gray bunny a warm smile as she walked him to the back door. “That would be real lovely, thanks, Judy.” Gideon hadn’t been to the city before; he’d never had the money for a train ticket or known anyone who could show him around. Now, with his baking business and Judy as a friend, he could finally go and see what Zootopia was like.

Nick and Judy waved the country fox off, wishing him well before Judy shut the door. They only had a moment’s silence before a girlish shriek filled the air. “Mister Nick!” The squeal from the top of the stairs captured their attention. Both mammals turned to the sound, already knowing the little bunny they’d find there. Sasha and Jasmine were stood together at the top of the stairs, and as Sasha let go of Jasmine’s paw, Nick dropped to his knees, opening up his arms.

Sasha was across the room like lightning, throwing herself into Nick’s arms. Small paws clung to Nick’s shoulders as the tod wrapped the baby bunny up in a cuddle. “Hey Cinnamon Bun.” He held on to Sasha tightly, rubbing her back as the little bunny nuzzled against him, trying to tuck herself under his muzzle. Lifting his chin a little, Nick let her wiggle under his snout.

“I don’t want you to go today.” Sasha had been sad once Judy and Nick had left the parade, and she hadn’t had the chance to see them before her mom had tucked her up in bed. Sasha had made sure to wake early though, not wanting to miss out on seeing Nick one last time before he went away. She really didn’t want him to leave, he was nice to her and looked after her, and he called her sweet names and let her sit on his shoulders.

Never in a million years had Nick thought he’d ever adore a baby bunny. He still wondered how
Sasha’s gnaw toy had ended up in his punnet of blueberries, but he was glad that it had. The rabbit in his arms had grown on him over the weekend. “I know, but I need to go back to my training.”

“I’ll miss you though.” Sasha’s lower lip wobbled. She didn’t get on with many of her siblings; they thought Sasha was too clingy and that she cried a lot, but when Nick was around and doting on her Sasha didn’t care about them, she didn’t care about what they thought. If anything, her brothers and sisters were nicer to her when Nick was around.

Watching her boyfriend and baby sister interact, Judy felt her heart melting. While she found Nick’s paternal side devastatingly attractive, she also found the sweetness of the bond between Nick and Sasha beautiful. They’d taken a shine to one another, and Judy prayed that nothing would change now that she and Nick were about to leave and would be separated from her family for a while. Judy silently thanked whoever had accidentally dropped Cloudy into Nick’s care package.

Jasmine remained by the stairs, watching as Nick and Sasha embraced, as Judy cooed over the two of them. Hearing her mom approaching she stepped aside, and Bonnie came to a standstill beside her. Mother and daughter shared a look, Bonnie nodding once. Barely withholding her squeal of delight, Jasmine bit down on her lower lip, making a small fist pump gesture at her side. “About damn time, you idiots.”

“I’ll come back and see you again soon, and until then how about I send you some letters, maybe your mom can arrange for us to have a phone call every now and then?” Nick offered, rubbing Sasha’s back. He didn’t want to lose contact with the small bunny in his embrace, but he knew it would be difficult to keep in touch. Nick didn’t have access to the internet for Furbook, if Sasha even had an account, and his screen time was limited. He was sure either his mom or Judy wouldn’t mind cutting one of their calls short now and then so he could call Bonnie and speak to Sasha.

Nodding, Sasha pulled back from their embrace, wide brown eyes finding emerald ones. Reaching into the pocket of her dress, Sasha produced Cloudy. She offered her favorite toy out to Nick. “Will you look after Cloudy for me please Mister Nick?”

Nick’s features softened, and he reached out a paw, smoothing his fingers over Sasha’s cheek. She was too sweet. He hoped that should he have kits one day that they’d be as adorable as Sasha. “Aww, Cinnamon. That’s very kind of you, but you need Cloudy to keep your teeth healthy.” Nick didn’t want to take her favorite gnaw toy from her. Seeing Sasha’s smile falter, Nick felt a pang of guilt. “I have an idea, give me a second, and I’ll be right back.” He vowed, standing to his full height before he took off down the stairs, past a confused looking Bonnie and Jasmine. More comfortable with the layout of the warren now, and familiar with the route back to Judy’s room, Nick started to jog. Making it to Judy’s room he pushed the door open, going for his bag. After a moment of rummaging, he produced the item he was looking for, and he started the jog back to the kitchen. Taking the stairs two at a time, Nick caught the amused smile on Judy’s smile. “Morning cardio.” He joked, returning to his position on his knees in front of a very confused looking Sasha. “Will you look after this for me, please? It’s my favorite, and I’ll be coming back soon for it.” Nick explained, looping one of his ties around the baby bunny’s neck, creating a loose Windsor knot. In truth, Nick had no idea when he’d next be back in Bunnyburrow, but if it would comfort Sasha then she could hold onto his tie until the end of time.

Looking down at the tie around her neck, Sasha grinned. It was royal blue with white paw prints printed on it, and the little bunny loved it. Grabbing the end, she started to play with the soft fabric. Looking up, she offered Nick a toothy smile. If this were his favorite tie, then she’d take care of it really well, especially because he’d be coming back for it. “I’ll look after it for you Mister Nick,” Sasha vowed, letting go of Nick’s tie long enough to give the tod another hug.
Returning Sasha’s embrace, Nick slowly withdrew; making sure the little brown bunny was looking at him. “Thank you. Now, if anyone is mean to you while I’m gone, you need to let me know okay?” Nick didn’t have any siblings, but he knew enough mammals that did. Sasha had spent a lot of time hanging around with him, Judy, and Jasmine over the weekend, never really bothering with her siblings that were nearer her age. Nick was concerned that they perhaps picked on her, that they teased her, as kits were known to do. Sasha might not feel comfortable letting her mom know she was being teased, but if she told Nick, then the tod could quietly let Bonnie know.

“I will Mister Nick.” Sasha promised, offering Nick another toothy grin as her paws returned to his tie. The baby bunny wondered how long she’d get to wear it for and whether she’d be allowed to wear it to school today. If not, she’d keep it safely tucked under her pillow with Cloudy.

Pleased, Nick slid a paw to the back of Sasha’s head, pulling her in so he could press a kiss to her forehead. “Good girl.” He whispered, letting her go. “Ju and I need to go and pack now, but then we’re heading to the train station. Do you and Jasmine want to come with us?” Nick offered, knowing Sasha would need an adult with her to bring her back to the warren once he and Judy were on the train. Bonnie would probably be too busy sorting out breakfast, and Nick had no idea where Stu was.

As Sasha nodded eagerly, Nick rose back to his full height, giving her head an affectionate rub, ruffling her fur. “Some more goodies for you, Nick.” Bonnie broke the moment, placing another tub of baked treats onto the counter. Jasmine scooped Sasha up, sitting the baby bunny on her hip. Judy moved to stand by the island counter, looking at the two massive tubs of baked treats Nick would get to take back to the academy with him. As Nick came to stand beside her, he grinned at the Hoppes matriarch.

“Still fattening me up, Bonnie?” Nick joked, unsure how he was going to eat all of the treats himself before they went off. Sure he could share them with Tony, Horton, and Randon, but would he? Probably not, no. He was a greedy fox when it came to blueberry treats.

“You’re next year’s main course.” Bonnie teased, stacking the two tubs.

Chuckling, Nick shook his head fondly. “We’ll be right back,” Judy promised, taking Nick’s paw in her own. Time was running out, and they really needed to pack. Making their way out of the kitchen, through the dining room and to Judy’s room, the doe nudged her shoulder against the tod as they stopped in front of her bedroom door. “Sasha adores you, Slick.”

“Yeah, she’s not a bad bun.” Nick shrugged, knocking Judy’s shoulder back as his rabbit opened her bedroom door. Together they took the few steps down into her room. Nick knew that Sasha had him wrapped around her little finger, but he couldn't find it in him to care. He hadn't had much interaction with kits over the years, very few of his fellow street mammals had them, and his old line of work hadn't brought him into contact with them. However, Nick had always had a soft spot for kits, for how unjaded they were, how they still believed the world was good and pure, and that they could do and be anything.

“You adore her too, don’t you?” Judy grinned. Since Nick’s first interaction with her younger sister Judy had guessed they would end up inseparable. Sasha was different than her littermates and had been since day one. While they liked to play games and venture outside, Sasha was more creative, preferring to stay indoors with her coloring books or sketchpad. It had made her a bit of an outcast, so she often spent more time with her older siblings.

Using his honed agility from his police training, Nick made a quick maneuver, catching Judy off-guard as he pressed her against the nearest wall, his paws either side of her pinning her in place. Enjoying the look of surprise on Judy’s face, Nick leaned down until their noses were almost
touching. “Not as much as I adore you.” He whispered, closing the gap between them to press his lips to hers in a soft kiss.

Though Judy had been caught off-guard by Nick’s sudden move, the doe was impressed by how much quicker he was on his hind paws. Any thought of praising him disappeared from her mind though when their lips connected. The unexpected press of Nick’s lips against her own had Judy’s heart skipping, butterflies erupting in her tummy as Nick’s paws started to wander. One found purchase on her hip, claws digging lightly into her delicate skin, while the other reached up to cup the back of her head, to save her from hurting herself against the exposed stone walls of the warren. With Nick’s scent flooding her nostrils Judy wanted more of her fox. Small paws grabbing at his t-shirt, Judy kept Nick pressed against her, his strong body pinning her in place. She loved his newfound strength, and a deeper, more primal part of her loved the thought of her mate being able to take care of her and protect her.

Their kiss was slow and soft, the sweet press and drag of lips exciting them both, promising more. Licking along the seam of Judy’s lips, Nick begged for permission, a low purr of contentment fleeing him as his bunny submitted, granting him access. Lips and tongue exploring, the taste of his mate drove Nick crazy. Never in his life had he thought he'd love another mammal as much as he did Judy, never in his life did he think he'd find himself in Bunnyburrow making out with Zootopia’s first bunny cop, on the road to becoming a cop himself. The soft sighs of Judy’s happiness and pleasure while Nick kissed her had the tod tightening his hold on her. Judy’s gasp as Nick squeezed her side made the fox smile against her lips. Knowing time wasn't on their side, Nick reluctantly and slowly withdrew from their kiss. Lips parting from Judy’s, Nick tipped his head down, letting his muzzle rest under Judy’s chin, and the breathless doe pressed a kiss to the bridge of his snout. Judy’s paws moved from Nick’s shirt and reached up to cup his muzzle, stroking him.

Judy licked her lips, the taste of Nick lingering. Opening her eyes, she was met with the sight of Nick’s closed eyes and the blissful and relaxed expression he wore. Judy’s heart clenched. It was what she wanted, for Nick to not feel the weight of the world bearing down on him anymore. As if sensing her gaze, Nick slowly opened his eyes. Violet and emerald met, and Judy could've lost herself in her mate’s expressive eyes. She didn't want to break the moment, but time was ticking on.

“We need to pack, Slick.”

“I know.” Nick sighed, untangling himself from his bunny to take a step back, putting a little distance between them. He reached out one last time though, tenderly stroking Judy’s cheek.

Shifting their attention to their bags, they both set about packing. Throwing all of the items Judy had arrived with into her bag, and double-checking that the key and letter from Mr. Big were secure, Judy turned her attention to the photo album she’d gifted Nick. “Do you want to keep this with you, or should I take it home?” She asked.

Nick gave it a moment’s thought. While it would be lovely to keep it with him, to be able to flick through it some more and reminisce, he wasn’t sure it would bode well to have it with him at the academy. He was sure the other cadets would either find it or see him looking at it and then he’d have a battle on his paws getting them to back off. “Could you take it home, please?” Nick made his decision.

Nodding, Judy packed the photo album away safely; along with the presents she and Nick had received from her parents. She only just managed to get everything into her suitcase, and she’d have to carry her flowers. Turning to find Nick packed and ready too, they both took one bag and one bouquet each, heading back to the dining room.
“Here Carrots, you hold the flowers, and I’ll grab the bags.” Nick offered as they reached the bottom of the stairs up to the kitchen. The tod was well aware of the fact that Judy was strong enough to carry a bag and a bouquet at the same time, but his mom had raised him to always offer to take a ladies bag when stairs were involved.

Ears drooping at the sweet gesture from her fox, the look on Nick’s face told Judy it would be criminal to turn him down. Placing her bag down, Judy held out her paw for the other bouquet. As Nick handed it over, she started to ascend the stairs, her fox following behind her with both of their bags. Once in the kitchen, Judy transferred her flowers into one large bouquet, making a mental note to split them again once she was home. Nick busied himself packing his tubs of treats.

The back door opened, and Nick turned towards the sound. “Hey, Stu.” Nick greeted the buck, not at all surprised to see him up and about so early in the day. The tod could smell the countryside on Stu’s clothes, the scent of the dirt he’d been working in clung to his fur, along with the faint trace of carrots.

Smiling at the fox, Stu felt a pang of sadness that Nick and Judy were about to leave. He had no idea when he’d next see them, but he hoped it would be soon. Nick had adapted well to his family, had taken everything in his stride, and the buck was proud to have Nick as part of the fold. “Hey son, all set?” He checked, paws grasping at the straps of his dungarees.

Having been wrapping a wad of wet tissue around the end of her flowers so they would stay moist during the trip to work, Judy froze as she heard her father address Nick as ‘son.’ Her dad only ever used that term when addressing one of her sister’s husbands. She and Nick had only just started dating, but her father was treating Nick as if they were married. The thought made Judy’s heart race in a mixture of excitement and panic, and from the corner of her eye, she noticed Jasmine and her mom as they turned to look at her, having heard her increased heart rate.

Quickly glancing at the contents of his bag, remembering that Sasha was looking after one of his ties, Nick nodded. “I think so.”

“Well if you missed anything Bon and I will send it to you at the academy.” Stu offered. Either that or they’d forward it on to Judy. She’d probably be seeing Nick again before he and his wife would. Stu hoped that they’d come back soon; the Hopps warren was always open to them.

“Thanks, Stu.” Nick appreciated the buck’s kindness and the warmth he felt from him. Though Nick would always love his dad, would always hold him in the highest regard and put no male before him, he couldn’t deny how soothing it was to know that he finally had a father figure in his life again. Stu had been apprehensive about him, to begin with, and Nick knew that was to be expected, but the tod felt genuine happiness at the realization that he’d won the buck over.

Stu said his goodbyes to Nick and Judy, embracing them both and making them promise to come back again soon. He and Bonnie stood together on the front porch and waved them off, watching as Judy drove one of the farm trucks to the station, Nick in the passenger seat, Sasha wedged between them, and Jasmine in the truck bed with their bags and Judy’s flowers.

Their departure from the train station was teary. They’d only had to wait ten minutes before the Zootopia Express had pulled into the station, and while Judy had embraced Jasmine, Nick had given Sasha one last cuddle. They’d swapped then, Nick and Jasmine embracing while Judy gave Sasha a squeeze. It wasn’t until Nick had pushed the button for the train doors to open that Sasha had started to cry. Big, fat tears had rolled down her cheeks, and the baby bunny had begun squeezing, paws reaching out for Nick as Jasmine had tried to hold her back.

The harsh sound of Sasha crying had broken Nick’s heart. Judy had taken the bags from him,
insisting he quickly go and soothe Sasha. Scooping up the baby bunny, Nick had cradled her, giving her an extra tight cuddle. “I’ll come and see you soon, Cinnamon. I’ll write to you every week too.” Sasha’s tears had slowed, the baby bunny hiccupping as she’d nodded, lower lip wobbling. Nick had pressed one final kiss to her forehead before Jasmine had intervened, hurrying Nick onto the train moments before the doors closed. Judy had picked windows seats for them, and Nick was able to wave goodbye to Sasha as the train pulled out of the station.

Shaken by Sasha’s sudden outburst, Nick didn’t notice Judy’s paw on his at first. His departure had never drawn such a reaction from another mammal before. Usually, animals were pleased to see him leave. The slow rubbing of Judy’s paw soon caught his attention. “It's okay Slick. Baby bunnies get separation anxiety. She'll be fine in half an hour.”

“I’ve just…” Nick paused, sighing. “I’ve never had a mammal act so devastated by my leaving before.”

“Like I said, she adores you,” Judy reassured her fox. Nick offered her a small smile before he threw his arm over the back of the seat behind Judy. The doe took the invitation and scooted closer, leaning against her mate’s side. The carriage they were in was almost empty, save for a small group of rabbits that were sat at the opposite end. Judy could see them giving her and Nick the stink eye and could hear the rude things they were whispering. She paid them no mind, though, curling up against Nick’s side.

The group of rabbits staring at them didn’t evade Nick’s notice, but the tod was so used to mammal’s looking at him and giving him dirty looks that it didn’t bother him in the slightest. “I’m going to miss you, Carrots.” He whispered, head tipping down so he could gaze at his doe. Lifting the paw on the arm that was thrown around her shoulders, he started to stroke along her temple, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head.

A small noise of happiness slipped through Judy’s lips at the kiss, and she slowly tipped her head up so she could look into her favorite emerald eyes. “I’m going to miss you more.” She murmured, purposefully keeping her voice low so the other rabbits in the carriage couldn’t eavesdrop. “You’ll keep calling me every week, right?”

“If I have to.” Nick teased as he stopped stroking her temple, clawed thumb instead brushing over the soft fur at the base of her ear.

Reaching for her fox, Judy gave him a thump with her paw, a smile painted on her lips. “Hey!” She protested.

Chuckling, Nick captured Judy’s lips in a soft kiss, keeping it chaste given their current location. As he pulled back, Judy settled against his side once again. “Thank you for bringing me home to meet your family.”

Though Judy had been nervous about Nick meeting her family, about him being overwhelmed by the sheer number of bunnies and the craziness of the Carrot Day Festival, he’d handled it like a champ. Most of her family liked him, her dad had even taken to calling him son, and Sasha was so enamored with him that if she’d have been the same age as Judy, then Judy would’ve been concerned about whether she needed to mark her territory or not. “You took me to meet yours first, it was only fair.”

“That was just my mom, Fluff, and you did kind of back me into a corner when it came to meeting her.” Looking back at it, Nick questioned why he’d resisted taking Judy to meet his mom in the first place. It would’ve happened eventually.
“Yeah, I did. I don’t regret it, though.” Judy had gained an incredible friend in Marian, and she looked forward to their weekly dinners. Besides, Judy wondered whether she’d have been able to convince Nick to submit an application for the ZPD again if they hadn’t of stayed at Marian’s. Their late night conversation in Nick’s kithood bedroom had opened many doors and had started the process of bringing them closer together.

“Me neither.” Nick felt immense joy at the fact his mom and his mate were friends, that they enjoyed one another's company. “Promise me you’ll be careful until I’m next home, okay?” Nick knew it was futile to ask her to stay safe; the life of a cop was never safe. Now that she was his, though, Nick’s worry about her safety kicked up another notch. At least he knew Wolford had her back and wasn’t afraid to jump in and rescue her, if the stitches on her arm were anything to go by. As Judy nodded, Nick stole another kiss from her, trying to cram in as many as possible in the short space of time they had left.

“Now approaching: Running Fields. Please alight here for the Zootopia Police Academy.” The PA System’s announcement made the doe scowl. She wasn't ready to let Nick go, wasn't ready for them to part for goodness knows how long again.

Reluctantly, Nick untangled himself from Judy before he stood up. His doe followed, helping him grab his bag from the rack above them. Taking her paw in his free one, they moved together to the train doors. As the train started to slow, Nick placed his bag down; releasing his paw from Judy’s to cup her face. “I’ll try and come home soon.” He promised, knowing it might be a while before Major Friedkin let him have any more time off. She'd been especially gracious in giving him this morning off.

“Please,” Judy begged, pushing up on the balls of her hind paws to meet Nick halfway, their lips connecting in a slow, gentle kiss. It was a sweet press of mouths, a reassurance of love, a promise of more to come next time they were reunited.

“I love you,” Nick whispered as the train pulled to a stop. He knew he’d said it so many times in the last twelve hours or so, but having the freedom to finally express his feelings was a huge relief to the tod. Nick never tired of hearing Judy say it back, either. He needed to hear it, needed the reassurance that she loved him. Nick hoped with time Judy wouldn’t have to say it so frequently, that his insecurities would disappear, but for now, he needed the assurance.

“I love you too,” Judy whispered in response as the train doors opened. Nick stole one more quick kiss before he was forced to let Judy go, picking up his bag and taking the steps down off the train and onto the platform. His heart felt heavy as he turned, watching the doors close, separating him from his love. Nick waited, though, for the train to start pulling out, waving Judy off. As the train disappeared from sight, he pulled his phone from his pocket. Nick would make it back to the ZPA with time to spare.

As the train left the station, Judy sighed, missing her fox already. Grudgingly she trudged back to her seat, sitting with a gentle plop. Judy’s journey back to the city remained uneventful, and once the train had made it to Savannah Central the doe alighted, bag in one paw and flowers in the other. Hurrying through the station and the city streets, she made it to the ZPD with five minutes to spare. Not having the time or inclination to explain her flowers to Clawhauser, she asked the cheetah to look after them for her before running off to the locker room to store her bag. Slipping into the bullpen with moments to spare, Judy took her usual seat at the front next to Wolford.

“How was your weekend, Connor?” Judy turned to look at her temporary partner, pleased to see him. Though she missed Nick terribly, the thought of a good day's work excited her.

“Oh you know, the usual. My wife wanted a new dining room table, so we spent all weekend...
traipsing around shops only for us to end up back at the first store we visited, buying the first table we saw.” Wolford rolled his eyes. He loved his wife, but sometimes she did things that drove him crazy. Connor guessed he did things that annoyed his wife too. It was part and parcel of marriage. “How was your weekend back home? Wilde doing okay?” He remained nonchalant, but the timber wolf couldn’t deny that he was desperate for some gossip. The ZPD had been a pretty boring place until the little rabbit by his side had bounced in, demanding something more than parking duty.

“It was perfect.” There were moments that Judy hated – her argument with her brother and then her disagreement with Nick being two of them – but overall it had been a great weekend that had culminated in her and Nick becoming a couple. “Nick is good, thanks.”

Nodding, Wolford suddenly caught Judy’s scent. Leaning in close, he inhaled a little deeper. “That’s not…? No way.” His eyes widened. “You and Wilde are together now?”

“Didn't anyone tell you it's rude to sniff your co-workers?” Judy blushed furiously, ears drooping as she tried to conceal the bright pink flush inside of them.

Wolford rolled his eyes, sniffing again. “I usually do undercover narc jobs, Judy, sniffing mammals is a way of life. Don’t evade the question.”

Though she and Nick had decided not to tell their families, they hadn't discussed their co-workers. Wolford’s nose was the strongest on the force, and Judy would be spending every day with him. There would only be so long that she'd be able to avoid his questioning. Besides, part of her was curious as to what exactly he smelled that gave the game away. Deciding it wouldn't hurt for her partner to know, Judy shrugged, offering Wolford a bashful smile.

Grumbling, the timber wolf leaned back, turning in his seat to face the rest of the room. “Francine!” The whole room fell silent. “You won the bet.” He gestured to Judy with a clawed thumb. The room suddenly burst into a cacophony of noise as Judy looked around in disbelief.

“Dang it Hopps, I had $50 down, couldn’t you have held out for another few weeks?” Delgato grumbled, slumping in his chair.

“I had $30 down for Christmas!” Rhinowitz slammed a hoof onto the table, the sound reverberating around the room.

“Bogo is gonna be so pissed!” Snarlof laughed, imagining the fury on his boss’s face when he found out he’d lost $100.

“Who caved first, Hopps?” Higgins asked, demanding more gossip.

“I told you all that Wilde wouldn't be able to keep it in his pants,” Fangmeyer smirked.

Incredulous, Judy looked at her fellow officers, jaw slack and eyes wide. “You were betting on us!?”
Trouble in Tundratown

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Officer Hopps to Dispatch, we have a 10-80 at Glacier Falls,” Judy called it in, paw on her radio as she chased after the stoat. It had been a month since she’d returned from Bunnyburrow, and Chief Bogo had put her and Wolford on patrol in Tundratown ever since. While they’d be purchasing their lunch the electronics store across the street had been robbed. Abandoning their food, Judy and Connor had taken off after the small mammal. His white coat made him hard to pick out amongst the snow, but Judy was determined to catch him. Her small size was an advantage, so Wolford had agreed to take the police cruiser, to try and block off the stoat’s route.

“I said stop!” Judy shouted for what felt like the hundredth time. By now she knew it was futile, few mammals would just suddenly give up, but it was protocol to at least give them the opportunity. “Officer coming through!” She followed up with another shout, dodging and weaving through the massive legs of the district’s polar bear population. Trust the stoat to try and lose her in a crowd. The snow made it difficult for Judy to gain any speed and she cursed the fact her species didn’t have paw pads. They would’ve made this chase much easier, providing her with better traction and endurance. “Nick is so doing all the snow chases in the future.” She decided, watching as the stoat took a right hand turn down an alley. Pelting towards the lamppost on the corner of the street, Judy grabbed it, using it to swing herself around so she could follow the perp. Eyes on the alley, she spotted a tall chain link fence splitting it in half. “Damnit!” She cursed, watching as the stoat neatly climb over the fence, pockets bulging with the stolen goods. Having no other option but to follow, Judy sped up and pushed off with her hind paws. Her jump afforded her some height as she grabbed onto the fence, but it was designed to hold back larger mammals, so the doe still had a way to climb. Gritting her teeth as the coldness of the metal penetrated her fur and reached her skin, she scurried up the fence, vaulting herself up and over. Landing with an elegant roll, she took off after the stoat again, watching as he exited the alley, swinging a left. This part of the district was unfamiliar to Judy, and as she turned onto the narrow street, the run down buildings and the litter-strewn pavement made her feel uneasy. Panting, Judy tried to pull in as much oxygen as possible to keep her going, feeling the cold air burn in her lungs, the wisp’s of her warm breath creating a little cloud as she exhaled. She was faster than the stoat, but he had home advantage.

Up ahead was a three-way intersection, and the street widened. The sudden sharp sound of a car horn spooked the stoat, and his temporary drop in speed enabled Judy to close the gap between them a little more. Distracted by the sound of the car horn, the stoat never noticed how the snow turned to water; he never noticed the public transport system of floating ice caps. One moment Judy could see him, and the next he was in the water.

Judy tried desperately to slow her speed, but without sharp claws to dig into the tundra, she started to skitter the closer she got to the icy water. Paws flailing, the doe landed on her butt with a thud on the snow, skidding. Heart hammering, Judy tried to find something to grasp, but her paws only found snow. “No no no!” She squealed, violet eyes as wide as saucers as the dark, icy water drew closer. Squeezing her eyes shut, Judy braced herself for the cold water.

It never came.

She came to a stop just shy of the water, hind paws dangling over the edge of the ice, toes skimming the water’s surface. Judy sighed in relief, her whole body relaxing as she cracked her
eyes open. For a mammal of her size, the icy water would kill her in a few minutes.

Judy’s relief didn’t last long.

“Help me! Please!” The desperate shout had the doe turning, eyes finding the stoat as he scrabbled at an ice cap, claws leaving scrape marks as he tried to climb onto it. The weight of the stolen goods in his pockets made it difficult for him to climb to safety. Judy went to stand, went to go and help, but the sound of his claws on the ice and his desperate pleas for help made her freeze.

Vision clouding, Judy felt her heart racing. She was back in Mr. Big’s house. Catstro was drowning. Claws were scraping. A muffled voice was pleading.

Judy felt dizzy. She felt sick. She could see Raymond and Kevin stood across from her, Catstro’s gang cowering in fear nearby. She couldn’t speak. Couldn’t move. Fear consumed her, body shaking.

“Hopps!” Wolford tried to get his partners attention, but she wasn’t responding to anything. He’d turned the cruiser onto the street in time to see the stoat go down and had witnessed Judy’s panic to stop. With his partner unharmed Wolford had saved the perp first, pulling the soaking, shivering mammal from the ice water before he’d wrapped him an emergency thermal blanket from the back of the cruiser, slapping cuffs on him and throwing him in the back seat. He’d need to see a medic, but right now Wolford was more concerned with his partner.

“Judy!” He tried again, snapping his fingers in her face. The gray bunny was hyperventilating, her eyes glazed over and her small body was shaking violently. She looked physically uninjured, though. A high pitched scream from her made the timber wolf flinch, and without giving it any thought he picked her up, racing back to the police cruiser where he let her rest in the passenger seat. She curled in on herself, paws hugging her knees, large ears coming down to hide her face.

Wolford was at a loss. What was he meant to do? He’d seen a similar reaction only once before. Rhinowitz had acted this way when they’d stormed a drug den a few years back after someone had fired a gun. Having once been in the army, the giant rhino now had a touch of PTSD.

“PTSD. Why the hell would Hopps have PTSD?” Wolford had no knowledge of how to help her, so he did the only thing he could think of. Grabbing his phone, he found the number he was looking for, hitting dial and pressing the device to his ear. “Pick up, pick up, pick up.” He growled, tail swishing in agitation as he kept one eye on his terrified partner, and the other on the perp on the back seat.

“ZPA, this is Jane Doe speaking, how can I help?” The cheerful antelope receptionist of the Zootopia Police Academy answered.

“This is Officer Wolford, badge number 7963. Get me Cadet Wilde now, please.” Connor demanded, shutting the passenger door as he raced around the police cruiser, sliding into the driver's seat.

“Officer, he’s in cla-” The doe went to protest.

“It’s an emergency.” Wolford cut her off, starting up the engine.

“Hold the line.” The doe responded, and Wolford was left listening to the sound of her walking briskly through the corridors of the ZPA. Judy wasn’t doing any better, and though he knew he was breaking with protocol in getting Wilde on the phone, he needed his partner to start coming around. The stoat’s teeth were no longer chattering, but he looked confused and drowsy. Keeping the
phone wedged to his ear with one paw, Connor pulled the car away from the scene, re-joining the main road and heading towards the hospital.

Stood at the front of the classroom, Major Friedkin surveyed her students. Today’s class was on judgment, on when it was best to take action and what that action should be. “At what point is it acceptable to use your taser, cadets?”

“When a perp annoys you.” Tony joked, gaining a round of laughter from the fellow mammals in the room. Nick chuckled, turning to glance at his friend.

Shaking her head, the polar bear smacked a paw down on her desk. “Wrong!”

“All the time. You wanna break the law? Here, have 30,000 volts.” Randon tagged on, earning more laughter from his fellow cadets.

Major Friedkin knew this year's intake were well aware of the answer, and they were simply testing her patience, but she’d had several cubs in her life, patience was her middle name.

A sharp rap at the classroom door captured the attention of all the mammals in the room, and Jane stepped in. “I’ve got a phone call for Cadet Wilde from an Officer Wolford?”

Nick was up and out of his seat in seconds, chair clattering to the ground. Snatching the phone from Jane, he pressed it to his ear. “Is she okay?” He barked, heart racing as his tail swished. If something had happened to Judy…

“Physically yes. She chased a perp through Tundratown, and he fell in the water. She froze, I can’t snap her out of it.” The stoat on the back seat seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness, and Wolford needed to get him to a hospital quickly.

Inhaling sharply, Nick slipped out of the room, aware of the stunned silence from his fellow cadets. His actions had been rude, and his mom would smack his ears for the way he’d snatched the phone should she ever find out, but the thought of anything happening to his mate, the idea of Judy being hurt, ignited terror in him like he’d never felt before. There was only one reason for Judy’s reaction to the icy water. “Catstro.” Growling under his breath, Nick paced. He thought they’d dealt with it, that she was no longer suffering. “Put her on.” He demanded. “Please.” He only just remembered his manners.

Thrusting his phone towards Judy, Wolford was grateful that he’d taken the advanced driving course. Slipping the phone under her large ears, he let go of the device, focusing his attention back on the road and the traffic that was moving out of his way. He put his hind paw down a little more, pushing the cruiser past the speed limit as the sirens wailed.

Nick could hear the sirens in the background, but what he focused in on was the sound of quick breathing and grinding teeth. “Carrots.” He called out. “Fluff.” The quick little puffs of breath didn’t slow. “Sweetheart.” He tried again, and this time the grinding of teeth stopped. “You’re alright; it’s okay.” He started to soothe her. He had no idea what to talk about, what would offer her comfort, but she’d successfully talked him down from a panic attack so he could at least try to return the favor and bring her out of her flashback. “It’s just a memory. You’re not there. What can you smell?” Nick continued to pace while Jane watched, the antelope’s eyes wide.

“Nick?” Judy frowned. Why was her fox here?
“Yeah, it’s me. I’m here. What can you smell?” Nick tried to get Judy to focus on her immediate surroundings in the hope that it would pull her out of her memories. Unfortunately, the general smell of the district wouldn't help, Mr. Big’s home still carried the typical tundra scent, but Nick figured there would be other unique smells in the cruiser that might distract her.

Slowly Judy unfurled, left paw rising to grasp at the phone as he ears sprung up, unmasking her face. Confused, Judy didn’t know what was going on, or why Nick was on the phone. She was moving though, the car rocketing down the streets of Tundratown, but she felt like she was still in Mr. Big’s house. “Fish, and polar bears, and Grandmamma’s incense.”

Nick cursed under his breath. “What can you hear?” he tried another angle, hoping to find something that would snap the doe out of her memory.

Judy tried her hardest to listen, but the sounds around her were the worst part. “Cries for help. Oh gosh, Nick. He’s drowning. He’s trying to get out of the pit but he can’t. He’s clawing at the ice. Oh cripes. Catsr-“

“You’re okay.” Nick quickly cut her off, his whole body tensing. He couldn’t let Judy mention Catstro’s name, couldn’t risk Wolford overhearing it. “You’re not there anymore, sweetheart. You’re safe.” He soothed. Judy’s noise of distress made Nick’s heart clench painfully. “Can you touch your right wrist for me, please?” He tried another route.

Frowning, Judy was thrown off by Nick’s request. “What?”

“Your right wrist. Touch it. Please.” The tod begged, hoping beyond measure that this would jolt her back to reality.

“Okay.” Judy moved her left paw to her right wrist. The action felt reflexive, like she’d done it hundreds of times before.

Giving her a moment to do as he asked, Nick stopped pacing; studiously ignoring the antelope that continued to linger and eavesdrop. He wished she would go away and leave him to have this conversation with Judy in peace. “What do you feel?”

Judy’s small paw touched a band of cool metal, and the doe glanced down, violet eyes finding a bracelet. That hadn’t been there when Catstro had drowned. “My bonding bracelet.” Nick had given it to her after, for her birthday. “Wait a minute.” The world seemed to right itself as Mr. Big’s house slowly disappeared, the sight and sound of Catstro trying to claw his way out of the pit faded away. “Slick?”

The change in Judy’s tone made the tod sag, body collapsing against the corridor wall. She sounded more like her old self, more aware. Her breathing was still a little uneven though. “I’m here, Carrots.” He reassured his love, relief washing over him. “Breathe with me.” He instructed, purposefully taking a loud breath in before he exhaled, repeating the action again. Not wanting to argue, Judy took a deep breath in when Nick did, following his lead. They exhaled together. Repeating the action several times, Judy finally managed to get her breathing back under control.

“What happened?” Judy clutched the phone to her ear, glancing around the cruiser. It was stationary now, parked in front of the hospital. Wolford was nowhere to be seen, but Judy could still smell him in the cruiser, along with the perp.

Judy sounded so small, so confused, and Nick had to stop himself from shouting in frustration that he wasn’t there to properly comfort her, that he couldn’t pull her into his arms and hold her, press kisses to her face and reassure her with his presence. “Wolford said you were chasing a perp, that
he fell into the water in Tundratown.” Nick prayed he wouldn’t set off another flashback.

Thinking about it for a second, the memory of chasing the stoat finally pushed through Judy’s cloudy and disorientated mind. “He stole some electronics.”

Nick didn’t know the finer details of the crime Judy had been dealing with, but he found himself nodding in agreement. “That’s right. You caught him.” The sounds of the cruiser’s siren had stopped a few minutes ago. “Where are you now?”

Glancing out of the window, Judy caught the sign to her right. “Tundra Hospital. I’m in the car. Wolford isn’t here.” Mind racing, Judy tried to piece together when they’d arrived at the hospital. She couldn’t remember getting into the car.

“But you’re unhurt?” Nick double-checked. Though the tod was learning to trust Wolford more, it wouldn’t surprise him if the timber wolf had missed any physical injuries on Judy. If Judy were hurt or in pain, he’d demand that she get out of the cruiser and go into the hospital.

Bobbing her head in confirmation, Judy soon realized that Nick couldn’t see her. “I’m unhurt.” She confirmed.

“Good. That’s all that matters.” Nick ran a paw over his face as he slid down the wall, head thunking back. He wished he were there, that he were in the city and could help Judy more. Being so far away was painful, and he missed her so much, hadn’t been able to hold her or kiss her since they’d parted ways on the train station platform a month ago. “I might not be able to offer her comfort, but I know someone who can.” Nick had an idea. “Fluff, can you do me a favor please?”

“Sure, what is it?” Judy still sounded a little disorientated, but Nick knew she was with it a bit more now. He still didn’t want her on her own, though. After Catstro’s death Judy had festered in her feelings for days until he’d come home, and then it had been like a dam bursting. He had a feeling it would be a while until he would be allowed home again to see her. Training had kicked up a gear, and the days were longer and more grueling than before. Several of this year’s intake had dropped out, and though there were times when Nick felt like quitting, he didn’t let himself give in. Judy had faith in him; his mom had faith in him. He could do this.

“When Wolford gets back, please ask him to take you to see mom.” Though Judy would be seeing his mom tomorrow for dinner, Nick wanted her to go over today too. It wasn’t like Marian would be annoyed by Judy’s arrival on her doorstep. His mom adored his bunny. Of course, the issue with Judy seeing his mom was that she was unaware of the Catstro situation, which left Judy with no one to talk to. Asking her to go and see Fru Fru, to spend time in the Big household with mammals she could talk openly about the subject with, was just begging for another flashback.

The memory of Catstro’s death was no longer prominent, no longer holding her in its grasp, but Judy still felt a little shaky and disorientated. Wolford had done the right thing by calling Nick, the sound of her foxes voice the perfect way to pull her out of her flashback. There was no need for her to see Marian, though. She didn’t want to worry the vixen by turning up unannounced. “Slick, I don’t nee-“

“Please.” Nick cut her off. If Judy’s reaction when he’d arrived back home the first time was anything to go by, then she shouldn’t be alone right now. “For me.” He knew it was wrong to guilt her into going, but being so far away from her left him with little choice. The only other mammal he had to call on was Finnick, and Judy didn’t need to be around that angry ball of fur right now.

Backed into a corner, Judy conceded. All she wanted to do was go home, grab her blanket, and curl up on the couch watching Nutflix. The lilt of panic to Nick’s voice made the doe reconsider and
accept his request. They were miles apart and Nick didn't need the worry, his focus should be on his classes. “Okay. I'll go and see your mom.” Judy spared a quick glance to the clock on the cruiser's dashboard, gasping at the time. “You should be in class!” The ZPA schedule hadn't changed, and Judy could distinctly remember spending her afternoons locked away in classrooms, taking notes and occasionally, when the sun was shining, wishing she was outside.

Nick had to withhold his laugh, his free paw grasping at his left ear as he tried to relax, while the paw holding the phone pushed the smaller device tighter to his other ear as if it would help bring them closer. “I was, but this is more important.” Nick knew that he'd probably be punished for his panicked reaction, for leaving the room without permission and for snatching the phone rather rudely from Jane. He'd take whatever punishment Major Friedkin would deal out, though. Judy was his mate, and her well-being was his number one priority.

“Go back to class, please.” Judy didn't want Nick missing any of his education. She knew how hard the classes were this time of year, how much information was thrown at cadets. She’d happily help him study and fill in any blanks, but she didn't want him missing anything because she'd freaked out. “I'm not going to freak out again. I can't worry him.”

Nick shook his head, stretching his legs out on front of him, along the floor. Back still pressed to the wall, the paw that had been grasping at his ear fell to his lap. “I'm not going back to class until I know you're okay, no matter how much I'm being stared at.” Nick lifted his gaze from the opposite wall to look at Jane, who was still lingering nearby, staring intently at the fox.

“I'm alright, Slick,” Judy told a small white lie. Physically she was fine, and she was a little better mentally than she had been a few minutes ago, but she couldn't shake the feeling of dread or the faint sounds of claws on ice and desperate screams for help. “So stupid. It's just ice water. You fell in it hundreds of times at the academy.”

Nick knew Judy well enough now to be able to pick up on the subtle shifts in her tone. “Yeah, not convinced.” He returned his gaze to the wall opposite, emerald eyes tracking the cracks in the plaster. With the inability to call his mom, Nick was relying on Judy following through with her vow to see Marian. Judy would probably try and act strong, would go home and try to act like nothing had happened. If there was one thing Nick had learned in his time with Judy, it was that holding feelings in, locking them away, only led to more problems and a harder time processing those feelings in the future.

Frustrated that Nick didn't believe her, Judy pulled the phone from her ear. Glancing down at the screen she saw a video icon. “I'll show you.” She declared, pushing the button. After a few seconds, the screen switched to a video call, enabling her to now see her foxes face as he pulled the device away from his ear. “See, I'm alright.” She placated him, pulling the phone away enough so that Nick could see most of her.

As the phone switched to a video call and his bunny filled the screen, Nick put himself on a video call too and immediately set about looking Judy over. Physically she was fine, yes, but the tightness in her shoulders gave her away. That, and her ears were now pulled back. He was tempted to call her out for lying, but forcing her into confessing that she wasn't 100% fine would likely result in them bickering. Judy was a big doe, and Nick had to trust her judgment, even if the thought made him frown. “Just, go see mom.” He sighed. “Pick your battles wisely, Wilde. This isn't one of them.”

Taking a moment to check out her fox, Judy could see the slight bags under his eyes and the way his fur was ruffled and not brushed to perfection like usual. He looked exhausted. “And you've needlessly worried him to boot.” The doe scolded herself. Even though Nick looked in need of a
good nights sleep, he was still the most handsome mammal to her. The crease of his brow and the narrowing of his eyes made the doe sigh, mimicking her mate. “You’re frowning.”

“That’s because I’m worried.” Nick got straight to the point. He knew how emotional his bunny could be.

“I love you.” Smiling, Judy tried to soothe her fox.

Features softening at the reminder of his mate’s love, Nick didn't bother stopping the warm smile that graced his face. “I love you too, but don't try and change the subject.” He admonished lightly. Judy was intelligent, and the tod had no doubts in his mind that she would try and wiggle her way out of their conversation. Jane’s small cough to his right had Nick tipping his head towards the antelope, eyes narrowing as he dared her to say anything about his relationship with Judy.

Hearing the cough, Judy’s ears sprang up. “You’re not alone?”

“No, afraid not. As this is outside of our standard calls, I get the impression I'm not allowed to be alone with the phone. I don't know what they think I'll do. They’re probably worried I'll Zoogle inter-species porn or something.” The opportunity was too good to miss, and Nick had to refrain from snickering, forcing himself to slip back behind his con-mammal persona mask for a few minutes.

“NICK!” Judy gasped, scandalized. The sound of embarrassment from the other mammal with Nick made the does jaw drop. “He has no shame!”

The look of outrage and embarrassment on Jane’s face, coupled with his bunny’s slack jaw made Nick break character. Head tipping back, Nick didn't bother trying to contain his laughter as his tail thumped the floor.

The sound of her mate’s laughter made Judy laugh too, and the doe shook her head fondly at her goof of a fox. “You’re terrible.” Nick’s comment had broken her out of her funk a little more. The warm sound of Nick’s laugh had drowned out the faint remnants of claws on ice, but Judy still couldn't shake her feeling of dread. It formed in her stomach, and the country bunny felt its weight settle.

“You love me anyway.” Nick pointed out with a grin.

It was impossible to deny. No matter how terrible or irritating her fox could be, Judy would always love him. “Yes, yes I do.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Wolford’s arrival back at the cruiser. Too lost in staring at her fox to have noticed the timber wolf approach, it wasn’t until he opened the car door that Judy was alerted to his presence. “How’re you doing, Judy?” Connor asked as he slid into the driver's seat, noting the phone in her paws.

Turning her attention from her fox to the timber wolf, Judy offered him an affectionate smile, grateful that he’d thought to call Nick for her. “Much better, Connor. Thank you.”

Wolford shrugged off the compliment. He was doing his job as her temporary partner and friend. The little bunny had needed snapping out of her funk, and the wolf had figured that Wilde would know what to do. “Don’t mention it. Chief wants you to take the rest of the day off though.” Connor had called the incident in, and Clawhauser had been quick to patch him through to Bogo. After the cape buffalo had finished cursing a blue streak, he’d given the order for Judy to take the rest of the day, and for Connor to return to the precinct to fill in the relevant paperwork. The timber
wolf hated paperwork, but he was grateful he too hadn’t been ordered home. The dining room table wasn’t going to pay for itself.

Phone and Nick forgotten for a moment, Judy vehemently shook her head. She was more than capable of returning to work and pulling her own weight. It wasn’t fair that her little freak out would cause so much grief for her partner. “I can’t do that, there’s so much to do. All the paperwork and th-“

Having been listening to the conversation between his mate and Wolford, Nick scowled as Judy started to object. To the tod, Chief Bogo’s order made perfect sense. Nick could see that Judy still wasn’t in any fit state to return to work, and it didn’t surprise him that Bogo had decided the same. “Carrots.” He interrupted, needing to stop her before she worked herself up into a frenzy.

Suddenly remembering her phone call with Nick, Judy gasped, feeling momentarily rude for ignoring him. Violet eyes shifted to the screen of the device in her paws, allowing her to see him once more. “Yes?”

“Follow Chief Buffalo Butt’s orders, please.” Nick’s tone left no room for argument, but the tod knew how his doe could be. In the background he heard Wolford snicker, the timber wolf trying and failing to hide the noise.

Frustrated that Nick agreed with the Chief, Judy went to protest. “But Slick…”

“Sweetheart,” Nick interjected, having expected her to put up a fight. “I know you want to carry on today and that you’re capable, but you need to take some time out. Go and see mom and let her look after you.” He placated his mate, reassuring her that he was on her side and only had her best interests at heart. The memory of Judy’s gut-wrenching sobs as she’d confessed to being present for Catstro’s icing looped through the tod’s mind. What she’d been through had been traumatic, and Nick had to refrain from snarling at the thought of Judy suffering without him there to offer her some comfort. “Thank goodness for Wolford. Not long now and I’ll graduate, then I’ll never be away from her again.”

Judy contemplated arguing, but the hard glint in her foxes gaze told her it would be futile. Besides, she didn’t want to cause any unnecessary worry for her mate. Academy training was only going to get harder from now on, and Nick would need to give it his all, he couldn’t be worrying about her. “Will she be home?” The doe conceded, ears drooping.

Nick let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, offering Judy a soft smile, though her drooped ears didn’t go unnoticed. “Yeah, she only works until lunchtime.” Nick knew his mom’s schedule like the back of his paw. It had made it easier for him to better pick when to visit her while Catstro had been looming over his shoulder. He was certain the caracal would’ve been able to track his mom down no problem, but Nick hadn’t wanted to be seen entering the house and giving up her location himself. “Wolford, could you take her to 1955 Cypress Grove Lane for me please?” Nick raised his voice, entrusting Judy into her temporary partners care some more. Though Judy had seemingly conceded, Nick wasn’t about to take any chances. The picture on the screen changed, and Nick was no longer staring at his bunny, but at the face of the timber wolf.

“Sure can. I’ll walk her to the door.” Wolford offered. He knew how protective one could be over their mate. Though he was still immensely protective of his wife he’d mellowed over the years, learned to trust her and her judgment, to know that she could get herself out of almost any situation and didn’t need him there fighting her battles for her or telling her what to do. Connor could remember being like Nick though, especially when he’d been forced into jobs out of the city limits and separated from his wife for long periods of time. Besides, the bunny next to him had become a close friend over the past few months, like a small, over-enthusiastic younger sister. Connor would
ensure she made it Mrs. Wilde’s home safely.

Relieved, Nick offered Wolford a grin. “I owe you, buddy.” Though favors were no longer a currency Nick really dealt with, having left them behind once he’d moved off of the streets, it didn’t hurt to offer them out and call them in every now and then. Nick would never leave the streets behind entirely. A leopard never changed its spots, after all.

“I’m getting a favor from the infamous Nick Wilde? Must be my lucky day.” Wolford knew enough about street life, had spent enough time undercover working intense jobs and had heard Nick’s name throw around a few times, to understand that favors were very important when a mammal had nothing else to give.

“Don’t waste it on something stupid, alright?” Nick laughed, remembering some of the funny moments that had come about when his favors had been called in. His favorite had been when an old high school buddy had been arrested and had used his one phone call to call Nick. His friend had referred to him as his lawyer, and Nick had been forced to get his paws on suit and briefcase quickly and make his way down to the station, all the while researching laws on disruption of the peace on his cell phone. To this day Nick still couldn’t believe he’d managed to get his buddy off of the hook.

Grinning, Wolford knew when he’d call in the favor, and it would drive the fox crazy. It would be sweet revenge for him having lost $20 in the betting pool. “I’ll save it for when I have mountains of paperwork to do.”

Laughter abruptly ending, Nick narrowed his eyes at the wolf. “You're evil.”

“And you were stupid enough to offer me a favor. You only have yourself to blame, Wilde.” The timber wolf chuckled, feeling a little smug to have pulled a fast one on the street-smart fox. Figuring Nick’s screen time was limited, and very aware of the wide violet eyes staring intently at him and the phone, Connor shook his head fondly. “I’ll put her back on for you.” He barely had the words out of his mouth before Judy was taking the phone from him, reclining in her seat.

“Will you stop worrying now?” Judy asked softly. While touched by Nick’s concern, she was more than capable of looking after herself. She didn’t need Wolford walking her to Marian’s door.

“About you? Never.” Nick shook his head. Asking him to stop worrying about his bunny was like asking Clawhauser to give up donuts – it was impossible.

Nick’s words filled Judy with a profound sense of warmth, and she felt a rush of affection for her fox. Though Judy wasn’t short on mammals worrying about her, and she was more than capable of holding her own, knowing Nick cared so much for her was undeniably sweet. “Have you finished all the treats from Gideon and Mom yet?” Judy shifted the conversation onto a lighter topic, not wanting to dwell any further on her freak out.

Nick didn’t call Judy out on her blatant attempt at shifting the topic and instead went along with it. If his mate needed the distraction, then he’d provide it for her. “I had to share them.” The tod scowled.

Seeing her fox scowl, Judy had to hold back her snicker. He was so protective of his baked treats, and though Judy was partly annoyed that someone had taken food from her tod when he needed as much of it as possible, she was also aware that he’d been gifted an awful lot of food and eating it all himself would’ve probably made him sick. “Oh Slick…”

“I know. It was awful.” Nick sighed, raising a paw to rest the back of it against his forehead in a
dramatic fashion. It had the intended effect, as Judy couldn’t withhold her laugh. Paw dropping back to his lap, Nick relished the sound of his mate’s enjoyment. “I could’ve finished them all myself, but Horton snagged what was left when I wasn’t looking and shared them with Tony and Randon.” The tod had gone to shower one evening and had returned to his bunk to find his treat tubs empty and crumbs clinging to the fur around the mouths of his friends.

“I can send you some more?” Judy offered, feeling sorry for laughing now that she knew Nick hadn’t willingly shared them.

The fox shrugged, not at all bothered. If he was being honest, there had been far too many treats for him to eat on his own anyway. “Don’t worry, I’ll wait until I next come home.”

“Cadet…” Nick was interrupted. The tod scowled, focus shifting from his mate to the antelope who he’d forgotten was still loitering in the corridor with him, wanting the phone back now that the emergency was seemingly over.

Keeping his gaze on the receptionist, Nick addressed his bunny. “They want the phone back. You’re the smart one Carrots, how fast are antelope? Think I could outrun her?” He grinned at the look of indignation on Jane’s face, and the way she huffed at his question.

Chuckling, Judy shook her head. “She’s got you beat by about 18mph, Slick.” The doe was grateful for her high school biology classes, and the mental image of her fox trying to run away from the antelope while clutching the phone made Judy break out into a grin.

“Eh, it was worth asking.” Nick shrugged, gaze moving back to the screen so he could see his mate and her beautiful smile.

“Go. You’re missing class.” Judy insisted. She was feeling better now, and from the corner of her eye, she could see Wolford was growing restless. The timber wolf had been trying not to listen to their conversation as he’d flicked through some notes in the jotter he kept in the center console, but his tilted ears gave him away.

“That’s the point.” Nick gave his mate a cheeky grin, eyes twinkling with mirth. He’d never been good in a classroom, had felt it more useful to gain life experience by living rather than being lectured at by someone while sat at a desk.

Knowing her fox and his lackadaisical attitude, Judy rolled her eyes, but that didn’t stop her next word from being serious. “Nick.” She warned. She loved him dearly, but sometimes her mate needed to be reminded to toe the line. Twenty years on the streets meant Nick was used to walking the thin line between right and wrong.

Giving an overly exaggerated sigh, Nick tried to suppress his smile. “Okay, I’m going. I’ll call you in a few days.”

Seeing the corner of her fox’s lips quirk upwards, Judy’s features softened. He could be a goof at times, but he was her goof, and she wouldn’t have him any other way. “Alright, I’ll speak to you then. I love you.”

Nick swallowed at Judy’s declaration of love, still not used to hearing it even though she’d said it countless times to him over the past month, since that fateful night on the back porch. It still astounded him that she loved him. “I love you too.” He reminded her. “Bye sweetheart.”

“Bye Slick.” Judy reached out a paw to touch the image of her mate just as the call clicked off, the screen going back to Wolford’s wallpaper. With a sad sigh, Judy handed the phone back to her
“Exchanging I love you’s already?” Wolford teased, wanting to eradicate the doe’s sad expression. He and his wife had been dating during his time at the academy, so the timber wolf knew all too well how painful the separation could be.

Glancing over to her partner, Judy lifted her right arm to show her bracelet, which now peeked out from under her uniform. She usually kept it tucked out of the way, not only to stop it being damaged but also to stop a repeat of the coyote’s reaction. “I’m wearing a bonding bracelet, Connor. I think that warrants I love you’s.”

Putting the keys in, Wolford started the engine, slipping the cruiser into drive. “Touché. Come on then, let me take you to see Mrs. Wilde.”

As the call clicked off, Nick sighed. He still wasn’t comfortable, still not 100% sure that Judy was as okay as she claimed to be. There was little he could do from the academy though and he had to trust that Wolford would take Judy to his mom and that his mom would look after his mate for him.

Pushing himself up off of the floor, Nick offered the phone out to Jane. “I’m sorry about snatching it from you.” He apologized, knowing his mom would smack his ears for the rude way he’d reacted. “I panicked.”

Taking the phone from Nick, Jane gave him a small smile. “It’s okay, I understand. Your mate needed you.” Jane herself didn’t have a mate, was yet to find a kind buck that understood her, but she’d watched her mom and dad when she’d been growing up and had therefore witnessed firstpaw a mammal’s need to protect their partner. Hearing Nick talk to Judy, who Jane remembered from last year’s graduates, made the doe a little jealous of their bond.

“Wilde!” The snapping of his name made the tod gulp, and he turned to find Major Friedkin staring at him from the classroom door. Class had just been dismissed, and Nick watched as Horton, Randon, and Tony slipped out of the room, offering him thumbs up. Knowing that he was about to be chewed out, Nick resigned himself to his fate. It was the price he’d willingly pay for helping Judy. “My office, now.”

Tail falling between his legs, Nick trudged after Major Friedkin, the giant polar bear dominating the corridors of the academy as they moved towards her office. Nick had only been inside it once when he’d been informed of the decision that he would be allowed two phone calls a week, and as Nick entered now, he saw that little had changed in the messy space.

A lone desk stood in the middle of the room, a long bookcase lining the back wall while filing cabinets ran along both sidewalls. Paperwork was stacked in piles all over the place, and Nick assumed there was some semblance of order to them. As Friedkin took her seat, Nick scrabbled up onto the giant chair opposite her, disliking that it was made for mammals much bigger than himself.

“Would you like to tell me what that was about, Cadet?” Major Friedkin didn’t like to play the ‘bad cop’ role, but Nick had broken with protocol, and she couldn’t be seen to be letting him off the hook. Favoritism was frowned upon, after all. Reclining in her chair she surveyed the fox, noting the tension in his shoulders, his pinched lips, and wrinkled nose.

“Carrots, I mean Officer Hopps, was involved in an incident a few months ago that wasn’t
pleasant. She occasionally remembers it and needs snapping out of it.” Nick purposefully kept his explanation vague, not wanting to give away too much information and risk Judy’s job.

Major Friedkin hadn’t heard of Judy being involved in any incident, at least not officially, so the news that something had happened to the small bunny cop made the polar bear frown. “She’s suffering from PTSD?”

“No!” Nick was quick to object, knowing what PTSD could mean for an officer. “It’s not an issue. We have it under control.” He covered for his mate. So long as Nick was there, he’d be able to snap her out of whatever flashback she was in, and the knowledge that her bonding bracelet seemed to help bring her back to reality was a useful tool in his arsenal.

“Officer Wolford just called you because Hopps was having a flashback and needed snapping out it. I’d call that an issue, Cadet.” Major Friedkin wasn’t playing. PTSD was a serious matter, and something most officers needed professional assistance with. “Is Chief Bogo aware of it?”

Nerves had Nick licking his lips. “We haven’t told him, but he might be aware as he’s given Judy the rest of the day off. Judy and I will speak to him about it.” He decided. The tod would have to tell the angry cape buffalo about his panic attacks anyway, so it only made sense to tell him about Judy’s flashbacks at the same time. “We’re such a pair.” Nick thought dryly.

“You’d better because if she has a flashback at an inopportune moment, it could be the end of her. Withholding information like that could see her sent into a situation where she has a flashback, and a perp gets the upper paw on her, and you wouldn’t want that would you?” Friedkin knew she was approaching the topic from a sensitive angle, but if she were going to ensure the fox spoke to the Chief, she’d have to bring Judy into it somehow. The polar bear had a feeling the fox opposite her would walk to the ends of the earth for the country bunny. Noting Nick’s jaw clenching, Friedkin realized she’d driven her point home, so she let it drop.

The idea of Judy being hurt, of dying at the paws of another mammal, made Nick’s jaw clench. It was partly why he was at the academy, so that once he graduated he could watch her six and keep her safe. “Can I go and see her please, Major?”

Sighing, Major Friedkin shook her head sadly. “I’m afraid not. The program becomes more intense now, and you’ve already been home more than any of the others. Keep performing well though, and I can let you go home again in two months or so.” As Nick opened his mouth to protest the polar bear shut him down, not giving him the chance to complain “Wilde, you’re doing well here and you’re on course to be valedictorian if you keep your performance up.” Leaning forward the polar bear folded her arms on her desk. “As much as I want to let you go home and be with Hopps, I won’t jeopardize your future. You have so much potential, which is why I have an idea as to your punishment for breaking protocol by taking the phone and the call from Officer Hopps without permission.” She hated to do it, but being accused of favoritism wasn’t something the polar bear wanted to deal with.

The smug smile on Major Friedkin’s face put the fox on edge, and Nick had to throw on his con-mammal mask, finding comfort in it. His whole posture changed as he relaxed in the seat, lazy grin crossing his lips as he shrugged. “Okay, if it’ll boost my grades, hit me with it.”

Noting the change in Nick’s body language, Friedkin had to stop her smile. She was about to wipe that grin off of his face. “Oh, I won’t be hitting you, the mammal leading your new one-on-one paw-to-paw combat sessions will be.”

Mask dropping for a split second, Nick’s eyes widened, and his heartbeat skittered while he swallowed. Forcing himself to relax, he went to object. “Paw-to-paw combat? Major, with all due
“Wilde.” Friedkin would never confess to enjoying the momentary look of terror on Nick’s face, but she didn’t want any backchat from him. The fox fell silent. “You’ve done extremely well in all other aspects of the program, but your skill in physical combat is still lacking. The mammal I have in mind will ensure that your combat skills will be unrivalled.”

Nick hated the idea already, but he’d serve his punishment with grace and make the most of it, learn what he could from this other mammal. He wanted to be valedictorian, he wanted to make his mom and his mate proud, wanted to prove to every mammal in the city that a fox could do and be anything. “Fair enough. When do I start?”

Pleased with the way Nick had adapted to the news of his punishment, Friedkin sat back in her seat, glancing at the calendar on her wall to check the date. She’d need to make some calls after she’d dismissed Wilde, set everything up for him. “Next week, on Monday. I want you to meet them in Training Room 3 after the morning’s session. You’ll go without lunch simply because it’s not best to do this kind of work on a full stomach. You’ll be granted extra at dinner though to compensate you.”

“Next week. At least that gives me a few days respite.” Nick found the silver lining. Though the offer of extra food was appreciated, the tod knew it wasn’t necessary for him. Rather than mentioning it and unleashing a whole new can of worms, Nick simply bobbed his head, his earlier grin now a tight smile. “Sounds good Major.”

Very familiar with the streets of Zootopia, Wolford headed in the direction of Cypress Grove Lane. While curious as to what had set off the gray bunny’s flashback, the timber wolf knew now wasn’t the time to ask. She’d come to him when she was ready, just like she had with the bonding bracelet and her concerns over another mammal being injured. Connor had learned that the rabbit by his side liked to mull things over herself for a while before asking others for their feedback. “Connor?” Judy calling his name broke the wolf out of his thoughts.

“What’s up?” He made a vague gesture towards the on-board dash camera, silently reminding Judy that their conversation was being recorded. The grateful smile she flashed him made his slight bending of the rules not seem so bad.

“When you sniffed me last month and figured out that Nick and I are dating, what did you smell?” It had been bugging her for some time, and while Judy had tried to figure out herself, she decided asking would be a much better idea.

The timber wolf had been expecting this question, but it had taken a little longer than he’d anticipated for Judy to ask. “Your hormones. Part of my training for the undercover position was to learn the different smells of mammals, at varying times of the year. Your species doesn’t have a mating season, but you smell more,” Connor tried to find the right word, “fertile,” he settled on, “when you have a mate. Your scent had shifted when you got back, and you spent the whole weekend with Wilde, so…”

Having not realized that her scent had changed, Judy blushed furiously, the inside of her ears flushing a darker shade of pink. “Oh cripes, that’s so embarrassing!” She grimaced before she gasped. Had her mom and dad picked up on it? Had Jasmine and Julian? “Oh no!”

Connor laughed, turning the cruiser down another street. “Don’t worry, my nose is trained for it, so
I picked up on it. The others didn’t, and if I hadn’t of said anything they probably wouldn’t have figured it out for a while anyway.” The timber wolf had contemplated not saying anything and seeing how long it would take for his fellow officers to pick up on the change in Judy’s relationship status.

“Then why did you say something?” Judy looked at her partner with a mixture of surprise and annoyance. He’d let the secret out on purpose?

“The bet was getting out of paw. The longer you and Wilde danced around one another, the more money was being thrown around. Now I like gambling as much as the next mammal, but Clawhauser is an awful bookie.” The chatty cheetah had slowly been losing track of everyone’s bet. The little tin he’d been using for the wagers had been replaced after a week with a petty cash box, and his notebook had quickly filled up. Being a bookie was not one of the receptionist’s top skills.

Imagining Clawhauser panicking with how quickly the betting pool had exploded made the gray bunny chuckle, her blush fading away. “How much did Francine win?” Curiosity drove her to ask, wanting to see how much her colleagues were willing to put on her and Nick.

Grinning, Connor turned the cruiser onto another street, knowing his answer would shock his partner. “Nearly $2000.”

“That’s a lot of money!” Judy cried, eyes widening. She hadn’t expected her co-workers to put that kind of cash down on her and Nick. Had they really been that obvious? Had it been so clear to every other mammal, some of who hadn’t even met Nick and were working solely off precinct gossip, that they were interested in one another? “How long do you think it’ll be until Chief Bogo stops glaring at me?” The Chief had spent every morning since the news of her and Nick’s relationship glaring at her from his podium in the bullpen. Judy had a working theory that the only reason she hadn’t been put on parking duty was that she was paired up with Wolford.

Wolford chuckled as they turned onto Cypress Grove Lane. Every mammal in the bullpen had caught the way Bogo had been glaring at the bunny, but their years serving under him meant they knew he genuinely harbored no ill feelings against her, and he was merely doing it for amusement, to see Judy squirm. “Not much longer, it was only $100, and for someone in his position, that’s chump change. I think he’s just enjoying making you uncomfortable.” Connor pulled the cruiser to a stop at the curb, shifting into park and killing the engine.

“That wouldn’t surprise me.” Judy rolled her eyes. Having served as part of Chief Bogo’s team for a while now, she was starting to get used to his strange brand of humor. Exiting the cruiser, Judy circled around the vehicle and headed towards the front door of the building Marian lived in. “You don’t need to walk me to the door Connor, I’ve got it.”

“I wasn’t born yesterday, Hopps. I promised Wilde I’d walk you to the door, and I intend to do so.” She couldn’t give him the slip that easily. “Here I thought Wilde was the sly one.”

Begrudgingly, Judy started to lead the way. She’d fully intended on seeing Marian if only to soothe her fox, but she didn’t need to be kitsat on the way there. Entering the building they made for the stairs, and Judy led them up to the third floor. The familiar cherry red door of Nick’s kithood home made the doe smile, and she was soon rapping her knuckles across the shiny surface, Wolford looming behind her.

Judy’s sharp hearing picked up on the sound of movement behind the door. “Coming!” Her favorite vixen called out. Moments later, the locks tumbled, and the door opened, revealing Marian. “Judy, sweetheart!” Marian grinned at the doe, her presence unexpected but not unwelcome.
Before the vixen could carry on her greeting, she caught sight of the mammal stood behind the rabbit. The timber wolf, dressed in a ZPD uniform, offered her a smile. “Her temporary partner.” Marian recalled their numerous dinner conversations where Judy had mentioned the other canine.

“Connor Wolford, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Wilde.” Wolford offered out his paw, a little surprised at what he was seeing. The conservatively dressed vixen with her pearl necklace was not what he’d had in mind when he’d thought of Nick’s mom.

“You’re Judy’s temporary partner, right?” Marian clarified, smiling as the wolf nodded. Taking his offered paw, Marian shook it. “Thank you for looking after her while my boy is away.” The vixen was immeasurably grateful for the timber wolf. His care for Judy meant that her son didn't have to worry while he was away, that he could focus on his studies and get the best grades possible. Knowing on the quiet that her son and the doe were romantically involved now only furthred Marian’s thanks. Though she was yet to see her son and Judy interact as a couple, the vixen had a feeling her usually protective boy was now borderline overbearing. Nick had never liked sharing, had never really had to due to his lack of siblings and friends, so Marian naturally worried that Nick would fly off the handles should anything happen to Judy, or should any other mammal try and take her from him.

“It’s not a problem Ma’am.” Wolford took back his paw, standing tall behind his significantly shorter partner. He made a mental note to ask Judy at a later date about the things she’d told Marian. The gray bunny had apparently spoken about him to the vixen as she’d recognized him immediately.

“Oh no, please, Ma’am makes me feel old.” Marian brushed aside the formality, spotting Judy mouthing along with her from the corner of her eye. The vixen offered the doe a playful smile, recalling their first meeting many months ago when Nick had turned up on the doorstep with the injured bunny at his side and she’d quoted the same words. “My, how everything has changed. My little Nicky is training to be an officer, dating Judy and living with her.” It was everything Marian had hoped for her kit – stability, and love. Realizing that her guests were still at the door, Marian moved aside. “Do come in.” She offered.

“I would love to Mrs. Wilde, but unfortunately I’m just here to drop Judy off. I’m needed back at the precinct.” Wolford wished he could stay and chat with Mrs. Wilde, perhaps even dig up some dirt on his future co-worker and eat some of the freshly baked goods he could smell in the kitchen. He knew there was a mountain of paperwork waiting for him though and that if he didn’t get back to it soon, Bogo would be right up his tail.

The vixen frowned, disappointed the wolf couldn’t stay, but she understood the constraints of work. “What a shame. Here,” she left her position by the door, popping into the kitchen only to return moments later with a little baggy of cookies. “Fresh out of the oven, please take them with you.” She handed them over to Wolford, enjoying the surprise on the wolf’s face.

Touched by Mrs. Wilde’s kindness, Wolford took the baggy of cookies from her, mouth salivating at the thought of getting to eat them later. If this were his reward for delivering Judy to the vixen’s home, then Connor would drop her off here every day. “Thank you, Mrs. Wilde.” He gave the vixen an appreciative smile before he glanced to his temporary partner, still concerned for her wellbeing. Though she looked much better, Wolford still had his reservations. He’d had to cover for her to Bogo and had informed the cape buffalo that Judy had been thrown around by the perp, which is why she’d remained in the cruiser and wasn’t in any state to help get the stoat the medical attention he’d needed. Bogo had asked if Judy had needed to see a doctor too, but Wolford had told him that she was okay, just suffering from a few bruises. “If you need anything tonight give me a call, and if I don’t hear from you I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” He offered, knowing already
that the doe wouldn’t call, but giving her the option anyway. “It was lovely to meet you, Mrs. Wilde.” Connor excused himself, wishing them farewell.

“Thank you, Connor.” Judy waved him off as he turned, heading down the stairs and out of the building. Once the timber wolf was out of sight, Marian shut the door, locking it. It was a reflex habit for her, especially after her husband’s murder. Glancing at the doe, Marian noted the tired expression on her face, and she offered her a sympathetic smile.

“Come on sweetheart.” Marian led the young rabbit into the living room, and to the comfy armchair she’d sat on during her first visit. Gesturing for her to sit, Marian disappeared for a moment, returning with the same soft red blanket Nick had wrapped around the doe all those months ago. Judy had taken her seat in the armchair, divesting herself of her vest and utility belt, which she’d stacked neatly on the floor. Marian had a feeling that something serious must have happened for Judy to be joining her in the middle of her shift and once she was sure the doe was comfortable, Marian tucked the blanket around her. “What happened?” The vixen cooed, sitting on the arm of the chair.

“I’m fine, it was just something small and insignificant.” Judy didn’t want Marian to worry like Nick had. Judy could handle it; she wouldn’t let it get the better of her again.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Marian offered as she reached out a paw to smooth down Judy’s ears, the doe pulling the blanket tighter around her, stifling a yawn as tiredness suddenly swept over her.

As lovely as Marian’s offer was, Judy didn’t want to dwell on her flashback, and she knew that she couldn’t mention anything about what had happened with Catstro. Nick still hadn’t told Marian about the caracal, or his old debt, and Judy had to stop her groan of frustration. Nick shouldn’t be hiding things from his mom, especially something so important. It wasn’t Judy’s place to tell the vixen any of it, though. Knowing all of this, Judy simply shook her head, offering Marian an apologetic smile.

“Okay, well how about I make you some carrot soup, and we watch a film on Netflix?” Marian offered, saddened that Judy wouldn’t share what was bothering her but understanding that maybe it was something the doe needed to process alone first.

Judy hated lying to Marian, hated hiding information from her, and the doe mentally reprimanded her mate for forcing her paw. The vixen had been nothing but loving and welcoming towards her, and she deserved answers. Judy hoped that Nick would come clean to his mom soon. “Thank you, Marian.”

Leaning down, Marian pressed a kiss to Judy’s head. “There’s no need to thank me.” The vixen whispered, rising from her perch on the arm of the chair. Leaving Judy, she headed to the kitchen to start making some carrot soup. However, she grabbed her phone first, firing off a text to Bonnie. Perhaps the older doe would be able to get some answers out of her daughter.

Chapter End Notes

As a little note, I did some background reading into PTSD and flashbacks for this chapter, but the information was all very conflicting. From what I read though, it
would seem each individual reacts differently, so I tried to incorporate as many elements as possible to cover my bases but tailor them to Judy and the situation. I apologise if it isn't wholly accurate, though.

We stick with Judy and the ZPD in the next chapter ;)

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the love on the last chapter!

I’ve seen the bookmarks steadily increase and received comments from some new faces, so to all those folk, welcome to the Safe Paws family :)

To existing members of the family, you know I love ya!

I appreciate every comment, bookmark, kudos, and all the love

Judy had spent the afternoon and early evening with Marian, the vixen fussing over her like a mother hen. The guilt at not being able to tell the vixen what was bothering her had slowly eaten away at Judy the longer the day had progressed, and by the time she’d called a Zuber to take her home, Judy had decided that she needed to have a word with Nick. It was time he told his mom about Catstro and the debt.

Now Judy was heading to the Bank of Zootopia in Savannah Central, key and letter from Mr. Big in her pocket. The bank had opened an hour before she was due in the bullpen, so the doe figured she’d finally look into the amount of money that had been given to Nick. Her mate was due to call tomorrow for their regularly scheduled chat, and Judy wanted to surprise him with the figure of his deposit box.

Taking the stairs up the front of the building, Judy entered through the revolving door. As she stepped into the foyer, the doe found her eyes widening, head tipping back, ears drooping as she looked up and up. The ceiling was high-vaulted, supported by massive marble columns that stood in a circular shape in the middle of the room. Countless plush sofas and coffee tables with heavy books on them were arranged neatly inside the circular fortress. Along the left-hand side of the room ran a marble counter that many bank tellers sat behind, each mammal dressed impeccably. To her right, Judy saw a little railing, several breaks in it where there was a door in the cream painted wall.

“Can I help you, Officer?” A young goat approached Judy, her name badge reading Lucy Bleat. She was dressed in a similar uniform to those behind the counter to Judy’s left, and the doe felt out of her element in her blues.

Offering the nanny an unsure smile, Judy produced the key from her pocket. “I have the key to a safety deposit box, but I’m uncertain as to how to go about accessing it,” Judy explained, keeping the key in her own paw. She wouldn’t let it out of her sight.

Lucy offered the rabbit a reassuring smile. She’d dealt with many mammals before who had inherited deposit boxes and were unsure as to how they went about gaining access to them. “That’s wonderful. If you follow me please we can fetch the corresponding key and then I’ll take you to your box.” She instructed, gesturing with a paw towards one of the doors on the right-hand side of the room.
Judy followed the goat towards one of the doors, was brought to an abrupt stop beside a computer sitting on a small desk. “To retrieve your other key, I need to see the serial number on the one you’re holding please,” Lucy explained. There were several layers of security to gaining access to the deposit boxes. Though a little unsure about handing the key over, Judy offered it out to the nanny. She hadn’t noticed the serial number stamped along the length of it when she’d first examined it.

Taking the key, Lucy typed the serial number into the computer before she handed it back to Judy. As she hit enter and brought up the details of the owner of the box, the nanny frowned. The box belonged to a Nicholas P. Wilde, his species listed as fox. Confused, and a little concerned as to why the sweet rabbit opposite her wanted access to a fox’s deposit box, Lucy pursed her lips. Though she wanted to ask it wasn’t her place, so instead she turned the computer around, offering the doe the keyboard. “There’s a security question for you to answer before I can go and get the matching key. It’s just a safety precaution.” She took a step away, purposefully looking elsewhere while the doe read the question and typed the answer.

“Security question?” Judy frowned. The letter hadn’t mentioned anything about a security question. If Judy didn’t know the answer, she’d have to wait until her phone call with Nick tomorrow. Eyes finding the screen, she read the question. “What do we search for in the rough sea of life?” Judy frowned. It was a question that had a plethora of answers, and the rabbit guessed that was the point. Thinking back, Judy tried to recall any time she’d come across such a phrase. “Wait a minute…” Judy’s eyes widened as she remembered her conversation with Mr. Big before they’d gone down to confront Catstro. They’d been discussing how she and Nick weren’t a couple. “A safe harbor.” The answer came to her. Smiling at the fact she and Nick were now a couple after all, that they’d found a safe harbor in one another, Judy typed in the answer, hitting the enter button after.

The ding of the computer alerted Lucy to the fact Judy had entered the correct password, and the nanny returned to retake the computer from her, making a mental note of the security code that appeared on screen. “I’ll be right back.” Lucy headed off towards one of the other doors to collect the corresponding key.

“Mr. Big must’ve known I’d check the amount, or come with Nick.” Judy mused, using the time without Lucy to further admire the bank. The marble flooring was cool beneath her hind paws, a welcome contrast to the hot sidewalks outside.

Lucy returned, another key in one hoof that looked just like the one Judy was holding. “If you’d like to follow me please.” Lucy led the way towards another door, this one guarded by two large grizzly bear security guards. As an officer, Judy was used to being surrounded by large predators, but the ruthless vibe she got from the two bears made her a little uneasy. Scampering after Lucy, Judy followed the nanny through a series of corridors and down several sets of stairs until they arrived in the basement. On the other side of the room sat the vault, protected by a large steel cage, the entrance of which consisted of two heavy-duty, locked doors. More grizzly bears protected the vault, these ones armed. On the right side of the room was a series of low-slung couches, and to the left of the room, Judy spotted a row of booths with red curtains hanging in front of them. Lucy led the doe to one of the booths, which had a medium-sized wooden table in the center of it and two plush chairs, one on each side of the table. “Please take a seat, and I’ll retrieve your box from the vault.” Lucy gestured for Judy to sit before she left the booth, closing the curtain behind her.

Sliding onto one of the chairs, Judy got comfortable. A strange sense of excitement bubbled up inside of her, along with some nervousness. Nick had been without funds for twenty years. How would he react to suddenly having a few thousand dollars to his name without having the debt looming over?
Lucy’s return broke Judy from her thoughts, the nanny entering the booth, ensuring the curtain was firmly shut behind her. She placed the deposit box down on the table, pulling her key from her pocket. “If you could put your key in the slot on the left, please.” She asked as she slid her own key into the lock on the right-hand side of the box. Judy did as she was asked, and when they turned the keys together, the lock tumbled, clicking open. “I’ll wait outside the booth for you. When you’re done, please re-lock the box, and I shall store it back in the vault for you.” Lucy explained, leaving her key in the side of the box as she stepped outside of the booth. Judy tracked the sound of her hind paws as she crossed the room, taking a seat on one of the couches.

Apprehensive, Judy looked at the box. It was long and made of wood, the locks made of iron. The lid was cracked open, having sprung up a little when she and Lucy had turned the keys. Reaching out, the doe slowly lifted the lid.

She barely contained her gasp. Small paws coming up to cover her mouth, Judy’s eyes widened, breath catching as she caught sight of the cash inside. The doe had only expected a few thousand dollars, but she was faced with several large bundles of cash. Swallowing, Judy’s paws dropped to the box, and she cautiously reached out to touch the money. Nibbling her lip, Judy started to count the cash, stacking the bundles in a neat pile once she’d counted them. “Sweet cheese and crackers...” Judy was shaking. The total sat at $300,000.

Feeling like she would pass out, Judy quickly stashed the cash back in the box, slamming the lid shut, turning the keys to lock it again before she pocketed her own key. Paws rising, the doe rubbed her face. Nick was going to freak. There had to have been an error, Nick had only borrowed $200,000 and had nearly paid back that full amount. The horrific interest had been the thing crippling him. Judy had only expected $30,000 at most, knowing that Catstro had probably spent some of Nick’s money over the years. Where had the rest come from?

With the box locked, Judy pushed back the curtain, capturing Lucy’s attention. She waited while the nanny stored the deposit box back in the vault before following her up and out of the basement. Judy was working on autopilot, still shocked by the amount of cash in the box. “Is that all for you today, officer?” Lucy’s question broke Judy out of her thoughts, and with a polite smile and nod, Judy thanked her, wishing her goodbye before she slipped out of the building through the same revolving door she’d entered through.

Taking a deep breath, Judy needed answers. Ducking into an alley, the doe pulled her phone from her belt, flicking through her contact list until she found the name she was looking for. Her large ears proving useful once again, Judy tuned into the world around her. She couldn’t hear any mammals nearby, no voices, breathing or heartbeats other than her own. Knowing she wasn’t being watched or eavesdropped on, the doe hit the dial button, lifting the phone to one of her ears, the other still in tune with the city around her. “Thank goodness we does can multitask.”

The phone only rang for a few seconds before it was answered, the shrill sound of a baby crying could be heard in the background. “Hello?”

“Hey Fru, it’s me.” Judy winced at the crying shrewlet. Little Judy had inherited her mom’s high-pitched voice.

Surprised to hear from her rabbit friend, Fru Fru grinned, pressing the phone closer to hear, trying to block out the sound of her baby crying and focus on the doe. “Judy! Hi! How’re you doing?”

“I’m doing good thank you, how are you and my little goddaughter?” It still made the rabbit coo every time she thought about the fact that the arctic shrew had named her baby after her. Judy had just been doing her job when she’d saved Fru Fru and had never thought in a million years it would lead to a friendship between them or Judy becoming a godmother.
"Aww, we’re good, though this little squeaker won’t stop crying.” Fru was becoming immune to the sound of her kit’s crying, but she picked up her daughter anyway and started to bounce her on her hip. “I guess you want to talk to daddy?” Though the arctic shrew wanted to chat for longer with her friend, she imagined the rabbit cop wouldn’t be calling for a social chat so early in the morning.

“Please, thank you.” Judy felt a little sorry for cutting short her conversation with Fru Fru, but time was at a premium, and she had several questions for Mr. Big.

There was a light commotion on the phone before everything fell quiet. “My child, I hope you’re well.” The soothing tone of the male arctic shrew met Judy’s ears.

A soft smile crossed Judy’s lips. Though Mr. Big was a feared mob boss, he had always been kind towards her. “I am Sir, thank you. I hope you’re well too.”

The arctic shrew had been expecting a call from the doe, though it had taken longer than anticipated for her to phone. He kept an eye on the goings on in her life, though. Mr. Big had eyes and ears all over the city. He’d received some troubling news about an incident yesterday, and though he wished to bring it up with Judy, he knew this call wasn’t the right moment for it. “As well as a mammal my age can be. To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?”

Knowing that beating around the bush wasn’t ideal when dealing with the mob boss, Judy cut to the chase. “I’ve just been to the bank.”

Chuckling, the arctic shrew had some idea as to the conversation that was about to follow. “It has taken you long enough.”

Not knowing how secure the line was, Judy kept the conversation as vague as possible, omitting names. “I wanted him to go, but he insisted that I went.” She rolled her eyes, leaning against the brick wall of one of the buildings that backed onto the alleyway. The doe still couldn’t hear any possible eavesdroppers.

Chuckling, Mr. Big reclined further into his plush chair. He’d been working through some of his business dealings when Koslov had handed him the phone. “That boy trusts you with his finances? He would be a good mate.” The shrew still believed that Nick and Judy were perfect for one another, and he was still silently hoping they would come together soon. The mention of Nick being a good mate made Judy laugh nervously, her free paw rising to rub at the nape of her neck. The sound of the doe’s nervousness gave the shrew pause. His sources hadn’t mentioned anything about Nick and Judy possibly being together. “You two have finally seen sense?” He sought clarification.

It was futile to lie to the shrew, and Mr. Big had been supportive of the idea of Nick and Judy dating when she’d spoken to him months ago. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good, that’s good.” Mr. Big’s tone softened, unable to completely conceal his glee. From the get-go, he’d seen the feelings bubbling under the surface between the fox and rabbit, and though it had taken them some time to pull their heads out of their tails, the arctic shrew was pleased that they’d found a safe harbor in one another. The world could be cruel, other mammals could be evil, and everyone needed someone to rely on, someone to have their back. Knowing Nick and Judy had that in each other soothed the old, cynical side of the small animal’s heart. Grabbing a pen, he scribbled a quick note to send them some flowers. “Was there a problem at the bank?” He brought the conversation back on topic.

Keeping her voice to a low whisper, Judy shook her head, even though the shrew wouldn’t see the
gesture. “No, Sir. Well, actually, I’m not sure. There was a lot in there, much more than what was
borrowed. There must’ve been an error with your accountant.” It was the only reason Judy could
think of for there being so much cash in the deposit box. “Sir, if it belongs to someone else…”

“Do not fret, my accountant isn’t that incompetent.” Mr. Big didn’t bother hiding his smile. He had
entrusted the distribution of the money to his accountant, but when the miniature horse had
approached him and explained that a fair number of mammals in Catstro’s dossier had passed away
with no next of kin, the shrew had been left with some extra cash on his paws. Having no need for
it, he’d topped up Nick’s fund before donating the rest to several homeless charities across the city.
Though most only saw him as a mob boss and shrewd businessmammal, the arctic was capable of
great compassion when the need arose. “The pair of you should enjoy it. Life is short, my child.
Have fun, make some fond memories, be happy, and love one another.” He passed along some
sage advice, remembering his years with his wife. She had been beautiful, vivacious, and had kept
him in line with just a single look. He’d been enamored; enraptured from the very moment he’d
been introduced to her at a high-society dance. Her compassion and love had perfectly balanced out
his ruthlessness, and she had helped softened his heart. With memories of his wife came some
melancholy, though. She’d passed quickly from a parasitic infection, leaving him alone to take of a
young Fru Fru who every day grew to look more and more like her mother. Mr. Big took solace in
the fact his wife hadn’t suffered for long, and that in her final days she’d been surrounded by
family and love.

“Thank you, Sir.” Judy was at a loss for what to say, feeling a little choked up. Her parents had
given her plenty of advice in her life, had always offered her honest truths, but they didn’t know
about her and Nick, they didn’t know how much Nick had been through and how much he
deserved some happiness.

“Anytime, my child.” The shrew hoped that Judy and Nick would live a long and happy life
together, that they would have security and stability. He would always be on paw to help them
should they need it. They were family, after all. Aware of the rabbit’s schedule, Mr. Big stole a
glance at his little watch. “Now, I believe you have a city to protect?”

Casting her gaze out of the alley, Judy caught sight of the clock mounted to the wall above the
bank. “Damn it!” She hissed, noting that she had five minutes to make it to the bullpen.

Mr. Big chuckled. He had a feeling the doe was used to always being on time, and that tardiness
was not in her nature. “Go, my dear. Fru will call you in a few days to set up a lunch date.”

Judy started to make her way out the alley, needing to cover some ground towards the precinct.
She needed to end the call quickly but didn’t want to seem rude. “Okay, thank you again, Sir.”

“My pleasure.” Mr. Big always had the last word as he hung up. Shuffling into a more comfortable
position in his chair, he let out a soft sigh, a smile on his lips. He had expected more protests from
Judy about the amount in the deposit box, but the shrew had a feeling she was still trying to process
it herself. The rabbit deserved it, not least for her kindness towards his daughter, the last piece of
his wife that he still had. Nick deserved some peace and happiness too. When the fox had come to
him as a teenager, the shrew had been reluctant to take him on, but Nick had quickly established
himself as a mammal willing to do anything within the mob bosses moral code of conduct to make
ends meet. The tod had given him ten years of his life, had done everything asked of him. Mr. Big
would be lying if he said he didn’t have a soft spot for the ex-conmammal. “I still can’t believe
Nicky is training to be a cop.” The shrew chuckled, shaking his head fondly. “The world is a
bizarre place.”

Skittering into the bullpen, Judy raced to her seat, scrabbling up onto the big object before
plopping her butt down on it with a minute to spare. Connor had already taken his usual seat next
to her, and as he leaned back, he looked the bunny over. “Not like you to be almost late, Judy.” He
remarked casually, unsure as to the rabbit’s emotional state considering yesterday’s incident.

Bogo had called in Wolford early, and the cape buffalo had chewed him out in his office for lying
to him about what had gone down with Judy and the stoat. Street camera’s had revealed the whole
chase along with Judy’s freak out. Connor had pointed out that he was protecting his partner, and
that it didn’t matter as they’d captured the stoat and he was safe, recovering in hospital. While the
Chief had appreciated Connor’s concern for the bunny, for thinking of her as family and looking
after her accordingly, he hated being lied to. The timber wolf had been docked a week’s pay for his
actions and was told he’d spend the next week on parking duty with Judy. Connor didn’t hold it
against the Chief, rules were there for a reason, and he’d broken them, but he knew that Judy
would be next in Bogo’s office. He only hoped the doe could hold her own against their boss.

“Atten-hut!” Higgins called out, prompting every mammal to rise to their seat, banging on the
tables as Bogo entered the bullpen. It was standard practice every morning to boost morale.

Lumbering into the room, Bogo scowled. It had been a long night for the Chief as he’d been called
in for an emergency, and spending his morning chewing out Wolford hadn’t helped. His day was
about to get a lot worse, though. “Alright, settle down.” He boomed, demanding order. His
officer’s all sat, falling silent as he threw several folders onto the podium, taking his position
behind it. He spent a moment looking over the mammals in the room before he was forced to slide
on his glasses, his vision not as sharp as it once had been. “I have three items on the docket. First, I
need a complete report on the arson incident in the Meadowlands from Grizzoli, Fangmeyer, and
Delgato. Secondly, there has been a spate of robberies in Outback Island. McHorn and Rhinowitz, I
want you to check it out. Finally, there was a murder last night in the Marshlands, attended by the
night shift.” Bogo flipped open the relevant file, grabbing a mugshot of the victim. Turning to the
board behind him, he violently pinned the image of the crook up. “It would appear this mammal
was found face-down in one of the marshes.” The Chief stepped back to his podium.

Judy’s blood ran cold. The face staring at her from the board, the mammal that had been found
dead was none other than the wolverine who had worked under Catstro, who’d counted out Nick’s
money when Judy had made the first drop.

“We have reason to believe he’s connected to a wider network of criminals, including this mammal
who is missing, assumed dead.” Bogo pulled another photo from the folder, pinning it to the board
too.

Judy nearly passed out.

Catstro.

Staring into the face of the caracal that had caused so much pain for Nick, who’d threatened him,
and her, and Marian, Judy struggled to breathe. Her body froze, her heart pounding, fur rising as
goosebumps erupted across her skin. He was back to haunt her. Catstro may have drowned in Mr.
Big’s mansion, but his ghost was back to torment her. Breathing picking up, Judy fought her urge
to panic, fought against her own mind. Forcing her paw to cooperate as her vision started to cloud
over, her mind throwing her back to the mansion, Judy reached for her bracelet. Small fingers
found the cool band of metal, felt the carrot and pawpaw charms. The edges of Judy’s vision
started to come back, the sight of Catstro’s death fading away.

Though Bogo hadn’t noticed Judy’s reaction, the timber wolf beside her had. Keeping a subtle eye
on the doe, Wolford frowned in a mixture of concern and curiosity. The photo of the caracal had
pulled a similar reaction out of the doe as the almost drowning yesterday had. To the wolf, there
appeared to be some sort of correlation.

“We’re going to liaison with the night shift on this case, and it will be a city-wide investigation. This is priority number one! We need to find out what networks these mammals are involved in and start shutting them down.” Bogo smacked his hoof against the podium, driving his point home. He could hazard a guess as to the sort of dealings these mammals were involved in, and he didn’t want them in his city.

“Due to the nature of this case, I’m assigning Higgins, Snarlov, and Trunkaby to work it and I expect regular updates on progress.” Bogo removed his glasses, the universal symbol that he was done. All assigned officers rose from their seats and collected their files from the Chief before leaving the room. Judy and Connor remained, sat together. Gaze glossing over the timber wolf, Bogo’s eyes settled on the rabbit. He hated what he was about to do; hated having to discipline his officers, but it was a necessary evil, one of the downsides to his role as Chief. “Hopps. My office. Now.”

Having been lost in her thoughts, paw on her bonding bracelet to fight back the vision, Judy had missed the rest of Bogo’s morning speech, but the calling of her name spurred the doe into action. Letting go of her wrist, Judy glanced at Wolford, noting the concern on the timber wolf’s face.

“I’ll meet you at the cruiser. You’ll be alright.” He murmured, offering her a reassuring smile. His mind was still stuck on Judy’s reaction to the caracal.

Nodding, Judy worked on autopilot as she slipped down from the chair, following behind the thundering form of the Chief until they reached his office. She had no idea what was about to happen, but the doe had a feeling it involved her freak out. With the door shut behind them, the cape buffalo took his seat, and Judy was quick to scrabble up into the chair opposite, her small frame dwarfed by the massive object.

For a moment there was silence between them, Bogo’s eyes steely, yet Judy met his gaze in silent defiance. With a deep sigh, the cape buffalo reached into his desk drawer, producing a plastic baggy. Tossing it onto the bureau, he reclined. “You have one minute to explain this.”

Standing up on the chair, Judy picked up the plastic bag, coming face to face with a torn out page of a notebook, her name scrawled on it in pen, added underneath Nick’s name, both of them hastily crossed out. There were several other names on the list, but they were all neatly crossed out. “I don’t understand, Chief.” Judy had never seen the handwriting before in her life, had no idea as to the notebook it had come from.

“I found this amongst the evidence collected last night from the wolverine’s home. You’re lucky I came across it before anyone else did. I want an explanation as to why your name, and Wilde’s, is on a piece of paper found in the home of a known criminal.” Bogo smacked a hoof down on the desk, making the wooden structure shake and spooking Judy. He couldn’t have his officer’s tangled up in illegal activities, couldn’t risk Internal Affairs shutting down his team. The work they did was important, and if IA shut them down for an investigation, the city would suffer.

Still examining the piece of paper, Judy was at a loss. She had no idea who the other mammal’s listed were, but if she were to hazard a guess at the wolverine’s role in Catstro’s gang, it would’ve been as the bookkeeper. “A list of mammal’s making payments…”

Swallowing, Judy put the baggy down on the desk, smoothing her paws over the plastic. Panic started to set in. If she said anything, Bogo would know that she was aware of Catstro, would push for more. He’d find out about Nick’s debt, his hustling, and her mob connection. He’d find out about Catstro’s murder at the paws of Mr. Big.
Bogo hadn’t earned his title or reputation without making a few suspects squeal in his time, and
though the bunny opposite him was one of his own officers, he couldn’t afford to go easy on her.
“Hopps. I don’t have time for your games. This is a high priority case, and I need information
now.” He started, keeping his tone light and friendly, playing the good cop card. “You’re lucky I
pulled that page before anyone saw it or you wouldn’t even have the chance to explain yourself.”

Letting go of the baggy, Judy’s paws came to rest on the desk, wide and frightened violet eyes
looking at the cape buffalo. “Sir, I-“

“Is this related to yesterday’s incident, to you freezing as the stoat fell into the water?” Bogo tried
another angle, seeing the fear in the rabbit’s gaze. His curiosity was piqued, but he masked it. It
wouldn’t do to let Judy see that he was concerned with anything other than finding out the truth.
When he’d gone back and checked the street camera’s Bogo had been surprised and angered, upset
that Wolford had lied to him and that the doe who had driven him insane when she had first arrived
at precinct one seemed to be suffering from a few issues.

“I was pushed around by the perp.” Judy lied, paws sweaty, heart rate increasing. She didn’t want
to talk about her flashbacks, didn’t want to mention Catstro and how she knew the caracal. Telling
Bogo that Catstro had blackmailed Nick, had pushed a lot of mammals into immense debt with
high interest rates, and that he’d met an icy demise would not only spell the end of her and Nick’s
careers but would probably see them both jailed. Shuddering, Judy pulled her paws to her body,
wringing them. She couldn’t say anything, couldn’t risk everything.

“Don’t lie!” Bogo had had enough of playing good cop. It was time to be the bad guy. He banged
his hoof on the desk once more, leaning forward. He was close to losing his cool with the rabbit.
“The street camera’s show you freezing and I forced the truth out of Wolford this morning. He’s
been punished accordingly for lying to me. If you want to keep your badge, you’ll not only tell me
what you know about the wolverine, but you’ll also explain yesterday’s reaction.” He threatened.
The buffalo knew how much that little gold badge on Judy’s uniform meant to her, could clearly
remember the heart-breaking sorrow on her face the last time he had demanded it from her, and
when she’d handed it over in Bellwether’s office.

The threat of losing her badge made Judy go ridged, violet eyes widening as it sank in. She’d
fought so hard for it, had risked everything for it, and now it could be forcibly taken from her.
Overwhelmed, Judy’s thoughts raced. She needed a way out of her situation, the chance to wait and
regroup with Nick tomorrow, talk about their options and see what was safe to tell Bogo. She’d
also have to call Mr. Big again, though she hated that it would put her in his debt. Everything felt
like it was spiraling out of control, and no matter how much Judy tried to navigate her way out of
the tornado her life had become in the last fifteen minutes, she was repeatedly sucked back into the
fray. Mouth opening and closing like a fish, Judy struggled to come up with an answer.

Bogo sighed. He’d hoped the rabbit would open up to him, that the fear of losing her badge would
loosen her tongue. All it had appeared to do was terrify her to the point of speechlessness. “I’m
docking you a weeks pay. You’re also going to spend today on parking duty before being desk-
bound for the rest of the week. You’re a good officer, Hopps, but I don’t tolerate liars or my
officers purposefully hiding information from me. I’ve done my bit by removing this piece of
paper from the scene, which could cost me my credibility and title as Chief, now you need to
return the favor and tell me why your name is on here.” He tapped his hoof on the baggy before he
pulled the item back to him, throwing it into his desk drawer. “You have until the end of the week
to tell me what I want to know or else I’ll be taking your badge and I’ll have to report you to
Internal Affairs. You are under no circumstances to ask any of your fellow officers about this case
or attempt to procure information through less than honest means. If I hear even a whisper about
you looking into it, I will report you to Internal Affairs immediately. Understood?” He hated to do
it, hated to come down on the doe like a ton of bricks, but she needed to understand the severity of the situation. By giving her a week, Bogo hoped that she’d have time to think about her answer and accept the idea of coming clean to him.

Though Judy felt some relief at being given a week to think of a plan of action, she knew she wasn’t out of the woods just yet. Grateful for the respite, though, Judy nodded, body working on autopilot. “Understood, Sir.” She swallowed.

“Dismissed.” Bogo let the rabbit leave. He took no pleasure in making her uncomfortable or threatening her, but it was part and parcel of his job. He did it because he cared. They were a family and family had one another’s backs, but at the same time, each member needed to be honest and forthcoming with vital information, so that the family could look out for them. Part of the buffalo wondered if putting pressure on Nick would help make Judy talk. The tod’s name had been on the scrap of paper too, after all.

Judy couldn’t leave fast enough. Dashing from the chair she skittered towards the door, jumping up to reach the door handle and turning it, opening the door before she slid out, letting it shut silently behind her. Needing some space, she hurriedly made her way down the corridor, turning a corner. With the area empty, Judy leaned back against the wall, sliding down it until her butt hit the floor. Paw going for her bracelet, Judy let out a whine, the noise sharp and alarming. Distressed, the doe wanted nothing more than to have her fox comfort her, to be at home with him. She was alone, though, still with the rest of the day ahead of her.

Though she rarely slipped back into her vocal cues, unlike her mate, Judy found great comfort in it now. Grasping at her bracelet, tears blurring her vision, Judy allowed herself a few minutes to stew in her feelings until she couldn’t delay her arrival in the garage anymore.

The fear of losing her job and ending up in jail for her part in Catstro’s demise refused to leave her alone, but the doe picked herself up off the floor, dusting herself down. Tucking her bracelet back under her uniform she slapped on a smile, trying to think of something happy so that her ears would stand to attention and not give her away. Memories of her weekend at home with her fox were her go to, and feeling like she could now face the world, and Wolford, Judy headed off towards the garage.

The journey to the Canal District was silent. Wolford had opted to drive today, the rabbit’s body language suggesting to the timber wolf that it probably wasn’t wise for her to be in charge of heavy machinery at present.

“I’m sorry,” Judy spoke as they entered a multi-storey car park. With parking duty being done on hind paw, they had to leave the cruiser somewhere safe for the day. The journey had given the doe time to think, time to reflect on the fact that her freak out had not only landed her partner with parking duty and desk duty but had also cost him a week’s pay. “I have some savings, whatever your week’s pay is let me know. I want to pay you. You shouldn’t lose out because of me.” Judy still had savings from the summer’s she’d spent working as a kit, and a nice little surplus of cash from her delivery job and kitsitting, though she’d slowly started to cut back on the latter two. Nick’s graduation was looming closer and closer, and by then she wanted to have finished working additional jobs. The doe reasoned that it was kinder to slowly cut back her hours rather than quit suddenly.

“Don’t be sorry, it doesn’t matter.” Wolford shrugged as he pulled the cruiser into a parking space. He made a vague gesture towards the dashboard camera, reminding Judy of the microphone before she could protest. Killing the engine, Wolford waited for the green recording light on the machine to go out, the lack of power affording them the ability to talk freely. “You’re my partner, I have
your back.” Covering for her freak out had been no skin off the timber wolf’s nose. Sometimes partners had to cover for one another, and yesterday had been one of those days.

“It cost you a weeks pay, along with parking duty and being desk-bound for the week!” Judy really didn’t understand why Wolford was willing to take such punishment for her considering they were only temporary partners. The thought of Connor going without money for a week because of her foolishness made the doe feel sick.

Wolford shrugged. Judy had never had a partner before, and though the doe liked to think she understood the bond between partners, she would only come to fully comprehend it once Wilde had graduated. True the ZPD was like a family, but your partner became the most valuable mammal in an officer’s life, sometimes even trumping their spouse. You had to trust your partner to have your back no matter the situation, had to trust your partner's instincts, know them inside and out so that you moved as one well-oiled machine. Though the rabbit was only Wolford’s temporary partner, he still treated her like he would his permanent one. “I’m not bothered. I’d happily do it all again.”

Opening her mouth to protest, Judy was cut off by the timber wolf. “Look, Judy. I’m not an idiot; I’ve spent ten years on the force, five of them working undercover. I can read mammals like the back of my paw. The moment Bogo pinned up that photo of the caracal this morning you started to react the same way you did yesterday when you saw the stoat drowning. To me, that indicates the two are related. Now I’m not going to ask for details, it’s not my place at present, but anything that can pull such a reaction from you must be pretty dark.” Connor hoped that by being understanding he would win over the doe, that she would stew for a little while as she usually did before opening up to him.

His curiosity had spiked at her reaction to the caracal’s photo, and given the mammal’s associations, it was hard for Wolford not to wonder what sort of activities Judy could be getting herself into, or what kind of animal’s she liked to associate with outside of work. He couldn’t picture her as a crooked cop, didn’t want to think of her like that. For now, he was content to let Judy come to him when she was ready, but if he started to suspect she was involved in some illegal goings on or associating with criminals, he’d have to take his concerns to Bogo. Of course, the timber wolf would only do so if he had undeniable proof. Connor liked the bunny by his side, thought of her like a sister and held her in a high regard, but crooked cops were the worst, the lowest of the low. Connor couldn’t risk getting tangled up in something like that, even by proxy. He had to think of his wife, of his mortgage and bills, and of the future kits he and his wife were trying for.

“I’ve crossed paths with him once or twice, that’s all.” Judy settled for a half-truth, hoping it would be enough to keep Connor off her back until she could come up with a way out of her current situation. She wished Nick were around, or that she could call him. Her fox would know exactly what to say to soothe her, would no doubt have countless ideas as to how they could get out of their current predicament. Considering Wolford had stumbled across Nick’s name a few times during his undercover work, the doe believed it was safe to assume that her tod’s past was known to the ZPD, and yet they’d still accepted him into the academy. His name on the list found in the wolverines home probably hadn’t been a surprise to the Chief.

Quirking an eyebrow at the snippet of information, Connor mulled over her comment. “Those must’ve been some paths.” He mused.

“He wasn’t a good mammal, Connor.” Judy shook her head. She could at least tell the truth there. Catstro had been the worst, and though Judy would never wish death upon anyone, she could see now that the caracal had been playing a dangerous game and karma had kicked him firmly in the butt.
“Which is probably why he ended up dead.” Though Bogo had informed them the caracal was assumed dead, the timber wolf had other ideas. Criminals lived dangerous lives, and very few of them just happened to go ‘missing,’ no matter how hard they tried to slip out from under the radar.

Judy gulped. Wolford had no idea how right he was. Deciding to remain purposefully vague as fear started to creep back in, Judy gave a small laugh. “Perhaps.” The timber wolf couldn’t know how close he was to the truth, and Judy couldn’t risk giving away any information that could link Catstro back to the mammal she’d been talking about with Wolford all those months ago. If he figured out that Catstro was the animal who’d been hurt, he’d know that Judy played a part in his ‘disappearance’ and the doe would more than likely end up in jail, her life in ruins. Though she hadn’t been the one to kill the caracal, she’d set the meeting up and had been present for it. She was an accessory to his murder.

“You know that Bogo will want you to meet with a psychiatrist, right?” Wolford pulled the keys out of the ignition, unplugging his seatbelt before he twisted in his seat so he could look at the rabbit.

Undoing her own seatbelt while Connor spoke, Judy’s head shot up, eyes widening as his words sank in. “What?!” The last thing she wanted was a mammal trying to get information out of her. She didn’t need to see a psychiatrist anyway as she was perfectly fine. Her bracelet worked wonders when things became a little intense, and she had Nick for when things bubbled over and she couldn’t cope. Judy didn’t need any more help. She could manage.

“To help with the flashbacks. It’s pretty standard. The ZPD’s preferred shrink will crawl around your cranium for a few hours every week and fill in some paperwork about your mental health.” Connor shrugged. He’d had to see the psychiatrist a few times after his undercover cases, even when nothing had been wrong. The mental health of officers was important, and the ZPD took its obligations to its employees seriously.

It would be much harder to lie to a psychiatrist, they were trained in the art of understanding the mind and getting to the crux of issues, batting down lies left, right, and center. “I hate the sound of it already.” Judy griped.

Wolford laughed, the deep sound reverberating around the cruiser. “You and me both.” He reached for his driver door, opening it. “Come on then Hopps. Those cars aren’t going to ticket themselves.”

By the time Judy clocked out for the day, she’d managed to work herself up into a frenzy. The tedious task of putting tickets on parked cars hadn’t been mentality stimulating, and as she and Wolford had been forced to split up to cover more streets, Judy hadn’t even had the distraction of her partner to stop her mind from wandering.

Throwing her keys onto the little dish her mom had gifted her and Nick, Judy stripped off her vest and belt, depositing them in a pile next to the small table by the front door. It wasn’t like the country bunny to be so messy, but with her mind on other things, tidiness was the least of her concerns. Trudging into the living room, the doe brought a paw to her mouth, nervously chewing on her blunt claws. She had until the end of the week to figure out how she was going to tell Chief Bogo about her freak out, about why her name had been on a scrap of paper in the wolverine’s apartment. “I could say to him that the wolverine and Nick are old school friends and it was a party invitation list, with me as Nicks plus one.” The idea popped into her head, sounding even more unbelievable when she spoke it aloud. “I could tell him that I had a traumatic kithood incident with ice water.” Judy tried another angle.
Plopping herself down on the couch, the doe gave up, throwing her phone from her pocket onto the coffee table before she put her head in her paws. Her excuses were pitiful. Chief Bogo would never believe them. “I can't tell him the truth. It’ll ruin Nick’s future, I'll lose my job, and we’ll lose this apartment.” Judy lifted her head, looking around the living room. The gray and reddish-orange blankets from Marian were folded together on the footstool, the framed photo of her and Nick from her parents sat on the bookcase, and Nick’s photo album had been placed on the coffee table. This was their home. It wasn't much, but Judy loved it, loved the security it offered, how Nick finally had somewhere safe and warm to live, somewhere he could add his own personal touches too. His bedroom was due to be painted when he next came home.

The tears were unavoidable, falling from her eyes to leave damp tracks down her cheeks. Judy had tried so hard to fix everything, to make the world a better place for at least one mammal, and now all of that was about to unravel. She'd wanted to make Nick’s life better, but this had the very real possibility of making it so much worse. Silent tears turned to wracking sobs, and Judy pulled her legs close to her body, hugging them. Chin resting on her knees, she screwed her eyes shut. The only sound in the room was of her cries, the sharp and alarming whining noise coming from her freely now she was alone without the risk of anyone hearing her.

Judy wanted Nick. She wanted her mate to hold her, to tell her it would all be okay, that they'd figure something out. He wasn't home, though. Miles and miles of land separated them, and for the first time since moving to the city, the doe felt so hopelessly alone.

Her phone buzzed. Violet eyes finding the small device, Judy willed whoever was calling to leave her alone. Letting it ring, the phone eventually fell silent, and Judy let out a small sigh of relief.

Relief was a short-lived emotion, though. The buzzing started again. The persistence of the caller had Judy reaching for her phone, swiping quickly at her nose and eyes to wipe away any snot and tears. Plastering on a fake, bright smile, she finally caught sight of the caller ID. “Nick.” Judy breathed as she answered the call, her mates face filling the screen. It was as if her prayers had been answered.

“Hey Carrots, I know today's not our usual day bu-“ Nick had started to speak, but the sight of tear tracks on his mates cheeks, the dampness of her nose from it running, made him stop. “Sweetheart.” The tod cooed, heart breaking at the sight of his rabbit looking so miserable. Nick had some idea as to what had caused his loves sadness. He'd been pulled from his afternoon classes to take a phone call from Chief Bogo, and the angry cape buffalo had chewed him out for fifteen minutes, ranting on about how he'd expected Nick would be connected to some shady criminals before he'd finally let the tod speak. While hearing that Marcus the wolverine had died wasn't overly surprising, finding out that his and Judy’s names had been brought into it had been. The further news that the ZPD was looking into the disappearance and assumed death of Castro had made the fox’s hackles rise, and Nick had been forced to rely on his years on the streets, on his smooth talking hustling ways, to get himself out of the call. “I guess Buffalo Butt chewed you out too, huh?” Nick’s tone dropped, taking on a more soothing lilt.

Sniffling, Judy nodded. “Wolford too. He’s lost a weeks pay for lying to the Chief and covering up my stupid freak out yesterday.” Even though the timber wolf had insisted that it was okay, that it didn't matter, Judy still felt awful for putting him through it. He had a family and bills to pay, and a sudden week without any income could be difficult.

“Wolford would've known what he was doing when he lied, Fluff. Don't feel bad.” Nick had no idea how long the timber wolf had been on the force, but he got the impression Wolford had been around a while. He wouldn’t have covered for Judy without knowing the consequences. Again, Nick found himself in debt to his soon-to-be colleague. The wolf had taken good care of his mate
so far. “Your freak out wasn't stupid, either.” Nick shook his head. It was to be expected that Judy would have some lingering issues from witnesses Catstro drown. Murder wasn't pretty, and it had been Judy’s first time seeing it.

“He lost a weeks pay because of me, Nick! I froze, and the stoat would've drowned if it weren't for Wolford.” Judy flapped. The doe didn't want to think about what would've happened had Connor not been there to save the day. The wolf’s fast thinking and driving had ensured that Judy had snapped out of her flashback and the stoat had been given the medical treatment he'd needed. As they'd been leaving the precinct this evening, cruiser parked back in the garage, Clawhauser had informed them that the hospital had called. The stoat was doing well, only suffering from mild hypothermia, and would be released into police custody tomorrow for questioning.

Judy’s worry about Wolford's financial situation was for nothing. “Use whatever's in the deposit box to pay him back.” The answer was obvious to the fox. The money was shared between them, and if Judy felt like paying Wolford so he wouldn't be out of pocket, then Nick wouldn't stop her. He owed the timber wolf. If Judy didn't hand him the money this week, Nick would take care of it after graduation. “It can be fixed, sweetheart.” The tod soothed. There were ways for them to get through this. They might incur a few cuts and bruises, so to speak, but Nick wholeheartedly believed they'd be okay. They had each other, after all.

Thinking back to the $300,000 sitting in the deposit box, Judy gulped. As much as she wanted to tell Nick that she'd gone and checked the amount, and as much as Judy wanted to see the shock and surprise on his face when she told him how much was in it, now wasn't the right time. “I can't use that money, Nick. It's yours.” Judy had always been an independent doe, and that meant being financially independent too. She couldn't rely on Nick to bail her out.

“Ours.” The tod corrected. “Weren't you listening when I said I want to share everything with you? I might not have much, but what I do have is yours too.” Judy was his mate, the mammal he was unequivocally and irrevocably in love with, and though it was early days, Nick knew that in the future he would ask her to bond with him, for them to claim one another. The fox also hoped that when the moment was right, he'd get down on one knee and ask Judy to marry him. The violet-eyed doe on the other end of the phone was it for him.

“I'll think about it.” Judy offered as an alternative, wanting to move the conversation away from money and onto more pressing matters. “Chief Bogo wants to know about my stupid freak out, and I might have to see a psychologist, and they'll try and make me talk, and they might find out about Catstro, and that would mea-”

Before Judy could keep going, before she could work herself into the mother of all frenzies, Nick interrupted. “We’re going to fix it.” He kept his voice strong and steady. Nick had wiggled out of some serious situations during his time on the street, avoided death several times too. He wasn't about to let this be the thing to bring him and Judy down.

“We can't just fix it, Nick! This is my head we’re talking about. My mind.” If Judy knew how to fix the issue, she would, but the mind was a complex beast and understanding it took years of skill and training. It wouldn't be an easy task, stopping the does flashbacks, and Judy had a feeling that even though they would dull with time, they would never truly leave her.

“I have an idea we can try when I'm next home.” Nick had spent the night giving it some thought. Without access to the internet, he'd been forced to think outside of the box, to talk about the issue with Horton, Tony, and Randon and see what their opinions were on the matter. The tod had come up with something he hoped would work, something that would lessen the impact of the flashbacks on his mate. It was a slightly risky idea, but if it worked, then the payoff would be worth it.
“What idea?” Judy demanded, willing to grasp at anything that could possibly help her overcome her problems.

The tod shook his head. As much as he wanted to keep Judy informed and be upfront with her, keep their bargain of openness and honesty going, Nick worried that if he told her the plan, it wouldn't work. “It's a surprise. Don't worry, I have faith it'll work.”

Home. Nick hadn't been home in a while, and Judy was starting to get angsty. Though they'd left one another on a high, having finally confessed their love, the doe hadn't been able to spend much time with Nick now that he held the boyfriend title. “When will you next be coming home?”

Nick winced, a quick flash of guilt and pain crossing his handsome face. Even though he’d spoken to Major after his call with Bogo, asked her for some time off, she’d remained firm. “Probably not for another two months.”

“Two months?!” Judy all but screeched. How was she going to go that long without him? Sure there weekly phone calls were lovely, and Judy would be forever grateful to Chief Bogo and Major Friedkin for allowing them, but the doe needed to see her mate in the flesh, needed to be surrounded by his scent again, and feel the thudding of his heart underneath her paws. The distance was painful, and the two separate lives they were currently leading didn't sit right with the doe, but she had no choice but to persevere. She loved Nick; she wanted him to do well at the academy.

“Shhh, I know. I know.” Nick hated the look of sorrow on Judy's face, and he silently cursed Friedkin for refusing to give him any extended time off. Though there were only a few months left of training, Nick felt like it was an eternity. Being away from Judy put him on edge and drove him crazy with concern. Even though she still wore her bonding bracelet, Nick had the constant fear in the back of his mind that another mammal would swoop in and try to take her because he wasn't around. He wasn't there to love her, to hold her, and he knew distance could be a real bitch to relationships. “I've been given more time off than the others though already, Carrots. Besides, don't you want your partner to be valedictorian?” Nick tried to find the silver lining, sought to give Judy something positive to focus on.

“Vale-“ Judy blinked. “Are you on course to be valedictorian?!” She grinned, eyes crinkling as the happy emotion took over, smashing her earlier sadness back into submission. She'd always known Nick was smart, that he was fast and a quick learner. From what she'd gathered, mammals on the streets had to adapt quickly, or they often met their end.

“You betcha. Who'd have thought this poor, uneducated street fox would kick the butts of all the elite competition, eh?” Nick still couldn't believe that he was doing okay, that he was managing to keep up with the others. His years on the street had made him smart and relatively quick on his hind paws, but he knew he'd been at a disadvantage not only with his size but his general health too. It hadn't escaped the tods notice that since his diet had improved, since he'd started eating a little more, his body had filled out some, muscles building with the mix of good nutrition and hard training.

“I've always had faith in you, Slick.” Judy’s expression softened, violet eyes staring into emerald ones through the screen. The doe had always believed that Nick was more than capable of anything if he put his mind to it. All he'd needed was a gentle nudge in the right direction.

Features softening as his mates did, Nick lost himself in his favorite violet eyes. “Then you need to have faith in me now, Carrots. I have a plan.”

“Please share, because I have until the end of the week to tell Chief Bogo about my freak out and why our names were on a piece of paper in Marcus’ apartment or I'm fired and you more than
likely won't be allowed to graduate,” Judy begged. If Nick had an idea, then Judy wanted to hear it, and if it was good, she wanted in on it. She was open to any and all ideas, desperate for even a scrap of hope.

News of his mate being threatened with losing her job drew a sharp, angry yip from the tod. Judy loved her job, she was brilliant at it, and the thought of Bogo taking it from her again made his blood boil. Due to the time, Nick had made the phone call outside, sitting in the shade of the classrooms. His tail thrashed angrily against the wall behind him, ears flattening as he only just withheld a snarl. The conversation he’d had with Bogo played through his mind, and the fox was even more convinced that what he was going to do was the right thing. “I’m coming back to the city for the day tomorrow. Buffalo Butt has agreed to a meeting with me, and Major has given me the day off. I’m going to tell Bogo about Castro, the debt, asking you to make the drops for me, all of it.”

Gasping, Judy shook her head, ears standing to attention, panic on her face. “No! He’ll pull you from the academy!” It was a stupid idea and had the possibility to backfire and ruin everything.

“If he does then he does, but I won't let you take the fall for my mess, I won't let you lose your job because I was an idiot as a teenager.” It was an easy decision for the fox to make, the right decision. Too many mammals had taken the fall for him over the years, and now it was time for Nick to face the music himself. He'd start with Bogo, and then he'd come clean with his mom.

Still shaking her head, Judy wasn't having any of it. “No. We’ll think of something else, we’ll come up wi-”

“There is no other way, sweetheart.” Nick sighed sadly. “I've been running from my mistakes for so long, but I’m ready to face the repercussions of them. I want to keep training, I want to spend every day working by your side and watching your six in the field, but I won't let you suffer because of me. I love you too much to let that happen.” Nick had never thought he'd hold any mammal, other than his mom, in such a high regard. Judy was everything to him. She was hope and happiness, love and acceptance, safety and forgiveness. The depths the tod was willing to go to for Judy still surprised him every day, and sometimes even terrified him. A year ago he'd never have even contemplated accepting blame for anything.

“We both made mistakes, Nick. I shouldn't have dealt with Catstro myself. I should've gone to the Chief with information and chased him through legal means, all above board.” The months since the caracal's death had given Judy time to think, time to reflect. She'd had enough information on the cat after their first meeting to have gone to Bogo, to have explained the situation to him and asked for help in bringing Catstro in and jailing him for his crimes. She'd been so caught up in the moment, in wanting revenge for Nick’s poor treatment, that she'd gone with the first idea that had come to mind. She'd been living with the mistake ever since. “I'm coming with you tomorrow.”

“No, you’re not, Fluff.” Nick shook his head. His conversation with Bogo would probably take a while, and the tod was pretty sure it would be emotionally draining. He'd told Judy a lot, but Nick had a feeling he'd have to give Bogo the whole, uncensored story. The doe didn't need to hear the gritty details, didn't need the heart break.

“Yes, I am. In case you’ve forgotten, we’re a team. You’re my best friend, my mate, and soon you’ll be my partner. Besides, I need to tell him about my flashbacks.” Judy put her hind paw down. Nick wasn't getting away with doing this alone, Judy wouldn't let him face this by himself. She would stand by his side, take the blame that was rightfully hers, and she would hold Nick’s paw and offer comfort when needed.

“You’re not seriously going to tell him about what happened in the mansion, are you?” Nick’s jaw
dropped. Confessing to that was suicide. Not only would Judy end up in jail but betraying Mr. Big would see her hunted. Nick didn't care much for himself, but he wouldn't let anything happen to his bunny.

“No, I might be a dumb bunny, but I'm not that dumb.” Judy rolled her eyes, the hint of a rueful smile playing on her lips. “I'll tell him that I saw one of Catstro’s gang members drown as I was leaving the drop point, and it frightened me.” She hated having to lie, but she wasn't about to confess to being an accessory to murder, to watching a mammal die and doing nothing to stop it.

Mulling over Judy’s suggestion, Nick nodded. “It's a half truth, so it should be okay.” Nick knew the most believable lies were those that weren't entirely false. It was easier to twist the truth a little, sprinkle in some details here and there than make up something brand new. “If Buffalo Butt mentions Catstro’s death we’ll tell him that he had a lot of enemies and disgruntled mammals after him and that he should start looking there.”

Judy nodded at Nick’s suggestion, happy to go along with the plan. Silence fell between the fox and rabbit, both of them lost in their own thoughts, yet focused on the eyes of the other. Judy found reassurance in the emerald eyes that stared back at her, while Nick found courage in his favorite violet eyes. “I’m kind of scared, Carrots,” Nick whispered, breaking the silence after a few minutes. He was still uneasy about being so emotionally open, with confessing how he was feeling. This was Judy, though. If any mammal understood that, it was his love.

Swallowing, Judy bobbed her head once in a nod, slipping further back against the couch pillows. “Me too Slick, me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter; how will Nick and Judy's chat with Chief Buffalo Butt go?
I started this fic three months ago, and I wasn't expecting much to come of it. I primarily wrote it for my own enjoyment and thought that I might as well share it. Well, I'm absolutely blown away by the response. I know I say that a lot, but I've just started looking into the stats in more depth and I just....

A03:
Subscriptions: 195
Hits: 13,920
Kudos: 602
Bookmarks: 106
Comments: 848

FF.net
Reviews: 226
Followers: 271
Favorites: 202
Overall Views to Date: 40,955
Overall Visitors to Date: 11,759

I actually had a bit of a cry this afternoon when these stats sank in.

THANK YOU. FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART.

All of the love and support, comments and kudos, bookmarks and views has made this little fic what it is today. YOU have all helped make Safe Paws into what it is. I could never have done this without you all, so know I appreciate and love each and every one of you.

ZNN are featuring this fic and our dear Drummer wrote the little piece about it. Apparently, it's going live on Monday (July 3rd) and I can't wait to read it!

I'll say it again, I love my little Safe Paws family to death. You guys are the absolute best. Thank you so much <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Unscrewing the cap from the half-full bottle of water in her paw, Judy took a swig of the cold liquid, swallowing the pill she’d put on her tongue moments before. Remembering to take her daily suppressant was a chore, but if it stopped her from turning into a lascivious bunny, then she’d willingly go through with the slight inconvenience.

It was 8:30 am, and Judy was stood on platform five at Savannah Central Station. During their phone call the night before, Nick had decided to catch the early morning train, having agreed to speak to Chief Bogo after morning roll call. Though Nick had suggested meeting outside the precinct, the doe hadn’t wanted her fox to arrive back in the city without being met.
“The train now approaching platform five terminates here. Please keep away from the edge of the platform.” The PA system’s announcement made Judy smile, though the bunny had already stepped back from the edge. Quickly finishing off her water as the train came into view, Judy tossed the empty bottle into a nearby recycling bin.

Dressed in her work clothes, Judy could feel a few curious gazes on her. She studiously ignored them, though, as the train pulled into the station, coming to a complete stop. Unsure as to where Nick would be, Judy pushed up onto the balls of her hind paws, trying to scour the crowds for her fox as passengers started to disembark. Through a gap in the crowd, Judy spotted a familiar face. Taking off in a sprint, desperate to be reunited with her mate, Judy nearly bowled Nick over as she flung herself at him, arms wrapping around his neck, legs locked around his waist as she buried her nose against his neck. The comforting, musky smell of her fox flooded her nostrils and Judy felt all of the tension in her body leave. They’d be okay. Everything would be okay.

Not having expected to be almost bowled over by his bunny, Nick was momentarily caught off guard, but he was quick to wrap his arms around his mate, to hold her close and support her small weight. One arm looped under her butt, while the other crossed her back, large paw cradling the back of her head. “I missed you.” The tod whispered, eyes falling shut as he relished the feel of his love. Though on the outside the fox was calm and collected, he’d been a wreck inside ever since his phone call with Bogo. He had so much he could potentially lose.

“I missed you too,” Judy whispered back, nuzzling against Nick’s neck. Paws tightening in the reddish-orange fur she’d grasped when she’d locked her arms around her fox, Judy let out a sigh of contentment, regretfully pulling back a moment later so she could look into the emerald eyes she loved so much.

As Judy pulled back from their embrace, Nick opened his eyes, violet and emerald meeting. “Hey, Fluff.” He grinned, unable to avoid taking in the sight of the bags under Judy’s eyes, the way the fur on the top of her head was in a slight state of disarray. Concern flooded the tod, but he pushed it down. They were about to spill nearly all of their secrets to Chief Buffalo Butt, so it was understandable that Judy looked a little worse for wear.

“Hey Slick.” Judy looked over her fox. His fur was brushed smooth, but the tiredness in his expression made the doe want to rush them home and tuck her fox into bed. She could easily remember the countless sleepless nights and the exhausting days at the academy.

Closing the minuscule distance between their snouts, Nick pressed a gentle kiss to Judy’s lips, eyes falling shut. The rest of the world ceased to exist at the feel of his mate's lips, soft and sweet against his own. One of Judy’s paws released Nick’s neck, moving to cup her mate's muzzle as she too closed her eyes, keeping him close as the gentle press and slide of their lips grew more heated, both mammals having missed the taste of one another. Head tilting, the new angle allowed Judy to tentatively lick the seam of her fox’s lips, seeking entry. Lips parting, Nick took control of their kiss, heat coursing through him. Long vulpine tongue tangled with smaller leporidae one as a low rumble escaped the tod, drawing a small gasp from the rabbit. Nick’s paw on the back of Judy’s head smoothed around, cupping her cheek, and the tod eased the pace of their kiss.

“Damn predo’s are taking over this city.” The sneer had Nick and Judy breaking apart, both mammals trying to regain their breath. Nick lowered Judy down to the floor as they looked for the source of the sound, anger bubbling under the surface as the fox searched for the mammal that dared utter such a slur. An angry moose glared at them from a few feet away, one of his large hooves covering the eyes of the calf that stood by his side.

Nick took a step towards the moose, letting out a sharp warning yip, chest rumbling with the start
of a growl. “What did you say, you overgrown deer?” Nick wanted to be the bigger mammal, wanted to let it go, but his instincts overpowered rationality. The need to protect his mate, to defend her, consumed him.

“Nick.” Judy put herself between her fox and the moose, small paw pressing against Nick’s chest, trying to ground him and keep him back, stop him from doing something stupid. She could see the clench of his jaw, the square set of his shoulders, and his balled fists.

Indignation flared across the moose’s face, and he removed his hoof from its place covering the calf’s eyes, pointing it angrily at Nick. “Don’t you have something to go and steal, fox?”

“I’d be careful of the accusations you throw around. In case you need your vision checking my girl is a cop, and I would just love to see her arrest your sorry ass for hate speech and speciest remarks.” Nick shot back, unable to take another step forward as his mate pushed him back. They were starting to garner some attention, and the tod almost wanted everyone to witness the disagreement.

Snorting, the moose dropped his gaze to Judy, looking her up and down before he shook his head, smirking at Nick. ‘I’m not afraid of the wabbit.”

Judy froze, body going ridged at the mocking tone the moose had used. Violet eyes narrowing, she decided to teach him exactly why he should be afraid of the ‘wabbit.’

Stepping into precinct one, Judy dragged the moose behind her, a pair of cuffs slapped around the mammal’s wrists. Nick trailed behind with the calf, distracting him with crazy stories from his time on the streets. “Clawhauser.” Judy greeted the chatty cheetah, who slowly put down his bowl of Lucky Chomps at the sight of the tiny bunny dragging a somewhat slow and disorientated moose behind her. “I’m needed in roll call, but Mr. Bullwinkle here thought he’d run his mouth and use speciest remarks. He refused to comply, so I had to dart him. Think someone can take him down to a holding cell to recover properly, and can someone take care of his son?” Judy explained, gesturing to the lumbering mammal behind her.

Still surprised by the sight of the cuffed moose, Clawhauser nodded, surprise morphing into glee as he spotted Nick. “Oh hey! I didn’t think you were coming home so soon.” The big cat grinned, picking up the phone to call through to some of the other officers so they could take care of the moose and his son.

“Got to keep coming back or you’ll have an angry bunny on your paws.” Nick shrugged, the corners of his lips tugging up into a smile. Judy had told him about the precincts little bet on them, about how their relationship was common knowledge amongst the other officers now. The thought of his future colleagues betting on him and Judy had amused the tod.

Giving Nick’s shoulder a playful thump, the doe was caught off guard as he grabbed her, hauling her close before planting a kiss on her lips. Judy let out a small noise of surprise, eyes widening as she pulled back from the impromptu kiss. “Not at work, Slick!” From over the tod’s shoulder, Judy spotted the calf blinking at them curiously. The high-pitched squeal from Clawhauser, who’d witnessed the kiss after calling through for another officer, made the rabbit groan. “I won’t be long.” She promised, reluctantly letting go of her fox and heading in the direction of the bullpen.

“Don’t even think about it, Benji,” Nick warned, lifting a paw to point at the cheetah, the tod’s eyes on Judy’s retreating form and the bobbing of her little tail. Paws clamping over his muzzle,
Clawhauser stifled his coo at how adorable Nick and Judy were, as another officer arrived to take care of Mr. Bullwinkle and his son.

Judy had never had a bad roll call experience before, but there was a first time for everything. The coil of dread in her gut that had slowly been building since yesterday’s meeting tightened when Chief Bogo entered the room. The buffalo went about roll call the way he always did, barking orders and instructions, but every now and then he would look directly at the bunny, putting Judy on edge. Nose twitching, breath coming quick and sharp, the doe reached for her bracelet several times, trying to ground herself. Could she do this? Could she sit there and let Nick tell his story to Chief Bogo? Could she let him risk losing his impending job, the one he was working so hard for? Judy had sat idly by once before in an important meeting, the one between Mr. Big and Catstro, and she couldn’t help but think about how that had ended.

Tuning out, Judy nibbled on her lower lip, running through scenarios in her head. They could tell the truth and end up fired. They could tell the truth and end up arrested. They could lie and cover their tails. They could sprinkle some lies amongst their honesty. So many options and so many outcomes. Nick wanted to be honest, but Judy wanted to protect her mate. Her hind paws started to thump as she let go of her bracelet, left paw rising to her mouth so she could chew on her blunt claws. This could all go horribly wrong.

“Hopps. Go and get Wilde and meet me in my office.” Bogo gave the final instruction of roll call, snapping the doe out of her thoughts. The room was empty save for the two of them.

Gulping, Judy could feel the nerves getting to her, causing her to tremble. Paw finding her bracelet again as she slipped off of her chair and started to head to the atrium, Judy tried to focus her mind. They were going with honesty, and her mom had always told her that it was the best policy, but the possibility of losing her job made lying oh so tempting.

Entering the atrium, Judy spotted Nick stood chatting to Clawhauser, the cheetah laughing so hard that the doe thought he might pass out. Her fox wore a smirk, body language relaxed. As she approached the duo, Judy reached out, a small paw landing on Nick’s arm. When emerald met violet, Judy could see the tension and worry in her mate’s gaze. “Come on, we should get this over with,” Judy whispered, lifting her other paw to stroke along Nick’s muzzle.

“Lead the way, Carrots.” Nick put on a brave face, saying goodbye to Clawhauser as he let his mate lead him towards Bogo’s office. Paw in paw, they ascended the stairs to the second floor. Judy’s heart hammered, her steps slowing the closer they got to Chief Bogo’s office. This was it. The past was coming back to bite them on the butt. Would they end up walking out of Bogo’s office still with their jobs? Feeling her paw being squeezed, Judy was grateful for Nick grounding her, stopping the nerves from consuming her.

Nick swallowed as fear crept through him, the pair of them coming to a stop in front of Bogo’s door. The tod hadn’t even started working for the ZPD, and he’d already been summoned to the Chief’s office. Taking a deep breath, Nick braced himself. He didn’t want to air his dirty laundry, didn’t want to talk at length about his past, but if it would ensure Judy got to keep her job, then he’d tell Bogo everything.

Lifting a trembling paw, Judy knocked against the frosted glass. “Come in.” The deep baritone of their boss had both small mammals turning to look at one another. Nick’s free paw came up to cup Judy’s cheek, and he pulled her close, pressing a soft kiss to her lips.
“We’ll be fine, Carrots. We have one another.” Nick wasn’t sure which of them he was trying to reassure the most, but the nod from his doe was enough to tell Nick that it had helped her a little. Taking his paw from her face, Nick reached up to turn the door handle, pushing the door open. Letting Judy enter first, Nick followed behind, the door shutting quietly behind them.

Bogo sat at his desk, a few dossiers on the surface of it along with a baggy of evidence. Nick spared a moment to look around the room. The large map of the city took up the center of the left-hand wall, some medals hanging beside it. A low bookcase was stuffed with files and folders below it, while the cabinets behind Bogo’s desk were filled with books on various legal matters and police protocols. The wall on the right was fitted with a huge window, the morning light illuminating the room.

Helping Judy onto the chair on their side of the desk, Nick followed behind her, hauling himself up so that the pair of them shared it. Thighs and shoulders pressed together, both small mammals kept their paws in their laps, unsure about where to start. Sitting so close to his mate, Nick could feel how rigid her body was, and he swore he could feel the thudding of her heart where their legs were pressed together.

Leaning forward in his chair, Bogo observed the fox and rabbit opposite him. He could see the tension in their bodies, the fear in Judy’s eyes and the silent acceptance in the fox’s. Grunting, the buffalo reached for the baggy of evidence. He pushed it towards the pair, knowing that Nick was yet to see it. “Why are your names on this piece of paper?” Bogo demanded, cutting to the chase. Though he wasn’t usually called to cases in the middle of the night, especially those involving the murder of a street criminal, the circumstances were too suspicious, and the wallet in Marcus’ back pocket tied him to a larger network of offenders that the ZPD had been trying to bring down for years. Bogo had taken a team to the wolverine’s house to search for clues, and it was while he’d been searching the mammal’s desk that he’d found a notebook. Flipping through the book he’d paused seeing Nick and Judy’s names. He’d had to withhold his snort of annoyance, jaw clenching as he’d quickly torn the page out, stuffing it into his pocket to interrogate his officers with later, before continuing with the search for clues.

Reaching for the desk, Nick pulled the baggy from it, bringing it closer so he could read the piece of paper. Seeing his name, along with Judy’s, made Nick sigh. There was no getting out of it; he’d have to tell the whole story. “I knew Marcus and Catstro, and through me they both knew Judy.” The tod started, placing the baggy back on the desk.

Pleased that Nick was forthcoming with information, though not entirely surprised that the tod knew some shady criminals, Bogo kept the pressure on him. “How did you know them?”

Licking his lips, Nick sank back in the chair. Wringing his paws, he felt Judy gently take them in her own. Turning his head to offer his mate a small smile, Nick found strength in her comfort. He could do this. It would probably do the tod some good to talk freely about his past with another mammal outside of his family, to finally lift some of the weight off of his shoulders. Snout dangerously close to Judy’s, Nick refrained from kissing her out of thanks. The last thing he wanted was to be chewed out by his future boss for canoodling during such a critical discussion. “It’s a long story, Chief.” Nick gave a wry smile, emerald eyes moving from Judy to look at the buffalo.

Though the Chief was aware of the relationship between Nick and Judy, and under precinct rules, it wasn’t banned given that they shared the same level of seniority, or would once Nick started, he bit his tongue for now. He had no issue with them being mates, figured they would probably need to comfort one another through this talk, but he’d have to ask them to keep their relationship out of the workplace when Nick graduated and joined them. “I have time, Wilde.” Bogo had set aside plenty
of time for this meeting just in case, but the sooner he had answer's, the sooner he could start making plans on how to approach this case. Knowing that Judy was involved somehow made his decision yesterday to ban her from interfering with the case a good move. She couldn’t be seen to have a conflict of interest.

A few months ago Nick never would've dreamed of opening up to anyone, let alone his future boss, but the beautiful bunny by his side was helping him overcome his fear of being emotionally vulnerable and was encouraging him to share himself with others. After twenty years of hiding his feelings, the tod was finding it hard going, but the few times he had opened up had been worth it, the result of his emotional honesty more than he could ever have hoped for. By telling Bogo the truth, Nick hoped he would be able to save Judy’s job. Though he wanted to graduate, wanted to join Judy at precinct one, he’d happily give it all up if it would save his mate's dream. He already had far more than he'd ever hoped for by having her love.

“I was seven when my dad was murdered.” Nick started to talk, the words fleeing from his lips before he could stop them. Though the tod was okay with sharing, he kept some of the finer, gritty details to himself. He told Bogo the same story he’d told Judy all those months ago in his kithood bedroom. Nick shared the story of leaving home at twelve years old and taking out a loan from Catstro at sixteen. He spoke about finding his mom crying and paying off the mortgage with the $200,000 he'd been given, and subsequently being beaten to a pulp by Catstro and his crew for spending the money on something other than Wilde Times. He finished by mentioning his payment plan deal.

Bogo listened to the story, careful to keep his expression neutral as the fox spoke, the tod having to pause every now and then to take a deep breath. It was in those moments he saw Judy step up to the plate, filling in a little for Nick while offering him physical comfort, small prey paws cradling larger predator ones. Bogo had seen some sights in his time, but never in a million years had he thought he'd ever see a small bunny comforting a fox. It became apparent to him that Nick had shared the story with Judy already, and the buffalo made sure to watch the rabbit’s body language too. As Nick’s story drew to a close, the buffalo brought a paw up to his face, pinching the bridge of his snout. “Did you not think that they'd want their money back?"

Nick had to stop himself from making a snappy retort and instead focused on the truth. “I did, and I already had ideas as to how I was going to pay them back before they jumped me in the street and dragged me to the warehouse.” The memory of that night had stuck ever since, had made Nick look at Catstro and his gang in another light. They hadn't been afraid to hurt him to the point where he’d needed to seek out a doctor, and they hadn't been afraid to threaten his mom's life either.

"$1000 a month is a lot of money for a young mammal without a job." Bogo pointed out. While it was apparent that the information he'd received so far from the fox was accurate, based on the body language and tone of both mammals sat across from him, the buffalo had a sinking feeling in his gut that there were things the fox wasn't telling him.

“I know, but they were threatening to hurt my mom if I didn't pay them back. I wanted to make sure that would never happen, so in the heat of the moment I panicked and made a snap deal.” Nick had been kicking himself ever since. He'd been young and foolish, terrified and hurt when he'd made the offer of $1000 a month. He hadn't know where he was going to get that much money from, all Nick had known was that he’d needed to get away and find a doctor who would treat him quickly so that he could protect his mom.

Placing a hoof on the desk, Bogo tapped the wooden surface with a finger. “Did you sign any contracts at any point?"
Nick shook his head, not recalling signing any paperwork. The banks he'd gone to initially would've probably asked him to sign a contract, but the caracal hadn't bothered with such formalities. “No, these were all verbal deals, and I've paid attention in class, so I know they’re just as legally binding as written ones.” Contrary to the belief of his classmates, Nick enjoyed learning about the laws of the city. It was a subject he’d had plenty of background reading in thanks to his time on the streets. Knowing the law had ensured that he wouldn't be caught out, that he'd be able to pay Catstro back, and keep his mom safe. He'd had the small permit slip up, but that had been it for years.

“True, except I don't believe this deal was reasonable, equitable, conscionable and made in good faith, meaning it could be considered non-binding. Did anyone witness the conversation the deal was done in?” Bogo dug for more information. A mammal like Catstro usually had a whole team working for them, and if the buffalo could get a few names, then they’d have somewhere to start with the case.

Nodding, Nick remembered that night. Eyes screwing shut, he felt Judy shift closer, nuzzling her nose against his cheek in an affectionate gesture. The memory of the warehouse faded away, replaced by fond memories of his mate. Eyes opening, he silently conveyed his thanks to his bunny before he turned back to the buffalo. “His whole gang.”

“Including Marcus?” Bogo enquired, not at all fazed by the affection between the two mammals opposite him. If Judy needed to reassure Nick in such a manner, then he'd happily let the doe get on with it. The more comfortable Nick was, the more information he'd divulge. Nick’s nod of confirmation that Marcus had been present should've set alarm bells ringing, should've made the buffalo consider Nick a suspect in the wolverine's murder, but the tod had been at the academy the whole time with plenty of solid alibis. While it wouldn't have been too far of a stretch to consider Judy a possible suspect, the very fact that the doe was so frightened of losing her badge was enough evidence for the buffalo that the rabbit wouldn't purposefully break the law. “Why do I get the feeling you're withholding some information?” Bogo questioned the tod, the sinking feeling in his gut still not shifting. While he knew a mammal had to have their secrets, this wasn't a conversation where Nick could hold back.

Nick had known that Bogo was good, you didn’t become the Chief by being an idiot, but he hadn’t expected the buffalo to call him out on withholding some information. Knowing it was futile to hide any of it, the tod turned to his bunny. “Carrots, can you give us a few minutes please?” Some of what he would have to reveal to Bogo he hadn’t told Judy yet, and he didn’t want the first time she heard it to be in her boss’s office when they were under pressure.

Vehemently, Judy shook her head. “We’re doing this together, Slick. Whatever it is, it’s fine.” She reassured her mate. They were a team. Judy didn’t want to stand outside. Nick was her partner, her mate, and whatever he had to say to Bogo she wanted him to say in front of her. They’d agreed to not keep secrets from one another, and Judy felt a flash of hurt that Nick wouldn’t share information with her, but was happy to do so with his future boss.

“Fluff, please.” Nick pleaded. The tod didn’t want to fall out over the matter, but he wanted to talk to Bogo first without worrying about Judy’s reaction to the thing’s he’d be saying, without having to answer any of her questions or feel the weight of her gaze. A lot of the things he’d be discussing were things he wasn’t proud of, and Nick would rather sit at home with Judy and explain it all to her properly later.

“Fluff, please.” Judy protested, her shoulders slumping. Mouth curving downward at the same time as her eyebrows rose and drew together, sadness swept through the country bunny. She’d thought they were doing so well being open and honest with each other, sharing everything.
“I know.” Nick’s gaze dropped as he tried to hide his guilt. Unable to leave Judy feeling upset, emerald sought violet as Nick lifted a paw, cupping the doe’s cheek. “I promise I’ll tell you everything in the fullness of time, but I don’t want you hearing it here, under these circumstances.” He murmured, letting his mate see his honesty, making her feel the weight of his promise. The drooping of Judy’s ears and the sad expression she still wore made Nick flinch, a painful expression fleetingly taking up space on his handsome face. “Please don’t look at me like that.” It pained him to see her hurt. Given his track record of hiding things from others though, it didn’t surprise the tod that Judy was reacting in such a way. “I’m not hiding it from you, I’ll tell you absolutely everything, just not now.” He pleaded once more, clawed thumb brushing over Judy’s cheekbone.

Though pained by her mate’s request, Judy studied the emerald eyes of the mammal she loved so dearly. Underneath the pain and the pleading, the doe could see a faint trace of fear. Nick was frightened about the conversation to come? Nick’s past didn’t matter to the doe, he’d changed and become the mammal he was always supposed to be, and no matter what happened after his talk with Chief Bogo, Judy would stand by his side and support him.

Having silently watched the fox and rabbit interact, Bogo figured it was time for him to step in. Dropping his tone to one of a soft, soothing nature, he captured the rabbit’s attention. “Hopps. Please, give us a few minutes.”

Taking a deep breath, Judy looked between her boss and her mate, finally giving a sharp nod. Pulling out of Nick’ grasp she slid from the chair, hind paws hitting the carpet. The doe didn’t have the opportunity to take a step before Nick had reached down, gently grabbing her arm. Leaning over the edge of the seat, the fox pressed a kiss to Judy’s forehead. “I love you.”

Sadness replaced with fondness and love for her mate, Judy reached up to stroke along Nick’s muzzle. “I love you too, Slick.” It was as if her boss ceased to exist when Nick was in the room, and it wasn’t until Judy was making her way to the door that she remembered that Bogo had witnessed her entire loving exchange with Nick. The inside of her ears burned with her blush as she stepped out of the room, the door swinging shut behind her.

Bogo went to speak. However, Nick lifted a paw to his muzzle, silently asking the buffalo to be quiet. Paw moving from his muzzle to point at his ears, Nick gestured behind him to the glass door. Bogo’s nostrils flared as he caught on. Judy’s large ears came in useful, but they were also a pain. Gesturing for Bogo to give him a moment, the tod pulled his phone from his pocket, having received it back this morning before leaving the ZPA. Opening up Furbook, Nick fired off a quick private message.

Only a few moments later Nick’s plan came to fruition. “Judy! Oh em goodness, you won’t believe the latest video Gazelle posted. Here, let me show you.” Clawhauser could be heard from just outside the office, the chatty cheetahs voice unmissable.

“Clawhauser. Not now, please.” Judy’s voice could be heard after, the nervousness and exasperation not hard to miss.

“Oh come on! It’s so good. Are you hungry? You must be hungry. Fangmeyer bought me some doughnuts…” Clawhauser’s voice started to get fainter and fainter as he led a reluctant Judy away from Chief Bogo’s office.

Once he was sure that Judy was out of earshot, Bogo chuckled lowly, the sound surprising the tod. “Quick thinking, Wilde.” The buffalo offered a compliment, though he wouldn’t be making a habit of it. Nick’s actions only reaffirmed to the Chief that bringing him into the ZPD fold was a good idea.
Shrugging off the compliment, Nick flicked his phone into ‘do not disturb’ mode before shoving it back into the pocket of his pants. “I have my moments. I had a feeling she wouldn’t leave.” The tod knew his mate would linger and try to listen in. Nick also knew that she wasn't nosy or rude, but more than likely frightened that he might need her at a moment’s notice. Nick appreciated his bunny’s concern, and it filled him with a sense of warmth at the thought of how much she cared for him, but he needed to do this without any coddling. “Time to mammal up again, Wilde.”

“You’re very close,” Bogo commented, curiosity getting the better of him. He knew they were dating and that they’d decided to become a couple during the time Hopps had taken Wilde home to meet her family, but other than that the buffalo had no clue as to what was going on in their relationship. Their interactions in front of him suggested a deep bond, and ever since the bracelet around Judy’s wrist had appeared, his canine officers had treated her differently.

“Is that going to be an issue after I graduate?” The question was loaded as Nick met Bogo’s gaze. He'd happily step back from the ZPD if it were against protocol for two officers to be mates. Being a cop had been Judy's dream first, and Nick wouldn't let anything get in the way of that.

Bogo considered tormenting the fox, contemplated making him squirm, but in the tod's eyes, he could see steely resolve. “It won't be an issue so long as you keep your paws to yourselves during shifts. I don't want to see the pair of you going at it, and I certainly don't want your fellow officers reporting to me that you're busy. I don't care what happens in your private life, but while wearing your badge you represent this precinct, and I won't have my officers being thought of as horny teenagers. Understood?” It wasn't against protocol so long as the officers involved were of the same ranking, to stop anyone from sleeping their way to the top, but with Nick and Judy as partners that would never be a problem. However, the rabbit and fox were representing the precinct and his team. He didn't want them distracting one another at work. Leaning forward a little more to draw himself a little further into Nick’s space, Bogo stared at the fox. “Now, start talking.”

“Understood.” Nick nodded, not finding Bogo’s request about his relationship with Judy all that unreasonable. He hadn't planned on letting it interfere with his work, as he wasn't about to risk his first honest job. Besides, he and Judy would have plenty of time in the evenings and on days off to be ‘horny teenagers.’

With that settled, Nick began filling in the blanks. Though he stuck to the truth, he was still careful as to how he worded his confessions, omitting names and other distinguishing details. Nick needed to come clean, but he didn’t have a death wish. Explaining how he’d managed to make $1000 a month, Nick confessed to working as an errand boy for a wealthy businessmammal, working all hours of the day and night, and doing whatever was asked of him. Bogo snorted, asking for further clarification and Nick was forced to discuss some of his jobs. The tod made sure to only talk about ones that wouldn’t land him in jail, and he reassured Bogo that everything was above board. It was a small lie. Mr. Big wasn’t an entirely law-abiding mob boss, but Nick had stuck firm to the rules set out by the arctic shrew, and in the mob world they were considered the law.

Piecing the story together as the blanks were filled in, Bogo tried to work out what had brought Nick and Judy together. “You were working for this businessmammal when you crossed paths with Hopps?”

“No. I made an error and offended the businessmammal. It cost me my job, so I turned to hustling.” Nick didn't elaborate on how he'd lost his employment with Mr. Big. The skunk butt rug wasn't exactly a pleasant topic. Bogo quirked an eyebrow, curious as to what had cost Nick what would've probably been a very lucrative job. “For my hustles, I would go to ice-cream joints for large mammals and buy popsicles. I’d melt them down into smaller ones in the shape of a paw,
brand them as pawpsicle’s, and then sell them to small mammals such as the lemmings from the Lemming Brother’s bank.” Nick had settled on pawpsicle hustling given how easy a job it was. It wasn’t the most lucrative hustle out there, but it had earned him just enough to keep Catstro off his back.

Silently impressed with Nick’s business savvy, Bogo knew he couldn’t condone it, at least not on the record. Opening one of the dossiers on the desk in front of him, the buffalo flipped through the file on the fox. After Nick had confronted him in the Rainforest district, Bogo had wanted every scrap of information about him compiled into one folder.

“Before you say it, I had all the correct permits and receipts of commerce needed for it. Everything was above board. I couldn’t afford being rumbled and ending up in jail, not when my mom was being threatened if I didn’t pay up every month.” It had been the one constant fear for Nick. He was all his mom had, and he had to protect her no matter the cost. Knowing now that she was safe, that Judy had taken care of it, the tod felt like the largest weight of them all had been lifted from his shoulders. He owed Judy so much, and he hoped this meeting with Bogo would be the start of him paying her back for her generosity.

Still flicking through the file, Bogo pushed on, finding an interesting document in amongst the thin dossier. Having been living on the streets for twenty years meant there was regretfully little information available about the fox. “How much did you make a day?”

“After splitting with my partner? Usually around $40.” Nick murmured, ashamed and a little embarrassed that after all the effort he went to with his hustles, he had little in his pocket at the end of the day. It was the price he paid for staying on the right side of the law as much as possible. The hustles with the higher payouts were riskier.

“Mhm. All above board?” Bogo glared; pulling the document he’d been looking at from the dossier. Pushing it across the desk towards Nick, he watched as the fox caught sight of his tax form. The only reason the document had caught his attention was due to its lack of information. Nick winced, silently cursing himself again for his tax forms. First, they’d caught him out with Judy, and now Bogo was onto them too. Offering the buffalo a shrug, one of Nick’s paws came up to rub nervously at the nape of his neck. “Yeah…except for that. Judy caught me out with it, that’s how she roped me into helping her with the missing mammal’s case. I was one of the last few who saw Mr. Otterton before he went missing.” Nick stuck to the truth, knowing that at some point in time the cape buffalo would probably ask how he and Judy met anyway.

Bogo smirked. Trust the smart thinking rabbit to rope the fox into helping her by threatening him with legal action. Nick had been right, all those months ago. He and his other officers hadn’t been about to help Judy, too hell bent on seeing the bunny fail. She’d shown them all though, blowing the case to smithereens without any help from them. If anything, the doe’s actions and the way she’d solved the case had been a huge wake-up call for the buffalo and his team. Judy had earned their respect and gratitude.

Looking at the piece of paper on the desk, Bogo surmised that Nick’s tax forms would never again be an issue. He was at the academy, on course to graduate top of his class, and Judy would keep him on the straight and narrow should he start to stray. It made sense for the tod to have lied on his tax form because he’d needed every penny to keep his mother safe. That didn’t make it okay in the buffalo’s opinion, but he understood. Though lying on a federal form was a punishable offense, Nick would be paying back his debt in a much more suitable fashion once he graduated. Picking up the form, Bogo put it back in the dossier. Nick’s story wasn’t going to leave the room, so no mammal had to know that he’d blatantly lied on his paperwork. “Regarding paying Catstro back,
Recalling the calculations he’d made a few months ago, Nick reiterated the figure as his paw dropped back to his lap. “I’ve paid back around $192,000 to date.” If the Caracal hadn’t have been adding such sky-high interest rates, Nick was pretty positive he’d have paid off the entire initial lump sum by now. He’d given 16 years of his life to paying the money back and no longer having to worry about it was one of the most freeing feelings for the tod.

“When was the last payment you made?” Bogo reached for a pen in his drawer, grabbing a few sheets of paper too as he started to scribble some notes. His memory was immense from years of training himself to remember the smallest details about a case, but given how complex this whole issue with Nick seemed to be, jotting down any information that could help with Marcus’s murder or Catstro’s assumed death was a top priority. The buffalo wasn’t sure how open Nick would be again in the future.

“Just after I left for the academy. I had the full amount ready, and Judy dropped it off for me, which is probably why her name is on that piece of paper.” Again Nick stuck as close to the truth as possible. Judy had been forced to top up the fund, but not by much. It still irked the tod that Catstro and his gang had turned up during Judy’s first drop and that she’d been forced to engage in conversation with them without having any backup. It had been foolish of him to assume they wouldn’t notice his absence from the city and that they wouldn’t know Judy. There was only one rabbit cop in the city, and she’d made headlines countless times.

Trying to piece everything together, Bogo sought out a reason as to why their names had been in the jotter with a range of others. “This paper could be from a list of mammal’s making payments?” It made sense for Catstro to keep track of money coming in and going out, and the animal’s that owed him. The fact that the jotter had been full of names suggested to Bogo that Catstro might have had many mammals under his thumb.

“Perhaps. I don’t recognize any of the other names.” Nick lied, this one rolling off of his tongue with practiced ease. Denial was one of the best tools of the trade for street mammals – deny seeing anything and deny being involved in anything. The truth was, Nick recognized a few of the names, but the mammal's in question were dead. “The following month when Judy went to make the drop, having worked additional jobs outside of working here to make up the funds, Catstro and his cronies never showed.” Nick felt it was pertinent to let Bogo know about Judy’s other jobs, if only so that it would soften the blow about the fact that some of the tax dollars of the cities residents, of which Judy was paid with, had lined a criminal’s pockets.

Uncaring as to how Judy had made additional money, though finally having a reason for the doe sometimes coming into work exhausted, Bogo continued to scribble some notes. “So something happened to Catstro, Marcus, and the rest of the gang in the time in between Judy's first and second drops?”

Shrugging, Nick was unsure as to what kind of answer Bogo was looking for from him. Nick had no information about that time given that he had been away at the academy. “I don’t know. I was away, and it’s not something I wanted Judy getting too involved in. When she told me that he never showed, I told her to try again the following month but not push it and not seek him out. Same thing happened the next month in that, again, he didn't turn up.”

Pausing in his note taking, Bogo lifted his gaze to the fox, eyes narrowing. “Why didn’t either of you inform us about Catstro and the possibility of him having gone missing?” The buffalo raised an eyebrow, peering over the rim of his glasses at the tod. It all looked highly suspicious from where he was sitting.
“Would you have really looked into the strange disappearance of a criminal and his gang, or would you have just been pleased that they were no longer actively operating?” Nick fired back.

Nick’s response caught Bogo off guard. Sparring a moment to think about it, all the cape buffalo could do was shrug. If it had been brought to the attention of the ZPD, then they would’ve been expected to look into it, but the Chief had a feeling that the case wouldn’t have been looked into too deeply. Having fewer criminals on the street was always a bonus for the stretched police force.

“I was planning on raising Catstro and the debt with you after graduation, hoping that we could use legal means to bring him down. Of course, his sudden disappearance threw a spanner in that plan.” Nick explained, leaning back in his chair. In truth, the tod hadn’t decided what he was going to do about Catstro and his debt after graduation, but Judy had taken the decision out of his paws when she’d seen to the caracal.

Bogo didn’t bother hiding his snort of disbelief, not convinced in the slightest that Nick would’ve come to him about Catstro. When he’d called the academy yesterday and chewed the tod out, he’d thought that the fox would be a tough nut to crack, that he wouldn’t be as cooperative and forthcoming with information. Having Nick willingly give him information was a surprise, even if the buffalo felt like he wasn’t being told him the whole truth. He would take what he could get for now, though. “I take it Hopps isn’t paying anymore then, considering Catstro is presumed dead?”

Nick nodded, paws clasped in his lap. “That’s right. She’s stopped all payments. Nothing has happened to my mom, and I would hazard a guess that if Catstro were still alive, he’d have gone for her by now.” The number of times the caracal had threatened his mom was lost on the fox, but he was under no illusion that if he had missed his drop by even ten minutes, his mom would’ve had some unwelcome visitors stop by.

“Without a body, we can’t explicitly state that he’s dead, but it would be safe to assume that he is considering his lack of action against your mother and his lack of appearance when Hopps went to drop off the cash.” Bogo finished scribbling notes, throwing the pen down. “Everything you’ve told me today won’t leave this room.” He promised, guessing it had taken a lot for the tod to come forward with such personal and private information.

“You were a victim, and I understand given the police’s usual aversion to your species and the former Chief’s lack of interest in finding your father’s killer, coming to us about Catstro wasn’t high on your priority list.” Bogo continued, making a mental note to pull Robert Wilde’s case file from the archives. “If we look at this issue from a legal standpoint, we have a whole can of worms. You made a deal with a known criminal, worked shady jobs for an unknown businessmammal, were working underage, and you lied on your tax form. If we take into consideration your time since meeting Hopps, her report states that while you were instrumental in helping her solve the missing mammal’s case, and you did cooperate, you also delayed the investigation and made her job somewhat more challenging, which could be seen as obstruction of justice.”

Nick froze. The listing of his crimes made the tod swallow, palms turning clammy as an uncomfortable feeling started to creep in, spreading through the fox and settling in his gut. He’d thought coming clean would help, that he’d be able to save Judy’s job. Heart pounding, Nick’s eyes widened. His gaze was focused on the buffalo on the other side of the desk as he held his breath, waiting for the Chief to say something more. Was he about to be arrested for the crimes of his past?

“However, you were a minor when you made the deal and were taken advantage of, and the high interest rate applied to your loan was illegal. Both of these make the deal void. Realistically you’ve almost paid the full amount back anyway, and the blackmail against your mother makes it easy to
see why you complied. No court in the city would dispute that you were making the best out of a bad situation. From a legal standpoint, in that regard, you're alright.” The law was complicated and confusing, and with so many moving parts to Nick’s story, there were lots of overlapping issues. However, it was apparent that Nick had been backed into a corner and had done what was necessary to survive.

All of the tension drained from Nick’s body, his shoulders slumping as he breathed a sigh of relief. Eyes slipping shut for a moment, Nick swallowed, overwhelmed. “Thank you.” Knowing from a legal standpoint that his actions couldn’t come back to bite him felt great.

The tod felt much lighter for having told his story to another mammal without omitting a large chunk of the details. He knew, though, that the difficult part was yet to come. Judy needed to have the blanks filled in, and his mom needed to hear the whole story for the first time. While Nick could guess Judy’s reaction, it was telling his mom that had him worried the most. It would break her heart, she’d cry and question why, but she deserved to know. He’d hidden so much from her for so long. Nick was rebuilding his life, with a safe home and a new job, and the tod felt it was time to wipe the slate clean, to let graduation be the start of living an honest, happy life.

“Nothing you’ve told me here is overly shocking, so why did you want Hopps to step out of the room?” Bogo’s question had Nick opening his eyes, the fox licking his lips nervously. Bogo noticed the action, curiosity piqued as to what was causing such a reaction. The buffalo braced himself.

Taking a deep breath, Nick put forward the main reason why he didn’t want Judy in the room. “I want to make a deal. I know my way around the criminal underground. I’ll give you information that could prove useful in cases you’re working as long as Judy gets to keep her job and isn’t punished for this. I pulled her into my mess, none of this is her fault, and she shouldn’t be blamed for any of it.” The tod knew everyone and would go to whatever lengths it took to stop Judy taking the blame for his wrongdoings. It was going against the message he’d asked Finnick to spread on the streets, but Nick didn’t care. He would atone for his mistakes, do right by his mate, and then go out and make the world a better place.

It wasn’t every day a mammal was willing to hand over information that could get them seriously hurt, and it led to the buffalo snorting in disbelief. “You leave yourself open to backlash from those whose secrets you’re spilling.” It was a genuine danger, and Bogo and the other officers couldn’t 100% ensure Nick’s safety.

“I know, but I don’t care what happens to me as long as Carrots gets to keep her dream.” Judy was Nick’s priority, and if he had to suffer so that she would be okay, then he was willing to go through with it. He would walk to the very ends of the earth for her. She’d done so much for him and shown him such an immense amount of love and kindness, after all.

Bogo refrained from commenting on the nickname, only just hiding his smirk. “You knew she would object to your offer, which is why you asked her to leave.” The Chief pointed out. The bunny cop had been working for him for long enough now that the buffalo felt he had a good grasp on her personality.

“Yes, and I’d rather tell her the finer points of my time in the businessmammal’s employ when she and I are alone. I’m not proud of the things I did, but I own up to them, and even though it’s a pitiful excuse I did them to keep my mom safe.” Nick also knew he’d be able to speak more openly when it was just the two of them, explain everything in more depth because Judy would no doubt have questions.

Knowing Nick's story now, Bogo felt a flash of guilt at having profiled him the moment they'd
As a cop, it was natural for him to make a snap decision about a mammal, to get a feel for them the moment he met them. Profiling was a genuine thing, unfortunately. However, sometimes a cop could get it wrong. This was one of those times. Bogo was mammal enough to admit that he’d wrongly labeled the fox opposite him. Bringing a hoof to his chin, he rubbed his face, mulling over Nick’s offer. Having inside information was always a bonus, but it could put Nick’s life in danger. Hoof falling to the desk with a thud Bogo shook his head. “No deal.”

Shocked, Nick’s jaw dropped. He’d been certain Bogo would take the offer. Nick knew everyone, knew everything, and he was willing to help. True he would be turning on those he’d been on the streets with, but they’d never had his back. The only mammal that had saved his tail was Finnick, and Nick would never betray his fennec friend. “I’m willingly handing you information!”

“Putting yourself in danger in the process. I will not allow one of my officers to do that.” The officer’s under Bogo were his family, and he would never put them in the line of fire if it could be avoided. The buffalo wouldn’t risk Nick’s life over information. He was also pretty confident that if something were to happen to the tod, it would have a knock-on effect on Judy.

Stunned into silence, Nick blinked. He hadn’t graduated and wasn’t technically an officer yet, but Bogo was treating him like he was, like he was already part of the team.

“You’re welcome to use any information you have when working your own cases, but I want you to run them by me first. I don’t want to risk you or Hopps being hurt.” Bogo elaborated. There was no way he’d be able to stop Nick using any information he already had, but he might be able to prevent the information coming back to bite them. With his mind centered on information coming back to bite them, Bogo grabbed the baggy from the table, pulling the piece of paper out of it. As he went to put it in his desk drawer for safekeeping, it ‘accidently’ slipped into the paper shredder. “I’m such a klutz.” The buffalo sighed. Since no one had seen him swipe the paper from the scene in the first place, no one would be any wiser.

Eyebrows lifting, eyes widening, and jaw dropping, Nick couldn’t believe what he was seeing. That was the only piece of evidence tying him and Judy to Marcus and Catstro, and Bogo had just shredded it. There was no physical proof in the ZPD’s arsenal anymore. The fox had never expected Bogo to make such a bold move.

“Even though Hopps is already an officer and you’re well on your way to becoming one, neither of you is above the law. You’re supposed to set an example for all other mammal’s to follow. For your past actions and for taking so long to tell me about them, I’m going to dish out some discipline.” Bogo looked the fox over, trying to decide on a suitable punishment. “Your first month will be unpaid, and you’ll spend your first two months on probation. This will involve a black mark on your record, and you won’t be able to take on any cases. Once the two months are up, as long as you haven’t caused any trouble, I’ll remove the black mark to allow you the chance to progress in your career with Hopps. If you’ve caused any trouble, then the black mark will stay on your record for longer.” It was the less severe of the punishments Bogo could dish out, but the fox didn’t need to know that. Nick had been a kit, caught up in a maelstrom, desperately trying to find some way back to the surface, some way to stay alive. The tod’s first month would be probationary anyway, a protocol in place to determine whether an officer was cut out for life as a cop or not. The setup at the academy was nothing like being an officer in the real world. Some mammals weren’t cut out for it, and this usually became apparent in their first month. Bogo had no concerns in that regard when it came to the fox. If Nick really did have information on a lot of the mammals on the streets, then the first few months after his graduation would see them twitchy and concerned that he would spill the beans. Putting him on a case was just asking for trouble. Therefore, probation would keep him confined to walking the beat, parking duty, or desk duty.
Having expected much worse, Nick was at a loss for words. A longer probationary period was nothing for the tod, and he’d happily keep his head down and his nose clean way beyond the first two months of his employ. Though Nick was a year behind Judy, having the opportunity in the future to progress up the career ladder with her was something he very much hoped for. The deal Bogo was offering him was much better than the one Nick had come in armed with, and the tod knew he’d be a fool to turn it down.

“Now, onto Hopps’ involvement in dropping off the cash. She’ll spend the rest of this week still alternating between desk and parking duty, and she’ll do the same next week too. Handing over money to criminals under the thumb of blackmail is frowned upon. I’m disappointed she didn’t come and speak to me, but given the criminals involved and the risk to your mother, I understand that she was probably frightened. I’m only telling you this as a courtesy because she’s your mate, but I will inform her of the decision myself.” Bogo lay down the punishments for both fox and rabbit. Though most saw the cape buffalo as aggressive and uncaring, the officer’s beneath him were his family and he didn’t like seeing them suffer. Given all of the information that Nick had shared, Bogo felt the punishments suited the crimes. The Chief had a feeling that the past sixteen years paying Catstro back had been punishment enough for the fox, and all Judy needed was a light punishment to serve as a reminder that she wasn’t to take matters into her own paws, that she had a whole precinct full of backup at her disposal. The bunny had no need to prove to any of them anymore that she was a capable officer.

“I feel like it would be a good time now to discuss Hopps’s issue yesterday. Would you go and get her for this, please?” Bogo moved the topic of conversation along. He had his answer as to why Nick and Judy’s names were on the piece of paper, now he needed to know why Judy had freaked out when the stoat had hit the water. The mammal in question had been discharged from the hospital and placed into police custody this morning and was more than likely being interrogated at present. The buffalo was well aware that Nick had been informed of Judy’s incident yesterday and that he had been granted phone access to speak with her.

Knowing it was an opportunity to run his idea past the buffalo, Nick shook his head. “Although this involves her, I would rather explain it to you to save her having to think back on it, and I want to run an idea past you about helping her overcome it. I don’t want her to know about my idea just yet.” It was risky to talk about Judy and her health without her present, but Nick didn’t want to stress out his bunny by making her think back on yesterday’s events.

Though Bogo would’ve preferred to hear the information directly from Judy, he would listen to her mate. “What’s going on?”

“She’s suffering from flashbacks. After the first drop, she witnessed one of Catstro’s gang members falling into the icy water and struggling to get out. It might in part explain why they didn’t turn up for the second cash drop.” The story had been agreed upon with Judy yesterday. It was close to the truth, but far away enough to protect his mate.

Having guessed that Judy was going through flashbacks, given the street camera footage that Bogo had been able to get his hooves on, the buffalo nodded. He wasn’t entirely convinced that it was the reason they didn’t turn up for the second drop, though. There was a procedure to follow when it came to officers suffering from flashbacks and PTSD. However, the Chief was willing to indulge the fox and hear him out. “How do you plan to fix it?”

Nick began to speak, detailing his plan to the buffalo, and the things he hoped to achieve. Bogo listened, eyebrow raised at the idea. It wasn’t totally ridiculous, but it wasn’t exactly a trusted method either. It had the possibility of epically backfiring. “That could work, though I’m not sure I want to hear any more of the finer details about it. Give it a shot, but if it doesn’t pan out, I’m
calling in the resident psychiatrist and having her examined and possibly placed on medical leave.” Bogo set down the terms. He would let Nick try and help his mate, and if that didn’t work, then he would bring in professional help.

Grateful for the opportunity to help Judy, Nick realized it was worth talking about his issue too while alone with the cape buffalo. “Speaking of medical. I should probably make you aware that I suffer from panic attacks on occasion.”

Given the fox’s history, Bogo wasn’t entirely surprised. “Triggers?” He asked, knowing he would have to make a note of anything that could possibly set them off. Nick wouldn’t be allowed to work any cases that could lead to another panic attack unless he sought help from the ZPD’s medical team and made considerable progress in overcoming his issues.

“Judy.” Nick cut to the chase. “I panic over the thought of her leaving…” He trailed off, feeling uncomfortable discussing the subject with his future boss, but knowing that it had to be done so that the appropriate action could be taken. Clearing his throat, Nick wrung his paws. “Leaving me.” He clarified, groaning at how awkward the conversation was, emerald eyes staring down at the floor, just to the side of Bogo’s desk. “She suggested I tell you about them just to cover my tail.”

“I’ll make a note of your panic attacks, but I can’t see it being an issue if that’s your only trigger.” Bogo grabbed his pen, scribbling down another note. He made sure to hide his smile at the reason for Nick's panic attacks. Having seen them together, Bogo was confident that the country bunny would never leave Nick. Giving his notes a quick read over, Bogo shook his head. “Now, I think we’ve covered everything.” The buffalo felt exhausted, brain throbbing from having to process so much information. If he was feeling the effects of the conversation, he was under no illusion that Nick was too. The overly peppy bunny being distracted by Clawhauser was probably a bundle of nerves by now too. It had been an hour since the cheetah had pulled her away from his office door. “I assume you’re taking the train back this evening?” Nick’s nod of confirmation was all Bogo needed to make his mind up. “Alright, I’m giving Hopps the day off. Go and fill her in on everything you’ve told me. I want her back in the bullpen tomorrow morning looking less stressed, so do what you’ve got to do.”

The lifting of one of Nick’s eyebrow’s made the buffalo scowl. He should’ve known how the tod would take that comment. “Mind out of the gutter, Wilde!” Bogo warned before Nick could make a crude remark. “Dismissed.”

Chapter End Notes

We’ve never been given a complete list of the laws in Zootopia, so I’ve been using a blend of American and British. Under UK law, hate speech is illegal.

ANYWAY. Explanations have been given, Bogo has been brought up to date, punishments have been handed out, and a massive weight has been lifted off of Nick (and Judy’s) shoulders. Loose ends are starting to be tied up.

Next chapter; Nick fills in the blanks for Judy and tells her how the rest of the meeting went before he then returns to the academy and finally finds out who his new combat teacher is.
Chapter Notes

So, urm.....there be some light smut in this chapter.

First time writing it, kinda nervous, but I got some advice from a group of lovely guys in the fandom and sent advanced copies to a few of them and they liked it, so... *pls be gentle ohmygosh*

If smut isn't your thing, the clean version of this chapter is on my FF.net account. You can find me over there under the same pen name. From now on, FF will feature the clean version of this story and you'll find the non-clean here.

I also want to quickly plug the What If? collaboration I'm part of, which is being hosted by the lovely Cimar of Turalis WildeHopps. My first contribution for it has gone up on his FF, A03, and DA pages. I really recommend y'all check out the whole project, though. There are so many crazy talented people working on it and it's going to be a huge bumper pack of mini stories! ^_^

Shutting the office door behind him, Nick’s legs felt like jelly as he made his way to the atrium, following the sound of Clawhauser’s laughter and his mate’s scent. Though he would have two months on probation rather than one, and a black mark on his record for a short while, the meeting had gone better than Nick had anticipated. He’d gone in hoping to be as honest as possible, to lay all the cards on the table, but his old habit of telling a few lies, of twisting the truth and omitting incriminating details, had come back out to haunt him.

Taking the stairs down to the atrium, Nick’s hind paws barely met the ground floor before Judy was grabbing him, small paws clutching dangerously tight on his forearms, ears up and alert, violet eyes wide and panicked, searching his gaze for answers. Judy’s whole body seemed to hum with her concern. Breaking one arm free from her grasp, Nick reached up, brushing a clawed finger along one of her cheekbones. “It’s fine. He knows, and everything is fine.” He kept his voice to a whisper, reassuring his mate. Panicked violet eyes became curious, and Nick knew he had a lot of explaining to do. “You’ve got the rest of the day off. Let’s go home, and I’ll fill you in, okay?” His paw cupped Judy’s cheek, and the doe nodded as she leaned into his touch.

“Hey Benji, we’ll see you later. Thanks, buddy!” Nick called out to the cheetah receptionist as he took Judy’s paw in his own, making a beeline for the exit.

When the big cat had received the message from Nick he’d been worried, concerned as to why he needed to distract Judy, but Nick had been kind to him the few times they’d interacted, and if he needed a favor, then Clawhauser was happy to oblige. Distracting the bunny had been a bit difficult; her attention obviously on the conversation in Bogo’s office, but Clawhauser had tried his best. “No worries, Nick!” He waved them off, watching as they left the building before his attention was drawn to the figure of his boss, stood on the balcony overlooking the atrium on the second floor. Whatever had gone on in that office, it had been serious.

Nick remained silent during the walk home, his mind racing as he thought about all the things he’d
have to tell Judy. The bunny by his side kept stealing glances at him, occasionally opening her mouth as if she wanted to say something before she inevitably closed it seconds later. Without Bogo looming over them, Nick would be able to be more open with Judy. He’d have to tell her about his time with Mr. Big and the things he was asked to do. Nick would have to inform her that they were going to try and work through her PTSD together. He’d have to tell her about the black mark on his file and the extra month of probation.

Judy took the steps down to their apartment first, letting go of Nick’s paw so she could fish in her belt pockets for her house keys. Finding them, she unlocked the door; stepping in and holding it open for her mate.

Nick followed in behind her, nostrils flaring as his nose was assaulted with Judy’s scent. His limited time at home meant her aroma was the strongest in their apartment. Shutting the door behind him, he watched as Judy decanted her keys into the dish on the small table. He’d left his keys back at the academy, as he’d been unsure as to whether he’d have the chance to go home or not.

As Judy moved through their apartment towards her room, she removed her vest and belt, depositing them on her bed. With the day off she had no need to remain in uniform. Stripping, she swapped her work clothes for her home ones – a comfortable pair of black leggings and a soft pink t-shirt.

While Judy went to change, Nick made a detour through the kitchen, grabbing two bottles of water from the fridge, a bug-based protein bar for himself, and some celery sticks for Judy. Shutting the fridge door behind him, Nick was on his way out of the room when a bottle on the counter captured his attention. Putting down the items he’d already gathered, he picked up the bottle, rolling it in his paw until he could read the label. “Leporidae anaphrodisiac – take ONE a day with water.”

Nick frowned. “Suppressants. Carrots is on suppressants.” The thought didn’t sit well. He knew that it was Judy’s body and she could do whatever she wanted with it, he had no say there, and he’d never try and sway her on any matter regarding it anyway, but he couldn’t help but feel concerned about what the suppressants were doing to her. Rabbits were naturally amorous mammals, blocking that surely wasn’t good for her?

The sound of Judy leaving her bedroom spurred him into action. Putting the pill bottle back down he grabbed the items he’d collected earlier from the fridge, heading into the living room where he found Judy picking up their matching blankets. “Mind if I go and change quickly?” The tod took in Judy’s clothes as he placed the water and food down on the coffee table.

Judy gave a nod as she headed back to the couch, blankets in paw. “Go ahead.” She wanted Nick to be comfortable, had a feeling their conversation might get a little heavy and personal. As Nick left the room, Judy scrambled up onto the couch, reaching for a bottle of water. Unscrewing the cap, she took a sip before she closed it again, placing it back on the table. Nick returned shortly afterward wearing a pair of loose gray sweatpants and a red shirt, and he joined Judy on the couch.

Not really in the mood for eating right now, both mammal’s left their snacks on the table. Fluffing up the pillows, Nick settled, half leaning on the armrest and half against the backrest, tucked into the corner with his legs stretched out along the length of the couch.

Having missed her mate and needing to touch him, Judy scooted across the sofa, unceremoniously depositing herself into Nick’s lap, wiggling until she lay on her side, cheek to his chest, hip on his stomach, and her hind paws between his splayed legs.

Chuckling, Nick wrapped his arms around his doe, holding her close. Judy squirmed for a moment, trying to get comfy before the most adorable huff of irritation left her. Sitting up, she dragged Nick
up with her, paws going for the hem of his shirt. “Off.” The bunny demanded, tugging at the fabric. Biting his tongue at the crude comment he’d been about to make, Nick obliged, removing his shirt and casting it to the floor before he returned to his comfy spot. Judy lay back down, nuzzling the cream fur on his chest. “Much better.” She sighed, a small paw coming up to rest on the tod’s chest, feeling the thumping of his heart.

Paws coming up once again, Nick placed one over Judy’s on his chest, while the other stroked down her smooth ears. “Go on, ask away.” He bit the proverbial bullet, knowing Judy would have a multitude of questions.

Judy remained silent for a few minutes, eyes closed as she focused on the sound of Nick’s heartbeat, the steady thumping under her paw, and the gentle rise and fall of his chest. The soft stroking of her ears had her tooth purring, finally relaxing.

Her nerves had been unbearable during the meeting with Bogo, but she’d been strong for Nick. He’d needed her to keep it together. When he’d asked her to leave the room, it had felt like the end of the world, like all the progress they’d made in getting Nick to be more open and honest had just taken a massive step back. Even though Clawhauser had tried to distract her, Judy hadn’t been at all interested in anything the cheetah had been saying. Her mind had been firmly stuck on the conversation going on in Bogo’s office, and the ball of worry in her gut had grown larger and larger every minute Nick and their boss had been locked away in discussion. When Nick had finally emerged, Judy had simultaneously let out a sigh of relief and had started to worry even more. Something had gone on, and she’d been left out of the loop.

“What did you talk about when you asked me to exit the room?” Judy picked her first question, turning over the paw on Nick’s chest so she could lace their fingers together. She’d missed having her mate around and had missed being able to reach out and touch him. The separation was tough, especially given that they hadn’t had much time to enjoy their new relationship status last time Nick had been allowed home.

Small paw locked with his, Nick smiled down at the bunny splayed across his chest. “My time with Mr. Big. I did a lot of things then that I’m not proud of, but given how long I spent with him I couldn’t hide it from Bogo.” By omitting his work for Mr. Big, Nick would’ve left a massive hole in his history that would’ve probably seemed suspicious to the cape buffalo. Instead of leaving the Chief to dig for information, and possibly uncover things Nick didn’t want him to know, it had been easier to partially come clean with his future boss.

Mr. Big hadn’t mentioned much of Nick’s time in his employ, and the doe had a lot of questions. Nick had spent ten years with the arctic shrew, a third of his life in his employee. It was a huge part of Nick’s past, and Judy wanted to know more. “What did you do for him?”

“You don’t want to know, Fluff.” The tod murmured, paw still stroking down Judy’s ears, smooth fur contrasting rough palm. Meeting Judy had been the start of a new chapter in his life, and Nick didn’t want to dwell on the past. He’d done what was necessary to survive, lived by the rules Mr. Big had enforced and had done his best to make sure nothing could come back to haunt him. Unfortunately, Catstro hadn’t got the memo.

Wanting more information, Judy knew she needed to prod, needed to try and get Nick to open up. The only snippet of information she had at her disposal was from Catstro. “What were you doing working at Hotel Verglas?”

Nick froze, paw mid-stroke. “How do you know about that?” He demanded, jaw clenching. It had been one of his harder jobs, the risks much higher than anything he’d done before. Nick had thought he’d been doing a good job at blending in and completing the job, until Catstro and his
gang had turned up looking for him, wanting an advance on his payment. They’d almost blown his cover.

“Catstro mentioned it in the meeting with Mr. Big. He said you were ‘banging cocktail waitresses two at a time’” Judy quoted, voice soft. She knew the caracal had been lying, Mr. Big had set the story straight, but the doe still wanted to hear about it from her fox. Even if there were some truth to the story, Judy didn’t have any right to be angry, as it had been before they’d met.

Eyes widening, Nick felt like his heart would stop beating. He couldn’t have Judy thinking he’d go and do such a thing. Squeezing her paw, still laced with his, the tod shook his head vehemently. “That never happened, Carrots. You’ve got to believe me.”

Hearing Nick’s panic, Judy smiled. It was a little cruel of her to lead him on and torture him, but hearing it from her fox’s mouth only cemented Mr. Big’s words for her. Shuffling, Judy tipped her head back, violet finding emerald. “Don’t worry, I believe you. Mr. Big said you’d never do anything like that.”

Shoulders dropping with relief, Nick wanted to admonish Judy for tormenting him like that and bringing it up when she already knew the answer, but he had to admire the way she’d played him for information. “I wouldn’t. Mr. Big had a list of rules for those in his employ, and they included no sex for information and no sex while working a job.”

“So you were working a job, then?” Judy found her in and latched onto it. Though Nick had opened up a lot since they’d met, the doe was well aware that he still had a lot of secrets. She respected that Nick would probably want to keep a fair few to himself, but she also knew how important sharing and honesty was, and if some of Nick’s past was weighing him down, then Judy wanted him to open up so she could help him carry the weight of it all. He didn’t have to face the world alone anymore.

Nodding, Nick remembered his time at Hotel Verglas with perfect clarity. “I was sent in undercover as a bellboy to gather information on the owner. Another mob boss, this one from the Rainforest district, owned the hotel, and he was encroaching on Mr. Big’s territory. I went in to gather information and feed it back to Mr. Big, who used it as blackmail material to get him out of his area. Turns out he had plans to flood the city with some new drug and was manufacturing it in Tundratown. I overheard his phone call with an associate where they were discussing it and told Mr. Big. Apparently Mr. Big had a long chat with this other boss, but he wouldn't say any more than that.”

Judy’s eyes were as wide as saucers. “Nick, that was so dangerous!” She gasped, paws rising to tug at her ears, feeling stressed at the knowledge that Nick had been forced into situations that could’ve gone horribly wrong.

“I needed to make ends meet, so I completed a fair few jobs.” Nick shrugged. Keeping his mom safe had been his priority, and Nick would've done whatever it took to do that. Mr. Big had been generous with his pay, ensuring those in his employee were suitably compensated for the tasks they were doing. For the first few months that he was in the shrew's employ, Nick had been given lodgings in the employee’s house on the Big estate, but as time had passed, he’d grown restless, unable to relax and be himself around the others. It was that which had driven him back to the street. Though he hadn't had a roof over his head, he'd been able to be himself. Spending his days behind the con-mammal mask had been tiring, and he'd needed the chance to unwind every night.

Frustrated that Nick had been forced into challenging and dangerous situations, Judy contemplated chewing Mr. Big out for making Nick do his bidding. Her fox had been vulnerable, and the shrew should've seen that. “What else did Mr. Big make you do?”
“He didn’t make me, Fluff. He offered me the work, and I took it.” Nick explained, seeing the building anger in his mate. Mr. Big had been a good employer, providing jobs to the mammal’s he thought were most suited to them, but offering them an out with no repercussions if they decided it wasn't right for them. Of course, sometimes it was apparent Nick was the only one capable of completing certain jobs, and though it had backed Nick into a corner, he'd been compensated accordingly. It was just a shame every scrap he'd made had been placed in his fund for Catstro.

“What else?” Judy demanded. If Mr. Big had offered Nick undercover work, it stood to reason he’d been offered other dangerous tasks too.

Knowing he would have to elaborate or Judy would continually ask questions, and maybe even speak to Mr. Big, Nick started at the beginning. “At first I was just an errand mammal. I took care of the small jobs that needed doing, from picking up the dry cleaning to dropping off letters and packages. Mr. Big wanted to see how well I could slot into the family and how dedicated I was. There’s nothing more soul-destroying than being the lowest level on the totem pole, though.” As the errand mammal, Nick had been given the worst jobs, the ones no one else wanted, and the ones that had him running all over Zootopia like a mad animal.

Sympathetic to her fox’s plight, and knowing that his species meant he'd spent a lot of time being treated like he was beneath everyone else, Judy gave Nick’s muzzle a gentle stroke, fingers trailing through short reddish-orange fur. The arctic hare that'd delivered the deposit box key and the letter was probably Mr. Big’s current errand mammal. “You’re not there anymore, Slick. You’re away from all of that; you're no longer the bottom animal in the hierarchy. You're safe and free.” Judy cooed, comforting her fox.

“But you,” the tod pointed out, tipping his head to lean into Judy’s soft touch. If his little bunny hadn't come barrelling into his life, hadn't outhustled him and blackmailed him, Nick knew he’d still be living under the bridge, would still be in Caststro’s debt and wouldn't have such a promising future lined up. Nick may have helped save Judy’s job, but she'd helped save his life.

Judy shook her head; ears drooping at the look her fox wore. “No. I gave you the tools, and you decided to use them.” Her grandma had passed on a saying to the doe when she’d been a kit, right before she’d passed away. “You can lead a horse to water, Judith, but you can't make it drink.”

“I’m glad I did.” Never in his wildest dreams had Nick believed he'd ever be in his current situation. He'd resigned himself to a life of petty crime, hustling, and homelessness. All that had changed and now Nick wanted to set an example for his fellow foxes, wanted to show them that they could be anything and do anything. “You’re starting to sound like Carrots, Wilde.”

“I'm glad too.” Judy had spent many days and nights during their separation after the press conference thinking about what life would've been like if she hadn't of met Nick. She probably wouldn’t have solved the case and would've lost her badge. It wouldn't have changed events in the city though, she reasoned. Predators would've continued to be darted, and unrest would've continued to grow. Not wanting to dwell on the idea, Judy steered them back on topic. “After that?”

Licking his lips, Nick sighed. He wasn't proud of the things he'd done, but thankfully he hadn't been involved in some of the heavier jobs. “I did a range of things. There were several undercover gigs in businesses owned by other family’s, I was the getaway driver on a few occasions.”

Judy couldn't believe what she was hearing, her jaw slackening at the revelation. “Getaway driver!”

Unsure as to how much information he could share with Judy, Nick gave it a moment of thought.
His mate was part of the Big family now and was even the godmother and name inspiration for Mr. Big’s granddaughter. She’d had the chance to betray Mr. Big before by telling Bogo about Catstro, but she hadn’t. “There was some highly suspicious activity going on with a few of the other families, and Mr. Big wanted to know what was up. A couple of his bears and I were tasked with following a few mammals. The bears left me in the car to scope out the area. I wasn’t given much in the way of details, but when the two bears stole a metal case from a lion in the middle of the Marshlands and jumped into the car yelling at me to drive, I drove.”

“One more and then I’ll drop it for good.” Judy wasn't sure how much more she wanted to hear, but it was an important part of Nick’s past, and though she could see how uncomfortable he was with sharing it, she was grateful that he was continuing to open up to her.

His mate was persistent, and Nick was learning when to pick his battles. Giving her one more story wouldn’t hurt. “Funnily enough, just because I’m a fox, everyone thinks I’m good at stealing things. The mob families are all civil to one another, they have a ‘please pass the salt’ kind of deal, but they all have their secrets. The Roo family, in Outback Island, apparently had dossiers of information on all the other families and were going to hand them over to the ZBI in exchange for the Don not going to prison. Mr. Big wanted the files. I went to get them.” Nick had Judy’s full attention, the doe’s eyes wide, large ears perked up and facing him, lips parted and her eyebrows raised.

“It was late at night, the family was out at the opera, and I managed to slip into the house. It wasn't an easy task given the countless armed kangaroo’s roaming the hallways. Have you ever been kanga-kicked?” He asked as Judy shook her head. “It hurts like hell. Anyway, I found the Don’s office and the safe hidden behind a painting on the wall.” Nick rolled his eyes, the predictability of it still amusing to him even after all these years. “It took me fifteen minutes to get it open. The Don was business savvy and ruthless, but he was awful at remembering passwords and combinations, so he used the same slack pawful for everything.” Raymond had passed him a file of possible passwords before he’d entered the house and Nick had worked his way through them. Naturally, the penultimate one had been the right one. “I grabbed the dossiers, locked the safe back up, put the painting on the wall, and went out the window.”

Jaw slack; Judy couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She’d known Nick had a shady past, had been involved in bad things, but she’d never envisioned him sneaking into mammal’s homes and robbing them. “You told Chief Bogo all of this?” The doe gasped. Had her boss really let Nick get away with robbing someone, even if that someone had been a mobster?

“But I look like I have a death wish? No. I told him about the errand jobs, figured they were more in line with the work of a businessmammal.” Nick filled her in, knowing they would have to keep their stories straight in case the issue ever arose again and they were questioned. Nick didn’t see it coming to that, particularly since Bogo had destroyed the one scrap of evidence tying them to Catstro and Marcus, but it paid to be cautious and prepared. Starting to smooth his paw down Judy’s ear again, he watched as she began chewing on her lower lip. Gently he pried her lip from her teeth, brushing the pad of one of his fingers over the soft skin. “What’s bothering you?”

Looking into her mate’s eyes, Judy’s thoughts wandered. They’d dodged a bullet this morning, but there was still trouble potentially looming on the horizon. “On the topic of businessmammal’s, I’m worried about Catstro’s gang coming after us, or leaking info to Bogo about my involvement in Catstro’s death if they’re questioned.” It was a genuine possibility. Criminals would do anything to lighten their sentence or get out of it entirely, and what better information to have at their disposal than that of a cop who sat back and watched a mammal die and who had connections to the mob. With her paws free from Nick’s, Judy began to play with the fuzzy cream fur on his chest.
“Hey.” Nick wrapped his arms around her, scooting them down so they could lie on the couch a little more, his head propped up by a pillow on the armrest. “There’s nothing we can do. We can’t risk getting involved anymore.” Brushing his fingers gently along Judy’s button nose he tried to reassure her that everything would be okay. “We keep our heads down and our noses clean, and as long as you stay away from the case, they probably won’t even try it.” Nick wasn’t entirely sure he believed his own spiel, but it didn’t hurt to hope.

Heartbeat thudding, Judy’s nose twitched as she swallowed “But if they do?” Her voice came out as a whisper.

“Well you call me. I’ll get the next train home, and we’ll face Bogo together.” There was no alternative in Nick’s mind. Judy liked to constantly remind him that they were a team, so if his bunny needed him then he’d drop everything and come back to her, help her however he could, take the brunt of the blame if it meant protecting her and keeping her safe.

“What did you tell him about Catstro and Marcus?” Judy needed to have her story straight, and she trusted Nick to have stuck as close to the truth as possible, without incriminating them too much.

“I covered our tracks. Told Buffalo Butt just enough that he’ll leave us alone and won’t think you were involved in Catstro’s death, or anything to do with his gang other than dropping off the cash for me.” Nick knew that what had gone down was morally skewed, that it threw his integrity into question, but he hadn’t been about to shove Judy under the bus. She was his mate, the mammal he loved. Judy had gone out of her way to save him from Catstro, to save his mom, and though the way she’d gone about it hadn’t been the best considering the situation they were now in, Nick would be eternally grateful for her kindness.

Going into further detail, Nick outlined his whole conversation with Bogo, ensuring Judy was well informed about everything involving her. He touched upon her flashbacks and mulled over the thought that the cape buffalo might not assign her Tundratown work for a while. “As punishment for the things I did tell him about us, I lost my first months pay, and I’m stuck on probation for the first two months, while you’re on desk and parking duty for the next two weeks,” Nick concluded.

Features falling as Nick informed her of their punishments, Judy sighed, warm breath escaping her roughly parted lips, ruffling the cream fur on Nick’s chest. Disappointment crept through her at the realization that Nick wouldn’t be earning and that they wouldn’t be able to take on any cases until his probation was over. The money wasn’t a problem given her savings and Nick’s deposit box, but work would drag if they were forced to walk the beat for two months. Though Nick was yet to start working as an officer, while at the ZPA he was still considered an employee and was under contract, and thus docking his future pay was deemed acceptable. It was a rare occurrence, but not out of the realms of possibility. At least they hadn’t lost their jobs.

Jobs. Judy groaned. Wolford would be displaced for the next two weeks. Either he would have to be confined to desk or parking duty with her, or he would be assigned another partner. She’d have to speak to him tomorrow and apologize for what was going on, make sure whatever option Wolford picked was best for him and his career. “What aren’t you telling me?” A feeling of unease settled in Judy’s gut and she felt like was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Knowing it was futile to deflect the question, and that lying would upset his bunny, Nick settled for the truth. “I have a black mark on my record.”

“What!” Judy scrambled to sit up, blood going cold at the information. Other than being fired, a black mark was the worst thing that could happen to an officer when being disciplined. “Nick, no!” She protested, small weight settling across his waist, paws covering her mouth. Wide violet eyes found calm emerald ones, and Judy couldn’t understand why Nick wasn’t as bothered as she was.
As Nick sat up, Judy slipped into his lap. The tod had known he would be punished, and he’d accepted the discipline Bogo had handed down. “It’s fine, Fluff. It’s only fo-”

“It’s not fine, Nick! That’s a permanent mark on your record. It’ll stop you from progressing, and you’ve worked so hard!” Judy protested, paws falling from her mouth. She’d have to speak to Chief Bogo tomorrow, try and get him to reconsider the mark on Nick’s record. The tod wouldn’t be able to climb the ranks and earn a promotion as long as it stayed on his record.

Unphased, Nick shrugged. “What’s one more black mark against my name, Carrots? This has always been your dream, and I won't let anything ruin it for you.” He reached out, fingers brushing across Judy’s cheek, claw trailing over her skin. Though still a little sharp, Nick had kept them filed down since receiving his first care package from Bonnie.

Judy didn’t want Nick to take the brunt of the punishment, didn’t want him to throw away his dream too. She was just as much to blame. She’d led Catstro to Mr. Big and had started off this whole chain of events.

“In the grand scheme of things, it's my fault you ended up in this mess. I was an idiot as a teenager and its come back to haunt me. I’m just sorry I got you tangled up in my mess.” Nick whispered, mouth curving down as his eyebrows pulled together. Dampness met his fingertips as they swept over Judy’s cheeks, the slightly salty tang of her silent tears mingling with the air.

“Please don’t cry, sweetheart.” Nick gently tried to wipe away her tears. It broke his heart seeing her so upset, seeing the tears rolling down her cheeks and dampening her fur. “I started all of this when I was a kit. Just promise me you’ll stay away from the case. If you do that, it should be fine.” He soothed the upset doe. Judy’s nod of agreement as she sniffled brought a small smile to Nick’s face. “The marks not a huge thing. It’s only temporary. Buffalo Butt says he’ll remove it when my probation is up as long as I’ve been good, which I'm more than capable of being with you by my side. I’d take hundreds of black marks though if it meant keeping you and your dream safe.” He leaned down ready to press a kiss to her forehead. However, Judy had other plans.

By moving her head at the last second, Nick’s lips met hers. A fleeting noise of surprise left the tod as his eyes fell shut, not at all complaining about the change of plan. Comforted by her mate’s kiss, Judy’s eyes slid closed too, her whole body relaxing as her sniffles stopped. The swell of love Judy felt for Nick had prompted her to move, driven her to kiss him and thank him for saving her tail. The relief at knowing his mark was only temporary soothed her soul.

Bringing his arm around his bunny, Nick hauled Judy closer. The scent of her tears still clung to her fur and hung in the air, but the taste of her overpowered anything his other senses were picking up. He’d never get tired of kissing her; never get tired of feeling her pressed against him. Her small paws reached for his shoulders, and her touch burned a trail across his fur. He was helpless, simply along for the ride. Heart thudding, Nick’s grasp on her tightened, eliciting a quiet whimper from his bunny, which he took greedily, savoring the noise.

Mind racing even as her body relaxed, Judy couldn’t help but be overwhelmed by the thought of Nick taking most of the blame to protect her, of him twisting the truth to cover their tails and save their jobs. Having a mark on his record, even though it was only temporary, wasn’t what Judy had wanted to hear. Being a cop may have been her dream, but she knew it was Nick’s too. He wouldn’t be at the academy putting himself through hell if it weren’t.

Judy felt the burning need to show her mate just how much she appreciated everything he’d done for her. The feelings of love and joy, gratefulness and adoration that consumed her when she thought of him drove her to cast aside all thoughts of keeping their kiss chaste. She wanted to love her fox.
Passion building, Judy started to lean back, tugging the tod with her. Nick followed, their descent disorderly until eventually, Judy found herself pinned under him. A massive, clawed paw landed on the armrest next to her head, while the other found its way to her cheek, cradling and caressing her as Nick took charge.

Nick tilted his rabbit’s head for better access, bold tongue licking at the seam of Judy’s soft lips, desperate to taste more of her. The feel of small prey trapped beneath him sent a primal thrill shuddering through his body. With her lips parting, Nick seized his opportunity to deepen their kiss.

Judy should’ve been scared, should’ve been fearful of having a predator pin her in place, but she felt nothing other than all encompassing love for the tod above her. It burned through her veins and sang in her heart, drove her to try and physically convey how much she trusted and loved her fox. Ruffled reddish-orange fur felt coarse under her paws, but the doe continued to tug her mate closer, trying to suffocate the space between them, as if she could make them one. Splaying her legs to create a valley she encouraged Nick to settle against her, but the tod resisted, keeping most of his weight off her. Unappeased, Judy reached around him, brazen paws grasping his lower back. With Nick distracted by their kiss, tongues sweeping together, soft and needy, Judy gave a quick tug, pulling Nick flush. The added contact had Judy’s lips temporarily parting from Nick’s, a breathy moan leaving the doe while the fox gave a grunt of surprise.

Trying to remain respectful but succumb to his mate’s demands at the same time, Nick’s paw slipped from Judy’s cheek, skimming over the planes of her supple body, cataloging every curve and dip, until it settled on her waist. The arm supporting him faltered, trembling as he tried to hold up his weight. Moving, he settled onto his forearm and into the valley between his mate’s legs, tentatively testing the waters as to how much of his weight Judy could take as he reignited their kiss. His bunny was intoxicating, a drug the tod never thought he’d taste, an opiate he had no wish to kick. Like any addict, he wanted more.

Their separation had made the doe needy. Whimpering as Nick reclaimed her lips, the musky scent of her mate pushed away her earlier fears and washed away her doubts and concerns. They could face anything so long as they were together.

Paws finding the cream fur on Nick’s chest, Judy loved the feel of strong muscle beneath her fingers. He was much sturdier now, had filled out more, and Judy took a strange pleasure in the idea of him being able to overpower her. Nick’s heartbeat thumped against her palm, quickened by his excitement and breathlessness from their kiss. Judy could hear her own heartbeat ringing in her ears, though she focused in on her fox, devoted all of her attention to him.

Cupping Nick's muzzle, Judy arched her back, pressing their chests together. Soft feminine flesh met solid masculine muscle, and she felt dizzy, lightheaded, and love drunk. It was a constant battle to remind herself to breathe through her nose, lest she pass out. Though distracted by the thorough kiss she was receiving from her mate, lips brushing together, sliding and parting, tongues meeting and exploring, Judy was still able to find Nick’s giant paw on her waist, still able to gently guide it to the hem of her shirt.

Catching on, Nick helped his love remove the pink garment; breaking their kiss only for the few fleeting seconds it took for the material to come off. Crashing back together, Nick grasped at Judy’s exposed body, her pleasured moan spurring him on. In the back of his mind, he felt the rational part of his brain trying to intrude. Did he want this to be more than only making out on their couch? Yes, yes he did. Did he want to rush this while they were high on their relief of getting out of an awkward situation relatively unscathed? Not really, though Judy’s insistent paws
continued to pull and tug and Nick couldn’t say no, couldn't imagine a scenario where he'd ever say no. Fur on fur, Nick explored the curvatures of her body; trailing sharp claws over delicate skin to drag small moans and mewls from his mate.

Judy broke their kiss several times as ripples of pleasure raced through her. Her brain wouldn’t focus, wouldn’t concentrate on anything other than the feeling’s Nick was evoking in her with the simplest of touches. Judy was breathtakingly aware of how gentle Nick was being, how his talented paw roamed freely over her semi-naked form, coaxing more sounds from her and crumbling her control.

Feeling the tension rising inside, Nick was caught off guard by a sudden tingling sensation, a throbbing he’d never experienced before. His lust-addled mind helpfully supplied the answer, making the tod growl against his loves lips, hips juddering at the realization. “Knot. First time with a knot. Son of a...” The feeling of his knot starting to swell was further confirmation that Judy was destined to be his mate. After all, knotting for his species wasn’t possible until a tod fell in love and found their soul mate. The deep primitive tug in his gut at the thought of one day getting to knot Judy, of getting to claim her and bond with her, pulled the start of a low growl from the tod, paw tightening on Judy’s waist, his possessiveness over the bunny hard to control.

Eager for more, his grip loosened, fingers climbing their way up until the fox finally found the soft cotton fabric of Judy’s bra. He paused, unsure as to his next move. Judy wasn’t some floozy, wasn’t some one night stand, and Nick wanted to do right by her, take things slow and gentle. As much as he wanted to get her naked, he didn’t want to push this. What had started out meaning to be a chaste kiss had already evolved into more than he’d anticipated, and though he wanted to claim her and ravish her, today wasn’t the day for it. She was tempting and driving him crazy with her breathy sighs and moans, her body quivering beneath him.

“Please.” Judy whispered against Nick's lips, pulling back just enough to beg, to bring her paws to his shoulder and dig her blunt claws into his skin. She was desperate, maddened by her desire. “More.” The demand came as a surprise to both mammals, the aching tension between them building. Judy had thought as a surprise to both mammals, the aching tension between them building. Judy had thought the suppressants would kill her sex drive entirely. Instead, it had only succeeded in suppressing it until Nick had pinned her in place. A distant, rational part of Judy’s brain pointed out how much of an inconvenience that was; that she’d have to speak to her doctor about it, but it was silenced by her rising lust. Never had another mammal made her this needy before, never had she wanted another animal so much. Something about Nick called out to her, sang to her very soul, encouraged her to love him with her entire being. She would blush furiously later at her wanton ways, but her mind was currently focused on her impending release.

The demand did wicked and wonderful things to Nick, and if he hadn’t have been fully on-board with the plan before, he certainly would've been now. Powerless, he gave in, all thoughts of going slow fleeing as he kissed her, stopping all rational thought. Lust barreling, his hips flexed, and Nick ground down against his mate’s clothed core, urged on by Judy as she grabbed his butt, pulling and pushing, desperately matching his rhythm. The friction was bliss, the soft cotton of his sweatpants an unfortunate barrier as he wished he could feel the heat of his bunny’s core. Never had the tod hated clothing more.

The promise of sweet release was not too far away, and Nick’s need defied reason. He chased it, bearing down, rolling his hips. The doe beneath him was his world, the love she gave him more than he’d ever wished for, and the encouragement she offered more than he’d ever anticipated. Life had been monotonous before she’d stepped hind paw into Jumbeaux’s Café, the need to make money and protect his mom the only thing keeping him going. Now that need was no longer there, the tod was free to live however he chose. Life with his gray country bunny looked like a bright prospect.
With Nick pressed against her, their hips moving in a steady rhythm that was slowly building, Judy felt like a teenager all over again. Rapid shallow breaths revealed her burning, reckless lust, which was unlike anything she’d ever felt before. It wasn’t just lust that drove her, but deep admiration and fondness for her fox too. She hadn’t meant for their kiss to turn into this, but the doe was beyond caring, especially as every roll of Nick’s hips meant she felt the unmistakable length of his foxhood pressing against her core.

Nick was everything to Judy, as cliché as the doe realized it sounded. He’d turned her world upside down, had shown her that life wasn’t always sunshine and roses, and even though she’d done the unthinkable and hurt him, he’d forgiven her and loved her. He’d stood up to Chief Bogo for her, protected her from the ram guards in the museum, taken the brunt of the blame for the Catstro mess. Judy owed her fox the world.

Paw moving to slide around Judy, who arched her back to grant Nick access, the tod unhooked her bra, pulling the garment off his mate before throwing it to the side, uncaring as to where it landed. Free to explore Judy’s exposed chest, Nick wasted no time. Possessiveness coursed through the tod’s body, the need to shield Judy from harm, take the brunt of every blow for her, defend her, and to make her his in every sense of the word. He wanted to leave her covered in his scent and mark so that every mammal she encountered would know that she was his. The globes under his paw were small and soft, flesh yielding to his touch. Prying his lips from his loves, the tod ducked down, mouth grazing peaked nubs, leaving gentle kisses in its wake.

The intimate gesture had Judy throwing her head back in pleasure, eyes slid shut in ecstasy, as she let out a high-pitched, melodious noise. The coil of desire that had been slowly building inside of her suddenly grew taut. She was right on edge, completely at Nick’s mercy, his expert paws and mouth playing her like a violin.

Something in Nick snapped at the sound of his mate’s pleasure.

Judy’s exposed throat called to the tod. Remembering how much his love had enjoyed his previous bite, he tipped his muzzle up, abandoning his exploration of his mate’s chest in favor of clamping his jaws lightly around her throat. The press of his sharp canines wasn’t strong enough to break the skin but just enough to remind the small rabbit that she was helpless and at his mercy.

Nick’s canines around Judy’s throat finally pushed her over the edge. The pressure that had been building inside of her at the press and pull of their bodies suddenly gave, and the coil of desire that had been slowly tightening until it was taut finally snapped.

Judy’s release crashed over her, body tensing, hips stuttering as her fingers scrabbled for purchase, head still thrown back as she cried out. The undulating motion of Nick’s hips helped her ride the waves of her release, her body trembling with aftershocks, hips trying to re-establish a rhythm as she sought friction to prolong her pleasure. Nick’s jaws had since left her throat, the tod’s muzzle against her shoulder, nose pressed to her neck as he huffed, his warm breath doing nothing to help the heat rushing through Judy’s body. Feeling his mate coming undone beneath, feeling the way her whole body shook, served only to heighten Nick’s pleasure and draw him ever closer to his release.

As her aftershocks subsided, Judy faintly realized that Nick was yet to catch up, the tod still desperately chasing after his release. Bringing a paw between them, curious fingers wrapped around hardened length through soft fabric. Judy almost swallowed her tongue. She should’ve known he’d be packing more than any of the bucks Judy had fooled around with. The surprised yip and groan that left her mate as she touched him emboldened her. Fingers sliding down, Judy found Nick’s knot, and the feel of the swollen flesh in her paw sent a thrill of excitement racing through
her.

With Judy’s paw now on him, Nick’s motions picked up, thrusting frantically as he whined. Knot throbbing, pressure building, the tod teetered on the brink. He was so close, desperate for his release, but he needed a little more. As if sensing her fox’s need, Judy’s applied a light amount of pressure to her mate’s knot, which was all it took for Nick to tip over the edge.

Loud yip escaping him, the short and sharp noise turned to a groan as Nick’s body racked with shudders, hips rocking as he worked through his release, the throbbing in his knot and the pressure behind the dam making way for nothing but pure pleasure and relief. Judy’s paw on him, even through his pants, had been wholly unexpected yet entirely welcome, and the tod hoped that next time she’d be even more pawsy.

Still in the throws of his release, Nick’s nostrils flared as he panted, desperately trying to cool down while seeking out Judy’s sweet scent, needing to smell his mate’s arousal, to know he’d sated her need. The smell was only faint, and it concerned him. Judy had been into it, had been enthusiastically vocal, and yet the delicious scent was hard to find.

Voice wrecked, it took a moment for Nick to speak, and he had to clear his throat before doing so. “I love you.” He whispered, wanting to remind her about how much she meant to him. Leaning down, he pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, lips lingering longer than necessary.

Judy’s eyes closed at the soft press of her mate’s lips to her forehead. “I love you too.” Judy breathed, surprised by her ability to formulate words. Her body felt like jelly, all of her earlier tension drained away thanks to her unplanned release. Still feeling the rolling of Nick’s hips, and aware that canine releases lasted longer, Judy stroked Nick’s back, soothing him through it. She could feel the growing dampness between them, Nick’s sweatpants ruined. The admission of her love was easy and natural, and this time, when Judy moved to capture Nick’s lips in another kiss, it was soft and gentle; sweet pecks and light caresses conveying the doe’s appreciation for all her fox had done for her. Slowly, the stuttering rhythm of Nick’s hips came to a halt, his tail thumping against the sofa.

Pulling back from their kiss, Nick’s nostrils flared. “Your sweet scent isn’t as strong.” The fox craved the smell, wanted nothing more than to drown in it. It called to him, drove him crazy. Never in his life had Nick thought he’d find the scent of a bunny’s arousal appealing, but the world had been full of surprises since Judy had barged into his life.

“Sweet scent?” Judy questioned, paws stilling on Nick’s back. She couldn’t remember ever emitting a sweet smell unless she was wearing perfume, which didn’t happen very often.

“Mhm.” Nick hummed, lifting his weight, pulling back enough to look down at Judy. Their snouts were dangerously close, and Nick had to resist the urge to kiss her again. His lips felt a little abused, tender and swollen from their passionate kisses. “When something really gets you going, you let off the most incredible sweet scent.”

Mortified was the only way to convey how Judy felt. Instinctively she grabbed at her large ears, pulling them over her face to hide behind them. Cheeks burning, a low groan of embarrassment slipped past her lips. Why had no one told her about the smell before? Nick’s chest vibrated against her, the telltale sign of his chuckle.

“Suppressants,” Judy muttered, letting Nick slowly pry her paws and ears away from her face. She could feel the warmth inside her ears, knew her face was probably flushed too. There was no doubt that Judy had been into their little tryst, enjoying Nick’s touch and the excitement of being pinned beneath him, but the suppressants were seemingly having a strange effect on her body.
Nick grinned at his bunny, finding her embarrassment charming and endearing. Reaching for her waist with one paw, the other supporting his weight, he stroked the fluffy gray fur he found there, soothing his love. “I know, I spotted them in the kitchen. I didn't think they'd affect your scent. Why are you taking them?” The tod kept his tone light and non-accusatory. He was genuinely curious as to why Judy felt the need to mess with her body.

“So I don't jump you the moment you come home,” Judy mumbled, paws finding Nick’s arms, fingers grasping at him. The fact she couldn’t encircle his arms with her paws was another reminder of their size difference.

“Well, I don’t think they work.” Nick deadpanned.

Letting go of Nick’s arms, Judy thumped her mate’s chest, trying desperately to hide her smile. “I’m blaming you. You tempted me.”

Nick’s lips quirked upwards into an amused smile as he arched an eyebrow. “I tempted you? I’m sorry, who instigated this?” Nick teased, eyes filled with mirth and affection as he stroked Judy’s side, still in awe at how much she’d wanted it. It had been more than he’d expected when they’d sat down on the couch together, and it hadn’t even crossed his mind when he’d thought about coming home. It was somewhat out of character for the fox. He was used to taking a vixen straight to bed, getting to the main event without so much as thinking twice. Judy, though, was nothing like the rest of them. The rabbit held Nick’s heart very firmly in her paws, and he would be damned if he treated her like a one night stand. She was worth more than that, deserved more than that, and Nick would let her set the pace. He’d probably end up going through several pairs of pants in the meantime. He was more than a little embarrassed now about the mess he could feel sticking to him.

Judy took stock of their current position. She was half naked and pinned under another mammal, the scent of arousal heavy in the air, choking them with its headiness. Intimacy was common amongst rabbits, sex a topic many families were comfortable with, and Judy certainly wasn't a prude, but her recent actions were a little out there for her considering her lack of experience. Sure she'd helped a few bucks get off, mouth and paw well versed in the art now, but they'd never taken care of her needs in return, never held her afterward or looked at her the way Nick currently was. It was why she'd felt comfortable letting herself go. Old insecurities were what made her feel vulnerable, but something about the way Nick caressed her, the way he looked at her with such open fondness, was enough to make her feel a little more confident.

“Feel free to jump me whenever you want. Next time, though, we’re losing the pants.” Nick whispered, breaking Judy from her thought as he grinned, revealing just a hint of sharp canines. The reminder of her mate's predatory nature sent a thrill through Judy’s body, the promise of next time further exciting her. “Steady on, Slick. I'm going to need to be on Bun-provera before you take your pants off.” She teased.

Judy’s habit of doing her homework was starting to rub off on the tod. In one of his recent letters to Bonnie he’d asked for more info on rabbit culture, customs, and life. A pamphlet had appeared in his next care package that had outlined rabbit family planning. Nick had almost had a heart attack wondering if Bonnie knew about him and Judy, but when he'd called her for a chat a few days later, and to spend some screen time with his favorite baby bunny, Bonnie had seemed none the wiser. Nick had read the little pamphlet cover to cover several times, memorizing its contents. Now, he was grateful for it. “Bun-provera. Rabbit birth control jab. Administered once a month.” Though Nick wanted kits one day, and the thought of Judy carrying his offspring not only pushed all the rights buttons for him but also stirred up his possessiveness, he knew it was a discussion for
another time. They'd already had too many heavy topics for today. “If it’ll offer some protection and it’s what you want, then go for it.” He left the decision up to Judy. It was her body, after all.

“I’ll go and speak to my doctor. It would probably be useful to be on it before winter comes along.” Judy mused. She'd read up about the fox mating season, and butterflies were flitting around in her stomach at the idea of getting first-hand experience of it.

“Winter.” The mating season had never been much of an issue for the tod. He’d had to deal with a fluffier coat and an overwhelming urge to find a mate, but he’d lived a pretty solitary life and had purposefully stayed away from vixens in season. “I’ve never indulged during the winter.” Nick’s mind wandered, thoughts momentarily turning to what it would feel like to love Judy when his senses and instincts were much sharper. “The vixens can get a little crazy then. They’re more gravid in season too, and I’m not shooting blanks.”

Judy snickered at her fox’s phrase, though she found a strange sense of joy in knowing that Nick hadn't been sleeping around in the season. Feeling a little more confident, she scratched lightly at the cream fur on Nick’s throat, enjoying the low purr that started to come from him, along with the thumping of his tail against the couch cushions. “Guess I’m going to be scratching the itch for you now?” It didn’t bother the doe, and she’d happily do whatever it took to make mating season as comfortable as possible for her fox.

Though Judy’s attention felt incredible, and the little sparks of pleasure tingling down his spine were distracting, Nick was still tuned into their conversation. Giving a slow shake of his head, he pulled his purring under control, though his tail continued to wag. Judy’s offer was tempting, but Nick wouldn’t let their first time together happen during the throes of mating season. “No rush, Carrots. I’ve gone my whole life dealing with it.”

“You could let me deal with it?” Judy offered, encouraged by Nick’s openness and the way his body responded to her attention. Knowing she could pull such a reaction from her fox was intoxicating.

“Why officer are you trying to tempt me again?” The tod couldn't help but tease, lips pulling into a grin at his mate’s suggestion. Emotions, senses, and instincts were much sharper and more overpowering during the winter, and in the back of Nick’s mind, he worried that it would be too much for her, that it would be too intense. On the other paw, he wondered how much more incredible the experience would be.

Gasping in mock outrage, Judy lowered her eyebrows to mimic a frown, as if scandalized by the suggestion. “I would never do such a thing.” She slowed her scritches until her paw came to a stop. “You’re a terrible liar.” Nick shook his head, his grin softening to a gentle smile as he gave Judy’s side a light squeeze. It still stunned him just how much of her small body his massive paw engulfed.

“You love me.” Judy’s paws found her fox’s muzzle so she could smooth down his ruffled fur before pressing a sweet kiss to his nose.

“I do.” Nick nodded, nose crinkling in surprise at the kiss. Shifting, he winced, a groan of disgust slipping past his lips. “Urgh. I need to change.” He complained. The look of amusement that crossed Judy’s face had the tod letting go of her side, lifting his paw to point a finger accusingly at his mate. “This is your fault.”

“Guilty as charged.” Judy couldn't wait for the day she could tack ‘officer’ onto the end of that phrase. There were only a few months left of training and graduation was just around the corner.
Nick would have to get through the exams first though, which was scheduled for the start of January.

The loud grumbling of Judy’s stomach broke the fox and rabbit from their teasing, Judy’s eyes widening at the noise. “Some bunny’s hungry.” Nick couldn’t resist the joke, and it was well worth the thump to his chest he received from his scowling mate. “I’ll take care of my mess, you eat something,” Nick instructed, slowly sitting up, bringing Judy with him.

“In case you forgot, I’m a mess too.” Judy’s nose wrinkled.

A lecherous smile crossed Nick’s lips, and he gave a quick wiggle of his eyebrows before he stood, tugging at his pants as he started to cross the living room towards his bedroom. “I’ll bring you some clean panties.” He threw over his shoulder.

“Find my bra while you’re at it!” Judy shouted after her fox, shaking her head fondly as she rolled onto her front, pulling a pillow close to rest upon. Satisfied, and feeling a little more confident now should anything similar happen again, Judy smiled.

“I hate Tundratown training.” Randon grouched as he shivered under the cold water of the showers in the male changing rooms, praying it would heat up soon. His tail curled around him, trying to provide him with some more warmth.

Turning the dial up on the shower, Tony thumped the pipe on the wall as if it would help heat the water quicker. “You and me both.” The tiger grumbled, tail swishing in agitation.

“You hate Tundratown training? I was the one who nearly drowned!” Horton protested, breathing a sigh of relief as the water started to warm up, though the flow rate left much to be desired.

“That’s because you’re an elephant. See, if you were a fox, you wouldn’t have that problem.” Nick grinned, reaching for the soap. They’d spent the morning outside tackling the Tundratown setup. In their efforts to better their times up and over the ice wall, Horton had cracked the frozen monolith in half, which had sent all four of them plunging into the freezing water at its base. Nick’s small size had enabled him to scramble out of the way of the icy sheet that had toppled down over them. Randon and Tony had been quick out of the water too, while Horton’s immense size had led to him being trapped under the water for thirty seconds until Major Friedkin and the other cadets had removed the chunk of ice covering him. He’d been momentarily forced under the waves, trunk wafting in the breeze as he’d used it as a snorkel.

Lifting a hind hoof, Horton made a stomping motion towards his smaller, furry friend. “Watch it Wilde, or I might accidentally step on you.” He muttered, glaring at the mammal to his left.

“I’d be nicer to me if I were you, Horton, I know a mouse.” Nick threatened back light-heartedly, knowing the elephant had an irrational fear of mice. While Fru Fru was a shrew and not a mouse, Horton didn’t need to know the finer details. Giving himself a quick wash, Nick stood under the lukewarm water, letting it slosh over him and warm him. He hated ice water, wasn’t particularly fond of the cold, and in the back of his mind, he wondered whether his plan to help Judy overcome her fear would work.

Judy.

Nick’s mind wandered back to his day in the city last week, brain ignoring his meeting with Bogo to focus on the more enjoyable aspect. He could still hear the sounds of Judy’s moans and gasps,
swore he could faintly feel the curvature of her body beneath his paws, imprinted for the rest of time. After he’d cleaned up and returned with a fresh pair of panties for his doe, and had collected her bra and shirt from the floor, they’d curled up together on the couch again. The day had passed with them watching Netflix and napping, stealing kisses and letting paws wander. When it had been time for Nick to leave, they’d reluctantly pulled apart, quietly leaving their home to head to the station.

Words of love and sweet kisses had been exchanged on the platform, and when Nick had boarded the train, it had been agony to leave Judy in the city. He’d had to remind himself that it wouldn’t be long now until graduation, that he was doing well and was on course to graduate top of his class, something the tod had never thought would happen. Judy was safe now too, no risk of Buffalo Butt coming after her for Catstro or Marcus. Nick had sent up a silent prayer that this would signal the end of Catstro barging into his life.

“Class for this afternoon, gentlemammals?” Tony’s question broke Nick from his thoughts. The tiger washed away the soapsuds adorning his fur, looking between his fellow cadets. The bengal hadn’t bothered learning his academic timetable, relying instead on his friends for the information. Horton was always willing to share with him, and his strong memory proved useful.

“Crime scene preservation and investigation,” Randon answered, surprising his friends. It was the one element of the academy training the wolf was looking forward to the most, having religiously watched CSI programs on the TV as a kit.

Nick pulled a face, reaching for the shower dial and reluctantly turning the water off. Crossing to the benches opposite he grabbed a towel, wrapping it around his waist. “Have fun with that, and please take some notes as I’m going to need to borrow them.”

“Oh yes, Wilde is being punished for his insubordination last week! Tell us, what fun-filled activities has Major Friedkin got you doing?” Tony teased, finishing up and turning his own shower off before he too grabbed a towel, wrapping it around him. Randon and Horton sniggered, the timber wolf remaining under the warm water a little while longer to bring his body temperature back up, while the elephant needed much longer to wash.

Eyes narrowing at the tiger, Nick soon plastered on a smirk. “Advanced paw-to-paw combat.” When Friedkin had dished out his punishment the tod hadn’t been best pleased, but when he’d relayed the information to Judy, the doe had sounded impressed. If it impressed his mate, then Nick was willing to give it a go.

Nick’s response wiped the amused smiles off of his friend’s faces. “Are you kidding me? We have to learn how to process a crime scene, and you get to throw someone around on a mat?” Tony asked incredulously, wondering what he could do to earn himself some advanced paw-to-paw classes. It didn’t sound like Nick was being punished at all.

“Yup, Major’s even brought in someone to teach me.” Nick gave himself a quick dry with the towel, casting it aside to brush out his fur, smoothing it down.

“I hate you right now.” Horton huffed, trunk flailing with the force of his exhale, a loud trumpeting noise escaping him. The sound sent the other three mammals in the room into a fit of laughter.

Pulling his laughter under control, Nick dragged on his ZPA issue clothes, appreciating that Major Friedkin had handed them all clean, dry sets before their showers. “I’ll be sure to tell you all about it at dinner, don’t worry.”

“Knowing you’re getting to do something cool really isn’t encouraging me to write you decent
notes.” Randon’s handwriting was the most legible of them all, and he and Nick often exchanged notes in the evening, ensuring they both had everything covered. Horton and Randon turned off their showers, making their way over to the benches to join Nick and Tony.

Tony snorted. “C’mon, it’s not as if Wilde needs good notes anyway. He’s fucking the bunny, and we all know she was valedictorian last year. She probably has all her notes crammed under her bed or something.” The tiger teased. Since Nick’s confession to them about his feelings towards the small gray bunny, Tony had tried to tone down his teasing, but that didn’t stop the bengal from making the odd jibe every now and then, especially since Nick had returned from his weekend trip to Bunnyburrow positively reeking of the rabbit cop.

“Have you ever stopped to consider how crass you are?” Horton questioned, casting aside one soaking wet towel to find a dry one, needing more than a hoofful of them to thoroughly dry his massive frame.

Tony mulled over his friend’s question for a moment before he shook his head. “Nope.”

Sighing, Nick rolled his eyes. He was used to his friends tormenting him and poking fun at his relationship with Judy. The tod knew it was all good-natured. “The bunny’s name is Judy, and the three of you know I’m not ‘fucking’ her.” The curse felt heavy on Nick’s tongue. He tried not to use bad language, didn’t want to fall into the habit in case he one day cussed in front of his mom. She’d wash his mouth out with soap.

“You’re right, sorry. Would ‘making sweet love’ work better?” Tony couldn’t resist teasing, grinning at his canine companion as he made a lewd rolling gesture with his hips. When it came to Nick and Judy, Tony had a whole host of jokes and jibes at the ready. His favorite so far had been asking what species their kits would be. The murderous look on Nick’s face when he’d suggested they could be called Funnies or Boxes had been well worth the pain he’d experienced shortly afterward when the angry fox had thrown his standard-issue boots at him, hitting him square in the face.

Reaching out to smack Tony around the back of the head, Randon gave the bengal a disapproving glare. “You’re an animal.”

“Ow!” The tiger rubbed the back of his head, hips stilling, huffing at his wolf friend “You’re not the first to say that, and you won’t be the last.” He pointed out. Tony knew he had many flaws in his personality, and he was actively trying to better himself, starting with ending things with his mistress and begging his wife for forgiveness. Hearing about Nick and his pursuit of Judy had inspired the tiger to get his act together, to do right by the lady who’d committed herself to him for life. His wife was a beautiful mammal, with a heart of gold, and the bengal only hoped she would forgive him for the way he had so cruelly treated her. He knew he didn’t deserve forgiveness, but he hoped for it.

“On that note, I bid you adieu.” Nick excused himself, shaking his head fondly at the antics of his fellow cadets. It felt strange to the tod to think of them as his friends. Twenty years on the streets being consistently screwed over meant Nick hardly relied on anyone and had more acquaintances than actual friends. Finding himself with a growing social circle that now also included Gideon Grey, who’d kindly sent him some more baked goods and several letters after Judy had mentioned Horton snaffling the last of his supplies, was a strange yet oddly satisfying feeling for the tod.

“Have fun!” Horton called out as Nick dumped his wet clothes and towels into the changing rooms large laundry basket.

“Try not to smack into anything again!” Randon yelled as Nick reached the door. The reminder of
the time the tod had hit a branch while trying to show off on a run lead to the timber wolf, tiger, and elephant breaking out into boisterous laughter, which was only amplified once Horton started trumpeting.

“Idiots. I’m surrounded by idiots.” Nick muttered fondly as he left the changing room, taking off through the hallways of the ZPA towards one of the main training rooms. Major Friedkin had given him instructions during their morning run to meet his new teacher inside Training Room 3 for the afternoon session.

Pushing one of the double-doors open, Nick slipped into the room. The floor of the large open space was covered in heavy-duty mats, but the tod’s focus was drawn to the mammal stood in the middle of them. Nick couldn’t help his short bark of laughter, the corners of his lips quirking up into a grin. “Well, I’ll be damned. I wasn’t expecting you.’

“Plan A was called home, something about his wife needing him. So you’re stuck with me, Plan B, for a week’s intensive training.” The mammal in the middle of the mats shot a smirk at the fox, thinking of all the ways they could make this week hell for Nick and ensure he would be equipped with the proper skills for paw-to-paw combat.

Crossing the room to join the other mammal in the middle of the mats, Nick shrugged. He had no idea who Plan A would’ve been, but he much preferred this teacher. “That doesn’t sound too bad.” A week’s intensive course seemed, as the name suggested, intense, but Nick preferred it to several scattered lessons a week for an infinite amount of time. Clapping his paws together, Nick rubbed them in anticipation. “So what’s first, Wolford?”
I'm so incredibly sorry for the delay with this chapter!

I move into my first home a week today so things have been a little crazy here. I've been buying all of the furniture and things I need so I've been out shopping every day. I've also got a cold (in the middle of summer, wtf) so I've not been feeling too great these past few days either. It all comes at once, eh?

On a brighter note, I'm overwhelmed by the amazing reception the last chapter received! Thank you so much for all your kind comments. There will be more chapters of a similar nature later on ;)

We've now reached over 16,000 hits and 1000 comments!!! *mind blown*
Thank you for all of the love and support, y'all are the absolute best. I love getting comments from everyone and finding out new people are joining the Safe Paws family ^_^

"I won’t give up, no I won’t give in, ‘till I reach the end, and then I’ll start again-“ Judy groaned, jolted from her sleep by the ringing of her phone. Paw sliding out from under the sheets, she felt around for the device. Accepting the call without checking the ID, she brought the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Hopps. We have a 187 at The Cloven Hoof. I need you here.” The order was short and sharp, and even through her sleep-addled mind, Judy could hear the urgency in her boss’s voice.

“Chief Bogo. Sir, I’m on desk du-“ Judy protested, against her better judgment. She was still serving her punishment and had another three days of it left.

“Fangmeyer will be at your home in five minutes.” Chief Bogo growled, the line going dead moments later.

Judy stared at her phone in disbelief, the cape buffalo’s words beginning to sink in. “187... mamicide.” The realization that Judy had been called to attend a murder scene spurred her into action. The past week and a half on desk and parking duty had been a nightmare, and Wolford had been assigned elsewhere this week. No matter how much Judy tried to weasel his location out of her boss, the Chief wasn’t budging. The chance for a change of scenery and to work with some of her other colleagues was too good to miss.

Scrabbling out of Nick’s bed, Judy was across the room and through the hallway to her own bedroom in no time, pulling her uniform out of the wardrobe and dressing quickly. Making a detour through the kitchen as she left the apartment, the doe picked up a bottle of water for the road.

Grabbing her keys as she left, Judy locked up behind her, taking the stairs up to the road two at a time. As she reached the top step, a police cruiser pulled up to the curb. Getting in, the doe was offered a soft smile by Fangmeyer. “Good evening.”
“Evening, Fangmeyer.” Judy greeted her colleague as she fastened her seatbelt.

The tigress pulled the cruiser away from the curb, turning on the sirens as she put her hind paw down, flying through the semi-deserted city streets in the direction of The Cloven Hoof. “I bet you’re pleased to be seeing some action.” Bogo hadn’t gone into detail as to why the rabbit had been assigned desk and parking duty, and Fangmeyer knew it wasn’t her place to ask. However, curiosity burned brightly in the back of her mind.

Humming in agreement, Judy took a sip of water. While the doe was looking forward to finally seeing some action, even if she was partner-less for the time being, she was unsure as to why Chief Bogo wanted her present at a murder scene. She had no experience with them, save for being around to witness Catstro’s demise, and there was a multitude of other officers more suited to dealing with the scene. “I guess. Not sure murder is the case I want to come back to, though.”

Recalling the first scene she’d attended, Fangmeyer sighed sadly. There was no way to ease someone into witnessing another mammal’s demise. Death was, unfortunately, the only certainty in life. The tigress could remember the stench of the room, the prostrate forms of the mammal’s who’d died, and the chaos caused by the massive number of cops and CSI’s who’d descended onto the scene. “If you need a moment at all while we’re there, let me know. You can sit in here and catch your breath.” She offered the doe, wanting Judy to know that it was okay to be impacted by the things she would see. There was no shame in needing some time away from such brutality.

“Thank you.” Judy appreciated her concern, but the doe wouldn’t let the scene get to her. She silently admitted to herself that there was the genuine possibility of her having a flashback at the sight of dead mammals, but The Cloven Hoof was nowhere near Tundratown, instead located in the Canal District. Reaching for the bracelet around her wrist, Judy grasped at the small charms on it. Everything would be okay.

The cruiser came to a stop outside The Cloven Hoof, and as Judy looked out of the window, she couldn’t believe the amount of activity she was seeing. The whole area had been taped off, and several members of the night shift were positioned to keep back the public, fielding questions from curious locals and reporters.

Leaving the vehicle, Judy was escorted through the crowds by Fangmeyer, and while the tigress had to lift the police tape to cross it, Judy’s small height meant she was able to walk right under it. “Chief will want to talk to you,” Fangmeyer explained, pointing over to Chief Bogo who was stood talking to Higgins. The hard set of his jaw and the pinched expression on the cape buffalo’s features was enough indication to Judy that whatever had gone on inside the rundown bar hadn’t been pretty.

Giving her boss time to finish up his conversation, the doe looked over the building. Located on the corner of an intersection, the bar wasn’t in the best part of the district. The street was lined with litter, the windows of surrounding buildings smashed, boarded up, or covered in a thick layer of grime. The street smelled like cheap takeout, and the rabbit swore she could detect the faint scent of narcotics, though without Wolford by her side to clarify she couldn’t be sure. A bright neon red sign hung from the side of The Cloven Hoof, flickering with the bars name, and beneath it sat an overflowing dumpster. The tin roof had seen better days, as had the patron’s trucks that were parked outside. Judy wrinkled her nose. Though it wasn’t polite to think it, The Cloven Hoof seemed like the sort of establishment where grisly things happened.

“Hopps.” Judy was broken out of her thoughts by the sound of her boss barking her name. Abandoning her position, she crossed to the agitated cape buffalo, having to crane her neck to be able to look up at the Chief. With a thumb, he gestured to another cruiser, this one inside the police
Together they crossed to it, tucking themselves out of view and earshot of the mammal’s that had gathered at the scene. Prying eyes and ears were a nightmare. “What’s going on, I thought I was on desk duty?” Judy spoke first, wide violet eyes blinking up at her boss. Mamicide wasn’t something Judy had any experience in, wasn’t an area she wanted to specialize in later on, so the fact that Chief Bogo had called her in the middle of the night and summoned her to the scene was a cause for concern.

“You are, don’t think you’re out of that,” Bogo warned, rubbing his forehead with a large hoof. He’d been up late finishing off some paperwork when the call had come through about multiple fatalities. Confused as to why he’d been called, given that the night shift was more than a capable of taking care of a crime scene, it had only taken the mention of who the victims could be for the cape buffalo to abandon his paperwork and head over. The carnage he’d witnessed when he’d stepped inside the bar had been unlike anything he’d ever seen in his life. Unsure where to start, Bogo had realized that perhaps gaining confirmation about the mammal’s identities would be a good idea. It was then he’d called Judy. “I didn’t want to bring you here but,” Bogo pinched the bridge of his nose, huffing. “We believe the dead mammals inside are all connected to Catstro.”

It felt like Judy's heart stopped beating. Catstro. “What?” The doe couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She’d done as Chief Bogo had asked and had stayed away from the case involving Marcus’ murder, had taken Nick’s advice and kept her head down and her nose clean. However, it seemed that no matter how hard Judy tried to stay away from it all, she would always end up pulled back into the Catstro mess.

“Witnesses say they all met here, sat down to talk, and a short while later the conversation got a bit heated before they all drew their weapons. We don’t know why they were shooting at one another yet, but we’re hoping you might be able to ID them, tell us if they’re all connected to the caracal and if anyone is missing.” Bogo laid out his plan. Though the team he had assigned to the case had uncovered a few of Catstro’s connections, the cape buffalo had his suspicions that Judy would know a lot more. If Nick hadn’t have been at the academy, Bogo would’ve called him in instead. The fox would’ve definitely known all of the caracal's gang. “If anyone asks, I’ve called you here so you can experience your first mamicide,” Bogo added, figuring he might need to cover their tails. He didn’t expect anyone to ask, but it didn’t hurt to have a story in place. Judy was meant to be on desk and parking duty after all.

Judy felt numb, Chief Bogo’s words slowly sinking in. “Shoot out. Catstro’s gang. ID bodies.” The doe swallowed, her right hind paw thumping the ground nervously as she chewed on one of her blunt claws. Giving a small nod, Judy agreed to her boss’s terms, and with a deep huff, the cape buffalo turned, heading towards the front door of the bar, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Judy was following him.

Letting her paw drop back to her side, Judy reached for her bracelet. With a deep breath, she followed the cape buffalo inside the bar, stopping briefly to don some gloves and protective paw wear.

The scent hit Judy first. Death and gun smoke. It made her eyes tear, and her stomach churn. The air was thick with it, heavy in her lungs, and Judy brought a gloved paw to her nose, trying desperately to block out as much of the smell as possible. In the back of her mind, she was grateful she hadn’t eaten anything in the last few hours. The copper tang of blood stuck to the back of her throat, and the smell of the final bowl movements of the deceased made her cough. The scent of gun smoke reminded her a little of the fireworks back in Bunnyburrow, but the metal tint to the smell was a cruel reminder that a plethora of bullets had been fired.
“Hopps. You good?” Bogo glanced down at the small bunny, watching her reaction. Mamicide’s were rough, the assault on the senses intense, and the cape buffalo wouldn’t hold it against the rabbit if she needed to head back outside for some fresh air.

Pushing through, Judy nodded. She had a job to do.

The room was clear of CSI’s, but the little yellow evidence markers they used were scattered around, their kit cases abandoned when they’d been asked to temporarily leave the room so Chief Bogo and Judy could look at the bodies. The silence in the room was deafening, a stark contrast to what Judy should’ve been hearing in the bar – the sound of patrons chatting and laughing, the jukebox playing in the corner of the dingy room, the sharp thwack of snooker balls as mammal’s tried to hustle cash out of one another. The lack of sound disturbed the doe, put her on edge and amplified the uneasy feeling in her gut.

Taking stock of the room as a whole, Judy found herself speechless. She’d watched hundreds of crime thrillers, regularly watched CSI programs on the TV, a guilty pleasure she would be forcing on Nick when he graduated, but none of it had prepared her for what she was currently seeing. The walls were littered with bullet holes, the wooden bar that ran along the left-hand side of the room was peppered with rounds, and the ramshackle furniture had been destroyed. “This was one heck of a firefight.” Judy murmured, the number of bullet cases and empty magazines littering the floor would take the CSI’s hours to process. The bar lights had been hit at some point during the scuffle, and shards of glass covered the floor, making the doe thankful for her protective hind paw wear. Glasses that had once been neatly stacked behind the bar were now shattered on the counter, soaked in cheap liquor from the broken bottles. The tang of alcohol lingered under the stronger scents of death and violence. The nearby snooker table had been upended, flipped on its side presumably to use as cover if the mass of bullet holes in it were anything to go by.

Judy steeled herself. She’d been purposefully avoiding looking at the bodies that littered the room, but as she made her way to the snooker table, she knew her time for stalling was coming to an end. Chief Bogo had stayed back, allowing Judy to make her own way to the first body, and as the doe rounded the corner of the upended piece of furniture, she felt like she’d been sucker punched. There, in a pool of blood, lay a maned wolf. Judy didn’t know his name, but his face was one she’d never forget. Fur a little lighter than Nick’s, legs a bit longer too, the maned wolf could’ve easily been mistaken as a fox to someone unfamiliar with the species. “He’s one of them.” The rabbit stated, an ear flicking around in her boss’s direction as she heard him pull his notepad and pen from his pocket. “I don’t know his name, but I know his face.” Violet eyes skimmed over the prone form, and Judy felt momentarily relieved to see he’d died with his eyes closed. Numerous bullet holes littered his body, and the position he’d landed in, splayed on his back, limbs akimbo, gun not too far out of reach, seemed to suggest that he’d been trying to defend himself when he’d died.

Leaving her position, Judy moved to the next body, this one slumped against the front of the bar. A jackal. The jackal. “This one too. I spoke to him when I dropped off the cash the first time. He tried to taunt me.” Judy could remember the way he’d called a ‘sweet little bunny’ and how he’d been the first to approach her in the abandoned building all those months ago. She hadn’t heard him sneak up on her, and the thought of how light he must’ve been on his hind paws still unnerved Judy to this day. The cream fur of the jackal’s chest and abdomen was stained red, the blood having also seeped through the light blue shirt he was wearing. Though he didn’t appear to have suffered as many gunshot wounds as the maned wolf, the claw marks ripping open his shirt and destroying his body suggested that he’d abandoned his weapon in favor of paw-to-paw. With one ear still tuned into Chief Bogo’s scribbling, Judy spared a moment to briefly wonder why they’d all been shooting at one another. Had Catstro inadvertently kept them all in line, and with him gone they’d realized they were free to do as they pleased? Had there been a power struggle as they looked to
replace the caracal? The scene gave Judy more questions than answers.

Making her way further into the room, Judy came across what she assumed had once been a table. The item was now no more than a pile of firewood, but it was the two raccoons next to it that drew her attention. Both were on their fronts, but one had landed on the other. The raccoon at the bottom of the pile was sprawled on the sticky bar floor, blood pooled around his chest area, eyes open and unseeing. Judy contemplated reaching down and shutting them, but concern about tampering with the scene had her keeping her paws to herself.

The mammal on top was slumped over the other, several bullet wounds in his back. His gun had been abandoned by his side, and the way in which he was down on his knees, facing the other raccoon, made Judy feel a momentary sadness. Had he been checking his friend, perhaps searching for his pulse or trying to stem the blood flow, when he’d been killed? “These two were part of his gang.” Judy could remember them more clearly from Mr. Big’s house than the drop. They’d hung back a little then, as if unsure. They’d cowered together in the mansion too. Were they brothers? Lovers? Judy didn’t know, and it was that thought which forced her to look around the room again, to find something else to take her mind off of the death surrounding her. Though the members of Catstro’s gang hadn’t been the most upstanding citizens, they’d still had lives and loved ones, feelings and thoughts. “Their families will have to be informed.” Judy sighed, frowning. “Ones missing.” She commented, taking several steps through the scene, careful of where she was putting down her hind paws.

Stopping his scribbling, Bogo looked up from his notepad, scowling at their surroundings. There were four bodies so far, and as it stood, it would take both shifts days to process the evidence. Another body would only add to the workload. “Who’s missing?”

“I don’t know his name. He’s a lynx, though.” Judy chewed on her lower lip, padding through the destroyed bar, trying to see if there was another body. Being vertically challenged meant the doe couldn’t see as much of the room as her boss.

Content to let Judy walk the scene one more time, Bogo went to pocket his notepad and pen when the sound of the back door of the bar opening captured his attention. “Chief, you’re gonna want to see this.” The urgency in Higgins tone had the cape buffalo crossing the room in several huge strides, Judy following behind him. Together they exited through the back door, entering the alley. If Judy had thought the bar was dingy and grubby, the alleyway was much worse. The passage was narrow, barely wide enough for a medium-sized car, and the buildings backing onto it from the other side were domineering. Glancing to her left Judy spotted the only entrance and exit to the small passage, police tape already blocking it, along with several officers. A crowd was gathering. A low humming just behind her had the doe turning, violet eyes finding a small light on the wall, flickering ominously, casting a little net of light into the otherwise dark alley. Judy wished her night vision was better or that Nick was with her. He’d be able to see everything in the dim light. Attention shifting to her right as Chief Bogo started to walk towards the other end of the alley, Judy followed. Dumpsters lined the walls, overflowing with trash bags and empty bottles, the stench of rotting food and liquor much stronger here than it had been inside. Mind on her surroundings, the doe nearly walked into the back of Chief Bogo’s legs.

“This him?” Bogo asked gruffly, shaking his head, silently glad that he hadn’t had the chance to put away his notepad and pen yet.

Curious, Judy stepped out from behind her boss. There, slumped against the dumpster, body almost doubled over, sat a lynx. Without being able to see the mammal’s face, Judy couldn’t say for sure whether this was the last member of Catstro’s gang, though it would make sense for it to be so.
Taking a few cautious steps forward, Judy crouched in front of the body. With a shaky paw, she reached out, pleased to be wearing gloves as she lifted the lynx’s head. Pushing the animals head up and back, so it came to rest against the dumpster, Judy could finally confirm his identity.

“Yeah, it’s him. I guess he was the last mammal standing and tried to escape.” Judy’s shoulders slumped as she took in the damage to his body. Bullet holes and claw marks littered his frame, along with a nasty looking black eye and a chunk missing from one of his ears. His position meant there was little blood other than the speckled trail along the ground leading to his final resting place.

“He didn’t get very far,” Bogo muttered, looking between the dead lynx and the back door of the bar. The blood spatter on the ground suggested that the mammal had staggered out of the back door, probably trying to escape, but had ultimately slumped against the dumpster to catch his breath, only for his breath to be taken from him.

Though Bogo now knew that all the dead animals were members of Catstro’s gang, he was frustrated that they were all dead. He still had no idea why they’d been shooting at one another and what had caused such an explosive fight to break out. While the cape buffalo couldn’t find it in him to be too shook up over the fact five criminals had died, he knew it might be too much for the doe. She’d known these mammals, and it was her first mamicide. “Alright, if that’s all of them then Fangmeyer will drop you back home.” Getting Judy away from the scene and the case was the best option. She was too close to it. If anyone in Internal Affairs figured out how Judy was linked to the dead mammals, they would be forced to investigate. Bogo didn’t want them poking around his team, intimidating his officers, and making their lives hell. This case was enough work without having to worry about anything else.

Standing up quickly, Judy turned and took several steps back towards her boss. She didn’t want to leave the scene just yet. What if her knowledge was needed? What if the CSI’s needed another set of paws? There was a lot of evidence to catalog and collect, and Judy had been given some basic crime scene training at the academy. “Sir, I can stay and help. I ca-“

“Hopps.” Bogo interrupted the rabbit before she could work herself into a frenzy. The doe fell silent, wide eyes watching him. The cape buffalo could see the desire to help in the smaller mammal, could understand why she felt the need to stick around, but he couldn’t let her stay.

“We’ve got this. We now know that all these mammals were linked to Catstro, which I’m very grateful for your help with.” He softened his tone, figuring that Judy would be more compliant if he were a little kinder towards her.

Judy wasn’t a fool, she could tell when she wasn’t wanted or needed. It stung a little, but she understood why Chief Bogo didn’t want her nearby. It was for her own safety, to protect her from any potential issues. She still felt the need to help, though. “I know you don’t want me involved, but Nick is calling me this evening, I could ask him for their names?”

Bogo sighed. He should’ve known better. Of course, Judy would want to try and help, the over-enthusiastic doe would never let anything go. By the time Wilde called, they would probably already have the names of the dead mammal’s, their fingerprints no doubt already in the police database. The cape buffalo nodded anyway, hoping that it would make Judy feel like she was doing something useful and stop her from sticking her nose in elsewhere. “Good idea. Call Clawhauser once you have the names and he’ll pass them along.” Lifting a hoof, Bogo signaled for Fangmeyer, the tigress having been stood at the end of the alleyway. “Fangmeyer will take you home, but I’ll see you at roll call at 9 am.”

Dismissed, Judy met Fangmeyer halfway down the alley, and together they left the scene, ducking under the police tape and navigating through the growing crowds of mammals. Removing her
protective shoes and gloves, Judy rolled them into a ball and shoved them into an empty pouch on 
her belt. Having a path cleared for the cruiser, Fangmeyer drove them away from The Cloven 
Hoof. Silence settled between the two ladies for a few minutes, until the tigress stole a glance 
towards the pensive doe. “You did well, Hopps. Seeing your first mamicide isn’t easy.” She threw 
out as they stopped at an intersection.

Broken from her thoughts about what she’d just witnessed, Judy turned towards her fellow officer. 
“Thanks. I can’t say it was a pleasant experience.” Judy gave a nervous chuckle. Catstro had been 
her first mamicide, and while the experience had scarred her and still caused her problems to this 
day, the doe was seemingly numb to the scene she’d just walked through. She hadn’t been present 
for their deaths, only the aftermath, and the feeling of relief that there were now no witnesses who 
could turn against her for her part in Catstro’s death was overwhelming. It was like a weight had 
been lifted off her shoulders. Judy wasn’t sure if that made her a bad person, for being quietly 
happy that the rest of Catstro’s gang were dead, so the doe tried not to examine her feelings too 
closely.

Before Judy knew it, the cruiser was pulling up outside her home. Offering Fangmeyer her thanks 
and a quick farewell, she exited the vehicle, padding down the steps to her front door before she let 
herself in, locking the door and depositing her keys in the bowl from her parents. Passing the 
 kitchen, Judy stole a glance at the oven clock. 2am. She could get another few hours sleep. 
Shedding her uniform as she made her way back to Nick’s room, she climbed back into bed. It was 
a habit now to sleep in Nick’s room, surrounded by his few belongings and the faint remnant of his 
scent. Judy had wondered whether it had seemed clingy, desperate even, but with the amount of 
time she was without her fox, she felt like she needed some comfort and something to keep her 
going. Besides, no one else was around to witness her actions. Setting her alarm, the doe snuggled 
into the bed, curling up in the sheets. Mind returning the crime scene, Judy spared a moment to feel 
sad about the loss of life, the horror and brutality of it hard to shake now she was alone, but there 
was no one left who’d get a kick out of telling Chief Bogo about her involvement in Catstro’s 
death. She was truly safe.

Though Nick was now on a different schedule to his fellow cadets, the fox still found himself 
being rudely awoken by Major Friedkin at 5:30 am. The polar bear clattered her way into the dorm 
room, shouting for everyone to get up before she left with the promise of returning in five minutes. 
Yawning, the tod forced himself out of his bunk.

“Good morning sleeping beauty!” Tony grinned at the fox, enjoying the disgruntled huff he 
received in response to his cheerful greeting. Spending the last two days without Nick had been 
strange for the tiger. He was used to having Randon, Horton, and Nick by his side. It had made 
him think about where he wanted to be stationed after graduation. Horton was planning on joining 
precinct one, as was Randon. Nick’s position there was a given considering his relationship with 
Judy. Did he want to be the odd one out? Nick would be placed under Chief Bogo, but where did 
that leave Tony and the others? Who would they work under? The last two days had given the tiger 
a lot of food for thought, but he wouldn’t make any decisions until he’d spoken to his wife at 
length. He was trying to redeem himself, trying to show her how sorry he was, and how much he 
truly loved her. This was a major decision, and he wanted his wife to be a part of that.

“How are you always so cheerful in the mornings?” Nick grouched, grabbing his issued shirt and 
pants from the rails of the bunk bed.

“Tigers are crepuscular.” Horton chimed in, already dressed and waiting for everyone else. The 
elephant was far more prepared than his friends, requiring little sleep compared to the other cadets.
“We canines are nocturnal, so be nice.” Randon stretched, pulling on his shirt. Though the timber wolf had spent his entire life living as if he were diurnal, his body still protested against the early start each morning.

The clattering of the dorm door opening and the sudden appearance of Major Friedkin barking orders for the morning run had Randon, Tony, and Horton across the room, shouting their farewells to Nick as they faced another grueling workout. With a wave of farewell, Nick turned his attention to his own schedule. Giving his sleep-ruffled fur a quick brush, he soon made his way to the canteen. The staff had been informed of Nick’s change of schedule on Monday night, and now they served him breakfast ahead of everyone else.

“Good morning Nick.” The elderly okapi cook greeted the fox, smile firmly in place. When Major Friedkin had asked him to come in a little earlier than usual this week, he’d been curious as to why, but getting some extra prep time for the breakfast rush turned out to be a blessing. Feeding Nick also meant that the mammal could try out some different recipes. Yesterday he’d served the tod egg and potato breakfast scramble, which Nick had devoured in minutes, prompting the okapi to put more on the fox’s plate. Nothing soothed the cook’s soul more than seeing mammal’s enjoying his food.

The scents coming from the kitchen made Nick’s mouth water and his nostrils flare. Usually, they were served a basic diet - nutritionally balanced to help them perform better but lacking in all of the good tasting stuff most mammal’s preferred. The fox knew he’d been spoilt yesterday, and he crossed the fingers that his lucky streak would continue. “Good morning Mr. Johnstoni. What’s on the menu today?”

Adding the final touches to the dish he’d just prepared, the okapi slid the plate across the counter towards the fox. “Omelette roll up with smokey fried potatoes, cream cheese, and watercress.” He declared, sprinkling a little watercress on top of the rolls.

“Mr. Johnstoni, you spoil me.” Nick shook his head fondly, offering the okapi a warm smile. Having spent several months at the academy, Nick knew all of the staff and had formed connections with them. The zebra down in the laundry room had been happy to swap the washing powder to another brand when Nick had complained about a small rash that had appeared on his shoulder. The giraffe in charge of training equipment had spent days searching for the best weapons for a mammal of Nick’s size and had signed off on him taking them with him after graduation. It paid to be nice to other mammals.

Pushing some cutlery across the counter until it came to sit next to the plate, the okapi chuckled. “You’re a growing kit. You need all the sustenance possible.”

“I’m in my thirties.” Nick felt the need to point out his age. It’d been a long time since he’d been a kit. The loss of his father had stripped Nick of his kithood innocence and forced him to grow up quickly. He didn’t mourn the loss, that would be pointless, he’d never be able to get it back. Instead, he placed all his focus on moving forward, on enjoying the moment, and looking forward to the future.

When Nick had first arrived at the academy, Mr. Johnstoni had noticed that the tod had been much thinner than was probably healthy, that he hadn’t been as strong as a fox in the prime of his life should’ve been. Though the okapi hadn’t been able to change the academy menu for one recruit or provide Nick with additional meals, he’d contemplated adding extra vitamins and minerals to his dishes. Worried he might be accused of spiking the tod’s food, though, Mr. Johnstoni had settled on giving Nick slightly larger portions, and to watching him eat. If he spotted Nick playing with his food he usually went over to ask if his meal was okay. Making the fox feel guilty, as if he was
insulted the tod wasn’t eating his cooking, wasn’t exactly noble, but it made Nick eat more and
had helped him gain some weight and strength. “You’re still a kit compared to me.” Mr. Johnstoni
lifted a hoof to rub at his graying muzzle. The cadets kept him young and kept him up to date with
the latest trends and sayings.

Picking up the plate of food, ignoring the cutlery in favor of eating the rolls with his paws, Nick
offered the okapi a soft smile. “Thanks, Mr. Johnstoni.” The break from the usual food provided
by the canteen was refreshing, and Nick realized he would be sad when the week was over, and
he’d be forced back onto the academy’s designated meal plan. The tod couldn’t wait until he was
able to go home again and taste his mom’s cooking, maybe even sweet talk Judy into making
something for him.

As Mr. Johnstoni shooed Nick away, the fox gravitated towards the table he usually sat at with
Randon, Horton, and Tony. As he sat and began to eat, though, Nick couldn’t help but feel a
strange sense of loneliness. The fox was used to being alone, or he had been before Judy had
bounced into his life. Early mornings and the evenings were the only times Nick got to spend with
his fellow cadets this week, and now the tod realized just how much he enjoyed having them
around. Having friends wasn’t as bad as he’d thought it would be.

Thoughts shifting to the food he’d been absentmindedly shoving into his maw, Nick groaned as he
finally paid attention to the flavors exploding on his tongue. The contrast between the cream
cheese and the fried potatoes was incredible, and as Nick finished up the first roll, he was licking
his fingers clean. Devouring the second roll, Nick’s tail wagged happily behind him.

“Good?” Mr. Johnstoni asked as he came out from the kitchen, making a beeline for the tod to
collect his empty plate. He’d watched the fox enthusiastically eat his breakfast and had felt a
twinge of pride at how well the dish had been received.

Nodding his head as he finished his final mouthful, Nick hummed in confirmation. “Mhm.” He
waited until he’d finished chewing and had swallowed before speaking again. “That was
incredible. Could you write the recipe down, please? I’d like to give it a go when I get home,
maybe make it for my mate.” Nick hadn’t had the chance to learn how to cook yet, but it was on
his list of things to do. He was sure he’d be able to surprise Judy with a tasty breakfast that wasn’t
toast or porridge.

“Ah, young love. I bet your vixen misses you.” Mr. Johnstoni could remember when he’d asked
his wife to be his mate, the nerves that had filled him, and the way he’d been shaking so hard that
she’d asked him if he was unwell. There was nothing quite like love.

The okapi had spent his younger years working as a chef in the city, working endless hours to
make enough money for his family. It had driven a wedge between him and his wife, the lack of
time together becoming a strain on their relationship. As soon as their youngest calf had left the
family home, they’d decided to move out to the countryside, to get back to nature and one another.
Mr. Johnstoni hadn’t been able to curb his love of cooking though, and when he’d heard about the
kitchen vacancy at the academy, he’d jumped at the chance to get back to the stove. Thankfully,
the short hours meant he could spend more time with his wife.

“Doe, actually.” Nick corrected the okapi with a nervous laugh. Though the old cook came across
as kind and respectful, his stance on interspecies relationships was still unknown to the tod. “I can’t
cook, but I’d like to learn so I can treat Judy.”

Surprised by the news that Nick was dating outside of his species, the okapi was further caught off
guard by the doe’s name. “Wait, a doe called Judy? Not Judy the knee-high, over-enthusiastic, gray
bunny who was here last year Judy, right?” He could remember the young rabbit well; her
determination had been inspirational, and her cheery demeanor in the face of prejudice from her fellow cadets had been quite a sight to behold.

“One and the same,” Nick confirmed, smiling at Mr. Johnstoni’s very accurate description of his mate.

Unable to stop his bleat of laughter, the okapi found great joy in the idea of the lively bunny taming the snarky fox. “My goodness, I never would’ve seen that coming.” Mr. Johnstoni wiped at his eyes. “I’ll write it down for you, but be aware that your mate won’t be able to eat it often. Rabbits can’t over-load on dairy, it’s bad for their digestive system, but as a treat every now and then it’s fine.” He passed along a warning, not wanting Nick’s good deed to result in Judy falling sick. Picking up the tod’s clean plate, the okapi motioned towards the canteen doors with his free hoof. “I’ll have it ready by dinner for you. Now go, or you’ll be late.” He shooed Nick away.

Rising from his seat, Nick thanked the okapi before leaving the canteen, slowly making his way to Training Room 3. The past two days had been theory based, and the tod was growing tired of the lack of action. He’d thought his paw-to-paw training would be predominantly focused on practical work, not sitting in the training room learning about physics, strike points, and how to, in theory, disarm a perp. Wolford was a good teacher and had been more than happy to go back over things Nick wasn’t sure of, but the tod was itching for the chance to throw the timber wolf around on the mat and finally put the theory into practice.

Stepping into Training Room 3, Nick found Wolford sat on one of the benches lining the large room. It was the position the timber wolf had sat in for the past two days, and Nick now associated it with theory work. “Urgh.”

“Morning, Wilde. At least pretend to be enthusiastic.” The timber wolf laughed, enjoying the disgruntled expression his fellow canine wore. It probably didn’t help that they’d been starting early every day. Connor was used to being up at such a time, what with his wife being a nurse and working all hours, but he had a feeling that before joining the academy Nick had lived life to his own beat.

Crossing the room to sit beside Wolford, Nick slumped back against the wall, stifling a yawn. “We’ve spent the last two days doing theory work. There’s nothing to be enthusiastic about.” He grouched. The theory was all well and good, but if he didn’t know how to apply it, then he would be useless out on the beat or in the field.

“Well it’s a good job today isn’t theory based then.” As annoying as it had been to teach Nick the guiding principles of paw-to-paw combat, the timber wolf knew that a solid understanding of the technical side of it was essential. It ensured that Nick would be able to master the practical side more efficiently and that he would be armed with the knowledge that his opponents might not have. It all worked together to give him an advantage and would hopefully make him the stronger fighter, even with his small size.

Perking up at the prospect of finally getting to fight, the tod sat tall, the tip of his tail flicking in excitement as his ears tipped forward, his focus entirely on the timber wolf. “I get to throw you around the mat?” Nick grinned.

“You get to try and throw me around the mat.” Wolford corrected, amused by Nick’s eagerness but also pleased by it. Teaching a mammal who wasn’t passionate and didn’t want to learn was a nightmare “I’m three times your size and more experienced, and I won’t be holding back.” He warned. On the train ride to the academy on Monday morning, the timber wolf had decided that he wouldn’t go easy on the tod. The skills he was teaching him could save his or Judy’s life one day. “No criminal you’re sparring with will hold back, for them it’s a matter of getting away from you
or facing time in jail. Most perps prefer the former option.”

Wafting a paw through the air, Nick dismissed Wolford’s warning. The wolf wouldn’t rough him up too much. The fox was pretty confident Buffalo Butt and Judy would have something to say should Wolford leave him sporting some bruises. “I’m going to kick your tail.”

Letting out a short howl of laughter, Connor shook his head. Nick was enthusiastic for sure, and the wolf didn’t want to squash that, but he was certain that once they started grappling he would best Nick several times before the tod would catch on and start putting his all into it. “We’ll see, Wilde.” Standing up, Connor grabbed the padded gloves that he’d set aside for the session. “Considering you just ate, we’ll go slow first and walk through the moves. Once I’m sure you’re not going to bring up your breakfast, we’ll get into throwing one another around the mat.” He set out the days schedule, sliding on the gloves as he strode over to stand in the middle of the mats. Nick had followed him over, lazy grin in place and body language suggesting he was feeling pretty confident. The timber wolf couldn’t wait to wipe that smile off his fellow canines face later on. “Alright, we’re going to start with some basic punches. So give me a natural stance.” He instructed, setting aside his growing friendship with the tod so he could focus on being a teacher first.

Taking the posture Wolford had shown him many times over the past two days, Nick ensured that his body followed the detailed description that had been provided with the images in the textbook he’d been made to read. His heels were in line with the width of his hips, toes pointing outwards at a forty-five-degree angle, and both hind paws in line.

Satisfied with Nick’s posture, and the ease of which he’d moved into it, Wolford held up one of his protected paws, palm facing the tod, ensuring it was at a height that Nick would be able to reach. “Alright, now give me a straightforward punch.”

The theory Nick had studied had suggested that hitting a mammal’s solar plexus was the best option but given Wolford’s height that wasn’t possible for the fox. The timber wolf had instead recommended that wherever possible, the tod should try and bring his opponent down to his level, either by sweeping their legs out from under them, or striking them in such a manner that they would be brought to their knees.

Relaxing his shoulders, Nick lifted his left arm. Keeping his palm open and down, formed as if to grasp something, he then brought his right arm to his right side, above his hip, balling his paw into a fist, drawing his elbow in and back. As he pulled his left paw back to his hip, Nick simultaneously drove his right paw forward, fist connecting with the padding. The dull thud of the impact filled the tod with a sense of pride. Pulling back, he relaxed his arms.

Though Nick’s first attempt had been decent, Wolford wasn’t entirely sure the fox was throwing all of his weight and force behind the punch. He would give Nick some more time, though. “Good, now with your left.”

Repeating his earlier actions, but this time striking with his left paw, Nick realized that he was able to put more power into the punches he was throwing with his right paw. He assumed that was down to it being his dominant paw, yet he knew it was important to train both. With that strike done, Nick listened as Wolford gave his next instructions. Four sets of the two punches, with no breaks between them. Doing as he was asked, Nick could feel a twinge in his knuckles by the time he was done. He wasn’t used to paw-on-paw combat, he much preferred slinking away from any potential conflict. Nick liked his face and didn’t particularly want it punched.

Nick’s discomfort didn’t go unnoticed by the timber wolf, so Wolford offered to mix it up with some reverse punching and then some lunge punches. Though Nick’s form was okay, he still lacked power. It was something they’d have to work on a little more, but for Nick’s first foray into
fighting, he wasn’t doing too bad. “Good, that was good.” The timber wolf offered out some praise as Nick finished his assigned number of punches. As Nick’s paws dropped back down to his sides, Wolford mimicked him, relaxing his stance. “Most mammal’s you’ll be facing will be bigger than you, so it’s in your interest to bring them down to your level. This is where kicks can come in handy. Remember though, kick with your whole body instead of just using your leg by pushing your hips forward. Don’t forget to withdraw your hind paw quickly too, to prevent your opponent from catching it or from sweeping your supporting leg.”

Nick was well aware that his size would be a disadvantage when dealing with a large percentage of the city’s population, but if Judy could take down a rhino, then he was willing to give it his all and try to keep up with her. He needed to get this right, not only so that he would graduate top of his class, but also so that’d be able to protect Judy in stressful situations. Shifting his weight from hind paw to hind paw, Nick stepped into a fighting stance.

“We’ll start with the back kick.” The timber wolf lifted his padded paws to a height Nick would be able to reach, planting his hind paws firmly so he could brace for the impact. Kicks allowed for more power transfer than punches.

Bringing his right knee up and across his left leg, Nick watched Wolford from over his shoulder before he kicked to the rear in a straight line; hind paw thudding against the padding, making Wolford push down with his weight to remain steady.

“Again,” Wolford ordered.

Nick complied, repeating the action several times with each leg. He could feel the burn and ache in his muscles, but the drive to deliver faster and more powerful strikes kept the tod going. They worked on different kicks too – stamping, front, thrust, and snap. Several times Nick misjudged his kicks and ended up falling, landing on the mat in a crumpled heap, much to Wolford’s amusement and the tod’s embarrassment. He was grateful that there was no one else around to witness his tumbles.

From there they moved onto sweeping, and Nick was finally able to try and bring the timber wolf down. With Wolford standing in as a perp, Nick hooked his right hind paw behind the timber wolf’s left ankle and sharply pulled his leg back towards his body, knocking Wolford off balance and sending him falling to the mat. The controlled move and knowledge of what was coming meant the timber wolf didn’t land in a crumpled heap like Nick had, but the tod still found it satisfying to watch one of his future colleagues hit the mat. They repeated the move several times, alternating legs and working at getting faster, before Wolford called for a short break.

“We’ll move onto blocking and grappling after the break.” The taller canine decided, crossing over to the benches to grab two bottles of water. Returning to Nick, who’d sat down in the middle of the mats, the wolf offered the fox one of the water bottles. “How’re you feeling?”

Taking the offered water bottle, Nick stretched his legs out in front of him. “A little sore, but more confident.” He unscrewed the cap off of the bottle, taking a quick sip.

Sitting down alongside the fox, Wolford took up a similar position. “No pain, no gain. Your confidence will continue to build the more we practice, and you’ll find the aches will go away as you build some more strength.” The timber wolf unscrewed the cap on his own bottle, taking a sip too. He could remember the intense combat classes he’d taken when he’d first decided to move into undercover work. Every officer had basic combat training, but given the higher risk with working undercover, he’d been required to attend an advanced fighting seminar. It had lasted two weeks and had covered both armed and unarmed combat. By the end of the two weeks his whole body had ached, muscles he didn’t know he had been screaming at him for a rest.
Screwing the cap back onto the bottle, Nick sighed. “I guess after this week I should keep up with practicing?” He figured that to maintain or improve his skill level he’d need to keep training long after Wolford had left. New methods of self-defence appeared all the time, and the tod knew that was something he’d have to keep an eye on too.

Wolford nodded. “That would be best. While you’re here, try and use one of your fellow cadets as a sparring partner. When you graduate and join us at the precinct, we have a ring set up at the gym. It’s worth spending some time there each week.” He put the cap back on his bottle, setting it down beside him. During his years at precinct one the timber wolf had been able to spar with all of his fellow officers, and on a few occasions, Bogo had even entered the ring with him.

“Yeah, except I’m not getting into the ring with Carrots. She took down a rhino with one kick.” The video of Judy’s training was still scorched into his memory, a reminder that although his bunny was sweet and soft with him, she was also a powerful and strong opponent. “Does she know you’re here?”

Wolford shook his head, placing his paws behind him so he could lean back and support his weight. “No, Bogo thought it was best for her not to be made aware, probably to make sure that she doesn’t insist that I go easy on you.” When he’d been informed of his new assignment, the timber wolf hadn’t been entirely convinced. He was well versed in paw-to-paw combat, but he wasn’t a teacher by any stretch of the imagination. Bogo had deemed it a suitable role for him though, so after informing his wife and packing a bag, Connor had grabbed the next train out to the academy. He had no idea what Judy had been told about his disappearance, but the wolf was curious as to what tale Bogo had spun to the gray bunny. “As much as I enjoy our comradery, my primary purpose of being here is to make sure you can defend yourself.” The wolf was growing fond of his fellow canine, could see the start of a solid friendship between them, but he couldn’t allow that to cloud his judgment.

“And Judy,” Nick added. Being able to defend his mate while on and off the clock would be useful. They’d already had a few disagreements with mammals that’d taken umbrage with their relationship, and though all of their friends appeared to support them, Nick knew not all animals in the wider community would. “She’s my mate. It’s my job to keep her safe.”

“No, it’s your job to stay alive so that you can go home together at the end of every day. You’ve bonded, you can’t afford to check out early.” Though Judy wouldn’t have experienced bonding like Nick had, the need for the profound and soulful connection not being a rabbit custom, Wolford knew that losing Nick would destroy the bunny. Though Nick wanted to protect Judy, an admirable trait in a mate, he needed to protect himself too, not foolishly risk his own life.

Squirming, the tod licked his lips, a small noise of discomfort slipping past his lips as his ears flattened back. “We haven’t…”

“You gave her a bonding bracelet months ago, and you haven’t bonded with her yet?” The wolf couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Judy’s multitude of questions when she’d first been given the bracelet had been enough to clue him into the fact that they hadn’t bonded, but that had been months ago. Bonding was supposed to take place shortly after the gifting of the bracelet, so that the tod followed through with his intentions.

Frowning at Wolford’s judgmental tone, the tip of Nick’s tail flicked in irritation. “I’m waiting for her to be sure it’s what she wants.” The sharp clip around the back of his head caught the fox off guard, and he raised a paw to rub at the spot that had just been walloped by his future co-worker. “Ow. The hell was that for?”

“You’re dense, Wilde. Hurry up and bond with her.” Wolford shook his head, paw falling back
behind him to support his weight again. Having spent countless hours in the cruiser and walking the streets with the doe, Connor could say without a shadow of a doubt that the fox was stuck with her. Nick was all she talked about.

Still rubbing his head, Nick’s tail thumped against the floor with his annoyance at being smacked. “I’m not rushing this.” Judy’s lack of experience still weighed heavily on Nick’s mind. It was a topic he’d have to raise with her soon, to understand where she stood regarding experience, but bonding wasn’t something to be taken lightly. ‘You know how important that level of commitment is.” Paw dropping from his head, Nick flexed it, trying to soothe the pain in his knuckles.

Wolford knew exactly how serious bonding was. He and his wife had waited until their wedding night before finalizing their relationship that way. He hadn't gifted her a bracelet, finding the tradition a little archaic, but he still firmly believed in the importance of bonding. It had been an intense experience for both of them. “You know, on Judy’s first day, when she walked into the bullpen, I felt sorry for her. I could tell right away she would be one of those ‘married to the job’ mammals. That isn’t any way to live, though. There’s so much more to life, but she was so single-minded, so focused on making the world a better place.” The arrival of the first rabbit cop had piqued the curiosity of all the officers in precinct one, and the timber wolf had watched Judy as she’d entered the room. He’d noted how she’d moved away from the typical roughhousing that occurred every morning, and how she’d placed herself at the very front of the room, like an eager student. “She’s broadened her horizons a little more now that she’s stuck with you.”

Snorting, Nick took the jibe in his stride. He’d had much worse over the years, and he knew Wolford meant no harm by it. “Thanks.”

“I’m serious. Don’t ever question her commitment to you. I only get half a story from Judy during our patrols, but from what I can tell she pulled you out of a rough spot. Now I haven’t known you long, but I feel confident in saying that you feel like you owe her for that. Don’t. You pulled her out of a rough spot too.” Looking around the room, the wolf lifted one of his paws, gesturing around them. “There’s more to life than this, than being a cop. The work we do is important, we change people lives, hopefully for the better, though I guess for the perps we make their lives worse, but it’s not everything. Fulfilling relationships are important too, as is enjoying the small things in life.” Bringing his paw back behind him, Wolford felt like their conversation had taken a much more serious tone. The advice he was about to impart on Nick was important though, something he’d once known but had only been reminded of once he’d been temporarily partnered with the little bunny.

“There are the spontaneous trips to the ice cream parlor, treating yourself after a long day of work, and the trips to the Canal District to watch the sunset change the sky from blue to hues of pink. There’s the boisterous laughter on a Friday night with your family, your smile so wide that it splits your face because you wonder how you were lucky enough to grow up in a house full of love. Then there are the late nights where you stay up with your mate, whispering into the darkness about your hopes, your fears, and your dreams, temporarily forgetting about the outside world and all its oppression. It makes you thankful that for once in your life you decided to put down your badge and gun.” Nostalgia swept over the wolf, and Wolford found himself staring at a blank space on the opposite wall. “It’s all about balance.”

Listening attentively to Wolford, Nick thought back on everything he’d missed out on by spending years on the streets. He’d never had the luxury of buying an ice cream for himself, or watching the sunset, or getting to curl up with the mammal he loved and talk through the night. He had the chance for those now though, the time to take a step back and admire the small things. Before, the need to make money, to keep his mom safe and Catstro off his back, had consumed him. That worry was gone. What was it he really wanted to do now that he had the time? He could try and
learn his father’s trade, reconnect with his history. He could spend more time with his mom and listen to her stories of the past. He could go to night school and take some business classes, or finally learn how to draw. He could spend hours walking through museums, sharing his knowledge with Judy before taking her for a picnic and watching the sunset together.

“It can be tempting to spend all your time working when you really enjoy your job, and I think that was the case with Judy, but she would’ve been missing out on so much more had she not met you. Before I was partnered with her, I was contemplating quitting the force. I was stuck in a rut, always working undercover jobs. I thought I was doing a good thing, that I was paying the bills and saving innocent mammals in the process. I never saw what my long hours were doing to my wife.” Wolford shook his head. After his first month working with Judy, he’d noticed an improvement in his relationship with his mate. Coming home at 5 p.m. every day had made her happy, and the reduction in his chances of being hurt on the job had pleased her greatly. Being a cop meant he was always at risk of being injured at work, but undercover jobs were far more dangerous than walking the beat or working on lower-level cases. “When I was undercover, I wasn’t allowed to spend time at home, I couldn’t contact her for fear of the criminals finding her and using her as leverage. In that job, I was so scared of losing her that I distanced myself. I was missing out on the best thing in my life.”

Feeling like he needed to open up in return, Nick was still cautious about being too forthcoming with his feelings, old insecurities holding him back. “Being a cop wasn’t always my dream. I want it now, but it hadn’t even crossed my mind until Judy roped me into helping her. I think this job called to me because Judy believed in me and my ability to be something more, to do something more with my life, and that’s not something I’m used to. A lot of mammals write me off because I’m a fox, so having Judy encourage me was something new and exciting. I think it was also in part my need to keep her safe that pushed me onto this path, that instinct to have her back and protect her. Just like your wife is the best thing in your life, Judy is the best thing in mine.”

Unable to stop his smile as Nick confessed that Judy was the best thing in his life, Wolford only just bit his tongue to stop the teasing comment he’d been about to deliver. The relationship between the fox and the rabbit was adorable, even though they’d lost him several bucks by getting together ahead of schedule. “I figured as much. Life is too short to spend all your time working and not take a step back and be reminded that yes, work can be rewarding, but nothing beats the little things in life. Judy may have saved you from a rough spot, but in return, you saved her from a miserable existence where she was a slave to her work.”

Wolford’s words gave Nick pause, brain ticking over as he processed the timber wolf’s perspective. The tod had never thought about it that way before. He’d always associated Judy as being the one doing all the saving. Now, thinking about it some more, he could see where Wolford was coming from. When Nick had first met Judy he’d noticed how dedicated she’d been, how driven and single-minded she was, but he could also see now how she’d changed since they’d become friends and started dating, how she’d softened up a little and was doing more outside of work. She had dinner with his mom every week, she grabbed lunch at the weekends with Akita, and she was exploring more of the city on her own merit, emboldened by their trip to the gallery. “You’re right, I never thought of it that way. Thanks, Wolford.” A slow smile crossed Nick’s lips, mind still working through the realization that he’d helped Judy in return.

“Connor.” The timber wolf corrected, figuring he and Nick were on first name terms now. Standing and casting his water bottle aside, Wolford clapping his paws together. “Come on, there’s too much estrogen in this room a present. Let’s see if you can throw me down onto the mat.”
Misty's on the Vine

Chapter Notes

A/N I'm so sorry for the delay in this chapter. I was dragged into some fandom drama against my will that involved a close friend so I stepped back for a short while. I don't think we're talking anymore, which hurts because I miss her. Due to the drama though this story has been pulled from ZNN however in order to ensure all my readers are catered for this will remain the smut version and the clean version will be over on FF.net. As I did before, I'll place an A/N on any chapter that has some smut so that you're informed about it and can decide which site to read on.

EDIT; it would seem that Safe Paws is back on ZNN. I was not made aware of its return to the site, and I've only found out about this because of a few reader comments in response to this chapter.

I also moved house and while my home is wonderful, I'm three days into living in my new place and homesickness has hit me hard. I'm struggling to focus and to sleep and eat properly. Churning out this chapter was a struggle, but I hope it's okay. I'm sorry again for the wait, I never wanted or planned to keep you all waiting. Hopefully, I'll be able to get the next chapter out quicker.

On a lighter note, a guest reviewer on FF told me that they think Ed Sheeran's song Perfect is a good tune for this fic, and after listening to it I think I'm in love. Can that be this fic's anthem? Is that a thing?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The jingling of keys had Nick sitting up, abandoning his position on the sofa in favor of heading towards the front door. He’d caught an earlier train home, Major Friedkin having told him to leave once he’d finished breakfast. It was the end of October now, and Nick hadn't been home in months. He’d been dying to get back to the city, to his mate, and to his mom. He’d never been away for long before, and the distance had been slowly driving him crazy.

Leaving the academy earlier than planned had enabled the tod to head to Bunnyburrow first. Once there, he’d made his way to the main shopping street in the heart of the district. Picking up a few things for Judy, and one of Gideon’s blueberry pies for himself, he’d then caught the Zootopia Express back to the city.

When the fox had made it home, he’d thrown the clothes from his bag into the washing machine and put the pie in the fridge. He'd organized the items he’d picked up for Judy, and had then walked around their apartment, taking in all the little changes. There were some more cushions made by his mom and some new kitchen utensils, but the biggest change had been in his bedroom. Nick had expected his scent to be strongest in the room, but instead, he was smothered by Judy’s smell. The doe’s pajamas were on his bed, her clothes over the chair in the corner of the room, and her dowel box and phone charger on his nightstand. The tod could've been mad that Judy was in his space and sleeping in his bed, yet it made his heart clench, features softening as he smiled.

Nick wore the same expression now as he watched Judy enter their home. She was oblivious to the fact he stood leaning against the door to the living room. Waiting, Nick watched in amusement as
his doe removed her vest, letting it drop to the floor before she threw her keys into the little dish from Bonnie and Stu. It was her double take that made Nick’s smile turn to a grin and had him snorting a laugh, Judy’s eyes widening as she spotted his keys in the dish. Judy’s head snapped sideways, large ears honing in on him as he chuckled at her expression. “Nick!” The tod found himself with an armful of gray bunny, Judy having launched herself at him in her excitement.

“Hey, Carrots.” Nick clung to the rabbit in his arms, savoring the feeling of finally getting to hold her again after so long. They were still allowed their weekly phone calls, and Judy often sent him little care packages and letters, but nothing could beat the feeling of being home and being able to reach out and touch his mate.

Judy had known for a month now that Nick would be coming home for Halloween, and she’d been counting down the days ever since he’d informed her of Major Friedkin’s decision to give him some time off. However, when they’d discussed trains, Nick had decided to catch the 4 pm Zootopia Express back to the city, to give him the morning and most of the afternoon to continue his training. That plan had seemingly gone to pot, but Judy was more than happy with the surprise of coming home to find Nick already waiting for her. “How’re you home so early?”

“Friedkin let me go after breakfast.” Nick had been surprised by the polar bear’s kind offer, but he hadn’t been so foolish as to protest. Though the tod had known that Judy would still be at work, having the opportunity to make a trip to Bunnyburrow and pick up supplies for his surprise had been too good to miss.

Pushing up onto the balls of her hind paws, Judy reached for her mate, looping her arms around his neck so she could pull him down, enabling her to plant a soft kiss on his lips. However, as she went to pull away, Nick refused to let her go. Giving in, as she’d missed getting to be so close to her fox, Judy gave herself over to him, body relaxing as she let him lead. The gentle press of lips and the sweet exploration of tongues had the doe whining, paws tightening in the slightly fluffier than before fur on the nape of Nick’s neck. Winter was coming, and Judy couldn’t wait for her fox to gain his seasonal coat. The feel of wandering paws had Judy’s whine turning sharply into a gasp of surprise, sharp claws lightly pressing against delicate skin as Nick grasped her butt. “Remind me to send her a gift basket.” The doe whispered against her mate’s lips, pushing back into the tod’s grasp, enjoying the way his large paws smothered her small frame.

A rumble of amusement made Nick’s chest vibrate, and he pulled back enough to look down at his bunny. Emerald met violet, yet Nick refused to remove his paws from their position, cupping Judy’s butt. “Speaking of gifts…” The tod licked his lips; nerves’ setting in as he prayed what he was about to do was right. He’d done as much research as possible with the limited resources he had access to at the academy, and once Major Friedkin had handed him back his phone this morning, he’d done some Zoogling. “Close your eyes, please.” He instructed, giving Judy’s behind a gentle squeeze of encouragement.

Curious about what Nick had done, but trusting her mate implicitly, Judy closed her eyes. Nick took her paws in his own, giving her a gentle tug to get her walking. Keeping her steps light and her eyes closed, the doe let her fox lead her through their apartment and into the living room. Brought to a stop, Judy thought that Nick would let her go, but instead, he ran his paws up to her arms, stepping around, so he stood behind her. Strong arms wrapped around her waist and Judy brought her paws to rest over her mates, fingers lacing together. “Open your eyes.” The soft whisper in one of her large ears made Judy shiver, a pleasant tingling sweeping down her spine at the tone of her mate’s command.

Opening her eyes, Judy inhaled sharply. A beautiful large bouquet of dark red roses sat in a vase on the coffee table, and alongside the flowers were jars of candy and a small collection of dowels.
Surprised, and confused as to why Nick had gone to such trouble, Judy’s head tipped sideways, violet eyes taking in all of the romantic gifts. It wasn’t her birthday, and it certainly wasn’t Valentine’s Day.

“Happy Courting Day,” Nick whispered, unsure as to how his surprise was received. It was a rabbit custom, a sort of holiday for them. Courting Day was the primary day of the year for bucks to make their intentions known and declare an interest in the doe they wanted to pursue. They showered them with gifts and asked their family for permission to court them. Nick had been in two minds as to whether or not he would fully participate in the day. He’d considered picking up some flowers on the way home as Judy was already his, the bonding bracelet around her wrist a symbol of his intent, and Stu had already granted him permission to date Judy all those months ago on the back porch at Bunnyburrow. Judy had gone above and beyond for him, though, and had adapted to fox culture and customs. It was only fair for him to return the favor.

The additional time off he’d been granted had sealed the deal for Nick and had prompted him to go all out. He’d been the only fox in Bunnyburrow buying Courting Day gifts, and though he’d received a lot of stares and had heard some ugly words muttered in his direction, he’d ignored them all, focusing on picking out the best gifts for his doe.

Judy’s dating history was still a mystery to Nick, something he knew he’d have to ask her about soon, so he wasn’t entirely sure whether she’d experienced Courting Day before. If so, then Nick was grateful it hadn’t worked out with whatever unlucky buck had tried to woo his bunny. If not, then Nick would get to be her first Courting Day suitor.

Ears drooping as the reason for Nick’s surprise sank in, Judy was touched by his thoughtfulness. Courting Day had always been her least favorite holiday, the day of the year where she’d always felt left out. Few bucks had wanted to ask her father for permission to date her, and the ones that had even considered asking had been put off by Julian’s overbearing need to ensure his littermates only dated the best of the bunch. Her brother meant well, but the doe hadn’t been able to experience Courting Day like her friends and other sisters. “Oh, Nick.” She sniffled, moved by the fact her mate had done some research and was partaking in elements of her culture.

“Please don’t cry, sweetheart.” Nick cooed, dropping a kiss on the top of Judy’s head, still holding her. His grip was broken moments later though as Judy turned on the spot, small paws reaching up once again for the back of his neck as he was hauled down into a fiery kiss. A muffled noise of surprise left the tod at his mate’s sudden passion, but he met the firm press of her lips with equal fervor. Nick swallowed the little mewls of happiness that Judy made as he wrapped his arms around her, paws sliding down to cup her butt and give him enough of a hold to lift her from the ground. Mouths still pressed together, Nick carried his bunny to the couch, struggling to remember where he was going as he was distracted by the gentle lick of Judy’s small tongue against the seam of his lips. As Nick came to sit on the couch, his bunny came to rest straddling him, her paws leaving his neck to instead press against his chest, keeping him pinned in place.

Judy softened their kiss as she came to rest on her mate’s lap, the demanding exploration of her lips and tongue slowing until she eventually pulled back. “Thank you.” She whispered, more touched by Nick’s actions than she’d anticipated. Though Judy had brushed off Courting Day, had forced herself to act like it hadn’t bothered her when no buck had asked her father for permission to date her, the doe had still been hurt by the lack of interest shown in her. The fact Nick had gone out of his way to buy treats for her, her favorite dowels, and a bouquet of beautiful flowers only served as a reminder to her that all of those bucks in Bunnyburrow weren’t worthy of her attention. Her fox had won her over without even trying.

Lifting a paw, Nick brushed a clawed thumb over Judy’s cheek, enjoying the way she leaned into
his touch, eyes closing as she turned and nuzzled his palm. “I guess it’s kind of redundant considering we’re already together and you’re more than aware of my intentions.” Emerald eyes moved to the bonding bracelet around Judy’s wrist, the carrot and pawpsicle charms a reminder of how far they’d come in such a short space of time.

“It’s not redundant.” Judy murmured, eyes opening. Following Nick’s gaze to her wrist, the doe smiled. “I still appreciate you going to all this effort for me.” She turned to look over her shoulder at the table, taking in her surprise. “How did you know I like Candy Carrots?”

“Educated guess. You like candy and carrots, and you’re my Carrots.” Wincing at how corny his response was, Nick knew he couldn’t take it back now. The snort of laughter from his bunny and the way she buried her snout against the fur sticking out from the open neck of his shirt as she chuckled made embarrassing himself worth it, though. In truth, Wolford had told him during one of their breaks in his training week that Judy kept a bag of Candy Carrots in her desk drawer, and had stuffed a little packet of them in her belt for when they were walking the beat or stuck in the cruiser watching mammals and traffic.

Twisting, Judy reached behind her for some of the candy. Grabbing a pawful she turned back around, feeding one to her fox before taking one for herself. Seeing the amusement on Nick’s face, and the pleasant surprise, as he tasted Candy Carrots for the first time, made Judy grin. They worked their way through her pawful of treats, enjoying being back in one another’s company until Judy ran out of candy. Resting their foreheads together, Judy’s chin tucked perfectly into the curve of Nick’s snout. Eyes closed, Judy let the feelings of love and appreciation roll over her and consume her. It felt like the tide lapping at the shore, caressing the sand, soothing her soul.

Nick offered Judy calmness, peacefulness in the stormy sea of life. Mr. Big had been right all those months ago – he was her safe harbor. With all the chaos of work and the closing of the cases regarding Catstro and his gang, Judy hadn’t had the chance to unwind. She hadn’t been able to stop and appreciate the fact that what had happened hadn’t come back to bite her on the butt, and it was all because of the tod whose lap she was sat in. The lengths Nick had gone to to ensure she wouldn’t suffer more than necessary still astounded her.

Judy knew it was silly to become so emotional over Nick wanting to give her Courting Day, but the fact her mate had bothered to look into it, had gone out and picked her favorite things and surprised her with them when no one else had bothered before, made her want to cry. Judy knew Nick was it for her, that there would never be anyone else, and it had prompted her to set in motion plans for his Christmas present. The doe was aware of her fox’s jealousy issues, and though he’d asked her to arrange for them to have dinner with Akita and Bandit this evening so he could try and tackle it, Judy had taken matters into her own paws too. She knew she needed to help Nick, to prove once and for all that no mammal would ever succeed in driving her away from him. Her Christmas gift would hopefully do that.

Ever since the Catstro mess Judy had started to try and make smarter decisions, decisions that took into consideration her fox and his feelings, decisions that would hopefully be right in the long-term and wouldn’t come back to bite them. It was tough, but Judy knew now that her life wasn’t just her own anymore. Her life was more interesting now, enriched, and work was no longer the only focus for her. It had crossed her mind on more than one occasion that though she’d wanted to be a cop to make the world a better place, a higher being pushed her onto the path. After all, if she hadn’t of pursued her dream she never would’ve met Nick.

Nick had never liked silence. Silence during a conversation was awkward, silence during a business deal meant he’d probably messed up, silence from his mom meant he was in trouble, and silence gave his mind the opportunity to walk down paths he didn’t like to travel. However, the
silence he found himself in with Judy was different than the rest. Her small weight was settled in his lap, her paws on him, her forehead against his. The little puffs of her breath ruffled his fur, the rising and falling of her chest giving him a rhythm to match, and her scent soothed him. Combined, it was calming, which was something Nick had never anticipated from silence before.

Though no words had been exchanged, Nick felt the depth of Judy’s love, and he hoped she could feel his in return. It was exhilarating and scary, fulfilling and intense all at once. Wolford’s words still rattled around the tod’s head. He’d been able to give something back to Judy, to provide her with something in return. The gray bunny in his lap had never been part of his plan, Nick had never afforded himself the luxury of thinking about a future with a mate, but looking at it now he couldn’t help but wonder if his life had turned out the way it had so that he would cross paths with her. They’d become inseparable – a fox and a rabbit. The thought almost made Nick snort, but the silence was too blissful to break. He couldn’t stop his smile though at the realization that some being out there, be them fate or destiny, had decided that the over-enthusiastic country bunny in his arms was his soul mate.

Soul mate.

The tod’s brain honed in on those two words, and his next actions were instinctual, driven by the primal part of his species that had been suppressed for hundreds of years as foxes had tried to become more civilized, to fit in with the changing world. Moving his head, Judy’s chin slipped from his snout, but before she could complain or pull back, Nick brought his muzzle to the side of her face, rubbing over soft gray fur, leaving his scent on her. He didn’t expect anything back from her, knew in the more rational part of his mind that it was a risk to muzzle her without talking about it first, but instincts drove him, and he succumbed to them happily. Eyes still closed, the fox savored the way Judy pressed back into his muzzling, and underneath the sound of their shared breathing he could pick up on the slow grinding of her tooth purring.

Heart clenching as Nick muzzled her, Judy began to grind her back teeth, consumed with love for her fox as he claimed her. Giving him time to smother her in his scent properly, Judy brought her paws to Nick’s snout, gently stopping his motion. Lifting her chin, Judy brought it to rest on the bridge of Nick’s nose, and with a gentle motion, she started to rub, chinning her fox, smothering him in her scent in return. Her mom had instilled in her the importance of chinning, how much of a sacred act it was, and though she and Nick were not lost in the throes of passion, and there was no ring on her finger, it felt like the right moment to mark him.

As realization set in as to what Judy was doing, Nick’s tail thumped happily against the couch, a low purr vibrating through his body. Judy’s scent flooded his nostrils, and he tightened his hold on her. “I love you.” Nick breathed, the thumping of his tail slowing to a gentle flick, the fluffy appendage swishing around to wrap around his mate.

Satisfied that Nick was suitably marked, that her instincts and desire had been sated, his words made the doe smile, and she pulled back enough to dip down and press a sweet kiss to his lips. “I love you too.” She whispered back, moving to snug against his chest, tucking herself under his snout, comfortably wrapped up in his arms and tail.

Content, Nick and Judy sat together in comfortable silence for a while, focusing on the sound of one another’s breathing and heartbeats. It was Judy who eventually broke the silence, voice soft and soothing, not quite ready for the moment to end but knowing they had other plans. “We need to prepare for dinner soon.”

“I know.” Nick sighed, not wanting the moment to end. They still had time before they were due to meet Akita and Bandit at Misty’s on the Vine, in the Rainforest District. Though Nick had asked
Judy to arrange dinner for the four of them, he couldn’t help but feel nervous. This evening would give him the chance to see Akita and Bandit together, to give him peace of mind that the arctic fox wasn’t trying to take his bunny from him. The tod also hoped he’d have the opportunity to speak with the other fox on the quiet, to sort through his feelings and jealousy. Judy’s scent surrounded him, clung to his fur, and he glanced to the bracelet around her wrist. He didn’t have anything to worry about; he was just irrational. Wanting to change the topic, Nick settled on work. “How’s the case?” When he’d last called there had been some exciting developments in The Cloven Hoof shooting, but as Judy was only drip-fed information she hadn’t had much to share with him.

Pulling back enough so that she could look into the emerald eyes she loved, Judy’s paws came to rest on Nick’s chest, rising and falling with his breath, feeling the thudding of his heartbeat under her palm. “They found Catstro’s body two days ago. He’s been officially declared dead. COD was drowning.” The information wasn’t new to either of them, and it hadn’t taken long for the ME to reach her conclusion. The call had come in an hour after role call, and Chief Bogo had taken a team out to Tundratown. She’d been called into his office shortly after his return and had been delivered the news that Catstro’s body had been found in a snowdrift.

“What about the rest of his gang? Any update?” The news of the shooting had been troubling the fox since Judy had filled him in on her attendance at the scene. The Cloven Hoof was known for its criminal clientele. Nick had been forced to enter the establishment a few times for business, and every time he’d felt the urge to bathe in bleach afterward. Lacking cameras and a morally righteous owner, The Cloven Hoof was the perfect place for dodgy dealings.

Nodding, Judy remembered her meeting with Chief Bogo this morning. “Money. They were all trying to find Catstro’s stash of money. They thought Marcus had taken it given he was the accountant, which is likely why he was killed first. The team on the case found encrypted messages on their phones, and they all suspected one another of taking the cash and trying to hide it. Chief thinks it all came to a head when they met up at The Cloven Hoof and it disintegrated into the shootout.” Chief Bogo had gone on to discuss the money and the fact that it now presented them with another case. It wasn’t high on the priority list, though. They had no idea how much money there was, no clues as to where to look, and Bogo felt like there were more pressing matters than a few grand of missing cash. They’d look into it because they had to, but Chief Bogo had sounded ready to wash his hooves of Catstro, his gang, and their mess. Judy had breathed a sigh of relief once the cape buffalo had dismissed her, knowing the money in Nick’s deposit box had been part of Catstro’s stash.

“They say that money is the root to the evilest ways.” Given how hungry Catstro and his gang had been for Nick’s money every month, it didn’t surprise the tod that they’d all met their demise while chasing it. It did leave him with one question, though. “What happened to the money then, if none of them had it?”

Lifting a finger, Judy extracted herself from Nick’s grasp, reluctantly leaving the safety of her mate’s arms and tail. Slipping from the couch, Judy headed in the direction of her room, casting a glance over her shoulder to find a confused expression on her fox’s handsome face. Grabbing the silver metal briefcase she’d stashed under her bed, Judy returned to the living room. She’d gone to collect half of the deposit box money yesterday in preparation for Nick coming home, doing as he asked all those months ago. Hoisting up the case, Judy let it come to rest on Nick’s lap, her fox quirking an eyebrow as he took it in while Judy scrambled up to sit sideways next to him so she could watch. “You asked me to withdraw half of the money in the safety deposit box for your mom.”

Staring at the briefcase on his lap, Nick chuckled. It was a little bit overkill for a few thousand dollars. He could only imagine how sketchy Judy had looked leaving the bank with it. “Fluff, an
envelope would’ve sufficed, there was no need to buy a briefcase for it.”

Rolling her eyes, Judy pushed out one of her hind paws, knocking Nick’s leg. “Just open it. 0327.” She told him the code, teeth sinking into her lower lip in a combination of excitement and concern. How would Nick react to what was inside? When Judy had left the bank, she’d booked a Zuber rather than walking, not wanting to be out on the street with so much cash on her.

Smiling at the fact that the code was his birthday, Nick entered the four-digit number into the lock on the side of the briefcase. It released with a clunk as he entered the last digit, and his large paws grasped at the metal. Nick lifted the lid and emerald eyes found the cash inside. “Holy…” Nick slammed the lid shut, eyes wide and heart thudding as he tried to process what he’d just seen. Gaze turning to Judy, he gestured to the briefcase with a tip of his head. “This…?” He swallowed. “Half?” Nick squeaked, disbelief marring his face.

“There was $300,000 in the box.” Judy dropped the proverbial bomb, and if the subject weren’t so serious, she would’ve laughed at Nick’s reaction.

Jaw dropping and eyebrows shooting up, a whine of distress and shock slipped past Nick’s lips before he could stop it. $300,000. That wasn’t possible. “I only borrowed $200,000. I only paid that much back.” Why was there so much in his deposit box? What was Mr. Big playing at?

Hearing her mate’s distress spurred Judy into action, and the doe moved to kneel next to Nick, paws finding his arm, which she rubbed soothingly. “I know. I asked Mr. Big why there was so much and he told me everything was fine, that you should just enjoy it.”

Emerald eyes still locked with violet ones, Nick was at a loss. Money. He had money. Lots of it. “That means there’s $150,000 in this case.” Nick let out the breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding as Judy nodded in confirmation. Paws shaking, Nick returned his focus to the briefcase, carefully lifting the lid again. $150,000 sat in his lap. His mom would be comfortable; she could give up her job and do something she loved instead, work somewhere that respected her. Though the amount of money would help his mom immensely, it gave Nick another problem. “Mom’s going to want to know where I got this kind of money from. I can’t make up some savings or something that dad had like I did before.”

Judy didn’t want to push, didn’t want to force Nick and get him to talk when he wasn’t ready, but this was a golden opportunity for him to finally confess to his mom, to let her know about everything that had happened to him since he’d left home as a kit. Judy knew it would be hard on Marian, that the vixen would probably cry or go into shock, but the longer Nick hid it from her, the more painful it would be. Keeping such huge secrets from the mammal who’d raised him and loved him unconditionally wasn’t healthy. “Maybe it’s time to tell her some of it?” The doe spoke softly, careful to keep her voice neutral. This was Nick’s decision to make, and whatever he chose Judy would respect that, even if she didn’t agree.

The suggestion didn’t catch Nick off guard as it had several months ago. Back then; the thought of telling his mom had been preposterous. She hadn’t needed to know, and Nick had wanted to keep it that way. His mom wasn’t going to take $150,000 from him though without grilling him about where it came from. He could say he won the lottery or that he won some money betting? That a friend had died and left him his fortune? Nick shook his head. He couldn’t lie to her. The tod had spent the last twenty years lying and conning, living up to the stereotypes of his species. He was trying to be more honest now, and though it was a slow process with the occasional bump in the road, Nick knew his mom deserved the whole truth. Perhaps it was time. “I guess I could tell her some of it. I could tell her how I paid off the mortgage and that I was working jobs for years to pay it off. I won’t tell her what jobs though, or where I was living. That would be too much for her. I
Paws still rubbing Nick’s arm, Judy gave the limb a gentle squeeze. “I’ll stay with you while you tell her if you want.” The doe offered, not wanting her mate to have to face this hurdle alone. Nick’s sharp nod made Judy swallow. The conversation wouldn’t be pretty, but she wouldn’t abandon her fox. “How are we going to explain that you suddenly have $150,000 to give to her?”

“The mammal I was paying back died, and as he had no next of kin an executive decision was made that I should receive the funds,” Nick suggested, opting for the truth. “It’s going to crush her.” He whispered, emerald eyes taking in the mountain of cash in the briefcase. Nick didn’t want to hurt his mom, didn’t want to disappoint her, and didn’t want to see the regret in her eyes. The possibility of hurting the mammal that had brought him into the world, who’d given so much to him and loved him with every fiber of her being, was soul destroying.

Though the doe knew Marian well, she still couldn’t predict how she would react. All she could do at present was try to offer her mate some comfort, and then stand by his side when it came time to bite the bullet. “It might, but it might also bring you closer together. Your mom will probably be angry and upset at first, it’ll be a lot for her, but she’ll come around, and she’ll realize that you did it all because you love her and you wanted to protect her. You only had the best intentions going into it. She’s your mom, Nick. No matter what she’ll always love you.”

Closing the lid of the briefcase, Nick took a deep breath. Judy was right. He’d gone into this with good intentions, the hope of freeing his mom from her worries, and for her to live a much more comfortable life. What was done was done, and all Nick could do now was come clean and hope for the best. “You’re right. Thank you.” With the briefcase locked he turned his head to look at his mate, and the mixture of concern and love on her beautiful face gave him strength. “Come on, we should get ready for dinner.”

Misty’s on the Vine was an impressive restaurant. Located in the Rainforest District, it had been in business for over 45 years. Though open 24 hours a day, the popularity of the place meant booking a table was highly recommended. Judy had booked in for 7:30 pm, and even with the distractions once she’d come home from work, she and Nick were still on time. Judy had decided to wear another of Marian’s creations, this time a pretty yellow dress that fell to her knees. The neckline was straight across, the halter straps that tied around her neck kept the dress up, and it was clinched at the waist with a sash of yellow ribbon.

Nick had decided to ditch his usual Pawaiian print shirts this evening in favor of a plain light blue one. Teamed with dark jeans, his clothes were comfortable yet suitable for dinner at Misty’s. When Judy had emerged from her bedroom after changing, Nick’s mouth had gone dry. The way the dress hugged her waist and hips was sinful, and the halter straps that were tied in a little bow at the nape of her neck were just asking to be undone. He’d kept a firm hold on her paw as they’d caught the train to the Rainforest District, eyes narrowing at any male that stole a second glance at his mate.

Still holding paws, they entered the restaurant. “Hi, I have a table booked for four under the name Hopps.” Judy offered the racoon behind the podium a smile.

The racoon flipped through the reservation book, finding the correct name and the note attached to it. “Your other two guests have already arrived. If you’ll follow me please, I’ll show you to your table.” The racoon picked up two more menus before leading the fox and rabbit to the booth where their friends had been waiting for a couple of minutes.
Spotting their landlady sat in a booth, Nick’s gaze soon traveled to the mammal by her side. “Bandit.” The arctic fox was exactly as Judy had described, with a black band of fur across his eyes and the rest of his coat pure white. What caught Nick’s attention the most, though, was the way the other tod was lost in conversation with Akita. They were snuggled together on one side of the booth, Akita closest to the wall while Bandit sat on the outside, body angled towards the amur leopard, leaning forward a little into her space. His left arm lay along the back of the booth and though he was much smaller than the feline, Bandit still managed to make himself seem large and imposing, shielding the big cat. From an outsider’s perspective, the canine and feline enamored. It wasn’t enough to convince Nick, though. He knew foxes, knew how they operated and how many of them weren’t afraid to live their lives playing to their stereotypes. He still didn’t believe that the arctic fox wasn’t interested in his mate.

“Akita!” Judy grinned, overjoyed at seeing her landlady after so long. With the craziness of her work and Akita’s recent trip back to the Old World, the two mammals hadn’t had the chance to catch up in a while.

“Judy.” The amur leopard’s attention left her boyfriend as Nick and Judy approached. Her position penned in against the wall meant she was unable to embrace her rabbit friend, but as Judy slid into the booth opposite her, and Nick took up the position on the outside of the booth, Akita offered her paw across the table.

Taking the felines paw in her own, Judy gave it a squeeze. Akita’s paw swamped hers, and the big cat’s size meant the doe didn’t have to worry about hurting her with her greeting. “Bandit.” Judy turned and greeted the arctic fox with the same warm cheerfulness, offering her paw out to him.

The tod took Judy’s offered paw, giving it a gentle squeeze before he let go, very aware of the hard green eyes focused on him. This was Bandit’s first time meeting Nick, and though Judy had shown him enough photos to last a lifetime, and the arctic fox was pretty certain he now knew every funny story regarding the other tod, he had the distinct impression that the red fox opposite him would be on edge all evening. Bandit didn’t want to risk ruining the relationship between the fox and rabbit should Nick take his friendly affection as being anything more than that, which is why he offered the same paw out to Nick. “Bandit Whitmaw.” He introduced himself formally, though the tod was certain that Nick already knew a lot about him.

The instinctual drive to rip Judy’s paw out of Bandit’s surprised Nick and the tod forced down the feeling as much as possible. Instead, Nick slipped back behind his con-mammal mask. Shoulders dropping and lazy grin in place, the red fox took the offered paw, giving it a firm shake. “Nick Wilde.” Flicking his tail up, Nick let it come to rest across Judy’s lap, staking his claim. Bandit’s eyes followed the movement, and when their gazes finally met again, the red fox pulled his paw back as he quirked an eyebrow.

Amused by Nick’s possessiveness, Bandit weighed up the pros and cons of tormenting the red fox. It was tempting, the darker side of him wanting nothing more than to mess with Nick, especially after the stunt he’d pulled with Judy’s bonding bracelet, but Akita had made him promise to be on his best behavior, and the arctic fox never broke the promises he made to his girlfriend. “I hear you’re currently training to become an officer, like Judy.”

Unsure as to how much of his life Judy had shared, Nick simply nodded. He prayed that Judy hadn’t told Bandit too much, if only because he didn’t trust the other tod. “You heard right. I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage, though. What is it you do?” Nick tipped his head a little, curious about the arctic fox’s background. Judy hadn’t been very forthcoming with any information.
“I work in medicine.” Bandit was proud of his job and how hard he’d worked to get to where he currently was. It hadn’t been easy, and even to this day there were still the occasional few patients who didn’t want to be tended to by a fox, but he was quickly earning a strong reputation at Savannah General. He’d moved around the city’s hospitals during his career, trying to get a feel as to where he fitted in the best, and he was hedging his bets on his current placement.

Nose wrinkling, Nick felt a little irritated with the other fox’s career path. He’d been hoping that Bandit would have an awful job, that it would give Nick something to feel better about. “I didn’t think they let us become doctors.” Nick let the barb slip, his displeasure at finding out that Bandit was well educated with a good job difficult to conceal.

“And I didn’t think they let us become cops, and yet here we are.” The arctic fox shot back, not liking Nick’s tone.

Scowling, Nick was about to respond when the peppy server interrupted, asking for their drinks order. Sighing, Nick sat back, letting Judy go first. His doe opted for elderflower wine, and Akita decided to try it with her. Bandit punted for water, explaining that he was on-call with Savannah General should they need an extra set of paws. Nick tried his hardest not to roll his eyes at the information. He was meant to be trying to work things out with the arctic fox, after all. When it came to Nick’s turn, the tod decided to go with something a bit stronger than his fellow mammal’s, having a feeling it would be needed if he had to spend longer in Bandit’s company. “Bourbon. Wild Turkey if you have it, please.” With a nod, their server left to get their drinks, and the feel of small paws on his tail had Nick shuddering, turning his head to look sideways at his mate. Judy was gently stroking his tail, wide violet eyes blinking up at him. Offering her a gentle smile as he tried to push down the feelings of pleasure from her stroking, the tod threw his arm around her, across the back of the booth.

Though Judy knew it was dangerous to be stroking Nick’s tail out in public, given the reaction it pulled from him, the doe wanted to soothe her fox. She could tell that he was on edge, that he was uncomfortable with their current situation. Nick’s con-mammal mask was back in place, after all. He was being silly, throwing his tail over her lap and his arm around her, posturing and staking his claim, but Judy indulged him in this instance and let him get away with it. Meeting Bandit was a huge step for Nick, and though so far it hadn’t gone as well as she’d hoped, at least they hadn’t killed one another.

“How is your training going, Nick?” Akita turned her focus to the red fox. The last she’d heard, everything had been going well for the tod, though he’d been forced into taking extra classes with Judy’s temporary partner. Akita had met Wolford a few times when he’d dropped Judy off at various restaurants across the city after their shift, so she and the doe could get dinner together. The timber wolf had always been polite to her, and his care for Judy was evident. The server returned with their drinks, setting them down for them before leaving them for a while longer.

Reaching for his glass, Nick took a sip of his drink, enjoying the sweet vanilla notes that complimented the oakiness of the liquor. Relaxing a little more with his mate’s paws on him, the tip of Nick’s tail flicked happily. “It’s going well, thank you.” When his week with Wolford had come to an end, Major Friedkin had asked for a demonstration to show Nick’s progress. He and Wolford had sparred for a while, and the tod had been able to pin the wolf a few times. Pleased with his progress, Major Friedkin had signed off his week of training and Wolford had returned to the city. Since then, Nick had made it his personal goal to spar with some of his fellow cadets at least twice a week in the evenings. Randon had been his first partner, matched regarding size with Wolford, and then Nick had entered the ring with Tony. The tiger had played dirty and had bested him for a while, but once Nick had been able to identify the big cat’s weak points, he’d utilized them to bring him down. The tod was yet to face Horton; he was working himself up to it as he
knew that would be the hardest sparring session.

“Nick’s modest. He’s on course to be valedictorian.” Judy interrupted, grinning at her fox with pride. She’d always believed in him, and seeing him thrive and succeed was the most incredible thing to witness. He’d gone from thinking little of himself and his situation, to bettering himself and his situation. Nick shrugged off her praise, though Judy didn’t miss the small quirking at the corner of his lips.

“You’ll probably end up on parking duty first.” Bandit threw a barb back at Nick, still feeling a little salty that the other tod had tried to belittle his occupation and status. Judy had told him all about her first day on the force and the 201 tickets she’d written before noon, and Bandit crossed his fingers Nick would find himself in a ridiculous high visibility vest putting tickets on cars too.

Shaking his head, Nick didn’t bother to hide his smirk. “I doubt that. Carrots is going to be my partner, and Chief won’t want her on parking duty.” Though Judy and Wolfford had been given patrol work since Nick’s enrollment at the academy, the tod had a feeling that Bogo was itching to get Judy back onto cases soon. She’d solved both the missing mammals and the night howler cases with ease and in a short space of time. Walking the beat wasn’t the best use of her talents, and neither was parking duty.

Though Akita had known that Nick and Judy would be working in the same precinct, she hadn’t been aware that they would be partners. “They allow those romantically involved to work together?” She questioned, gaze shifting between Nick and Judy. She knew in most professions that rules and regulations were in place to deal with relationships in the workplace.

“Mhm. So long as one isn’t superior to the other, it’s fine.” Judy had breathed a huge sigh of relief when she’d discovered that her relationship with Nick wouldn’t stop them from being able to work together. They would have to keep their paws to themselves while on the clock as the last thing Judy wanted was to be caught in a compromising situation with her mate and have to be disciplined by Chief Bogo.

Offering Judy a soft smile, Nick moved his arm around Judy so that he could gently stroke the back of her head, shifting a hind paw to knock it against one of hers. “You’re superior to me though, Fluff.”

“Still just an officer.” The doe shrugged, letting go of Nick’s tail long enough to reach for her wine and take a sip. Elderflower wine had been her first drink as a teenager, and the doe was extremely fond of it.

As Judy placed her glass back down, Nick chuckled. His mate could be clueless sometimes. “That’s not what I meant.” He smiled in amusement as the real meaning finally sank in, the inside of his rabbit’s ears turning a light shade of pink as they dropped with her embarrassment.

Feeling flustered, Judy let her paws fall back to Nick’s tail, giving her something else to focus on other than her raging blush. “Don’t be silly.” She whispered, stealing a glance up at her mate, unable to stop her smile as she saw the fondness in Nick’s gaze. Every time he looked at her with such warmth the doe wondered what she’d done to deserve such a loving mate.

“You two will give me cavities.” Akita shook her head fondly, finding the rabbit and fox adorable. When she had first shown them around the apartment, she’d had a sneaky feeling that something would happen between them, but it had taken a little longer than she’d anticipated. The amur leopard had worried that once they’d come to their senses and started a relationship, they would no longer need a two bedroom apartment and would move out, but that hadn’t been the case, and Akita couldn’t be more grateful. They were her best tenants, never asking for anything and always
paying their rent on time. The tenants in her other properties continually gave her headaches.

Silently watching Nick and Judy interact, Bandit couldn’t deny that there was chemistry between them, but he couldn’t help but feel disgruntled with the other fox for the way he’d handled the bonding bracelet issue. When the arctic fox had first seen it around Judy’s wrist he’d been surprised, curious, and a little concerned. The acceptance of a bonding bracelet was a huge deal, so when Judy had started asking questions about it, apparently not understanding its true meaning, Bandit had been furious with Nick, though he’d refrained from saying anything as it hadn’t been his place.

All four mammals fell silent as they started to peruse the menu, and when their server returned they were ready to order. Judy went first and opted for the veggie pizza, Akita settled on the salmon pasta, Bandit decided on the cricket cassoulet, and Nick ordered the beetle burger.

Once their orders had been taken and the server had left, Nick turned his focus to the other tod. “So, Bandit. Remind me again how you met Judy?” Nick trusted his mate and her version of events, but he wanted to test the other fox’s honesty.

Taking a sip of his water, Bandit lifted an eyebrow at Nick’s question. An uneasy feeling settled in the arctic fox’s gut as he felt like he was being tested. “The supermarket. She looked alone and lost in the predator aisles, so I stepped in to help.” He could remember the day like it was only yesterday. It had been quite the sight to see a small rabbit wandering through the predator aisles, basket in one paw and a scowl on her face.

Annoyed that the stories matched up and he wouldn’t be able to call Bandit out, Nick wrinkled his nose. “How noble of you.”

“I’m always happy to help a lady in need.” Bandit relaxed against the back of the booth, silently enjoying how he was able to get under Nick’s skin so easily. It was a little cruel of him perhaps, but the other fox hadn’t given him the chance to show that he was a good mammal. Instead, he’d acted like every other mammal and judged him before getting to know him.

Eyes narrowing, Nick’s free paw clenched under the table, oblivious to the concern on Judy’s face as she looked between the two males. “I bet you are.”

“Akita, how was your trip home?” Judy picked the first topic that came to mind, biting on her lower lip. The tension in the air could be cut with a knife, and Judy knew that she needed to steer the topic of conversation away from anything that could lead to Nick and Bandit coming to blows. Giving Nick’s tail a warning squeeze, she slapped on a smile. The end of her mate’s tail stopped flicking with her squeeze, and Judy felt momentarily pleased that he’d been suitably chastised.

A wistful smile crossed Akita’s lips as she remembered home. Though Zootopia was beautiful and she was feeling more and more at ease in the city as time went on, nothing would ever replace her homeland. “It was wonderful, thank you. Zussia this time of year is perfect. It’s just starting to get cold, and all the leaves turn beautiful shades of orange and red. We have plenty of public holidays too, and the streets are filled with mammals. We had Unity Day before I came back, where we celebrate the peaceful existence between predator and prey. There was singing and dancing, a parade and a talent show.” The leopard loved all of the traditions of her home and always took part in them when she was able to. This year she’d been on one of the floats, dancing with some of her old friends. She was sure there were photos of it flying around on Furbook. “You should visit the Old World soon!” Akita still had her family home in Zussia, and she was more than happy for Nick and Judy to borrow it anytime they wanted. The crossing to the Old World was much easier now, with regular ships and planes across the ocean; the only downside was how expensive the trip could be.
Nick had never ventured to the Old World. As much as he’d wanted to follow in his Grandfather’s footsteps, he’d never had the means to do so. Now, though, with $150,000 sitting in a deposit box he could explore the world with his doe and see everything their planet had to offer.

“That would be incredible. I’ve always wanted to travel. Up for it, Slick?” Judy nudged her mate, noting the distant look in his eyes.

Jolted from his thoughts, the tod offered Judy a smile. If she wanted to travel, then he’d take her travelling. “Sure, sounds like fun.”

The arrival of their meals stopped the conversation from going any further, and all four mammals fell silent while they ate. “Is it good?” Judy whispered at Nick, nodding her head at his food. When Wolford had returned from the academy, Judy had asked how the food was there, and whether Nick had appeared to be enjoying it. The timber wolf had told her that Nick was eating fine, though one day he’d simply pushed his dinner around the plate as if he hadn’t been interested in it.

Judy’s concern about his eating habits was endearing, but the doe did not need to worry anymore. Nick was doing better with his food; he was enjoying it more and finding his appetite growing. There were occasional days where food held no interest to him, but they were few and far between now. “It’s great, Fluff. Best burger I’ve had in years.” Nick reassured his bunny, offering her a smile.

“Yeah?” Judy couldn’t stop her need to double-check, pausing with her fork halfway up to her mouth.

Though Nick could feel Akita and Bandit’s eyes on them, he ignored them in favor of reassuring his mate. Nodding, he made sure he held Judy’s gaze so she would understand that he was being honest. “I’m enjoying it.” He kept his response short and sweet; cryptic enough so that Akita and Bandit wouldn’t know what they were talking about, but a strong enough response to ensure Judy would understand and let it go. The dropping of her shoulders and the smile she offered Nick before she carried on eating prompted Nick to return to his own food.

When their plates were clear, and the server had returned to take them away, they were presented with the dessert menu. “Oh before we move on to dessert, I need the little kitten’s room.” Akita excused herself, eyes swiveling to Judy. When Judy had called her to arrange dinner, the amur leopard had suggested that the two ladies leave the table for a short while to allow their mates to chat. Akita had read Bandit the riot act before they’d arrived, so the feline had no concerns that her mate would cause a scene with Nick.

Catching on, Judy felt a little nervous leaving Nick alone with Bandit, but the two tods needed to work a few things out without the ladies present. Judy trusted Nick, but she knew he wasn’t always in control of his emotions now that he was getting back in touch with them. “Me too.” Judy excused herself, deciding to go ahead and give Nick and Bandit the opportunity to talk alone.

Nick and Bandit moved, letting their mates out of the booth. The red fox found it a little suspicious that both ladies needed the bathroom at the same time, but then every female he’d ever known had always taken another mammal with her to the bathroom like they were incapable of going alone or it was some strange female tradition. As Judy and Akita crossed the restaurant, Nick watched his mate’s tail bob with every step she took.

“You’ve muzzled her.” Bandit broke the silence, knowing full well his mate had left on purpose. Akita was smart, but Bandit hadn’t gotten to where he was without learning a thing or two.

Gaze shifting from the door of the ladies bathroom to the tod sat opposite him, Nick let his lazy
grin settle into place. “She’s chinned me.”

“I know. I can smell it.” The moment the rabbit and fox had sat down Bandit had inconspicuously inhaled, and the blending of their scents were more apparent now. “I was never interested in her.” The tod took advantage of the fact they were alone, playing into his leopard's plan. “I can tell you don’t like me, probably think I’m too friendly with your mate, but she’s not my type.”

Lifting an eyebrow, Nick scoffed. “Not your type?” The red fox found that hard to believe. Judy was smart and beautiful, strong and passionate. What wasn’t there to love about her? She was the complete package.

“I have nothing against pred/prey pairings, they’re just not for me. Judy is one heck of a rabbit, but I genuinely wanted to help her in the grocery store, contrary to what you might think.” Bandit happily offered up the information. The fox sat on the other side of the booth to him came across as a little insecure, if his possessive tail flick was anything to go by, and Bandit knew he’d have to go out all to convince the tod that he wasn’t a threat.

Not entirely convinced, Nick appraised the arctic fox, needing more information. “And why did you help a complete stranger, other than apparently liking to save damsels in distress?”

Sighing, Bandit adopted the tone of voice he usually reserved for his nervous patients. Nick very much reminded him of them. “Have you ever seen a prey mammal, let alone a rabbit, down any of the predator aisles in your whole life?” It was unheard of, and Judy’s lost expression as she’d tried to figure out what to buy had prompted Bandit to go and ask her if she needed help. Finding out she was shopping for her predator friend had amused the arctic fox, and he’d admired her for the guts it had taken to venture into the predator aisles.

Shaking his head, Nick couldn’t say he’d ever seen a prey mammal in the predator aisles before. However, it was mainly due to Nick’s lack of time spent in supermarkets. They weren’t as easy as street stalls to steal from, and when he’d had some change for food he’d purchased from street stalls too due to how cheap they were.

“I think it took less than a minute for her to mention you. Since then its been a litany of ‘Nick this’ and ‘Nick that’ and ‘this one time, Nick and I...’ so even if I were interested, I’d have got the hint by now. Besides, you were quick to put a bonding bracelet around her wrist.” At first, Bandit hadn’t noticed how much Judy spoke about Nick, but after knowing the doe for several months now; he could safely say that the red fox was her favourite topic of conversation. “It was kind of underpawed of you.”

Caught off guard by Bandit’s comment, Nick narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know what you mean.” True the tod had wanted Judy to wear something that would keep other canines away while he was at the academy, but he’d genuinely wanted to commit that fully to her too.

Leaning forward, the arctic fox let his arms rest on the table, eyes focused on the other tod. He wouldn’t mince his words. “You gave her the most valuable gift a canine can bestow on another, a gift that caused a lot of trouble for her, and you didn’t even do her the decency of telling her what it meant.”

Uncomfortable with the turn of the conversation, Nick tried to brush off Bandit’s words. He’d already been chastised by his mom and then Judy once he’d told her about the bracelet’s true meaning, he didn’t need Bandit joining in. “She didn’t need to know. All she needed to know was that I love her and that I wanted her to have it.”

Watching Nick squirm was fascinating, and though Bandit knew it was cruel to prolong the other
tod’s suffering, he also knew it had been cruel of Nick to keep Judy in the dark. The doe had been confused, angry, and off balance without answers. The fact neither he nor her timber wolf partner could give her any answers had been painful. “I’m sure she enjoyed not knowing what it meant when she was being called a predo and being harassed by mammal’s who thought their way of thinking was just and righteous.”

“She knows what it means now, which is the important thing.” Nick knew he’d messed up by not telling her the true meaning of her bracelet right away, and he’d apologized to her for it, but it didn’t take away from the fact that it had been given with all of his love.

When Judy had returned from her weekend in Bunnyburrow reeking of Nick, and with a large grin on her face, Bandit had wanted to smack the tod for taking so long to come clean with the bracelet’s real meaning. “That doesn’t negate the fact that you purposefully didn’t tell her about it because, and I’m going to go out on a limb here, you were scared.”

Rolling his eyes, Nick crossed his arms over his chest, frowning at the arctic fox as he tried to sink further back into the booth seat. “We can only give one in our lifetime, so of course I was scared.”

Barking out a laugh, Bandit shook his head. The other fox’s denial was hilarious. “No. You weren’t scared about gifting to her, other than perhaps worrying if she’d like it. You were scared of your feelings, of her feelings too. You were afraid it would be thrown back in your face, and you would be hurt.” Watching as Nick went to protest, the arctic fox cut him off. “I work closely with a whole group of medically and psychiatrically trained mammal’s, Nick. You pick up a thing or two by being friends with them. For example, you have the trademark signs of abandonment problems, low self-esteem, and issues surrounding food.” The intense focus Judy had paid Nick as he ate, and her line of questioning had piqued Bandit’s curiosity. “The first two are typical for our species, but the third is interesting.”

Nick’s anger flared and he found himself standing, leaning over the table, paws down on the smooth surface, lips curled up into a snarl. “Don’t you dare psychoanalyze me!” He snapped, barely holding back a growl. If there was one thing Nick hated more than anything else, it was other mammal’s poking into his business. He knew he was a mess but he was working on it, and Judy was helping him. He didn’t need some other fox trying to interfere.

“They’re casual observations, nothing more than that.” The emotional outburst from Nick was enough to tell Bandit that his diagnosis had been 100% correct. Sitting back to seem as none threatening as possible, as they were starting to cause a bit of a scene, the arctic fox watched as Nick’s jaw clenched, the wheels of his mind turning as he forced himself to sit back down. “She loves you.” He attempted to soothe the other tod.

“I know.” It was one of the few things Nick was sure of in life.

Bandit shook his head, not convinced. “I don’t think you do or, at least, subconsciously you don’t. You’re possessive over her, even to the point where you’d decided you didn’t like me before meeting me.” It hadn’t taken a genius to figure out that Nick wasn’t his biggest fan. “While your possessiveness might be endearing now it may come back to cause problems for you both in the future.” The arctic fox worried that Nick might become overbearing or that it could lead to one of them being hurt in the future. Some possessiveness of one’s mate was healthy, expected almost, but the level at which Nick seemed to be sitting at made Bandit worry for the country bunny.

“She’s all I have. I’m not letting her go without a fight. I also asked her to arrange this.” Nick knew he could be a little intense, that his emotions sometimes managed to get the better of him now he was reconnecting with them, but the tod hoped that over time he would mellow out a little more.
Though he’d remained silent at the time, Bandit had been with Akita when she’d received the phone call from Judy about dinner. The doe had explained that Nick had wanted to meet Bandit, and he’d left it to her to organize it given his inability to do so from the academy. The arctic fox had been impressed by Nick’s willingness to meet him, particularly since he’d gotten the general impression from Judy that Nick wasn’t a fan of his. “You did, and it’s commendable, a step in the right direction.” He offered Nick some praise, knowing it could go a long way. However, the fox could see that his fellow predator still considered him a threat. Nick’s issues were deep, and though Bandit was curious as to what had caused them, he knew better than to ask at present.

Sighing, Bandit reached into his jacket pocket, glancing at the door of the ladies bathroom before he slid a black box across the table. “I’m asking Akita this evening, after dinner, as we walk home through the canopy. There’s a viewing area where you can see the ocean and the sky meet, and she always stops to stare at it because it reminds her of home. She wears the softest smile as she reminisces and it makes her even more beautiful.” Bandit decided to go all in. If this didn’t convince Nick that he wasn’t a threat, then nothing would. He watched as Nick reached for the box, opening it to find the diamond ring inside. “Judy has always been yours. There was never any competition. I was never a threat. The only threat right now is that your mate seems to think we might kill one another.”

“I’m pretty good at not leaving any evidence.” The comment was out before Nick could stop it; mind working on autopilot as he stared at the ring in the box he was holding. Bandit was going to propose to Akita. He was going to fully commit to another mammal.

Eyes flicking between Nick and the door to the ladies bathroom should Bandit need to suddenly snatch back the ring box, the arctic fox snorted. “And I’m good at stopping mammal’s from bleeding out.”

Closing the ring box, Nick slid it back across the table to Bandit, watching as the other tod pocketed it again, his whole body relaxing once it was out of sight. Nick was still uncomfortable that Bandit had been able to deduce so much about him from their brief interactions, but seeing the ring for Akita had helped soothe the jealousy in him. If Bandit was going to propose to Akita, then he must be serious about her, which would mean that Judy honestly didn’t hold any of his interest. Seeing the ring that the arctic fox had picked out for the amur leopard gave Nick a lot to think about. He wanted to marry Judy in the future, but he was unsure how to go about it. He’d have to head to Bunnyburrow and ask permission first, then figure out what to do for a ring. It wouldn’t be too flashy, Judy would hate that, but at the same time, Nick wanted it to be special and unique.

“I know that look well.” Bandit failed to hide his smile. It had been a risk for him to show Nick the ring he’d picked out for Akita, but by making the first move and trusting Nick with the information of his impending proposal, Bandit hoped it would lay the foundations for them starting to become friends. Nick was a huge part of Judy’s life, so Bandit knew he’d be seeing more of the other fox in the future. “That’s the look of a mammal trying to figure out how the hell he’s going to get down on one knee.” The narrowing of Nick’s eyes informed Bandit that he was right. “I wouldn’t think about it too much. You’ll know when it’s time.” Bandit shrugged. Where to propose had hit him suddenly one afternoon when he’d been tending to some of his patients. Since then, he’d been carrying the ring around in his pocket waiting for them to pass the spot his mate loved so much. This evening’s dinner had presented the perfect opportunity. “One fox to another, I suggest we start over.” He offered out a paw. “Bandit Whitmaw.”

Biting his lower lip, Nick made up his mind. Bandit was going to propose to Akita, commit himself to her for life, and so far he hadn’t given Nick any indication that he was interested in Judy whatsoever. “Just your damn insecurities rearing their ugly head again, Wilde.” The red fox offered out his paw, knowing it would make his mate happy for him and Bandit to get along. That,
and Nick knew he needed to work through his issues, and this was a crucial step in that. “I’m sorry.” Nick apologized as he shook Bandit’s paw, realizing that it had been unfair of him to judge Bandit without getting to know him first. He’d always hated it when other mammals had done that to him. As their paws separated, Bandit shrugged, wafting off the apology. “Nick Wilde.” The red fox started over.

“As in Wilde & Son?” When Judy had first mentioned Nick’s surname it had set off some bells in the arctic fox’s mind, the name familiar. It had taken him a short while to figure out where he’d heard the name before, but once he’d spoken to his grandmother, it had all become clear. Nick’s small nod made Bandit smile. “My grandmother has a coat from your family business, it’s her favorite thing. We’ll probably have to bury the old loon in it.” The tod shook his head. The coat was dark forest green, double-breasted, and fell to his grandmother’s knees. She wore it everywhere and took special care of it so that it lasted.

Snickering, Nick felt himself relaxing now that he was sure Bandit wasn’t a threat. “I’m sure your grandmother loves being called a loon.”

Chucking, the arctic fox shrugged. He loved his grandmother dearly and spent a lot of time with her when he wasn’t busy at the hospital. The fact she lived so close to Savannah General was another factor encouraging the tod to apply for a permanent position there. “As long as I’m out of earshot, and not within reach when she’s armed with her rolling pin, I can get away with calling her anything.” Bandit’s chuckle turned into a proper laugh.

Able to relate, Nick laughed too. His mom had often whacked his tail with the dishtowel whenever he’d misbehaved as a kit. She’d never put much force into it, but it had been enough to ensure he didn’t step out of line again. While thinking about stepping out of line, the red fox made a mental note to apologize to Judy for how he’d flown off the handles every time she’d mentioned Bandit. It hadn’t been fair.

Though Akita had done everything in her power to soothe the gray doe as they’d chatted in the ladies bathroom for several minutes, the amur leopard could see that Judy was itching to get back to Nick and make sure the two fox’s hadn’t killed one another. Giving in, she reached for the door, holding it open for the rabbit. Though Akita’s hopes had been reasonable, she hadn’t expected to open the door to the sound of Nick and Bandit laughing together, seemingly getting along fine “I told you, Judy. Nothing to worry about.” She offered her female companion a grin, watching as Judy’s shoulders dropped, the frown on her face smoothing out as her large ears honed in on the conversation between their mates. Judy had been frightened that Nick would end up throwing Bandit down on the floor, or that Bandit wouldn’t be able to keep his sharp tongue in check.

Surprised that Nick and Bandit appeared to be getting along, Judy scampered back to their table, slipping past Nick to take her seat beside him. Stretching up and across, the doe pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek, wide violet eyes searching emerald, her frown back in place as she tried to gauge how her fox was doing.

Happy to have his mate back, Nick lifted a paw, sweeping his fingers over her cheek, smiling as she leaned into his touch. Dropping his voice to a whisper, he pressed a kiss to Judy’s forehead. “We’re good, Fluff. It's all good.”

Chapter End Notes
Courting Day is loosely based on Sweetest Day, a holiday that is celebrated in the Midwestern United States, and parts of the Northeastern United States, on the third Saturday in October. It's a day to share romantic deeds or expressions, and I figured it was time to bring in some rabbit customs for Nick to adapt to :)

Tundratown and Truths

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the delay in this chapter! I was ready to post a few days ago but unfortunately, I've been in and out of the hospital since the weekend. First with broken toes and then with MRSA, so my schedule has been blown to smithereens. Thankfully I'm on the mend now and have been discharged by my specialist, so things are looking up!

My friend also reached out to me, and though I don't think we're going to go back to being close friends again soon as there's still a lot for us to talk about, it was good to hear that they're doing okay. Thank you for all your well wishes and hopes that we'll reconcile.

On a side note, I got my first piece of fan art the other day! I keep going on about it but I love it so much, and I'm honored that Leon wanted to draw something for this fic. Check it out here and share the love: http://lgarniger.deviantart.com/art/Safe-Paws-697483516

Nick wasn’t entirely convinced that what he’d made was edible, but the tod had followed the recipe from Mr. Johnstoni to the letter. Staring at the plate of food before him, Nick took a deep breath, checking the tray over once more before picking it up. When they’d returned from dinner last night, he and Judy had discussed sleeping arrangements. They’d concluded that Judy should just move into Nick’s room, considering the fact she slept there whenever he was away. Judy had protested at first, wanting Nick to have his own room after so long without, but the tod had shut down her argument. He wanted her in his space, enjoyed having her around, and he couldn’t imagine sleeping without her beside him. However, his room still needed painting so they’d agreed to do that this afternoon and spend the night in Judy’s room while the paint dried and the fumes dissipated.

Moving through their apartment, tray in his paws, Nick slowly backed into their bedroom door, opening it. Slipping inside, the door closed with a soft click behind him, and Nick placed the tray down on the nightstand. Judy was still curled up in bed, large ears smoothed down, cheek smushed into the pillow and paws grasping at the sheets. Taking a moment to admire his mate, Nick knew today would be tough for her. He was ready to put his plan into action to help Judy overcome her flashbacks.

Reaching out, the tod smoothed a large paw down one of Judy’s ears, the silky soft fur like velvet. Judy snuffled, pushing back into Nick’s touch, and the fox chuckled. The sound pulled Judy from her rest, and Nick was faced with the beautiful violet eyes of the bunny he loved. “Morning, Carrots.”

Smacking her lips together, Judy yawned. “Morning, Slick.” She offered her mate a sleepy smile, reaching out to touch Nick’s muzzle. Small fingers ran across short fur, and Judy found comfort in having her fox home. Their extended time apart had been wearing her down, and though their weekly phone calls helped, nothing could replace having her mate back in their apartment and close enough to touch.
“You looked so peaceful, I’m sorry to wake you.” Nick apologized, eyes briefly closing as his mate touched his snout. He’d been tempted to let Judy rest for longer, but they had a lot to do today.

Paw falling from Nicks muzzle; Judy brought it to her mouth to hide her yawn. “I had a pleasant dream.” She explained, happiness sweeping through her as she remembered what it had been about.

“Did a particular handsome fox play a role?” Nick couldn’t resist teasing, wiggling his eyebrows. Back when he’d lived under the bridge, Nick hadn’t dreamed often. After hustling all day his body and mind had been too exhausted. Once he’d started at the academy, though, the dreams had come back. Nick had worried they would be dark, that sleep would be difficult for him, but they’d turned out pleasant. Memories of his kithood, of his time with Judy, and scenarios for the future all carried him into sleep.

Hiding her grin behind her paw, Judy snickered. “Maybe.” She evaded, moving her paw from her mouth to tuck it under the pillow.

Unable to stop himself, Nick leaned over; bring their snouts together so that their noses touched. Emerald eyes focused on violet, and a lazy grin passed over the tod’s lips. “Maybe?” He pushed, curious for more.

“It was Christmas, and we went back to Bunnyburrow,” Judy admitted, wiggling her nose, making her fox laugh. It had been a wonderful dream, and though Judy had been sad to be woken from it, nothing could beat being in the moment with Nick. Christmas in Bunnyburrow was equal parts amazing and crazy. All of the Hopps family came together for a giant feast, and her mom went all out with the decorations. Littermates were the only ones to exchange gifts with one another, and presents were piled high under all of the Christmas trees that were dotted around the Hopps warren.

Watching the way Judy’s eyes misted over as she thought of home, Nick wondered what it would be like to spend Christmas in Bunnyburrow. The district had grown on him during his weekend there, the back porch of the Hopps warren holding plenty of memories, and he missed his little shadow, Sasha, more than he’d anticipated. “You want to go back for Christmas?”

Snapped out of her thoughts by her mate’s voice, Judy shrugged. It would be nice to go home for Christmas, she’d never missed a Hopps Family Christmas before, but she knew that she had other obligations in the city, and life was no longer just about her. She had to consider Nick, too.

Nick had spent every Christmas with his mom. Christmas Day was an awful time for hustling as there were too few mammal’s to con as they stayed home with their loved ones, so Nick had always taken the day off to enjoy his mom's company and her food. He didn’t want to leave her this year. If Judy wanted to go and see her family in Bunnyburrow, then he wouldn’t stop her, but spending Christmas without her would be tough.

“Why don’t we all go to Bunnyburrow? Your mom could come with us?” Judy put the idea out there, figuring it would be a great way to accommodate everyone. Her siblings adored Nick, most of them anyway, and her parents liked Marian. It would also be a break for the vixen, a small adventure out of the city limits.

Rolling the idea around, Nick’s only concern was that the sheer number of kits in the warren would overwhelm his mom. It had been a long time since she’d been around little ones. However, his mom had always been quick at adapting, and getting to take her out to the countryside and have her interact some more with Judy’s family would be a positive. “We could have dinner with mom tomorrow and ask her? I think it’s time to tell her about us and for me to come clean about the mortgage, too.” The thought of telling his mom about how he’d cleared their debt terrified him, especially as he couldn’t guess how she would react. She deserved to know; she deserved to
understand what had been going on in his life, and why things were so much better for him now. Having Judy by his side would be a blessing as Nick worried the conversation could set off a panic attack, and the last thing he wanted was to go through another one of those.

The discussion with Marian about the mortgage would be tough for her fox, and yet Judy couldn’t help but feel proud of him for being willing to take the first step in coming clean. It would be a lot for him, a lot for Marian too, and Judy silently vowed that she would stand by Nick’s side throughout the whole discussion. She wasn’t concerned about Marian possibly reacting negatively to the news of them being a couple now, if anything Judy was confident the vixen was on their side. After all, looking back at it, it was highly suspicious that Marian had bought them blankets in each other’s fur color, and that she hadn’t noticed or mentioned the book that Judy had borrowed on fox customs when the vixen had mentioned every other book that she’d borrowed. Noses still resting together, Judy closed the small distance between their lips to give her mate a soft kiss. “If that’s what you want to do, then we’ll do it.”

Nodding, Nick committed to the plan. There was no backing out now. It was time to mammal up again. Pulling back from their nose boop, the tod forced himself to relax and focus on the present. “I made you breakfast.”

“Toast?” The cheeky question was out before Judy could stop it, and the doe snickered at the sharp gasp from her mate. Nick was plenty of wonderful things, but a cook wasn’t one of them.

“Oh Fluff, you wound me!” Nick whined, dramatically bringing a paw up to his chest, covering his heart. As the sound of his rabbit’s laughter filled his ears, Nick turned to pick up the tray, placing it on Judy’s lap once she’d sat up. “Omelet roll up with smoky fried potatoes, cream cheese, and watercress.”

Surprised, Judy stared at the mountain of food in disbelief. There was far too much here for her. Nick had never cooked anything in his life, and yet the food in front of her looked amazing, like it had come straight out of a restaurant. “You made this?”

Grumbling under his breath, Nick nodded. “I can follow a recipe, Carrots. I’m not promising it’ll taste great, but,” he shrugged, gaze dropping to the duvet, feeling a little embarrassed.

Realizing how her comment may have been perceived, Judy carefully reached out, not wanting to jostle the tray, and she cupped her fox’s muzzle. “Thank you, Slick.” She whispered, touched that he’d gone to such effort for her.

Leaning into his mate’s touch, Nick offered her a small smile. He’d never be as good a cook as his Mr. Johnstoni, and he would never be able to make as many incredible dishes as his mom, but he’d keep trying if only so that he could share the cooking with Judy, so that she wouldn’t be the only one making their meals.

Giving her fox some fuss for a moment, Judy soon turned her attention to her food. Picking up her knife and fork, the doe paused as she realized once again that Nick was without food.

“I figured we’d share again…” After last night the tod knew just how much Judy worried about his eating habits, and this was another way for her to see how much better he was now. That, and he’d quite enjoyed being fed by her the last time he’d served her breakfast in bed.

Nick’s tentative comment had Judy looking up, shoulders dropping as relief coursed through her. Grinning, the doe cut off a small chunk of omelet, offering it out to her mate.

Shaking his head, Nick took the fork from Judy. “Ladies first.” He insisted, holding it out to her.
Indulging him, Judy opened her mouth as he brought the fork towards her and she accepted the mouthful of omelet. Flavor exploded on her tongue, and the doe couldn’t suppress her groan of enjoyment. “This is so good!” She mumbled through her mouthful, knowing it was rude but completely uncaring.

“Yeah?” Nick broke off a piece for himself, popping it into his mouth. It didn’t taste as good as Mr. Johnstoni’s, but Nick had to admit that for his first attempt it wasn’t bad. “Hm.” He hummed, chewing his mouthful while he loaded up the fork again for Judy.

They ate in silence save for Judy’s small noises of pleasure and contentment every time Nick fed her a forkful, until eventually, the plate was empty. Judy licked her lips, feeling full. “Thank you.” She offered Nick a fond smile, enjoying her fox’s grin as he took the tray from her lap, disappearing out of the room for a moment before returning without it. “What’s today's plan?” The doe asked, stretching, while Nick sat back on their bed.

Nervousness set in and Nick licked his lips. This could go one of two ways; either Judy could be onboard with his plan or flat out refuse. “You need to put some warm clothes on, and your swimsuit on underneath.” He explained, keeping the reason vague to not spook his mate. Judy went to protest anyway, opening her mouth, but Nick cut her off. “Please, trust me.” Nick grabbed his phone from the nightstand, quickly booking a Zuber.

Unsure why her mate was so secretive, but trusting him implicitly, Judy nodded, making her way out of bed and across to her bedroom so she could grab some clothes. As they’d only decided to share a room last night, Judy hadn’t had the chance to move her belongings over. Returning with her swimsuit and some warm clothes, Judy was slightly disappointed to find that Nick had already changed into an old pair of swim shorts and was currently bent down, searching in the bottom of his wardrobe.

“Eyes up, Fluff.” Nick could feel Judy staring at him as he rummaged in his closet for some warm clothes, knowing that his incoming winter coat meant half of his usual clothes didn’t fit.

Laughing, Judy discarded her shirt, changing into the top of her swimsuit, feeling more comfortable stripping off in front of Nick considering their antics last time he’d been home. The doe still turned around though to strip off her lower half, and it was the sound of a bag hitting the floor behind her that had Judy looking over her shoulder, catching Nick openly staring at her bare butt. “Eyes up, Slick.”

Turning around once he’d finished in the wardrobe had led to a delightful surprise for the tod, and the bag he’d stashed in the closet that contained towels had fallen out of his grasp when he’d been faced with the bare behind of his mate. His dreams had sometimes centered on seeing his bunny without her clothes, but his dreams didn’t hold a candle to the real thing. “Nu-uh, I’m not missing this view.”

Flushing at the admiration for her fox, and still feeling the heavy weight of his gaze on her, Judy quickly finished dressing, pulling on her warm clothes over her swimsuit. When she turned back around, she found that Nick had thrown on a pair of pants and a large green jumper, the fluffy fur poking out from around the collar. She couldn’t wait until his winter coat grew in entirely. “I wonder if he’d let me brush him.”

Offering out a paw to Judy once they were both dressed, Nick picked their bag up off the floor as his phone binged in his pocket, alerting him to the fact their Zuber had arrived. Leading Judy out of their bedroom and down the hallway, they passed the kitchen door. Nick couldn’t take more than a few steps though as Judy tugged him to a halt.
Horrified by the mess, Judy gasped. “Nick, the kitchen!” Countless pots were strewn across the countertops, utensils scattered amongst them, food splashes decorated the stovetops, and the sink was overflowing with pans and dishes.

“Eh, it’s fine.” Nick brushed aside Judy’s concerns. He was a tidy mammal, but the dishes wouldn’t take any harm while they were out dealing with Judy’s ice water issue. “I’ll take care of it later, don’t worry Fluff.”

Protesting, Judy gestured wildly around the kitchen with her free paw. “It looks like a war happened!” She exclaimed, unable to understand how one mammal could make so much mess when creating one meal.

“It did, between me and the stove. I won.” Nick rolled his eyes, giving Judy’s arm a tug to get her moving again, pulling her from the house and locking up behind them before they ascended the stairs to street level, where their Zuber was waiting for them.

As Nick held open the Zuber door for her and she climbed in, Judy’s mind started to wander as to where they were heading. “Where are we going?” She decided not to beat around the bush and outright ask. They could be going swimming, that would explain the swimsuits, but it seemed such a strange thing for Nick to suggest they do. Judy recalled Nick saying he owed her a few dates, but this didn’t really feel like one of them.

“You’ll see.” Nick evaded the question to the best of his ability, climbing into the vehicle behind Judy and shutting the door. He could feel Judy staring at him as they headed towards their destination, and as much as the tod wanted to tell her where they were going, he wouldn’t allow himself to cave and ruin it. “Cool as a cucumber, Wilde.”

Moving her gaze between Nick’s profile and the view out of the car window, Judy felt the tendrils of fear start to creep through her as the car passed into Tundratown. “Why are we in Tundratown?” She questioned as Nick took her paw in his own.

“You’ll see, but it’s okay, I’m here.” The tod knew this would be difficult for his rabbit but he wouldn’t leave her side, and if at any point she wanted to go home then he’d be happy to call it quits. He silently prayed this would work though, else she’d have to be evaluated by the ZPD’s medical team and that could raise issues for the future of her job. The Zuber slowed to a stop and Nick was first out of the vehicle, passing the driver a few bills as a tip before he helped Judy out, snatching their bag before he closed the door. He waited for the car to leave before he turned to their surroundings. Finnick had helped him pick out the location – a quiet park next to a factory. “Hey, it’s alright. Trust me.” Nick could almost feel Judy’s nervousness, and the tod crouched before his mate to reassure her. “I brought you here because I know you’ve been struggling with ice water since Catstro.”

Judy’s body responded automatically, her whole body going rigid as her eyes widened. Heartbeat picking up, the doe’s breathing became erratic. Concerned for his mate’s well-being, Nick brought his paws up to cup her face. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m here, you’re safe, and it’s fine. We’re just going to work on overcoming it. Kit steps, that’s all.” The tod felt a little helpless, though he forced himself to remain calm and focused on his mate. Judy had talked him through panic attacks; he could talk her through this. His hold on her face was so gentle that Judy was able to vehemently shake her head, and Nick was quick to soothe her. “It’s okay, we’ll go slow. Have you heard of positive association therapy?”

The question gave Judy something to focus on and snapped her out of her funk. “No.” Her voice was a whisper, violet eyes focused on emerald ones.
“You currently associate the cold water with Castro’s passing, so we’re going to rewire that part of your brain and make you associate cold water with other, more positive things.” Nick had done some quick research on the topic when he’d had access to his phone, and outside of that, he’d asked Finnick to look into the matter and send him as much information as possible. The fennec fox had grumbled, but had come through for him and had sent Nick numerous care packages of information and medical journals associated with the theory. Nick had read everything that had been sent to him, digested it all and formulated a plan. It would take more than a few sessions for Judy to overcome her fear, and Nick knew that once he went back to the academy, there would be a large gap until they’d be able to do this again. With the addition of their plan to spend Christmas in Bunnyburrow came a new challenge – how was Nick going to keep this up while there?

Taking Judy’s paws in his own, holding them tight, Nick grounded her. With their bag still slung over his shoulder, he started to lead her over to a small corner of the park, where the ice had melted away to reveal a small pool. “Let me show you what we’re going to do.” Letting go of his mate, he let the bag slip off his shoulder and come to rest on the ice. “The water here is a little warmer than in other parts of the district because the factory next door uses it to cool its machines.” The tod started to shuck off his jumper, casting it onto the bag so it wouldn’t become damp from the ice. Stripping off his pants, Nick threw them aside too, leaving him in just his swim trunks. Cautiously, the tod dipped his toes into the water, hiding his wince at how cold it was. True that the water was warmer than usual, but it was still cool. Once Finnick had helped him find the location, he’d sent some letters to a few old friends and had cashed in some favors. They had between 30-60 minutes in the water before they would have to get out and dry off or they risked falling ill. The bag he’d brought with them contained plenty of fluffy towels and paw warmers. Steeling himself, Nick took the plunge and stepped into the water, the icy liquid coming up to his waist. Taking a quick moment to adjust to the temperature, Nick turned back to his mate, offering out a paw. “The water’s fine, Carrots. I promise.”

As Nick had stepped into the water, Judy’s heart had felt like it had stopped beating. Visions had clouded her gaze, the thought of Nick perishing in the icy murk stealing her breath. Blindly reaching for her wrist, Judy grasped at her bracelet, screwing her eyes shut. Nick’s voice had her opening them, and her vision cleared to show her fox’s outstretched paw. Finding the emerald eyes she knew so well, Judy held Nick’s gaze. She wasn’t sure what she was searching for – reassurance, honesty, trust? Whatever it was, she found it. Shakily, Judy tugged on her jumper, removing the item to add it to the pile of Nick’s clothes. The cold was biting, and Judy fought back a shiver. Dread crept through her. She couldn’t get in the water. Couldn’t submerge herself in the cold.

“Then how about you just put your hind paws in today?” Nick suggested, not entirely sure whether Judy knew that she was voicing her fears. Seeing his mate so startled and unsure was unsettling, but Nick couldn’t back down now, couldn’t give up. Even dipping a toe in would be a huge step for Judy today. His other paw reached the edge of the small pool, and the tod patted the ice. It would be cold on her butt, but Judy could sit and swish her hind paws in the water to get accustomed to it. “Nothing is going to happen to you. I’m here. I won’t let anything happen.” He reassured her, not wanting another flashback to set them back.

Judy had an unbelievable amount of trust in Nick, had done ever since he’d saved her from losing her badge, and now she drew on that trust. Nick wouldn’t let anything happen to her. He’d keep her safe. Quietly she removed her pants, adding them to the pile as she took a few tentative steps towards the water’s edge. Nick’s paw was still outstretched, and like she had done countless times before, Judy reached for it. Letting her fox guide her, she slowly sat on the edge, bracing herself as she lowered her hind paws to the water. Millimeters above the surface of the water, Judy froze the descent. Images of Catstro’s body bobbing on the surface of the water assaulted her mind and had
the doe screwing her eyes shut, a whimper slipping from her lips.

Spurred into action, Nick leaned forward, swooping in to steal a kiss from his bunny. Distracting her was his primary aim, but it was also part of his therapy idea. The tod’s ego wasn’t so big as to think that his kisses were anything impressive, but they usually did the trick at distracting his mate, and that was what he was banking on for this to work. It only took a few seconds before he felt Judy go lax, shoulders dropping and small paws rising to touch his muzzle. With her suitably distracted, Nick reached for her left ankle, and at a painfully slow pace, he lowered her hind paw into the water, all the while keeping her occupied with their kiss. Nick repeated the action with her right ankle, submerging her right hind paw into the icy water before he cupped her cheeks, throwing his all into their kiss for a few more minutes. Savoring the taste of his rabbit, Nick was reluctant to break away, and he was very aware that the moment he did, Judy would realize where her hind paws were.

Ultimately he ended their kiss, resting their noses together. Judy’s breathing was heavy, though whether that was from panic or breathlessness from their kiss, Nick wasn’t sure. Taking one of her paws in his own, Nick placed it on his chest. “In and out. In and out.” He instructed, having Judy mirror his steady breathing until she seemed calm. He watched as she glanced down at her hind paws, swishing them experimentally in the water. “You’re doing so well.” Nick offered her some praise, smiling as he leaned in again to kiss her. This time, he lightly grasped her waist, pulling her closer to him, drawing her a little closer to the edge. He had no intentions of letting her fall into the water, but the doe protested, and Nick abandoned his plan.

Breathing under control, Judy felt the cold water lapping at her ankles. The fear that she’d initially felt had been battered into submission by her mate, and the doe instead focused on the fact that nothing bad was happening. Her hind paws were in the water, and she was safe. Feeling a little more confident, Judy continued to swish her hind paws through the water, acclimatizing to the temperature. “You can do this, Judy. Nick’s here. It’s just water.”

Monitoring his mate, Nick could tell she was feeling more relaxed, so he cautiously removed a paw from her waist, letting it rest on the ice beside her. Unsure how she would react, Nick’s actions were slow. Making his claws dig into the ice, he slowly dragged his paw back, letting them scrape through the frozen surface. Judy’s body stiffened in his arms at the sound. “It’s just me. You’re okay. You’re safe.” Nick stopped scraping his claws, instead moving to hold onto his mate, scattering light kisses across her face.

Judy was transported back to the mansion at the sound of claws on the ice, her body torn between staying and fleeing. The cold and the scraping noise tugged at her flight instinct, while the warmth of her mates embrace and the kisses she could feel being rained down on her begged her to stay. Blindly reaching for Nick, she grasped the tod, blunt claws sinking into fluffy reddish-orange fur as she pulled him closer, no longer caring about her hind paws in the water, focus solely on seeking comfort. “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Judy forced her mind to focus on something else, repeating her mantra over and over again as she buried her face in Nick’s neck, screwing her eyes shut, inhaling his scent.

Sensing how overwhelmed Judy was becoming, Nick decided to call it a day. Perhaps trying to get her used to the sound of claws on ice so soon wasn’t a good idea. He’d focus on getting her fully into the water first, and take it from there. It took some maneuvering, but Nick was able to get himself out of the cold water and keep Judy in his arms. Carrying her over to their clothes and bag, he fished around with one paw for a towel, which he wrapped her up in. “You did so well, Fluff. I’m proud of you.” He set about drying her off, slowly extracting himself from her grasp while he reassured her that everything was fine. Once Judy was dry and dressed, Nick dried himself off and put his own clothes back on, starting to stuff the towels into the bag.
“I’m sorry.” The small voice had Nick abandoning his task, instead crossing to his mate. Judy stood nearby, arms folded, hugging herself with her head bowed. Gaze focused on the ice beneath her hind paws, Judy’s large ears were smoothed down, teeth sinking into her lower lip.

Moving into the rabbit’s field of vision, Nick brought a paw up to capture her chin, tipping her head back enough so that he could gaze into the violet eyes he adored. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry about.” He kept his voice firm but soft, needing Judy to understand that it was okay. “I’m proud of you.”

“I couldn’t even deal with the noise.” Unfurling her arms, Judy reached up for Nick’s paw, gently prying it from her chin so she could trace her fingers over his claws. They didn’t scare her, not anymore. Where once a predator bearing his claws at her had frightened her, spending time with her fox had taught her not to judge a mammal by their species or whether they were predator or prey. Yes, Gideon had clawed her as a kit, but Nick had soothed away that hurt.

Shaking his head, Nick watched as Judy played with his paws, no longer fearing that his claws would hurt her. Sometimes, when he held her close, he was reminded of how small she was in comparison, that no matter how good a cop she was or how many rhinos she took down; his claws were still designed to hurt her. Ever since he’d found out why she’d reacted so badly to his raised paws at the press conference, Nick had made every effort possible to ensure she’d never feel frightened by them again. “But you had your hind paws in the water and didn’t panic.” He focused on the positive, wanting Judy to see that she’d made progress today. “Kit steps, sweetheart.” Lifting his free paw he smoothed his fingers over her cheek, smiling at the way she instinctively tipped her head into his touch. “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

Shaking her head, Judy wasn’t ready to give up. She could do it, and she could overcome this. All she needed was some more time and practice. “I want to try again now.” There was still no one else around, and she was feeling warmer. They could go again.

“We’ve spent long enough in the water for today.” Nick didn’t want to push it, knew that small steps would be the best way forward with this. Though Judy’s drive to try again was endearing, and a testament to her strength and desire to overcome her problems, pushing too hard could have the opposite effect. Nick wasn’t willing to risk the progress they’d made today.

Scowling, Judy grasped Nick’s paw tightly. He didn’t understand. She needed to push herself, to force herself to endure it. There was nothing to be scared of, she was just being silly. “Ni-“ Her sentence was cut off by the press of her mate’s lips against her own. “You can’t keep doing that, you know?” The reprimand came out much softer than she’d anticipated once Nick had broken their kiss, the corners of her lips quirking upwards into a small smile.

“Doing what?” The tod feigned innocence, lazy grin in place as he slipped his arms around Judy, pulling her close, giving her no way to escape.

Giving herself over to Nick’s embrace, Judy lifted her paws, letting them rest on his muzzle, giving the short fur beneath her fingers a gentle stroke. “That.”

Seeking clarification, the fox leaned in close. “This?” He whispered, raining down kisses all over his mate’s face, her peals of laughter echoing around the empty park. The sound was like music to Nick’s ears, and the smile on Judy’s lips was a welcome relief after her earlier sadness. Getting Judy to the point where she no longer feared icy water and the sound of claws on ice would be a long journey, but Nick was ready to put in as much work as was needed to help his mate. After all, she’d done everything in her power to help him.
Stepping out of the shower, Nick gave his fur a quick dry with a clean towel. He’d called another Zuber to bring them home, and he’d insisted that Judy shower first and warm up. The doe had protested, and it had taken the promise of him cleaning the kitchen while she was gone to make her see sense. Though the kitchen had been a mess, Nick had managed to clean it up in the twenty minutes it had taken Judy to shower. She’d pushed him into the bathroom then, throwing clean towels and clothes at him before she’d retreated to the living room. “Such a pushy bunny,” Nick muttered with a fond shake of his head, discarding the towel in favor of the sweatpants and t-shirt Judy had picked out for him.

Throwing his towel and dirty clothes into the laundry hamper, Nick left the bathroom, padding through the apartment to find his mate, his nose leading the way. He found Judy curled up on the couch, staring at the blank TV screen, nose twitching and brow furrowed. Remaining silent, the tod watched her from the living room doorway. Concern prompted him to move, to find something to distract her with. Turning, Nick made his way into the kitchen, quietly searching in the large cupboard under the sink until he found what he was looking for, pushed all the way at the back. Pulling out the two tins, Nick placed them down on the counter, grabbing some kitchen towels to cover the surface. From the cutlery drawer he produced a knife, and gently he pried the lid off of one of the tins. The forest green paint he’d picked out several months ago met his gaze, and a wicked grin crossed the tod’s lips.

Staring into nothingness, Judy replayed the morning. She hadn’t had much trouble getting her hind paws into the ice water, even if Nick had distracted her, and in the end, she’d been comfortable with it. Everything had been fine until Nick had dragged his claws along the ice. That sound, it had to be the root of all her problems. The cold water was just collateral. Teeth sinking into her lower lip, Judy tried to come up with a way to overcome her fear of the sound. She could ask Nick to record it for her and play it on loop when she was safe at home, where nothing could hurt her, so she could get used to it. “I doubt that’ll work, Judy.” She sighed, at a loss. Without warning, her line of sight was blocked. Tipping her head back, Judy was faced with the looming figure of her mate, with a very mischievous grin on his handsome face. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop thinking it.”

In a blink and you’ll miss it move, Nick took advantage of his exceptional agility, arm reaching out so he could wipe his fingers over the end of Judy’s nose. The startled expression on Judy’s face as she tried to figure out what had just happened was almost as adorable as the gasp of horror from her as she lifted a paw to feel the damp patch on her nose, fingers coming away green.

“NICK!” Judy couldn’t believe it. Her sly fox had smeared paint all over the end of her nose. “Oh, you’re in trouble now, Mister!” Launching herself off the couch, Judy caught Nick off guard, and the two mammal’s tumbled to the ground. Struggling, Judy was surprised by Nick’s strength and his moves as they grappled, rolling around the floor, careful not to get paint on the carpet. Finally, after some literal arm-twisting, Judy was able to wipe some of the green paint from Nick’s finger onto his own nose, successfully earning her revenge. The sigh of resignation from her mate made Judy laugh, her whole body shaking. Sprawled atop her fox, Judy didn’t care how silly she looked with paint swiped across her nose, clothes rumpled, and fur ruffled from their tussling. Nick’s laughter joined her own, and the doe soon found herself staring into emerald eyes. “Thank you.” Voice a whisper she brought their muzzles together, uncaring about the paint, to press a chaste kiss to her tod’s lips.

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Clean paw rising, Nick smoothed down Judy’s ears, following through until his paw came to rest at the dip of her lower back. “Come on booger nose, we have a room to paint.”

Unimpressed with the nickname, Judy narrowed her eyes. “Look who’s talking, snot snout.” Dissolving into laughter, both mammal’s rose from the floor.
Together they set about painting their bedroom, moving Nick’s things into what would now be the spare room and covering the furniture and floor with drop clothes to avoid getting paint on them. Paintbrushes and rollers in paws, Nick and Judy set about painting the walls, somehow managing to splatter some on each other as they worked.

Once one wall was finished, Nick stepped back to observe their handiwork, but not before he threw open his bedroom window to let some fresh air in. “We should paint two walls purple.” Nick decided, envisioning the color of Judy’s walls. They were going to be sharing the space, so they might as well share the color scheme.

“I don’t mind green, Slick.” In truth, Judy didn’t want Nick to change his plans for the room too much. This was his first bedroom as an adult, and though he’d insisted on them sharing, Judy wasn’t going to take over.

Mulling it over, Nick decided to put his hind paw down. “Two walls green and two purple. This is our bedroom now.” The tod decided, leaving the room in search of the leftover tins of purple paint under the sink.

Shaking her head fondly as she watched Nick leave, Judy’s smile felt like it would split her face. Reaching for the radio with her free paw, she turned it up as the sound of Destiny’s Cub came through the speakers.

Dinner had consisted of take-out, both mammal’s too tired from their afternoon of painting and tussling to cook. After eating, they’d been forced to shower again to remove the specks of green and purple that had mysteriously appeared on their fur. Now, together on the couch, Judy was no longer lost in her own mind, and Nick hoped she’d be receptive to revisiting Tundratown tomorrow.

The tod was reluctant to break their peace, but with his limited time at home, some conversations needed to be had, ones that he could no longer put off. “Carrots.” Reaching out, the fox smoothed a paw down Judy’s back, the doe sprawled over his chest as they lay together.

“Mhm.” Judy hummed, eyes shut as she enjoyed their closeness. The feel of Nick’s paw sliding down her back made her shudder, and she arched into his touch, wanting more contact.

Nick knew the conversation he was about to start had the possibility of turning sour, so the tod forced himself to think before speaking. The last thing he wanted was for them to argue, but Judy needed to understand how serious he was about the issue he was about to raise. “How much does your family know about my past?” The question was innocent enough, and Nick kept his tone as light as possible, bringing his paw around to rest on Judy’s waist.

Eyes opening at the question, Judy frowned. Moving so she could see her fox, violet eyes found emerald ones. “Not a lot, just that you were having a rough time before we met.” Her mom and dad hadn’t asked for much information about Nick, uncharacteristically trusting her judgment when it came to the tod.

“I told your parents the full story, the one I told you at mom’s house.” Nick set the ball rolling, opening up first and sharing. He’d promised Judy on the back porch in Bunnyburrow that he’d confide in her. Opening up to Bonnie and Stu hadn’t been as scary as Nick had anticipated. Instead, it had been very freeing. He still kept in regular contact with Bonnie, the pair of them exchanging letters and when he had the chance, phone calls. Sasha was always lingering, wanting to speak to him, and he had quite the collection of letters and drawings from her pinned to the wall next to his bunk now.
Judy’s jaw dropped. “What?” She knew how much Nick hated talking about his past, how he felt ashamed by his years on the streets, so the fact he’d willingly opened up to her parents caught her off guard. Her mom and dad hadn’t mentioned it to her, hadn’t given any indication that they knew. The realization that this meant Nick trusted her parents also caught her off guard. Nick’s trust was hard to earn, yet he’d opened up to her parents after only a few days. What had happened on the back porch when she’d ran away like a scared kit?

“I told them after my panic attack, before you came out to join me. They needed to know, I didn’t want there to be any secrets.” Nick sat up, back resting against the arm of the couch as Judy slid into his lap. The new position meant the doe had to tip her head back slightly to keep her fox’s gaze, but it was more constructive to their conversation. “I didn’t want there to be anything that could come out later that could lead to them disapproving of me. Disapproving of us.”

Shaking her head, Judy knew that even if her parents had disapproved of Nick, she would’ve stood by his side and done everything in her power to make them see how great he was. The doe loved her parents and respected their opinions, but she wouldn’t let them dictate how she was to live her life. “You don’t have to tell my parents everything.”

Shrugging, Nick didn’t feel the need to hide anything from Bonnie and Stu anymore. They’d welcome him into their home, treated him like one of their own, and had looked out for him when he’d been worried about losing Judy. Telling them about his past had been his way of showing his trust and appreciation. He’d heard horror stories about mammal’s not getting on with their future in-laws, and the tod was pleased that didn’t seem to be the case for him. “Your brother did mention something to me though, when he and I spoke on the porch before we left. He knew that I’d spent some time on the streets.”

Inhaling sharply, Judy mentally cursed Julian for opening his mouth and letting it slip that she’d told him about her tod’s past. “Remember that he and I fought on your first night? He wouldn’t listen to me, I couldn’t get anything through his thick skull.” Even though Julian had come around since then, the doe still felt a flare of anger at the memory of how her brother had treated Nick. She’d wanted her fox to feel welcome in her family home, and Julian had almost ruined that. In her anger, she’d said more than she probably should have.

Nick could remember his first night in Bunnyburrow well. The disagreement between Judy and Julian had made the tod feel awkward, and he’d been ready to leave so the Hopps warren could return to normal, but his mate, her mother, and little Sasha had convinced him to stay. What had gone on between Judy and her brother when they’d left to duke it out was still mostly a mystery to the fox, but he was starting to piece it together. “What did you tell him?”

The idea of hiding how much she’d revealed to her brother momentarily crossed Judy’s mind, but she knew she had to be honest with Nick. The last thing she wanted was to lose his trust by lying to him. Teeth sinking into her lower lip, Judy’s gaze dropped to Nick’s chest, expression becoming neutral as she recalled her spat with her brother, feeling guilty for telling Julian so much about her fox. “I told him about your family business, that your dad was killed, that the firm collapsed, and that at twelve you left home…” She paused for breath, wringing her paws together in her lap, reminded again that she shouldn’t have shared any of it without Nick’s permission. “That you have food issues because of it and that you had no one to turn to.”

Pain flared in Nick’s chest as his suspicions were confirmed. “You told him everything.” His tone was flat; disappointed that Judy had been so frivolous with information.

“He wouldn’t listen, Nick! He couldn’t see past your species. I had to make him see you for the mammal you are. He needed to see how far you’ve come.” Judy lifted her head, trying to back-
peddle, to explain her reason for sharing so much with Julian. She hadn’t shared the information with malicious intent; all she’d wanted was for her brother to see sense. Sometimes being slapped with the hard truth could do that.

Reaching up to tug at one of his ears, Nick shook his head. “That information wasn’t yours to share, though.” He pointed out, finding Judy’s gaze. He didn’t want to argue with her, didn’t want this to turn into a fight, but his doe needed to understand that at the time he and Julian had been far from friends and that sharing private information about him put the tod on edge. He was used to keeping his cards close to his chest.

Eyes finding the tufts of cream fur poking out of the collar of Nick’s t-shirt, Judy let out a shaky breath. “I realized that the moment I’d said it.” At the time she’d felt some guilt but had believed the ends justified the means, yet ever since that night it had bothered her when she thought about how much she’d told Julian. Judy gave up, violet eyes lifting to find emerald ones as she reached out for her mate, small paws finding his muzzle, which she gently stroked. “I just wanted him to understand. I wanted him to back off and actually get to know you, to see you for the wonderful mammal you are, and not judge you because of your species.” Julian’s prejudice towards fox’s had surprised the doe, she’d always assumed her brother was open-minded and forward-thinking. The disappointment she’d felt to learn that wasn’t the case hadn’t been pleasant, but he seemed to be getting better now that he was trying to forge some kind of friendship with Nick. If they went back to Bunnyburrow for Christmas, Julian would have more time to bond with Nick. “He’s my littermate, he won’t say anything to anyone. You’re right though, it wasn’t my information to share, and I shouldn’t have told him in the first place.” Paws falling from Nick’s muzzle, Judy let them rest in her lap, not daring to break eye contact. “I’m sorry.” She poured all of her honesty into her apology, not having intended to hurt her mate. It was a testament again to the fact that she could no longer just think of herself in situations, she had to consider Nick and his feelings now too.

Silent for a moment, Nick could see that Judy was genuinely sorry, that she understood that it hadn’t been her place to reveal his past to others. While other mammals might try and punish their mates for such an action, be it through the silent treatment or being a bit off with them for a few days, Nick knew there was no point crying over spilled milk. What was done was done, but hopefully, Judy now knew not to bring it up with another mammal again, even if they were family, without talking to him first. “I won’t lie, it hurts that you went and gave him information I gave you in strict confidence.” The grief and guilt that crossed Judy’s face tore at his heart. “I’m letting it go this time because I know you only had the best of intentions, that you wanted to make things easier for me in your family home, and that emotions were running high. Next time something like that comes up though, please come and speak to me first. It’s a touchy subject for me and one I only feel comfortable sharing with those I’m close too.” After twenty years of not trusting anyone, opening up took a lot for Nick, but he knew that once he and Judy came clean about their relationship to her family, hiding his past would be virtually impossible.

Nodding frantically, Judy’s shoulders sagged with relief. Worry had coursed through her when Nick had confessed his hurt, the doe believing she’d messed up big time and had lost some of Nick’s trust. She’d never meant to hurt him, it had never been her intention. “I will, I promise. I’m so sorry.”

Needing to touch her, Nick brought a paw to Judy’s cheek, cupping her face as he stroked along her cheekbone. “I know. It’s fine.” He ended the conversation, not wanting to dwell on it. He had something else he needed to talk to her about now.

He’d had some time to think this morning about the conversation he’d had with Bandit last night. The arctic fox had made some valid points and given Nick some food for thought. Hiding the meaning of the bonding bracelet from Judy had been underpawed, and it had been sly, a
stereotypical trait he wanted to shake. “Can I talk to you a little more about this, please?” The tod reached for Judy’s paw, lifting it so that they could both see her bracelet.

“I thought you told me everything about it?” Unease swept through Judy at the thought of Nick hiding some more information about the bracelet from her. She thought they were over that, they’d agreed to no more secrets. The idea of Nick hiding something else from her made her stomach roll.

Nodding, Nick licked his lips. “I did. I want to explain why I didn’t tell you about its meaning, though.” There were many layers to Nick’s issues, and the tod was slowly peeling them back, working through them one by one. It was a slow process, at times painful, but he wanted and needed to face his demons. There was too much at stake now.

“You thought I’d reject it, and you.” Judy could remember the conversation they’d had in Bunnyburrow like it had only happened yesterday. It had the most stressful discussion of her life, and it had ultimately changed her life. It still tore at her whenever she recalled the things Nick had said, how he’d listed all of the qualities he’d perceived as making him a bad candidate to be her mate. She hoped now that Nick was starting to see how little any of that mattered.

It didn’t surprise Nick that Judy could remember that evening and the deep conversation they’d had. It had been emotionally draining for the fox, but getting everything off his chest had felt good. “I want to explain why I thought that.”

“You said it was because you felt like you had nothing to offer.” Judy continued, not sure how much more Nick could explain. He’d told her a lot on the porch and had been forthcoming with information when she’d asked for it. Sure it had taken her a while to back him into a corner and to initiate the conversation, but once the ball had been set rolling, Nick hadn’t had a problem informing her about her bracelet and everything that went along with it.

“In part, but I think it stems from more than that.” Since that night, Nick had had plenty of time to examine his thoughts and feelings, working through them while he was away at the academy. Judy was a perfect sounding board, and her help with his issues was greatly appreciated, but there were some things that Nick had to work through on his own. He’d had time to look back at what had caused him to act in such a way, and his conversation with Bandit last night had only affirmed his need to share more of his past with Judy. A lot of his self-esteem issues and fear of rejection could be traced back to his species and how other member’s of society treated fox’s, but he could see now that an incident when he’d been a kit had probably contributed to the issue too. It had been a turning point for him, when he’d started to bottle things up and assume the worst of everyone. “I was ten, maybe eleven, and it was a month before Christmas. I was still going to school but not actually paying attention. I didn’t want to be there, I didn’t think it was the best use of my time, but I stayed because it was the done thing and I didn’t want mom to worry about where I was in the day when she was trying to keep the business going.” That had all changed when money had become so tight that they’d been struggling to pay the bills and the debtors had been threatening to take assets from them.

“We had a class gift exchange planned for the last day of the semester. Our teacher decided it was a good way to boost the holiday spirit. There was this vixen, Evie, and I had a bit of crush on her, everyone did.” Nick confessed with a shrug, spotting the small smile on Judy’s lips at his admission. Kithood crushes were common, and Evie had been the prettiest vixen in the whole school. All the males had fancied her. “We had no money, but I still wanted to give her something. I’m not very creative, unless it involves hustling, but I had access to a tailoring business, so I decided to make something she could wear. The wife of one of our old tailors could knit, and she would often sit in the corner of the shop knitting for her grandkits, so I asked her to teach me. I spent four hours every night for two weeks with her, learning her hobby.” A fond smile crossed
Nick’s lips as he recalled his time with Mrs. Clifford. She’d treated him like a grandkit and had been exceptionally patient with him as he’d tried to understand the basics of knitting.

“I picked out the best yarns we had in store, and I spent a week and a half knitting Evie a jumper. It wasn’t some gaudy Christmas themed one, though. It was baby blue and soft. She liked daisies, so I managed to put a pattern of daisies in it. By the end, my paws were sore, and I swear I was going cross-eyed, but I’d made something. I’d created something for someone else.” The image of the jumper was burned into Nick’s mind. It hadn’t been perfect, far from it, but for his first attempt, it hadn’t been terrible. Nick hadn’t tried his paw at making anything else since. Occasionally, when he walked past a store selling a jumper in the same shade of baby blue, a pang of pain would blossom in his chest. “When the gift exchange happened, I was last. I’d managed to swipe a blue gift box from a market stall, so I presented it to her in that. When she opened it…” Nick trailed off, averting his gaze.

Dread settled in Judy’s gut as her fox trailed off, and she reached out to him, smoothing her paws over his muzzle in what she hoped was a comforting gesture. She wouldn’t force the story out of him, wouldn’t demand that he carry on, but she would show her support and care and hope that Nick would willingly open up and continue for her.

Judy’s paws grounded him, offered him comfort. Keeping his gaze focused on the wall over Judy’s shoulder, he continued where he’d left off. “There was this bully called Huxley, he liked to steal my lunch and push me around, and when he saw my gift he just couldn’t resist making a few comments.” Nick snarled, blood boiling as he thought about the young rhino and the years of torment he’d suffered at his hooves. “He made comments about my family’s predicament and about the gift I’d spent a month working on. The rest of the class laughed at me, Evie even tried to hide her laughter behind her paw.” Nick snorted, shaking his head, jaw clenched and lips downturned. “I couldn’t stand it. I fled. When school started back up after Christmas, I asked to move classes, and even then my attendance began to drop until, at twelve, I moved out and gave up on school altogether so that I could help mom.”

Listening to Nick’s story, seeing the pain in his eyes and the anger that had his body going taut, Judy’s heart broke. The image of Nick as a kit being humiliated like that made her want to scream at the injustice of it all. Many kits were bullied, it was a sad fact of life, but Judy had never thought her fox would be on the receiving end of such torment. From the little she’d heard from Marian about Nick’s kithood, he’d been happy and carefree, always smiling and helping others. He’d given Marian no indication that other mammals at school had been picking on him.

“The last time I gave someone something I’d put all of my love, thought, and care into, it was thrown back in my face, and I was laughed at for it.” Gaze leaving the wall, Nick finally focused back on the violet eyes of the bunny in his lap. Handing the bracelet over to Judy had been terrifying, and he’d watched her every move as she’d opened it, examined her expression to make sure her joy had been genuine. After the jumper incident, the only mammal Nick had ever given present’s to had been his mom, and she’d always accepted them with love and thanks, liking everything he’d been able to give her.

Horrified that Nick would think that she would throw the bracelet back in his face, though she could see why he’d considered that an outcome, Judy felt the need to reassure him. “I would never…”

“I know.” Nick cut her off, moving a paw to stroke along Judy’s cheek, gently dragging his claws through her fur. “I just. It doesn’t excuse my actions, the fact I kept its meaning from you, but I hope you understand now why I was reluctant to tell you. I should’ve been honest with you, should’ve trusted that you wouldn’t throw it back at me.” Guilt had nibbled away at him once he’d
returned to the academy, and it had only gotten worse when he’d been informed of the abuse she’d received from other mammals when they’d spotted it around her wrist. Fear had held him back, and he knew that wasn’t a good enough reason, but it was a hard thing to overcome.

Even when she hadn’t known the true meaning of the bracelet, it had been apparent to the doe that it had been given with love and affection. A mammal didn’t just buy another mammal jewelry unless they cared. Did Judy wish that Nick had been more forthcoming with the bracelets meaning? Yes, yes she did, if only because it would’ve saved them from awkwardly dancing around their feelings for so long. If Nick would’ve told her on her birthday how he felt, she would’ve jumped at the opportunity to date him and would’ve kissed him senseless right there and then. The past couldn’t be changed though, and they were together now. They needed to look to the future, and working through Nick’s issues, finding the root cause of them and talking about it, was all part of the healing process. “It’s okay to be afraid, Nick. What happened was horrible, and if I ever come across Evie or Huxley I will personally kick their butts, but you can trust me with everything, even your secrets, and your fears.”

“I trust you completely.” Nick cupped her face, offering his rabbit a small smile. Trusting another mammal was tough, there were no guarantees that he wouldn’t be hurt in the future, but he was willing to put his heart in Judy’s paws and hope for the best.

Eyebrows drooping and mouth curving downwards, Judy struggled to believe her fox. She knew he trusted her to some extent, but she wasn’t sure he completely trusted her. “Do you? You’re always acting so possessive about me around others, like you’re worried I might stray.” She was careful to keep her tone neutral and non-accusatory, not wanting to start a fight between them. They’d come far this evening, their serious discussion not having dissolved into an argument. Judy wanted to keep it that way.

“It’s not you I’m worried about, it’s everyone else.” Nick didn’t know how other mammals were thinking, weren’t aware of their motives or morals.

Judy hated to point it out, but Nick needed to see his behavior from her perspective. “Yes, but that implies that I would stray, that I could be tempted away from you, which isn’t fair on me.” She watched, as Nick remained silent, emerald eyes searching hers before his shoulders dropped, realization setting in that she was right. She’d never stray, would never be unfaithful, but she understood why Nick was worried. Reaching out, Judy grasped the underside of Nick’s muzzle, forcing him to hold her gaze and know the weight of her words. “I love you with every fiber of my being, and I’m not going anywhere, not going to run away or leave you, but you need to start loosening your grip a little and start trusting me some more. I know others hurt you in the past and that it’s hard to believe you won’t be hurt again, but I’m not going anywhere. Start by trusting me with that.”

Nick knew that Judy was speaking sense, but the thought of losing her sent fear coursing through him. He was starting to see though that he couldn’t smother her. He had to trust that she wouldn’t stray, had to believe in their love. “I’m sorry. I forgot how frustrating dealing with emotions is. I don’t mean to come across as overbearing, I don’t want to smother you or hurt you, or make you think that I don’t trust you. It’s tough coming to terms with the idea that someone actually wants to stick around. I guess I’m back to being emotionally unbalanced.” Nick aimed for humor, remembering their conversation on the sky-tram.

Knowing how her fox always fell back on humor when he was uncomfortable, the doe slowly let go of his muzzle, leaning in to press a sweet kiss to his nose. “Just keep coming to me when you have issues, keep telling me things, keep letting me in, start trusting that I’m here for the long haul. I mean, I’m still wearing my bonding bracelet, so you’re stuck with me for life.”
Emerald held violet and the tod nodded, the corners of his lips quirking upwards. “Life doesn’t sound bad at all, Fluff.”
Hey, my loves! I hope you're all doing well. Just a mini update to let you know that my health is getting better and my friend and I have mended fences and things are going great. Thanks so much for all your well wishes with both issues, I greatly appreciate them all! :)

Since my last update, I've also been gifted more fan art! I know, crazy right!? I'm beyond honored, and every time I'm gifted some I end up crying a little. I honestly can't believe that people are inspired enough by this little fic to draw something for me!

Please go and check out the very sweet Knoton13 on DeviantArt (https://knoton13.deviantart.com/). Not only did he draw an adorable piece of Safe Paws art, but he just surprised me with one for Carrot Farmers too. I love them both so much!

I also commissioned the absolutely lovely Red Velvet Panda to draw a new DeviantArt icon for me, based on a selfie I sent her. Yeah, she saw my real face! She did such an incredible job and really knocked it out of the park. Check it out here: https://www.deviantart.com/art/Midnight-Opheliac-698918298

On another note, there be smut in this chapter. A fair bit of it. Approx 3000 words it.

As always, thank you so much for all the kudos, comments, favorites, and love that you guys leave me for this fic. It means the absolute world to me! Special shout out to Uomo for coming up with the title for this chapter.

This is Part I, and Part II will be going up next week. Enjoy!

The morning light crept through the gap in the curtains, throwing a narrow band of warmth across the bed. Judy had been awake for an hour now, watching her fox as he slept. Now and then he’d snuffle, shifting a little, and it brought a smile to her lips. Their conversation last night had been somewhat cumbersome, but Judy hoped that Nick now realized that he didn’t need to be so possessive. Shortly after their discussion, they’d decided to head to bed, and with Nick’s room still uninhabitable due to the paint fumes, they’d retreated to Judy’s old room, now the spare bedroom.

Violet eyes memorized the slope of Nick’s snout and the tip of his canines just visible through his slightly parted lips. In his sleep, her fox looked carefree, but Judy knew that there was a small storm battling inside of him. His list of issues was diminishing, and Judy felt like they’d made some more progress last night, but there were still a few more hurdles to go. Pride swelled within her at how far he’d come.

The slight change in Nick’s heartbeat alerted Judy to the fact he was waking up, and her smile returned as she reached out, gently brushing her fingers across his muzzle and up to his cheek,
down to his throat to a sensitive spot. Scratching lightly, Nick’s tail started to thump against the mattress at her affection, bed sheets rising and falling with the movement as he lazily opened his eyes, a low purr vibrating through him. “Good morning sleepy.”

“Morning Fluff.” Nick smacked his lips together, head tilting back a little to allow Judy more access to his throat, his purr intensifying as she scratched just the right spot. “How long have you been awake for?”

Still fascinated with the fact that her fox purred, Judy moved her paw to a different part of his throat, enjoying the blissful expression that crossed Nick’s face as she hit the right spot. “A while.” She admitted, hoping it didn’t come across as creepy. Something was soothing about watching him sleep while enjoying the stillness of the morning. It was like the rest of the world ceased to exist and their problems faded away to nothingness.

“And you haven’t made me breakfast?” The corners of Nick’s lips quirked upwards, but the sudden thump to his chest had him wheezing. “Jeez, ouch. Okay, I deserved that.” Reaching out, Nick grabbed Judy’s waist, hauling her closer. Noses coming to rest together, the tod stole a kiss, uncaring about morning breath. “I’m sorry.”

Judy could never stay angry at her fox for long, and his teasing nature was a trait she adored. “You’re forgiven.” She let him off the hook with a roll her eyes and a fond smile on her lips.

Grinning, Nick adjusted his hold on his rabbit, and in one fluid motion, he flipped them, pinning Judy beneath him before he buried his snout against her throat, the bed sheets landing in a heap on the floor from his actions. Judy’s squeak of surprise was adorable, and the fox chuckled, tail swishing happily at the sound. Having the advantage, Nick laved kisses across his mate’s throat, his sharp canines occasionally nipping at soft skin as his bunny tipped her head back, revealing more of the smooth white fur on her neck. Small paws grasped at his shoulders, blunt claws digging in every time he used his teeth, and little pants of pleasure helped Nick find just the right spot to focus his attention on. Nostrils flaring, he finally caught the strong scent he’d missed last time he’d been home.

Reluctantly, the tod slowed his ministrations, pulling back enough so that he could look down at his panting bunny. “Come on; we have a busy day.” As much as he wanted to carry on, as much as his instincts screamed at him to love his mate, they had a lot to achieve this morning.

Blinking, Judy started at her fox in disbelief. “Nick!” He couldn’t just stop now, not when things had been looking so promising. Grasping his shoulders tightly, she refused to let him go. “You can’t just leave me like this!”

Playing dumb, Nick adopted an innocent expression, one he’d worn countless times during his hustles. “Like what?”

“Needy.” Judy snapped, hind paw flexing as if she were thumping the ground. She’d gone for months without being able to touch Nick, and though they were still relatively new to the physical side of their relationship, the thought of more was enticing. No longer on her suppressants, the does needs were difficult to ignore. During Nick’s absence she’d been taking care of them herself, but now that he was here, he could scratch the itch for her.

Making a show of scenting the air, the tod smirked. “Hmm, I can tell.” He couldn’t resist teasing, enjoying the red hue that flushed the inside of Judy’s ears. “Don’t worry; I’ll take care of you later on.” Nick twisted out of Judy’s grasp, hind paws hitting the floor as he retreated from the room, but not before the sound of Judy’s frustrated squeal reached his ears. With a chuckle, he made his way to the kitchen, peering into their freshly painted bedroom as he passed it. A small part of his mind
pointed out how unfair it was to rile Judy up and then leave, but the other part of his brain reminded him that it would make his plans for later that much sweeter.

Groaning in frustration, Judy brought her paws up to her face, rubbing at her eyes. “Stupid handsome fox and his stupid knowledge of my weaknesses.” Forcing herself out of bed, Judy left the room, pausing in the doorway of their shared bedroom. Wincing as she was finally able to see the color scheme in the cold morning light, Judy shook her head. “Slick, the color combination is…” She called out, pausing to try and find the right word. Green and purple may have worked for their eyes, but it didn’t work for the walls.

“Terrible. I know.” Nick yelled back from the kitchen with a laugh, sending a text to his mom to check they were okay with dinner this evening. Phone in paw, he moved back through their apartment to stand beside Judy, looking around their bedroom.

Even though Nick had insisted that the room had to be suitable for them both, Judy still wanted it to be more a reflection of Nick than her. “Want me just to forest green everything?” She offered. It was only two walls that would need painting over, a task she could complete in a weekend.

“Nope, it may be an awful color scheme, but it’s us.” The tod shrugged. It was an odd combination, but for Nick, it represented how different he and Judy were, and yet they were happy together. He couldn’t tell Judy that, though. It was a bit too mushy, even for him. “Besides, I don’t know what you do in bedrooms, but I don’t spend much time staring at the walls.” Nick couldn’t resist, glancing down at Judy as he suggestively wiggled his eyebrows.

Boxing Nick’s shoulder with her left paw, Judy shook her head, trying her hardest to suppress her smile. She had a feeling that once she and Nick finally crossed that line, his statement would be accurate. “Insatiable.” She scolded, no heat behind her words.

Lifting his free paw to his chest, Nick plastered on his innocent expression again. “Who, me?” He asked, mock scandalized. The slight curvature of the corner of his lips gave away his amusement, though.

As their Zuber came to a stop at the small park in Tundratown, Nick tipped the driver before helping Judy out, the bag from yesterday slung over his shoulder again, fresh towels at the ready. Once the car had pulled away, they started to walk in the direction of the pool, paw in paw. “Please don’t try and push yourself today,” Nick warned. He knew how gung-ho his mate could be, and the last thing he wanted was for his plan to backfire because she tried to bite off more than she could chew.

“I have to push myself a little, Slick, or I won’t make any progress.” Judy pointed out, swinging their joined paws as the snow crunched beneath them with every step. The doe knew it would be tough, but she was willing to put in the effort. She needed to overcome this, mainly so she could keep her job, but also because she didn’t want to disappoint Nick.

Judy’s playful swinging of their arms made the tod smile, but the innocent gesture contrasted the seriousness of their conversation. “Just don’t overwhelm yourself, okay?” He asked again, needing Judy to get the message. This wasn’t some game; it had the ability to make her issues even worse if it went wrong. Kit steps were needed.

Violet eyes finding the pool from yesterday, Judy nodded on autopilot, not paying attention. To overcome her issues she needed to face her fears and step out of her comfort zone. If that step was more like a stride or a jump, then so be it. “At least Nick is here to help.”
Sensing that his mate wasn’t listening, Nick refrained from rolling his eyes. “Massive ears and she doesn’t put them to good use.” He shook his head fondly, silently vowing to keep a keen eye on Judy and intervene should it get too much for her, no matter how much she protested. Reaching the edge of the pool, Nick let go of Judy’s paw, dropping their bag onto the icy ground before he stripped down to his swimwear. Following the same pattern as yesterday, he stepped into the water first, hiding his wince at the cold, before he turned and offered a paw to Judy.

Hind paw thumping the ground as her nerves set in, Judy wasn’t frightened about stripping off in front of her fox anymore, but she was a little unsure as to how much she’d be able to achieve today. “This is ridiculous; it’s just water.” She mentally scolded herself, removing her outer garments until she too was left in her swimwear. Taking the tod’s offered paw, Judy stepped towards the edge of the pool. “Nick is there, if he can get in the water then so can you. You’re fine. You can breathe.” Judy focused on the rhythm of Nick’s breathing, large ears honed in on the sound, and she mimicked him. In and out. In and out. Letting Nick guide her, Judy came to sit near the edge of the pool, slowly lowering her legs until her hind paws were submerged, the water lapping at her ankles. It was much easier today than yesterday, and Judy looked up at her mate with a grin.

“Well, would you look at that.” Nick returned his mate’s smile, feeling a rush of love for the rabbit sat opposite him. “Proud of you, Fluff.” He praised her, remembering the journals that had explained that it would help build her confidence. Leaning in, he stole a kiss, the sweet press of lips distracting Judy long enough for him to wrap a paw around her waist, gently tugging her forward. Judy’s body stiffened, however, and Nick abandoned his plan. “Slow and steady, Wilde.”

Frustrated with herself, Judy took a deep breath. “You can do this.” She gave herself a pep talk before she scooted her butt across the ice, drawing herself closer to Nick and the edge of the pool. The action caused her legs to sink into the icy water a little more, and Judy bit down on her lower lip, feeling the tendrils of fear whisper through her mind.

“Carrots,” Nick warned, observing Judy as she pushed herself, ready to swoop in and stop everything should Judy push too far.

Shaking her head, Judy lifted a paw, gesturing for Nick to stop worrying. “I’m okay, I promise.” She took a deep breath, moving forward a bit more, legs sliding into the cold water. Nick let go of her waist, his paws coming to rest on her knees, and Judy appreciated the contact. Slowly, making sure to keep her breathing under control and focusing her thoughts on her fox, she was able to scoot right to the edge of the pool, submerging her legs up to her knees.

“So gung-ho.” Nick couldn’t resist teasing, hoping to bring a smile to Judy’s face as he gently stroked his clawed thumbs over her knees, offering her some comfort as she adjusted to the cold.

Judy couldn’t argue, Nick was right, so instead, she offered him a smile, shrugging her shoulders. The cold water made her feel uncomfortable as it lapped at her knees and Judy shuffled a little before she forced herself to remain still and adjust. “You need to get over it to keep your job, and Nick put so much thought and effort into this. You need to make him proud with your progress.”

Monitoring his mate, Nick watched as Judy bit down on her lower lip, shuffling before falling still, staring at her legs where they disappeared into the water. He contemplated calling it a day, but as Judy released her slightly swollen lower lip, Nick noticed her shoulders sag and her hind paws start to move through the water. She was getting used to it. Closing the distance between them, he swooped in for another kiss, the press of his lips soft and sweet as he tasted his mate, hoping to soothe her. “What do you want for Christmas?” He asked as he pulled back, throwing her a curveball to keep her mind occupied.

Confused, Judy lifted her gaze to stare at her fox, eyebrows coming together and mouth agape as
she tried to figure out where that question had come from. “I don’t want anything.” She answered honestly. Getting to spend Christmas with her family would be more than enough for her.

“How about a necklace to match your bracelet or some beautiful lingerie?” Nick threw some ideas out there knowing they were stupid, but hoping it would distract his mate and hopefully lead to him being able to bring her a little further into the water. Judy wasn’t big on jewelry, and as much as he wanted to see her in beautiful lingerie, he knew it was a slightly selfish present. The tod already had an idea as to what Judy’s Christmas present would be, though it would involve some planning.

Shaking her head, Judy switched the focus from herself. “What am I going to get you?” She mused. Nick had a lot of things now, things he hadn’t had before, and with the money in the deposit box, he could buy anything he wanted. What could she purchase for the mammal that could now have it all?

“I don’t need anything. I have everything I want here right.” Nick winced at how corny his words were, but he was telling the truth and wouldn’t dare take them back. Reaching out for Judy, he wrapped his paws around her waist, holding her as he leaned in to rest their noses together.

The inside of Judy’s ears turned a light shade of red with her blush, and the doe ducked her head in embarrassment, feeling the heat reach her cheeks. “Sap.” She whispered as their noses came to rest together, eyes falling shut as she honed in on Nick’s heartbeat, small paws reaching out to cup his muzzle, enjoying their closeness. She hadn’t forgotten about her legs being in the icy water, and she gave them a gentle kick, swirling them in the pool. “It’s not too bad.” Getting used to the water bit by bit seemed to be working, and Judy couldn’t wait for the day when she’d no longer fear it and could dive in headfirst. “By the way, if we ever have to chase a perp in this district, you’re doing the running.” Judy pulled back enough to gaze into her favorite emerald eyes, paws dropping to land on Nick’s arms.

This time, the change in topic confused Nick, and the tod lifted an eyebrow. “That’s not fair.”

“First, you’re the probie, so you automatically get a raw deal and secondly,” Judy lifted her legs out of the water, bending her body in such a way as to show Nick the underside of her hind paws, and her lack of paw pads and sharp claws. “I don’t have any traction.” She explained as she submerged her legs in the water again to her knees, without a second thought.

Noting how quickly Judy returned her legs to the water, Nick had to hide his smile. He didn’t want to draw attention to it and risk Judy’s nerves coming back. “Fine I’ll do all the running, but only because I’m a gentlemammal.” He conceded, but the disbelieving look on Judy’s face made him gasp in mock hurt. “Oh Carrots, you wound me! Haven’t I been a gentlemammal towards you this whole time?”

“You have.” Judy nodded. Bolstered by the confidence of being able to push herself a little more, Judy moved her paws to Nick’s bare chest, lightly running her fingers through his fluffy fur. “Though I’m curious to see what you’re like when you’re not a gentlemammal.” She mused, feeling her blush but studiously ignoring it as she moved her paws up, sweeping her fingers along Nick’s throat and up to muzzle before she ran them underneath his lower lip.

The unexpected and brazen comment from his mate had Nick’s grip on her tightening, emerald eyes widening as the implication of her words sank in. A low growl slipped from his lips before he could stop it, mind wandering as lust barreled through him. “Carrots…”

“What?” The faux innocence wasn’t fooling either of them, but Judy still enjoyed falling back on it. She had hundreds of siblings, her mom had been pregnant for most of her life, and her siblings weren’t known for being quiet. Judy may have been inexperienced in comparison to her fox, but
she wasn’t oblivious.

Realizing that Judy’s teasing could be payback for the way he’d left her needy this morning, Nick gladly took it. “Fair’s fair, Wilde.” The tod smiled. “And you call me the licentious one.” He shook his head fondly before he captured Judy’s lips in another kiss, unable to get enough. He’d lost track of how long they’d been in the water for, but he was starting to lose feeling in his tail. Breaking their kiss, Nick let go of his mate. “I think that’s enough for today.” He smoothed down her ears, offering her a warm smile.

Pleased with her progress, Judy extracted her legs from the water, offering her paws out to help Nick exit the pool. Once her fox was out of the water and they were drying off, the doe’s mind wandered. How would she carry on with this once Nick went back to the academy tonight?

“Ladies first.” The tod offered, gesturing with a paw towards the bathroom. The trip back from Tundratown had been uneventful, but they both needed to clean up before dinner.

Shaking her head as she emptied their bag of towels, Judy refused the offer. “Nope, I went first yesterday. You go first.” The showers at the academy were communal, and though their bathroom wasn’t luxurious, it was better than the ZPA had to offer. Nick should enjoy it, and most of the hot water, before heading back.

“Carrots,” Nick warned, not wanting her to argue with him. More of his body may have been in the water, but his incoming winter coat had helped keep him insulated.

“Slick.” Judy shot back as she crossed her arms over her chest while her left hind paw started to thump the floor. She would gladly argue this out with Nick, and she would make sure that she’d win.

Knowing how stubborn his bunny could be, and perhaps wanting to push his luck a little, Nick’s lazy grin settled firmly in place as an idea struck him. “Fine. How about together?”

Caught off-guard by Nick’s suggestion, Judy’s hind paw stopped mid-thump, violet eyes widening as her arms fell away from her chest, swinging down to her sides. “You want to shower together?”

“We’d save water.” It was a flimsy excuse, and the look on Judy’s face suggested to the tod that she knew it too. “It sounded better in my head.” He shrugged, lazy grin still firmly in place as he watched Judy contemplate his offer. Her hesitation suggested to him that it had been a bit too forward, a bit too much for the doe, so he started to backtrack. “You know what, it’s okay. We’ll go separately.” He made to move, to concede and give in by going first. He didn’t want to push, wanted her to know she had an out if she wasn’t ready.

It felt like Judy had been mulling it over for an eternity when in actuality it had only been thirty seconds or so. However, she’d made up her mind. “No!” She threw out a paw, stopping Nick in his tracks. Finding the emerald eyes she loved so much, Judy nodded. “Together.”

“You sure?” Nick checked, giving his mate one last out. He had no idea what would happen once they were both in the shower, but he was positive it wouldn’t remain completely innocent.

Determined, Judy tugged at the bottom of her jumper, lifting it up and over her head before she abandoned it on the floor. Turning on the spot, she headed off in the direction of the bathroom, leaving Nick to traipse after her. Large ears picked up on him ditching his own jumper as he slipped into the bathroom behind her.

Taking the lead, Nick turned the shower on, letting the water start to warm-up. As he turned back
around, though, he was greeted with the sight of Judy left in only her damp swimwear, having removed her pants and thrown them in the general direction of the laundry basket. Realizing it was his move, Nick took off his pants too, casting them aside to join Judy’s, leaving him in his damp swim shorts. Watching his mate, he noticed the rise and fall of her chest, her breathing had picked up, and her ears were smoothed down behind her. Not wanting Judy to feel shy, Nick reached out to her, pulling her close so he could wrap an arm around her waist, the other coming up to sweep along her cheekbone. Wanting to soothe Judy’s nerves, because no matter how brave his bunny said she was he could still tell she was nervous, he cupped her cheek and closed the distance between them, pressing a feather-light kiss to her lips.

Needing more, Judy brought her paws up to hold Nick’s muzzle, this time pressing her lips to his more firmly, demanding more from him. She could gladly spend all day kissing her fox, but her anticipation for more was growing with every passing second.

Paw moving from its place around Judy’s waist; Nick used the distraction of their kiss to tug lightly at the fastenings of Judy’s swimsuit. The top half came away with ease, and the fox threw it aside, a low purr slipping from his lips, muffled by Judy’s kiss, as she pressed their bare chests together. The feeling of small paws letting go of his muzzle to creep down his body, toying with the waistband of his swim shorts, made the tod break their kiss, needing to catch his breath for a moment.

“If you ask me one more time if I’m sure, then you’re showering alone,” Judy whispered, knowing her mate would hear her. She wanted this, needed it, and though Nick’s concern for her was endearing, she wasn’t a wallflower. Watching as Nick’s eyes opened, Judy met his gaze, emerald and violet locked together as the doe blindly pushed her mate’s swim shorts down, letting him kick them aside as they pooled at his ankles. Not daring to steal a glance down just yet, Judy rose to her tiptoes, seeking another kiss.

Nick had no problem with being naked; it was a situation he’d unfortunately been in several times while working jobs and living on the street. He knew he wasn’t bad looking, wasn’t too out of shape either thanks to the academy, so if took him stripping off first to encourage Judy, then so be it. He would do whatever it took to make her comfortable, and if at any moment she changed her mind then he would respect that. Lips parting, the sweet taste of Judy was intoxicating. Tongues meeting, Nick slipped his paw from Judy’s cheek, skimming the curvature of her waist, claws dragging lightly through her smooth fur until he reached her swim bottoms. Not wanting to risk incurring Judy’s wrath by tearing the garment off, the tod slowly pushed the fabric down until gravity took it and it landed around her ankles.

Kicking aside her bottoms, Judy felt the insides of her ears burn as she realized she was completely naked in front of the fox she loved. Though she’d fooled around a lot as a teenager, she’d never let herself be completely naked before. Tongues slowing in their exploration, Judy reluctantly pulled back, eyes opening at the same time as Nick’s. For a moment they simply gazed at one another, and Judy felt like time had come to a standstill. “You’re really going to do this, Judy.”

Staring into the violet eyes of the rabbit he loved with every fiber of his being, Nick couldn’t quite believe that this was his life now and that Judy was his. A flurry of emotions overcame him – happiness, excitement, awe, anticipation, and love all crashed together to make the tod feel dizzy. Large paw reaching out, Nick tried to ignore how shaky they were. Clawed fingers making contact, Nick traced Judy’s collarbone to her throat. She was tough and sturdy, but underneath all that Nick knew there was a softness to his bunny. Fingers brushing down Judy’s throat, Nick kept his touch light, watching as his mate shivered as he reached her chest. A small whimper came from Judy as
he dragged his fingers across the swell of her breasts, his massive paw dwarfing the petite mounds.

Judy’s grip on his chest tightened with his touch, blunt claws digging in as she sought more. It was only once Nick started to trail his paw down the curvature of her waist that Judy let him go, and only long enough for her to start her own exploration.

The feel of small paws smoothing down his body, settling on his belly, made the tod swallow. As much as he wanted to carry on, the room had steamed up, and the water was still running. Reluctantly he pulled back, grasping his mate’s paw in his own and leading her into the shower. It took all of his willpower to keep his gaze up, to not openly ogle her like she was an all you can eat buffet.

Reaching for the soap, the water crashed down on Nick. With some gentle maneuvering, he had Judy standing under the warm spray, back to him. With tender touches, he started to wash her, rubbing her back, stroking her ears, and smoothing his paws down her limbs. From his position, he could see her cottontail flick with her contentment, and under the sound of the shower, he could faintly hear her grinding her back teeth together, purring. There was only one part of Judy’s back left to wash, and large paws moved to grasp at the butt he’d spent countless hours staring at. Judy jumped at the contact, paws reaching out for the wall to steady herself. “Easy, jumpy bunny.” The tod teased, soaping up the globes in his paws, the water sluicing away the suds.

Trembling under Nick’s touch, Judy knew she’d have to turn around. As his paws left her butt, she took a deep breath and turned, violet eyes finding emerald ones. Nick held her gaze for only a moment before his eyes lowered, taking her all in. Feeling a little self-conscious under her mate’s intense stare, Judy moved to wrap her arms around herself, but Nick’s paws shot out, stopping her.

“Yes, jumpy bunny.” Nick teased, the corners of his lips quirking upwards into a lazy grin as he soaped up his paws. Cleaning his mate’s belly first, Nick worked his way upward, being extra thorough when he reached her chest. His attention pulled soft sighs from Judy, and when she was putty in his paws he headed south, fingers creeping as he washed her hips. Turning his paws inward, he focused his attention at her core. Her small paws scrabbled at his shoulders as he rubbed, using the guise of cleaning her to bring her pleasure.

Body shaking as Nick paid attention to her center, Judy tightened her grip on him, breath ragged. “Your turn.” She whimpered, eyes screwed shut as she felt the pleasure increase. “Nick...” She didn’t want Nick to stop, not really, but she knew if he continued she wouldn’t get the chance to wash him, wouldn’t get to feel her soapy paws explore his strong frame.

Reluctantly, Nick obeyed Judy’s demand, slipping his paw from between her thighs long enough for the water to wash away the remaining suds, and for them to swap positions.
Staring at her fox’s back, Judy took her time soaping him up, her paws covering less area than Nick’s, and his incoming winter coat adding a layer of thickness Judy hadn’t accounted for. Soon though, she was left in the same situation as Nick had been. Deciding to start with his tail first, she gently grasped the damp appendage, smoothing her paws along its length, transferring the suds to the soft fur. A high-pitched whine, similar to the one Nick had made the first time she touched his tail, left the fox. Emboldened, Judy continued, washing the suds away before she turned her attention to his butt. “In for a dime…” She grasped the firm flesh, Nick’s tail wallop her side as it wagged. Paying very close attention to the job at paw, the doe was disappointed when it was time for the water to wash away the suds. With the back of her mate clean, she watched as he turned to face her.

Judy kept her gaze on Nick’s eyes for a moment before she finally let them wander. She admired the full length of his physique, taking in the broadness of his chest, the cream fur that blended in seamlessly with his reddish-orange coat, and the narrowness of his waist. Continuing south, the doe was finally met with the sight of Nick’s arousal. Judy inhaled sharply, caught off-guard by the red tip peeking out from his sheath. Sure she’d done her homework, but diagrams online were nothing like seeing the real thing. Flushing as she realized she was staring, Judy’s gaze lifted, finding amused emerald eyes watching her. Shyness overtook her and Judy bit down lightly on her lower lip.

Nick knew he was averagely endowed for his species, but Judy’s open staring at him was adorable. Her lip bite, though, sent lust barreling through the tod and in one smooth movement he had his rabbit pinned to the slippery tiled wall of the shower, mouths crashing together with his desperation to taste her. One of his paws found purchase on the wall beside Judy’s head, and the other grasped at her waist, holding her tight.

Giving as good as she got, Judy returned Nick’s kiss with equal vigor, paws running over his body, skimming down his belly until her fingers brushed against his length, now plumb and fully exposed. Her touch pulled a shrill noise from Nick, and her fox’s hips stuttered. Encouraged, Judy wrapped her paw around the length; giving an experimental stroke, thumb sliding over the tip. Nick broke their kiss, panting as he buried his nose against her throat, his hips taking up a smooth rolling rhythm.

Shuddering, Nick tried his hardest to clamp down on his noises. He’d always been a little vocal, and it had bothered some of his past partners. Driven to please his mate as she pleased him, Nick’s paw slipped from Judy’s waist, sliding between her thighs to find the apex of her legs. Brazen fingers stroked her, coaxing mewls of rapture from her lips, which Nick soon silenced as he pressed their lips together. Long tongue licking forward, Nick was firmly in charge, and Judy was so lost in his kiss that he felt her paw stop moving. Uncaring about his own pleasure, for now, the tod pressed a digit forward, warmth and tightness engulfing it. The doe’s gasp as he crooked his finger was music to his ears. He wanted to pull every imaginable sound from his mate, wanted to touch her until the end of time, show her just how much he loved her.

Nick dragged his mouth from Judy’s and her head fell back, thunking against the tiles. He watched as her eyes slid shut in ecstasy, fascinated by the sweet noises she made as he pressed another digit forward. She was tight, and the fox silently questioned if she’d be able to take him when they took the final step. Though he was average for his species, he knew he was packing more than a buck. The sweet scent of his mate’s arousal flooded his nostrils and Nick inhaled deeply, eyes falling shut too as he savored the smell. Knowing he was able to pull such sounds and scents from his mate did wonderful things to his ego. Licking his lips, Nick opened his eyes, moving his paw from the wall to extract himself out of Judy’s grip, never once slowing the rhythm of his other paw. Wide violet eyes looked up at him, concern mixed with pleasure clouding Judy’s features. “Ladies first.” He insisted.
Slowly pulling his paw back from between Judy’s thighs, she whimpered at the loss of contact, but Nick wasn’t so cruel as to leave her hanging. Stooping, he slid his hands under her butt, lifting her with ease to pin her between himself and the wall, holding her up like he’d done on the porch in Bunnyburrow. Lips meeting, the tod slowed the pace, taking his time to taste his mate, to coax her tongue into meeting his. Judy wasn’t a one-night stand; she wasn’t some random vixen he didn’t care about. She was his mate, the strong bunny he wanted to tie himself too in every sense of the word. She was his future. “Nick…” Judy’s voice quavered as their mouths parted, her pleading tone and thinly veiled need spurring him into action. Lifting Judy just that little bit more; the back of her legs came to rest on his shoulders, paws grasping at the fur on his head as he was overwhelmed by the strength of her scent, snout buried between her powerful thighs.

Eyes widening as it finally hit her what Nick had planned, Judy’s head fell back at the first contact between her mates lips and her center. Heat and excitement coursed through her veins, setting her nerves alight. A few bucks had done this for her before, when prompted, but never a predator. “You really do have a pred kink, don’t you Judy?” A slow, long lick up her core caught the doe off guard and her hips bucked, body shaking as her fox continued to boldly taste her, one of his clawed thumb finding the bundle of nerves at the apex of her legs, making her convulse with every rub. Whining, her paws tightened their hold in Nick’s fur, back arching as she pulled him closer, encouraging him to carry on.

Chuckling lowly at his mate’s eagerness, Nick wasn’t one to disappoint. Pulling back for a moment, he peppered kisses along the inside of Judy’s thighs, throwing in a gentle bite here and there. Judy’s wild reaction was a beautiful indication of her ecstasy. Returning his attention to her center, he coaxed her to abandon. Damp thighs quivered either side of his head and, adjusting his hold, the tod pressed agile fingers forward, working them in time with his mouth.

This had never been his favorite act as he had never cared much for his old partners, but the sounds he was able to pull from Judy’s lips – her cries, whimpers, and pants – along with the way she demanded more from him, had the tod reevaluating his opinion on the matter. He wanted to please Judy, wanted to push her towards release, leave her a quivering mess and him with the taste of her on his tongue. The whispered sound of his name had Nick glancing up, emerald finding lust-blown violet. Judy was beautiful, desperate and needy and looking at him like he was the most valuable treasure on the planet. Heart skipping as he held her gaze, Nick watched, enraptured, as she reacted to his ministrations.

Eyes falling shut, Judy’s teeth sank into her lower lip as Nick loved her, a deep rumble vibrating through her from his chest as he growled. The bucks in her past hadn’t had the first clue what to do, but her fox was far more capable. Hips rolling, Judy desperately sought out more, teetering on the edge. “Please.” She begged, eyes opening to find Nick still watching her. The sight of him between her thighs, of a strong and deadly predator loving her so intimately, was dizzying and empowering. Judy begging was like the sweetest symphony. Wanting to give her release, wanting her to let go completely, Nick upped his attentions, lips, tongue, and teeth working together as he crooked his fingers, finding the right spot.

Back arching as she ground down, the snapping of the coil that had been slowly building inside of her had Judy crying out, swept away with the crashing waves of her release. Nick didn’t let up, though. He worked her through it, and soon the doe was shaking, whining her mate’s name at the overstimulation.

The honeyed noises and the obvious pleasure on Judy’s face filled the tod with a sense of accomplishment. Pulling back, he licked his lips, enjoying that his mate was boneless in his grasp, her small body relaxed and pliable. His length ached, desire nearly uncontainable, but his primary
focus was on his rabbit.

Judy felt like jelly, like her legs wouldn’t be able to hold up her weight. Testing the theory, she made to stand, and Nick let her down in one fluid movement. She was unsteady on her hind paws, needing to lean against the shower wall for a moment. Reaching up, she grasped the underside of Nick’s snout, pulling him down to press their lips together. Their kiss was soft and gentle, lips dragging along lightly as they shared her taste. Gathering her strength, Judy broke away, turning them so that her fox was pressed against the tiles.

Sinking to her knees, Judy ignored how uncomfortable and slippery the shower tray was. Instead, she lifted her eyes to look up at her mate. This wasn’t the first time she’d been in this position, but it was the first time she’d been here with a mammal she actually cared for and loved. It made her unexpectedly nervous.

Starting slow, the doe dropped her gaze; scattering light kisses across the left side of his hips, her small paws grasping at his strong thighs. As she dragged her mouth over to give the same treatment to the right side, the plushness of her lower lip skimmed the underside of his length. The sudden tight grip on the top of her head had Judy looking up, finding her fox watching her, jaw clenched as he tried to retain control. “Not happening, Slick.” Holding his gaze, Judy gave the other side of his hips the same treatment, trailing kisses inwards until she reached her destination. Licking her lips, Judy swallowed. Though her large ears were smoothed back, she could still hear the quickened beating of Nick’s heart, and she hadn’t even got to the good stuff yet.

The sight of Judy down on her knees was doing such wonderfully wicked things for Nick. The way she held his gaze as she dragged her mouth over him, feather-light and so innocent looking, had him tipping his head back, swallowing hard. The mental images paled in comparison to the real thing. Concern had him restraining himself though, forcing his hips to not surge forward with her caresses. Female anatomy hardly changed between species, but the same couldn’t be said for males. This was all new to his rabbit, and he didn’t want to spook her. Blindly he reached out, large paw settling on the top of her head as he felt the first tentative lick, a deep rumble starting low in his chest.

Her fox was tense, and Judy knew he wouldn’t get much pleasure from this unless he relaxed. He had no reason to be so on edge; she was perfectly capable and willing to return the favor. “Let go, Slick.” She breathed, voice just loud enough to be heard over the sound of the water that continued to crash down around them. The doe had all but forgotten about it, had been too lost in the feel of her mate loving her, but now the sound of it roared in her ears, the dampness helping her as she reached with a paw to run a finger along him. The paw on her head disappeared; leaving Judy with no other option but to chuckle, warm breath fanning over plumb length, making Nick shudder. “Not of me.” She clarified, feeling the paw return a moment later. He still had his head tilted backward, so the doe tried a new tactic to get him to relax, to give himself over to her. “Look at me.” She demanded, soon met with the lust-addled emerald eyes she loved so much as Nick tipped his head forward. Curious fingers found his slightly swollen knot, and petal-soft lips followed after, the doe never once breaking eye contact.

Nick’s resistance crumbled, hips thrusting forward as his mate kissed his knot. “Damnit.” He growled, giving in to her, trusting her to take care of him. Wet heat soon enveloped him and the sensation was all Nick could focus on.

This had never been Judy’s favorite act either. She’d always felt used afterward, like all her partners had wanted were to get their rocks off, not caring about her feelings or needs. Nick, though, was different. He’d taken care of her first, given her pleasure without asking for it back. Instead, Judy had wanted to return the favor. The way he smoothed his paw around the back of her
head, stroking her ears as he rolled his hips encouraged her. His rhythm stuttered as she found just the right spot, laving her tongue over the sensitive tip, and Judy heard her mate start to pant. His knot in her paw continued to swell, the rabbit having not forgotten to use her fingers alongside her mouth. The loud growls and yips that had been tumbling from Nick’s lips were growing closer and closer together, and she bobbed her head, searching for another sensitive spot. She found it as she dragged her tongue up the underside of him, and that seemed to be the final straw.

“Fluff.” Nick was only able to give her a few seconds warning. Part of him felt bad about it, but mostly he was so consumed with his release that little else mattered. Paw tightening on Judy’s head, his body tensed, hips driving forward as he let out a loud yip, finally falling over the edge. “Ungh,” He groaned, eyes sliding shut in ecstasy as he rode the waves of his release.

Even after he’d warned her, Judy stubbornly didn't move. She had no problem tasting her mate. The trembling of Nick’s legs as he crested, coupled with his loud yip, was empowering for the doe. The salty tang on Judy’s tongue was all that remained as she stood, guided up by Nick’s paw, which had slid from the top of her head to cup her cheek. A lazy grin decorated her fox’s lips, body slumped against the tiles. As she rose, the doe left a light trail of kisses up his chest, her small stature stopping her from reaching any further. Nick’s other paw came to rest on her waist, pulling her close as he ducked down, capturing her lips with his own in a gentle kiss. The tastes of them mixed and Judy mewled, surprised as Nick broke their kiss to rub his muzzle over her face, scent-marking her. When the opportunity arose, Judy chinned him in return, both mammals purring in contentment.

Towels trailed over clean fur and touches lingered as Nick and Judy dried one another off after their shower. Though they hadn’t gone all the way, both mammals were sated. With all of Nick’s things in Judy’s old room, it didn’t take long for them to dress. “We should move everything back into our room,” Judy suggested as she pulled on her jumper, ears springing up once she’d put the garment over her head.

“We can do that now.” Nick decided as he stole a glance at the clock on the nightstand. They had time before they had to leave for his moms. Turning, he left the room for a moment to discard the damp towels into the laundry basket. Upon his return, he and Judy set about moving their belongings into their shared room. “Do you think it would be a good idea to give mom the money tonight?” Judy double-checked that they were still going ahead with the plan. The doe had no idea how the evening would turn out, but she crossed her fingers that everything would be okay. Watching as Nick nodded, emerald eyes still on the briefcase, Judy gave his question some thought. “As much as I want her to have it right now, it might not be best. If she reacts badly to the news, she’ll probably react badly to the cash too.” Presenting a mammal with $150,000 was no small thing.

Seeing Judy’s point, Nick bobbed his head, gaze turning from the briefcase to look at his mate as she approached him. “I just don’t want her struggling while I’m gone.”

“I think she’s doing okay, Nick.” Judy reached out, stroking a paw down his arm. Every time Judy went over for dinner the fridge and cupboards were well stocked, Marian was clean and healthy, and there didn’t seem to be an extortionate amount of bills on the kitchen counter.

“The next time I’m home should be Christmas. We could give it to her before we leave for Bunnyburrow,” Nick wasn’t comfortable traveling so far on public transport with such a vast sum of cash. They could present it to his mom and have her put it in her bank account before leaving the
city, that way ensuring it was safe and Marian would have easy access to it should she want anything during their stay with Judy’s family.

A month and a half without Nick would drag, but they were nearing the end of his training now. He’d be home soon for Christmas and New Year, during which time she’d force him to study, and after that, he’d return to the ZPA for his exams. He was so close, and it filled Judy with excitement every day, knowing that she was one step closer to having her fox by her side again. “I’ll put it back in the deposit box until then so that it’s safe.”

“Thanks, Fluff. What would I do without you?” The tod teased, turning to wrap his arms around his bunny, lifting and carrying her to the bed, sitting her on the end of it.

Paws around her fox’s neck, Judy played with the thick fur at the nape. “Oh I don’t know, you’d probably forget to buy new shirts.” She tugged playfully at the collar of the blue shirt he had on. Jasmine had visited the city a few weeks back hoping to meet up with a buck she’d been talking to online. When he hadn’t shown up for their lunch date, Judy had stepped in and taken her shopping to cheer her up. In the end, Jasmine had walked away with several bags for herself, while Judy had been carrying one for Nick. She hadn’t needed anything for herself, but with Nick gaining more muscle he’d been in need of some new clothes. Judy had picked out a few for him, including the shirt he now wore, and she’d even found a few of his trademark Pawaiian ones too.

Chuckling, Nick gave Judy’s waist a gentle squeeze, emerald and violet locked together. During one of their scheduled calls, Judy had taken great pride in showing him all of the new clothes she’d bought for him. The only mammal who’d ever bought him new clothes before had been his mom, so to have his mate pick things out for him was a strange yet welcome experience. “You love my shirts.”

“I love you.” Judy countered. Nick’s dress sense left a lot to be desired, but it was part of him, and she wouldn’t change that for the world.

“Same thing.” The fox shrugged, smile firmly in place as he ducked down to steal a kiss from his mate. “I love you too.”
The journey to Marian’s house didn’t take long, and given the pleasantness of the evening, Nick and Judy decided to walk there. They would have to return home to pick up Nick’s bag after dinner, but the tod wasn’t scheduled to catch the Zootopia Express until much later in the evening. “How’re we going to tell her about us?” Judy questioned as the building Marian lived in came into view.

“How do you want to tell her?” Nick stole a glance down to his side, at the rabbit holding his paw. Given how much his mom knew about his intentions towards Judy - a tod didn’t buy a bonding bracelet for just any old mammal after all - he figured she wouldn’t be too surprised at the news. 

Shrugging, Judy stole a glance up at her fox. “She’s your mom, Slick. You know her better than me.” The doe wasn’t sure how Marian would react to the news of them dating. The vixen was very fond of her, Judy knew that much, but Nick was her kit and mothers could get funny about their sons having other ladies in their lives.

“I don’t think it’ll be much of a problem, Fluff. I’ll come up with something, don’t worry,” Nick offered. They wouldn’t need to sit his mom down and give her some grand talk about them now being a couple. That was overkill. His mom was smart; so Nick could try and drop a few hints at first, see if she’d catch on.

Curious about her mate's plan, Judy couldn’t resist a jibe. “Now I’m scared.”

“Oh Fluff, wounded me again!” Nick gasped, the corners of his lips quirming up into a smile. He’d missed his doe teasing him; it wasn’t the same over the phone. As they reached the building, Nick pushed open the front door, holding it open to let Judy in first. Once his mate was inside, Nick followed behind her, heading up the stairs and to the third floor. Stopping in front of the cherry red door of his kithood home, Nick lifted a paw and knocked. He felt the urge to wrap his tail around Judy’s ankles; the instinct to stake a claim on his mate was strong, even around his mom.

However, Nick forced his tail into submission. Judy had reassured him she wasn’t going anywhere and he had to trust that. Besides, his mom wasn’t about to take Judy from him, even when they told her about their relationship. Marian adored Judy, and Nick was confident she’d be happy for them.

Hearing the knock at the door, Marian double-checked the food on the stove and in the oven. It would only be five-minutes or so before everything would be ready to be served. Tampering down her excitement, Marian hoped that tonight would be the night Nick and Judy would tell her about their relationship. If they hadn’t told her by the time they were ready to leave, Bonnie had insisted she let the cat out of the bag. Heading to the door, Marian unlocked it, swinging it open. “Nicky!”
she cooed, reaching for her kit. He’d always come to visit her at least once a month before he’d left for the academy; so going for months at a time without seeing her son was hard. Their weekly phone calls were great, but nothing would ever compare to holding him in her arms.

Engulfed in his mom’s embrace, Nick wrapped his arms around her, hugging back tightly. “Hey, Mom.”

Pulling back from their embrace, Marian held Nick out at arms distance, looking him over. “You look so well.” She couldn’t hide her sad smile. Nick had been so scrawny and tired looking before he’d met Judy. She had no idea what he’d been doing before he’d enrolled at the academy, but meeting Judy had been the turning point. Eyes raking over her son, Marian could see now for herself how he was filling out. Judy had made a few casual comments during their dinners about how Nick was getting stronger, and Marian got the distinct impression that the little rabbit had a thing for that. Inhaling, her nose picked up on the strong scent of Judy on his muzzle, and the vixen’s tail wagged happily at the realization that Judy had chinned Nick. Letting go of Nick, Marian’s focus turned to Judy. Reaching for the rabbit, she hugged her, picking up on Nick’s strong scent on her cheeks. “Judy, my dear. How’ve you been?”

“All well. Thanks, Marian. What about you?” The doe asked as they broke their hug. Marian’s winter coat was coming in too, though she wasn’t as fluffy as Nick, perhaps a side effect of her age.

“Oh much better now that my favorite two kits are here.” Marian ushered them inside, playfully pinching Nick’s cheek as he passed her on his way to the kitchen.

Swatting gently at his mom as she laughed, the tod rolled his eyes as the three mammals entered the kitchen. “I’m not a kit, mom.”

“You’ll always be my kit, even when you’re married with your own little ones.” The vixen moved to stand at the stove. She was aiming for subtle with her comments, even though she knew it wasn’t her forte.

Wide violet eyes turned to find him, and Nick met Judy’s gaze. Marriage and kits were a serious conversation they still needed to have, but given the lack of time left this trip, it would have to wait until Christmas.

Holding Nick’s gaze, Judy’s mind started to wander. Thoughts of what Nick would be like as a father flitted through her head. He’d been so fantastic with her younger siblings, especially Sasha. The baby bunny would be over to the moon to hear that Nick would be coming back for Christmas. Any time she called home her sister would butt in, wanting to know how ‘Mister Nick’ was doing.

The tod could almost see the wheels turning in Judy’s head, and curiosity gripped him. Now wasn’t the time or place to ask what was on her mind though, so he broke their gaze to help his mom, reaching for the cutlery drawer.

Eyes falling to Nick’s paw as he reached out, Judy wondered what it would be like to have Nick as her husband, to introduce him to everyone in such a way. It would be unorthodox, frowned upon even, but Judy didn’t care for wider society’s thoughts on their relationship. Still staring at his paw, Judy imagined a band around one of his fingers. Plain gold would probably suit her fox, though she’d have something engraved inside it, just for him.

“Judy and I had dinner with Akita and Bandit on Friday night, and yesterday we painted our bedroom,” Nick answered his mom’s question about what they’d been up to, managing to drop a hint about their changed relationship status.
Catching her son’s choice of words, Marian hid her smile. The opportunity to torment her boy by ignoring the comment was too great to miss. “Oh, that sounds lovely. Did you enjoy dinner?” Marian was genuinely curious. She’d sensed from conversations with Judy that Nick and Bandit didn’t get along. She couldn’t blame Nick – foxes were possessive by nature – but at the same time, she could see how hard it was on Judy.

Irritated that his mom seemingly missed his hints, Nick scowled. He’d have to think of something else and up his game. “It went well. We had a good time didn’t we, Fluff?” He turned, cutlery in paw, jolting Judy from her thoughts. The slightly glazed expression she wore concerned him, but he figured if it were important she’d let him know.

Snapped out of her thoughts, and trying to figure out what Nick and Marian were talking about, Judy nodded. “Yeah, it was great.”

“How wonderful! Nicky sweetheart, will you go and set the table, and Judy my dear could you grab some plates for me please.” Marian gave them tasks, and they both stepped up. Nick disappeared into the dining room to set the table, while Judy removed three dishes from the cupboard and helped her plating their food. The vixen had settled on smoky hake, beans, and greens for her and Nick, and had made mushroom buckwheat risotto for Judy. Carrying her plate and Judy’s, Marian let the doe take Nick’s.

Having set the table and sat down, Nick watched as his mom and mate entered the room. Marian put down the two plates she was carrying first before she took her seat, and Judy delivered Nick’s meal to him. With his subtle comment not having worked, Nick decided to grab the bull by the horns. As Judy went to move away and take her seat, the tod reached out for her, feeling his mom’s eyes on them as he tugged Judy back until he was able to press a soft kiss to her lips. Judy momentarily froze as she was caught off guard, but he felt her relax moments later. “Thanks, Fluff.” He whispered as they parted, enjoying the blush that colored the inside of her drooping ears.

Feeling her blush and the weight of Marian’s stare, Judy ducked her head. “You did that on purpose,” Judy whispered at her fox.

“You don’t have any evidence to back up that claim,” Nick spoke softly, grinning at his mate. Cautiously, he turned to look at his mom.

Though Bonnie had filled Marian in on seeing Nick and Judy sharing a kiss, seeing it with her own eyes was so much better than hearing about it. Deciding to ditch the ruse, Marian knew she would have to call Bonnie this evening and fill her in. “It’s about time!” The surprise and shock that crossed the faces of the kits opposite her nearly made the vixen laugh. “You’ve been dancing around one another for months. I mean Judy, darling, you weren’t subtle in taking the book on our cultures. Then again, I don’t think it was subtle for me to buy it and leave it there for you…” She mused. “And Nicky, asking me to order a bonding bracelet wasn’t subtle either, especially as it’s around Judy’s wrist. I don’t know how long you two were going to pretend around me that you aren’t together.”

“I guess we were a little worried about your reaction,” Judy admitted, rubbing one of her hind paws over the floor. Marian’s outburst suggested that she’d already figured out their feelings for one another and that they’d inadvertently given them away at some point. “Do mom and dad already know too?” The thought gave Judy pause. Her parents had been more than welcoming towards Nick when he’d stayed with them, and Judy knew her mom was always sending letters and care packages to her fox. “If they already know, that would be a lot easier.”

Turning her focus to Judy, Marian offered the doe a soft smile. She was too cute. “Oh, sweetheart.
I gave you a reddish-orange blanket, and I gave Nicky a gray one. Most of the dresses I make for you are green, I’ve shown you Nicky’s kithood photos, and though I might be old, my nose is still sharp.” She looked between the two of them, spotting a blush marring the inside of her kit’s ears. “I’ve known for a long while, and I’ve been rooting for you two since the day you first appeared at the front door.”

Body working on autopilot, Judy took her seat, at a loss about the fact that Marian had wanted them together even before they’d realized their feelings for each other. As the vixen picked up her cutlery and started to eat, Judy’s gaze moved to her fox, and they shared a look. “She’s known all this time and was purposefully dropping hints. Oh Judith, what use are you as a cop if you can’t even spot clues!” Turning her focus from her mate and to her dinner, Judy picked up her cutlery and started to eat, Nick following her lead.

“When did you two pull your heads out of your tails?” Marian questioned. She knew the answer, of course, Bonnie had called her the moment Nick and Judy had left Bunnyburrow, but she didn’t want to let on just yet that she’d been scheming with Judy’s parents.

Between mouthfuls, Nick used the opportunity to answer. “The Carrot Day Festival. Things were a bit intense.” The tod looked over at Judy, recalling their argument and subsequent make up on the back porch. A lot of their meaningful conversation seemed to happen there.

“In other words, I backed him into a corner and demanded to know the meaning of my bracelet,” Judy clarified. It had all come to a head when they’d been at Bunnyburrow, and there was no way they could’ve continued to avoid having the conversation.

Laughing, Marian shook her head fondly. “I told you hiding the meaning from her would drive her crazy.” Over their dinners together, Marian had noticed Judy’s continuous agitation, and on occasion, she’d seen the doe touching her bracelet then opening her mouth as if to ask a question before she would rethink her decision and close her mouth. She’d told Nick countless times to be honest with Judy, that the doe wouldn’t throw it back at him and deserved to know, but her son had been resolute in his decision.

Rolling his eyes, Nick shook his head. His mom had been on at him from the moment he’d bought it, insisting he tell her. “Yeah yeah, you were right.”

“I’m just glad everything worked out for you two.” Marian let the subject drop, knowing it was a sore point for her kit. The important thing was that Judy was aware of the bracelet's meaning now, and she’d chosen to continue wearing it. Returning to her food, she waited until Nick and Judy had resumed eating before she spoke again. “So, when am I going to have grandkits?”

Nick’s sharp inhale at Marian’s question sent him spiraling into a coughing fit, and Judy was fast to react, rising from her seat as she reached for her mate, thumping his back. It seemed a common occurrence for him to be caught off guard and end up choking while eating. As a glass of water appeared before them, Judy looked up to find Marian trying to suppress her smile. Handing Nick the glass, Judy slowed her thumps, beginning to rub his back instead. “We haven’t talked about that,” she murmured once Nick had stopped coughing, gaze on her fox’s profile, as she made sure he was okay.

“Yet,” Nick wheezed, pulling his breathing under control. His mom had purposefully waited until he’d had a mouthful, he was sure of it. Judy nodded in is peripheral.

Retaking her seat, Marian couldn’t resist teasing her son one more time. “Well, I’m not getting any younger.”
“Mom.” Nick’s tone dropped, eyes lifting to catch her gaze. The last thing he wanted was for his mom to push and for Judy to feel like they had to have kits to make her happy. It was their decision, no one else’s.

The change in Nick’s tone was all the warning Marian needed. She liked to torment her son but knew that she sometimes pushed it a little too far. “I’m playing, Nicky. I love you both no matter what.” She held her kit’s gaze, making sure he understood the weight behind her words. Grandkits or not, she loved them dearly and would respect their decision. It was their lives that would be changed forever, after all.

Needing to change the subject, Judy moved back to her seat, sure now that Nick was okay. “I was planning on spending Christmas in Bunnyburrow with my family, Marian. I was wondering if you and Nick would like to join us?” She took her seat.

Caught off guard by the question, Marian blinked, surprised. “You want Nicky and I to come and spend Christmas with you and your family?” The idea of getting to see the countryside for the first time in her life and experience the world beyond the city limits excited her.

“If you’d like. I know you two always spend Christmas together.” Judy gave Marian the option to back out if she wanted. The doe understood if the vixen wanted to spend Christmas with Nick in their family home.

Looking to her son, Marian received no help from him as he merely shrugged, leaving the choice entirely up to her. “Bonnie and Stu won’t mind?” Marian questioned. The last thing she wanted to do was turn up to spend Christmas with them when they’d planned just to have their family around.

“Not at all, you’re family.” Judy hadn’t asked her parents yet, but given how well they got on with Marian, the rabbit couldn’t see it being any bother.

Family. The word gave Marian pause. For so long it had been just her and Nick, and even then her kit had been slowly slipping away from her, lost in whatever he’d been doing before he’d met Judy. Getting to spend Christmas in a busy house, to be surrounded by festivity and family, was too good an opportunity to miss out on. Perhaps it would be the start of a new tradition. “We’d love to. Thank you, Judy.”

When dinner was finished, and all of their plates were empty, Judy excused herself to visit the little rabbit’s room, leaving Nick and Marian alone. The tod picked up the plates, helping his mom carry them into the kitchen. Knowing how keen his mate’s hearing was, Nick lowered his voice to a whisper as he asked his mom to send him a care package next week, containing a few specific items. The surprise on the vixen’s face had been all the confirmation Nick had needed that what he had planned was perfect. Having finished stacking the dishes, Nick and Marian headed to the living room, meeting up with Judy. “Mom, there’s something I want to talk to you about.”

Having taken a seat on the sofa, her son’s comment put Marian on edge. “Nicky, what’s happened?” She frowned. Hearing that her son wanted to talk to her was never a good thing, especially as his voice had taken on a somber tone.

Knowing her mate would need her support; Judy sat beside him on the couch, opting to sit close so she could press her thigh against his. The doe had no idea how Nick planned to tackle this conversation, but she wouldn’t intervene unless necessary. This was between Nick and his mom; she was just on the sidelines.

Deciding to start a little into the story, Nick took a deep breath. Judy’s reassuring presence encouraged him to tell his mom the truth. His mate had been right, he couldn’t go on lying to his
mom about it all, and he couldn’t hide it from her any longer. The truth would always find a way to come out, better for her to hear it directly from him first. “Back when I was about sixteen, do you remember when I came home to find you crying? You’d just been fired from your diner job, the bills were stacking up, and debtors were threatening you.”

Marian nodded sharply, sparing a quick glance to Judy. Curiosity burned through her veins as to where Nick was going with this, but a small feeling of dread was starting to build in her gut. Their family had a lot of dirty laundry, and though the vixen loved Judy like a daughter, she wasn’t sure how much the doe knew. Losing her job had been embarrassing, their lack of money after Robert’s passing even more so. She’d tried her hardest to give Nick the very best, to ensure he was well fed and dressed, but it had been tough.

“Judy knows everything, don’t worry.” The tod caught his mom looking to his mate, and he too turned to gaze at her. The reassuring smile she offered him encouraged him to continue, and he turned back to look at his mom. “I had decided to start up my own business and make an honest living that.”

The last part of her son’s sentence gave her pause, mind trying to work out why he would use such a phrase. “An honest living?”

Steeling himself, Nick decided it was better to rip the Band-Aid off than dance around the subject. “After I left when I was twelve, I needed to make money, so I started hustling.”

The vixen’s blood ran cold. “Nicky…” The thought of her twelve-year-old kit out on the streets hustling mammals for cash horrified her. She’d figured that he might not be doing anything good as it was hard for a kit to get a job, let alone a fox kit, but she’d hoped he’d end up working for a businessmammal as an errand boy, or washing dishes in some restaurant.

Seeing the horror on his mom’s face, and knowing everything else he had to tell her was much worse, Nick pushed on. He’d started the ball rolling, and he couldn’t stop now. “I wanted to leave that behind. I had this idea to make a theme park just for predators. It was going to be a place where we could be ourselves, without fear; I made a business plan, cash flow forecasts, and a multitude of other documents. I went to every bank in the city, and no one would loan any money to me, even though my documents were solid. Prey mammal’s owned all of the banks, and none of them wanted to lend to a predator, let alone a fox.” He snorted, shaking his head. “So I went and found a loan mammal.”

“No.” A paw came to land across Marian’s mouth, the vixen not wanting to believe her son had been so foolish. Loan mammals were the worst, a law unto themselves.

As much as he wanted to comfort his mom, Nick knew he had to carry on talking. If he didn’t, he’d lose his courage. “He gave me $200,000 upfront to go and buy the warehouse the theme park was going to be in. I came straight here to tell you, to let you know that I was going to do something that would take us into the green, but when I saw you crying…”

Paw falling from her mouth, Marian reached across the small distance between them to rest her paw on Nick’s knee, finding her kit’s gaze, fear unlike anything she’d known before consuming her. “Nicky. What did you do?” Hundreds of thoughts went flying through her mind, each one worse than the last. She needed to know what her son had done, where that money had gone.

“I used it to pay off the mortgage on this place, so you’d always have a roof over your head. I wasn’t about to let the debtors take it; I wasn’t about to risk you ending up on the street or losing the one place you, me, and dad lived together.” For Nick, the decision had been a no-brainer. The theme park had been his dream, but reality had taken over.
Frozen, Marian stared at her son. A lawyer had come to her one day and told her that there had been an error with her husband’s estate, that he had savings which had paid off the mortgage, and stocks and shares which made her money every month. If Nick had paid off the mortgage for her… “The lawyer was lying,” she whispered in disbelief.

Nodding, Nick reached out, placing one of his paws over his moms. “I hired him. I knew you wouldn’t take the money otherwise.” Marian had always been stubborn, a mammal who insisted on taking care of herself, so there wouldn’t have been any chance of her taking the money if Nick had of just handed it to her. Getting her to take the $150,000 he’d set aside for her would be his next challenge.

“Nicholas.” Marian pulled her paw back, torn between being angry and upset. “That money was for your business.” She’d never wanted Nick to feel like their lack of funds was his responsibility. She’d never wanted him to give up his dream because he felt like he had to take care of her. It was supposed to be the other way around. Marian was meant to do everything to take care of him. “How’re you paying it back without a business?” The thought made her features fall, eyes widening. $200,000 was an awfully lot of money for any mammal. Even when Nick graduated and became a cop, he wouldn’t have that much spare cash floating around.

“I was hustling until I met Judy.” He figured that he’d already confessed to hustling as a kit, it couldn’t be much worse to admit doing the same as an adult. Keeping his gaze on his mother, Nick felt Judy take his paw in her own, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

Though part of Marian didn’t want to know any more, she felt like she needed to understand what her son had been doing all these years. He’d placed himself in danger by using the money for some purpose other than what it had been intended for, had he put himself at risk working for money to pay it back too? “What sort of hustling?”

“Selling pawpsicles, mainly. I’d get a jumbo-pop from an elephant cafe, melt it down, and make little ice pops in the shape of paws. Then I’d sell them to small mammals as they left work.” Nick explained his hustle. Though he’d toed the line between legal and illegal with his hustles over the years, this one had always been his favorite. It had been easy to execute, legal so long as he had the right permits to paw, and reasonably rewarding.

Dismayed by her son’s confession, Marian couldn’t believe Nick had gone to such lengths. It hadn’t been his job to find money to pay off the mortgage; it hadn’t been his job to take care of her. Tears gathered in Marian’s eyes. When she’d brought Nick into the world, she had vowed to do everything to make sure he was safe and happy, and she’d failed. She had failed as a mother.

“It’s how Judy and I met. I hustled her, and then she hustled me.” Nick had been telling the truth when he’d told his mom about him helping Judy with the missing mammal’s case; he’d just omitted the fact that they’d met before Judy had pulled him into helping. The dismay on his mother’s face had Nick turning to look at Judy, needing to see something positive or reassuring. His mate didn’t disappoint. The small smile on her face was encouraging, but she reached up with her free paw to stroke his cheek, leaning in to press a kiss to the side of his muzzle. Persuaded to continue, the tod turned back to his mom. “I did what I had to to meet payments every month. They were going to hurt you otherwise. I would never let that happen.”

Marian missed the interaction between her son and Judy, her mind too focused on the information Nick had just revealed. However, the mention of being hurt snapped her out of her thoughts. “The bruises…” The vixen could remember Nick coming to see her now and then sporting a fading bruise, wincing as he got up from the dinner table, or walking with an ever so slight limp. To the untrained eye, it wouldn’t have been apparent, but a mother never missed anything regarding her
children, especially not one that worked in the medical profession. She’d always asked him about it, but he’d brushed aside her concerns. “You didn’t get them bumping into your furniture, did you.” The question was rhetorical, voice hardening at the thought of Nick openly lying to her every time she’d asked.

“Kind of hard when you don’t have any furniture,” Nick muttered under his breath with an eye roll. It had been a flimsy excuse back then, and he’d questioned on more than one occasion how his mom had bought it. Opening his mouth to give her a more reasonable answer, he stopped at the hard glint he could see in her eyes; freezing at the anger he could see welling up in her.

“What do you mean no furniture? Where were you living that had no furniture? If you were in the Nocturnal District, so help me, Nicholas, I will smack your tail. Your father and I raised you better than that.” The thought of Nick living in the district under the city had always terrified the vixen. It was dark and dirty down there, and mammals with little to no morals enjoyed the fact the cops mostly ignored the shady business taking place over there.

Needing to backtrack, Nick tried to force himself to relax, to seem nonchalant. “It doesn’t matter where I was living, mom.”

“Nicholas Piberius Wilde. Don’t you dare ignore my question.” Marian put her hind paw down. If Nick had been living in the Nocturnal District, then she wanted to know. The only saving grace was that he was no longer there, that Judy had pulled him out of such an immoral place.

Judy had sat by, watching and listening to the conversation, monitoring her mate so she could offer him comfort whenever he needed it. She knew Nick’s former living arrangements were a sore point for him, that the admission of his old ‘home’ would break Marian’s heart even more. Catching Nick’s gaze, she held it, starting the confession for him, tweaking it to fit. “Soon enough those dreams die, and our fox sinks into emotional and literal squalor…”

Nick didn’t want to finish the sentence, didn’t want to voice where he’d been living, but his mom was ruthless. She’d force it out of him or Judy. Not daring to look at her, he kept his gaze on his mate as he took a ragged breath “…living in a box under a bridge.”

It was like someone had ripped out Marian’s heart. Her son hadn’t been living in some ramshackle apartment in the Nocturnal District. He hadn’t had a home at all. Lips parting in distress, Marian screwed her eyes shut, paws clamping over her mouth as she tried to stop herself from sobbing. “You were homeless? Why didn’t you come to me? You have a home here!” she wheezed between shaky breaths, unable to stop a few tears from slipping out, sliding down her fur to leave a damp trail behind them.

It was a gut reaction, the need to reach out to his mom. Nick hated to see her cry, and he hated it even more when he’d been the one to cause her tears. Letting go of Judy, he grasped his mom’s wrists, trying to gently pry her paws from her face so he could see her. He needed to look into the emerald eyes that matched his own. “I would’ve added to the bills, and they would’ve known exactly where to find you. It was safer to be where I was,” he explained, praying that his mom would understand. Everything he’d done had been to protect her.

Too weak to fight off her son’s grip, Marian let him pull her paws from her face. She wasn’t sure which emotion was more prevalent – anger, sadness, or guilt. Staring into the eyes that matched her own, the vixen shook her head. “I don’t care about the bills; you’re more important. You were under a bridge, Nicholas! That’s not safe! How much do you still owe?” she tried to do the math in her head, tried to figure out how much she could contribute every month to keep her kit safe, but the numbers weren’t adding up, and her brain felt like it had been in a blender.
“I don’t owe anything.” At least Nick was able to give his mom some good news. She didn’t have to worry about any mammal’s coming after them.

Knowing her son had hidden so much from her for so long, Marian found his answer hard to believe. “Nicholas…” she warned, not wanting him to lie to her anymore. Her heart was already hurting too much.

Realizing that now was an opportune moment for her to jump in and help her fox, Judy spoke up. “I dealt with it. The loan mammal and his gang won’t bother Nick again. The debt’s gone.”

Furious eyes turned to Judy. Marian had hoped that the sweet doe hadn’t been pulled into her son’s mess and lies, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Fear gripped her at the thought of Judy being hurt too. The rabbit was like a daughter, and she couldn’t risk anything happening to her. “What did you do, Judith?”

Wincing at the use of her full name, having not been scolded for a long while, Judy decided to stick as close to the truth as possible. This was Marian they were dealing with. “I renegotiated. Then the loan mammal died.”

“You killed him?!” Marian felt shell-shocked. Surely the tiny rabbit opposite her hadn’t gone toe-to-toe with a loan mammal.

Knowing she would have to lie, as she couldn’t risk dragging Marian further into her mess, Judy shook her head. “No. He and his gang died in a shoot out at The Cloven Hoof. They were all trying to kill each other.” Judy omitted what they were fighting over; throwing in the location, as she knew it had been broadcasted on the news. Marian was smart; she’d put two and two together and figure it out.

Mind going blank, Marian stared at the two mammals opposite her. A lot had been going on in her son’s life, and she hadn’t known anything about it. She’d suspected a few things, but none of it had come close to the truth. Shaking her head solemnly, silent tears rolled down her cheeks. Disappointment welled inside of her that it had come to this. Nick should’ve come to her; he should’ve told her about everything going on in his life and let her help. Judy shouldn’t have been dragged into this either. Paw rising, Marian pinched the bridge of her snout, eyes screwing shut as her heart ached, heavy with the knowledge that her kit had endured so much because he’d felt obligated to help her. She’d failed him, failed as a mother. She was supposed to protect him from the harshness of the world, but instead, he’d suffered because she hadn’t been able to get a grip on things and manage their finances. Her silent tears turned to sobs, her whole body racking with the intensity of her crying.

Hating the sight of his mother’s heartbreak, Nick left his seat, moving to comfort her. Crouching next to the couch, he reached out to pull her into a hug, yet his mom’s paw shot out, and she grabbed his chin tightly, eyes opening to reveal rage in her gaze. “You’re an idiot, Nicholas.”

Used to hearing such a phrase thrown at him, the tod nodded, the corners of his lips curved downwards. “I know.”

“If anything had happened to you...” Marian didn’t even want to entertain the idea. The streets were dangerous for any mammal, but more so for foxes. Other species sneered at them and thought they were a blemish on society. Nick would’ve been a prime target for any animal, and he hadn’t had anyone to protect him.

Trying to nod as best as he could in his mom’s iron grip, Nick sighed, shoulder slumping. “I know.”
“No, I don’t think you do! I’ve already lost my husband. I will not lose my son.” That was the crux of the issue for Marian. When Robert had been murdered it had only been Nick that had kept her going, the need to provide for her only kit taking priority. Over the years her family had broken contact with her, disliking her association with the Wilde’s. It had been just the three of them, and when Robert had died, they’d been down to two. Marian couldn’t stand the thought of losing Nick, the kit she’d grown and nurtured. Being alone frightened her, and losing the last link to her husband was an unbearable thought.

The mention of his father put Nick on edge, even after all this time it was a sore topic for him. He could understand his mom’s worry, but she didn’t need to be concerned now. Everything was okay. “I’m safe now, mom.”

“Yes, now. What if Judy hadn’t have come along? How long would you’ve hidden this from me and continued to live on the streets, conning mammals out of their money?” she demanded, seeing the rabbit in question from the corner of her eye. She’d always believed Judy had been a blessing in her son’s life, but now she could see just how much of an impact the doe had had on Nick.

Still with his chin held in his mother’s grasp, Nick shrugged. It was a stupid question as far as he was concerned. There was only one answer. “However long it took to pay off the debt. Keeping you safe is my priority.”

“I’m your mother. It’s my job to keep you safe, not the other way around! You’re all I have,” Marian cried, needing Nick to understand. It was her duty to care for him, to provide for him, to ensure his safety. She hadn’t been able to do any of that. Guilt consumed her. Her kit had suffered because of her.

Anger flooded Nick’s body, and he yanked away from his mother’s grasp, paws tightening into fists at his side as his jaw clenched. “You’re all I have too! You lost your husband, but you forget that I lost my father. Every kit in school was talking about their dad, and all I could do was sit there quietly and pray no one asked me about mine because I didn’t want to be the only one who’s father was dead.” Emotions Nick had been trying to keep under lock and key burst forward. He hadn’t had time to deal with the grief of his father’s death, hadn’t had the opportunity to mourn him properly, and it had left a gaping hole in his heart that nothing would ever fill. His mom had been so wrapped up in her sadness and stress that Nick hadn’t wanted to talk to her about it, hadn’t wanted to bother her or weigh her down more. What little friends he had hadn’t wanted to spend time with the sad fox kit, hadn’t wanted to listen to him pour his heart out and cry. They’d abandoned him at the first available opportunity. He’d had no one to turn to. The only way he’d been able to cope had been by pouring his heartache into trying to help his mom. He’d rationalized that at least if she was okay, then life could perhaps regain some semblance of normalcy. “I didn’t want to lose you too. I didn’t want to lose this house and the memories of dad cooking at the stove, or reading ‘Fox in Socks' to me to help me sleep, or playing chess with me at the dining table. I didn’t want to lose th-”

Pain erupted in Marian’s chest at the painful memories of her husband, and she had to hold her paws up, fingers splayed, sobbing as she listened to her son’s tirade. “Stop, Nicky, please.”

Trembling with a mixture of sorrow and rage, Nick angrily wiped away the silent tears that had fallen during his spiel. He didn’t want to raise his voice at his mom, didn’t want to hurt her any more. Softening his voice, he unclenched his paws, running them over his face before he met his mom’s tear-filled emerald eyes. “I chose to pay off the mortgage, I chose to live on the streets and hustle, and I would do it again in a heartbeat. You’re my mom and I love you. I will do anything to make sure you’re cared for. I will do anything to make sure nothing destroys our memories of dad.” His mom didn’t stop crying, and the tod was a loss. He didn’t know what to say to make it all
better, didn’t know how to make her stop crying. Reaching out for her, he noticed his paw shaking. “Mom…”

“No! Enough!” Marian snapped, shrinking back from Nick’s touch, paws rising to hide her face as she tried desperately to stop her tears. It was futile. She felt too delicate, like her heart had been ripped out of her chest and stomped all over.

It was like someone had burst a balloon. Nick’s paw dropped to his side like a lead weight, tail falling between his legs as his ears flattened back in submission, head hung in shame and sorrow. His mom wouldn’t even let him offer her some comfort.

Though Judy had been little more than a bystander in their conversation, she felt her heart break for the mother and her son. Wanting to soothe her fox, knowing his fears of abandonment, she reached out for him. Nick must have sensed her coming though, as he pulled his paw away just before she could reach it. Unperturbed, Judy reached out again, this time forcibly grabbing his paw. She could see him wanting to shake her off, wanting to withdraw into himself, but Judy would be damned if she was going to let that happen. She’d spent far too long pulling Nick out of his shell to let this set them back. Refusing to let him go, she gave his paw a tight squeeze.

“You should go. I don’t want you missing your train.” Marian needed some time alone; she needed to process everything Nick had just told her and work through her feelings. She couldn’t do that with Nick and Judy around. Forcing herself to try and get some composure, the vixen sniffled, wiping at her eyes.

Nick felt like a rhino had sucker punched him. His mom was sending him away. Fear crashed through him that his confession had done irreparable damage to their relationship, that his mom would abandon him now like everyone else had. No matter what though, he would always love her. Leaning down he pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I love you,” he whispered, but when he didn’t get a response he turned, head still bowed, feeling tears slide down his cheeks as he moved to leave the room. Had he just made the biggest mistake of his life?

Up and out of her seat, Judy looked between the two foxes. This hadn’t been what she’d wanted or hoped for. Telling Marian was supposed to lift a weight off Nick’s shoulders, help his mom understand what had been going on in his past, not tear them both down. Perhaps it had been naive of her to think that things would work out for the best, but she’d thought Marian and Nick were stronger than that. They’d overcome so much together already. Moving to the vixen, who had her head bowed, Judy placed a small paw on her knee. “We both love you,” she murmured, releasing Marian a moment later to flee after her mate, who’d already left the apartment and was making his way down the stairs.

Pulling in a few ragged breaths, Marian tipped her head back, staring at the ceiling as she sniffled, the sound of the front door slamming shut echoing around the apartment. For a moment all was quiet, until the vixen’s brain managed to work itself out of its funk long enough to remind her that she just sent Nick away, and he was due to go back to the academy tonight. Something could happen to him while he was away, he could be hurt or die, and they’d have parted on a sour note. Up and across the room in the blink of an eye, Marian yanked the front door open, panic coursing through her as she leaned over the stairwell banister. “Nicky!” she cried out, seeing her son and Judy at the building door. Nick turned to look up at her, and the pain in her kits eyes had her feeling like the worst mother in the world all over again. “Please come back, sweetheart!” she choked out, wanting to erase his pain and hold him.

Wavering, Nick didn’t know what to do. A light push from Judy had him moving through, trudging back up the stairs with his doe following behind. As he reached the third floor, he kept his head
dipped, tail down and ears flattened in submission. Primal instincts almost had him bearing his throat. “You sent me away.”

Reaching for her kit, Marian pulled him into a tight hug, arms clamping around him, not daring to let him go. The fear of losing him was too great. “I shouldn’t have,” she whispered, tail curling to wrap around Nick’s ankles, stopping her son from leaving. “I’m s- so sorry Nicky. I’m so sorry,” she cried, tucking him under her chin, rubbing her muzzle over any of his fur she could get to. Disappointment at herself was her primary emotion. She’d pushed her kit away after he’d done so much to protect her, as if his struggles had been meaningless.

Tucked under his mom’s snout, Nick felt like a kit again. The reassuring scent of home filled his nostrils; he could feel the reassuring thud of his mom’s heartbeat on his cheek from where it was pressed to her throat.

Reluctant to let go, but needing to look into the eyes that matched her own, Marian slowly pulled back. Unwinding her arms, her paws came to cup Nick’s face, clawed thumbs smoothing over his damp cheeks. He looked so much like Robert, and he acted just like him too. “I failed you,” she started, carrying on before Nick could interrupt. “It’s a mothers job to care for her kit, to provide for them and protect them, shelter them from the evil of the world. I didn’t do that.”

“It’s not your fault.” Nick butted in, not wanting his mom to blame herself. That hadn’t been the purpose of their conversation. All he’d wanted was to get rid of any secrets between them, fill in the gaps for her.

“Shhh, Nicky.” Marian moved her paws, one cupping his chin while the other stroked along the top of his muzzle. “I could’ve lost you. The world is such a dangerous place and you were knee deep in some nasty business. I’m not angry with you, though. You did what you thought was right. I’m just relieved that you’re here, and you’re okay. I need some time to sort through everything you’ve told me, that was a lot for your old mother’s heart to handle, but I know you’re safe now.” She leaned in, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “No one will ever be more important to me than you. I love you, so much.”

Sniffling, Nick leaned into his mom’s touch. Emerald held emerald and the tod nodded. He couldn’t expect his mom to be okay with everything he’d told her; it had been a lot of unpleasant information. However, hearing that his mom wasn’t angry with him soothed him, pushed away his fear of being abandoned. Eyes closing as she kissed his forehead, Nick felt a shaky smile cross his lips. “I love you too, mom.”
Christmas; the most wonderful time of the year. At least that was what the song on the cruisers radio was warbling. Judy wasn’t feeling too wonderful, though.

“I’m sorry again Judy, I didn’t think he’d take that shortcut,” Wolford broke through the stony silence between them, sparing a quick glance towards Judy as he drove her home. They were meant to report back to the precinct first before clocking out, but the rabbit in the passenger seat was in no condition to be walking through the shiny, clean corridors of the ZPD. The timber wolf’s sensitive nose had been forced to smell the disgusting odor coming from Judy for the past thirty minutes as they drove from the Canal District back to Judy’s home.

Trying her hardest not to focus on the fact she smelled like a sewer and her fur was starting to mat, Judy failed to hide her grimace of disgust at her current state. “It’s fine Connor, it’s not your fault at all. I didn’t know he was going to use that route, and you wouldn’t have been able to fit down those drains anyway.” The doe knew her size made her a valuable asset to precinct one. She was able to get into the small spaces that her colleagues couldn’t. Sometimes, like today, that wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

The day had been quiet for her and Wolford until they’d spotted a raccoon slinking down the street they’d been parked on. His face had been familiar to them both, a picture of him pinned to the board in the break room. There was a warrant out for his arrest. In her usual manner, Judy had tackled the problem head on and confronted the raccoon, only for him to start running. The doe had given chase, and Wolford had used the cruiser to get ahead and block the road. Both officers had believed to have him cornered when he’d been trapped between Judy and the vehicle, but the criminal had given them the slip, diving down a storm drain and into the sewers. Judy had been forced to pursue him, and Wolford had called for backup. By the time Judy had tranquilized the raccoon and dragged him out of the sewer, she’d been covered in muck, half of which she didn’t want to know the source of.

As the cruiser came to a stop outside her apartment, Judy thanked Wolford, the pair of them wishing one another a lovely Christmas as Judy had booked time off to visit Bunnyburrow with Nick and Marian. It was already December 20th, and time had flown past since Nick’s last trip home for Halloween. Gingerly exiting the vehicle, Judy made her way down the steps to the basement level and her front door. While fishing for her keys in her pocket, Judy wondered how she was going to get to the bathroom without traipsing all the muck on her fur into the carpet. Just as she pulled her keys from her belt, the front door swung open.
“Hey Fluff, you’re hom-” Nick had heard the sound of the cruiser pulling up outside, and being a gentlemammal he’d gone to open the door for his mate. However, the sight and smell that greeted him were not what he’d been expecting. “What the hell happened?” He looked Judy up and down, nose wrinkling as pungent smells wafted his way.

Surprised to find Nick already home, Judy went to hug him, stopping short when he took a step back, nose crinkled and eyes fixed on her matted fur. “Chasing a perp,” she sighed, the sting of rejection faint. She knew that any other time Nick would jump at the chance to embrace her, but she currently smelt like a sewer.

“What the hell happened?” Nick questioned, already formulating ways to get Judy into the shower. His doe nodded, humming her agreement. “Well, at least you didn’t get filthy for nothing. Wait here, I’ll grab some towels, and we’ll make a mini walkway to the bathroom.”

As Nick disappeared, Judy started to remove her uniform, first her belt and then her vest. It would all need to be disposed of, there was no way she could salvage it and get the smell out. She’d need to shampoo herself several times just to get her fur clean. Not wanting the scent in the house, she ditched her belt and vest by the front door, grateful for the fact they had a basement apartment and no one on the street would be able to see her. Stripping off her pants and shirt too as Nick arrived back, arms laden with towels, Judy looked up to find him with a raised eyebrow. “I’m not bringing the smell into the house,” she explained, watching as her mate nodded in understanding and set about creating a walkway of towels. Once the three towels were down, Judy set foot inside, walking to the end of the last one. Nick picked up the other two and moved them in front of her, and so they continued until Judy reached the bathroom. “We’ll probably have to throw out those towels too,” she sighed, grateful for the tiled bathroom floor that she could just wipe clean later.

“You shower and let me worry about this. I’ll empty out your belt and get rid of everything else,” Nick offered, not wanting his mate to worry. He also wanted her to hurry up and get in the shower so the smell would go away. With a nod, Judy shut the door, and Nick heard the water running a moment later. Satisfied, he turned his attention to the filthy towels and the ruined clothes outside. “The things you do for those you love.” He shook his head fondly.

It took four lots of shampooing for Judy to feel like all of the muck was out of her fur, but even then she still thought she smelt, so she shampooed once more before she stepped out of the shower, using one of the clean, fluffy towels to dry herself off. Judy had to go slow and be gentle as her fur was a little matted from the rough treatment. Leaving the bathroom in a cloud of steam, Judy trudged to their bedroom. Nick had come home with two bags, and both of them were placed on the end of the bed. Excitement bubbled up inside of Judy as she realized they were so close to him being permanently home. He was home for three weeks now, and after New Year he’d only be returning to the ZPA for a week to sit his final exams. With a smile still on her face, the doe changed quickly into her underwear. As she went to grab some yoga pants and a shirt, though, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. “Oh, sweet cheese and crackers.” Changing tactic, she picked up her brush from the dresser and made her way to the living room.

“Hey Slick, I hate to be a pain but do you think you could brush some of these mats out please?” she asked as she walked into the living room, finding Nick sat on the couch. Her fox looked up, and his jaw slackened. “What?”

Caught off-guard by Judy’s sudden appearance in the living room in only her underwear, Nick’s brain could only focus on the fact his mate was half naked. “Have I ever told you how beautiful you look in your underwear?”

Blushing, Judy’s ears drooped, and she pulled them over her shoulders to try and hide behind them.
She was more comfortable wearing less clothing around Nick now, especially after their shower the last time he’d been home, but she’d never had another mammal give her such a compliment before. Bucks had called her pretty in the past, flattered her with sweet words, but the sincerity in Nick’s voice and the weight of his gaze were very welcome. “Thanks, Slick.”

Sliding off the couch, Nick sat on the floor, back to the sofa as he placed a pillow in front of him. “Come on, let me brush those mats out,” he offered, patting the pillow. As Judy came and sat before him, the tod swallowed. “The world is testing me by putting me in the same room as my half-naked bunny during mating season.” Taking the brush from his mate, Nick started to brush the fur on the top of her head, working methodically to ensure he caught every little mat.

They sat in silence for a while; the only sound in the room their breathing and the strokes of the brush. Judy started to purr, grinding her back teeth together as Nick gently combed out all the knots in her fur. The tod couldn’t stop the end of his tail flicking in contentment as he worked the brush over Judy’s small frame. Coming home this time had been a nightmare. He’d had to empty out his wardrobe and locker at the academy, and his mom had ended up sending him a suitcase to go with the duffle bag he’d arrived at the ZPA with. His mom had also been helping him buy Christmas presents, and in his suitcase, he had gifts for Judy, Bonnie, Stu, Jasmine, Julian, and Sasha. Judy had picked up his gift for his mom.

“Your winter coat has come through,” Judy commented, breaking the silence. She’d noticed how much fluffier her fox was when he’d opened the door, but the sludge on her fur had taken priority. She was itching to take the brush from him and return the favor, to run her paws through his soft, long coat.

Nodding as he worked on Judy’s left side, Nick hummed his confirmation. “It’ll stick around for a few months, so there’s plenty of time for you to enjoy it,” he teased, remembering how his doe hadn’t been able to keep her paws to herself the last time he’d been home, always running her fingers through his fur. Silence settled between them for a few minutes as Nick swapped to Judy’s right side, her clothes having stopped her fur from matting too much. “Tony left his mistress, by the way.” Nick filled Judy in on some of the ZPA gossip. During their phone calls, he often touched upon the goings on in the lives of his fellow cadets.

“Did his wife take him back?” Judy questioned, remembering everything Nick had told her about the tiger and his antics. Part of her hoped the tigress had told Tony where to shove it, that she wouldn’t tolerate him playing the field anymore, but from what little she’d heard about his wife, Judy had a feeling she’d eventually forgive him.

Moving to brush Judy’s lower back, Nick shrugged, even though the doe couldn’t see the action. “I don’t know, he hasn’t said much since he told us that he broke things off with his mistress. I think he’s hoping to grovel over Christmas break and try to show her how sorry he is.”

Scowling at the information, Judy’s hind paw began to move as if she were thumping the ground. “I hope he doesn’t think he can ’show her how sorry he is’ by just buying her something nice for Christmas. That’s a cheap tactic.” The doe didn’t know Tony’s wife, but she knew females in general. If he really wanted to buy her something, then purchasing a meaningful gift was better than buying an expensive one.

“Tony can be a pain, but he knows he messed up and it’s going to take a lot to earn his wife’s trust again. I think he was planning on taking her out dancing and then for a walk through Marsh Park tomorrow night,” Nick said, relaying what little information Tony had shared with him before they’d parted ways at Savannah Central. The tiger had been uncharacteristically subdued on the journey back from the academy, and Nick’s years on the streets had taught him how to read
mammals, so it came as no surprise to see that Tony was nervous, possibly even scared.

Leaning forward so Nick could reach her lower back, Judy stretched, touching her toes and undoing all the kinks in her back from her long day. “I don’t know whether her decision to give him another chance is foolish or admirable,” she mused. The rabbit knew that if she were in the shoes of Tony’s wife, and knew her husband had kept a mistress, he would soon become her ex-husband.

“Everyone deserves a second chance, Carrots. I gave you one, remember?” Nick pointed out. He’d spent the best part of eight months in Tony’s company. The tiger was an idiot at times and had no filter, but he was an all around okay mammal. Having a mistress was a huge mistake, and Tony had realized that now and was actively trying to fix it. In Nick’s eyes, that was admirable.

Body tensing, Judy remembered the press conference and all the damage it had caused. Most of all, she felt a rush of guilt as she remembered how much she’d hurt Nick.

Seeing Judy freeze, Nick stopped brushing, abandoning the tool to wrap his arms around the doe’s waist, holding her as he rested his chin on her shoulder. “I didn’t mean it as a dig, Fluff. Mammals make mistakes, and yes some of them are foolish and could’ve been prevented, but it’s what makes us who we are. We learn from those mistakes, and we grow from them. Some of us then end up prancing around our feelings until eventually, we end up shackled up with the mammal we accidentally hurt, living in interspecies sin, and loving every moment of it,” he teased, hoping to lighten the mood.

Caught off guard, Judy snorted as a grin crossed her lips. Sinking back into Nick’s embrace, she forgot about her guilt. “It was hard to resist your charm, Slick.”

“I am quite charming, it has been said.” The tod dropped a kiss to Judy’s shoulder, hiding his smile in her fur.

Snickering, Judy twisted, turning in Nick’s grasp until she sat facing him. “Careful, or your head won’t fit through the door.”

Inhaling sharply, Nick brought a paw to his chest, letting it rest over his heart. “Wounding me again! You really need to stop this, Carrots,” he dramatically admonished. In truth, he enjoyed Judy’s teasing and had missed it while away at the academy.

“I’ve got to keep you in line somehow.” Judy was on a roll, and the joy at having Nick home was hard to contain. Their apartment wasn’t the same without him, and his scent had just been starting to fade. Judy had tried to preserve as much of it as possible over the last month and a half, but it had been futile as Nick had so few belongings. Their bedding had lost his scent after the first wash once he’d returned to the academy, and no matter how much of her face Judy had smushed into the pillow, she hadn’t been able to catch a trace of it. When loneliness had struck, she’d turned to their wardrobe, grabbing one of his Pawaiian shirts to bury her nose in. She would never admit to having occasionally fallen asleep clutching the gaudy fabric.

Shaking his head fondly, Nick dropped his paw from his chest, reaching out to touch Judy’s knee, needing the physical contact after spending so long without her. “There she goes again,” he tutted. Corners of his lips quirking up into a soft smile, Nick knew their alone time was limited. Tonight they would be heading to his mom’s to give her the case full of cash, and tomorrow they would be heading to Bunnyburrow for a week. “I’ve been talking to mom a lot about the past.”

Surprised, Judy offered the tod an encouraging smile to keep him talking. She knew how much he hated bringing up the past, but opening up to his mom was a good thing. He couldn’t solely rely on
“I’ve been telling her a little more about my hustling and life on the streets.” Nick had been drip-feeding his mom information during their weekly calls, trying to weave it into their general conversation. The last thing he wanted was to overwhelm her again, to upset her and make her cry. “She seems to be taking it okay, but I can see she still feels guilty.”

Paw finding Nick’s on her knee, Judy gave it a gentle squeeze. “She’ll probably always feel a little guilty, Slick.”

“It was my choice though. She shouldn’t beat herself up about it.” Nick wasn’t one to whine, he’d always made the best of a bad situation, but the fact his mother still acted like it was her fault upset him. No matter what he said, she didn’t seem to think any differently.

Sensing her mate's need for comfort, Judy reached out, fingers brushing his cheek, stroking the thick fur. “She’s your mom, she’ll always feel like she could’ve done more. We know she couldn’t though, that things were tough for her too. We just have to remind her all the time that we love her and that everything is fine now, that the past is the past and we have to move forward.”

“When did you get so wise?” the tod sighed, his paw leaving Judy’s knee to stroke her cheek in return, claws dragging lightly. He half expected her to flinch away, to think of when Gideon had clawed her as a kit, but instead, she leaned into his touch. It was a testament to how much she trusted him, and it warmed his heart.

Spotting an opportunity to tease Nick and lighten the mood, Judy took it. “When I started dating an old fox.”

“With age comes experience,” the tod shot back, offering his bunny a wink, which had her laughing. Nick had missed the sound.

Picking up the brush, Judy threw it onto Nick’s lap. “Get back to brushing, fox.” She offered out her other leg.

“Yes, rabbit,” Nick mock saluted before the two mammals shared a grin. Picking up the brush, he started to work on Judy’s legs. After this, he only had the brush her chest. He’d purposefully saved his favorite part for last.

“I had lunch with Akita a few days ago.” Judy picked a new topic. She’d been going out for lunch a lot lately with friends, even catching up with Bandit on occasion. The doe had felt it best to keep Nick informed about her comings and goings if only to try and soothe his insecurities and show that she wasn’t hiding anything from him. She’d half expected him to still disapprove of her spending time with Bandit, but Nick surprised her. The first time she’d told him they were going for lunch, he’d wished them a good time and told her to pass his regards on to the arctic fox. The second time, he’d asked how the first time went, but the tone of his voice hadn’t held any of its previous jealousy. Judy could tell Nick still wasn’t entirely comfortable with it, but he was making progress, and the more he was able to see how harmless it was the less it bothered him. She hoped in the future that she wouldn’t have to tell him her plans to soothe his insecurities, but because she simply wanted to keep him in the loop.

Finding a tangle, Nick focused his attention on it, ears pricked forward still to listen to his mate. “How did it go? Did you ladies have fun?”

“Mhm,” Judy hummed. When Akita had broken the news to her of her engagement shortly after Nick had returned to the academy, the doe had filled him in during one of their calls. She’d been
unaware, however, that the tod already knew of Bandit’s plan to propose. “We spent a lot of time
talking about the wedding. They’re thinking of getting married in May and are in the process of
picking a venue. She’s also asked me to be the maid of honor, and she’s gone for a pastel theme.
We’re planning on going dress shopping after New Year, and I can’t wait to see Akita trying on
wedding dresses. She’s thinking about an off-shoulder dress, sticking with the white theme, but
she’s still undecided if she wants a train or not…” Judy trailed off, catching the amused smile on
Nick’s lips. “What?”

“Has anyone ever told you how cute you are when you get excited?” The sentence slipped out
before Nick could rethink it, and the tod’s eyes widened as he realized what he’d just said. “Sweet!
I meant sweet,” he corrected himself, praying he hadn’t insulted Judy too much as he paused
brushing.

Habit had Judy opening her mouth to correct Nick, to ask him not to call her cute, but she shut it as
another thought hit her. If Nick were a buck and they were dating, he’d be able to call her cute all
the time, and it would be fine. Would it really be bad to let her fox use the term? Mulling the
thought over for a moment, the panic on Nick’s face prompted her to start talking. “Do you know
why we don’t like being called cute by mammals who aren’t rabbits?”

Rather than risk putting his hind paw in it again, Nick shook his head, brush still in his paw.

“It started off as a derogatory and condescending term towards us, and it mostly still is amongst
other species, but we rabbits began to reclaim it. Amongst rabbits, it’s now a verbal cue as to the
bond between us, be it friendship or something more. We don’t like those who aren’t rabbits using
it because of the context they usually say it in, it’s not meant with endearment like it is within our
species, and others often use it to try and hurt us and make us feel inferior.” Judy explained, trying
to come up with an example for Nick. “Consider the use of ‘sly’ to describe your species. When
another fox says it to you, how do you feel?”

Nick didn’t need to think about his answer. “It doesn’t bother me.” He and Finnick used to joke
about which of them was the slyest. Usually, the fennec fox won that argument, his small stature
and ability to act as a kit worked in his favor when tricking mammals out of their cash.

“And how does it feel when other mammals use it?” Judy questioned, hoping her example would
work.

Recalling the many insults that had been hurled his way since he’d left home as a kit, Nick sighed.
He acted like it didn’t bother him, as if the words bounced straight off, but they still hurt. It was
better to not let other mammals see that they got to him, so he often countered their abuse with a
witty comeback, or he’d hustle them. “As if they’re talking down to me, like I’m less than them.”

“That’s what it’s like for us.” Judy took the brush from Nick’s paw, setting it aside.

Feeling guilty for having used the word, especially now that he understood why it was a sore point
for rabbits, the tod reached out to gently grasp Judy’s waist. “I’m sorry, Fluff. I didn’t know.”

“It’s fine, please don’t feel bad about it.” Judy brushed aside his apology. It wasn’t that she didn’t
appreciate it, but that the comment hadn’t really hurt her. He had no need to apologize. “In all
honesty, as long as you don’t abuse it, I don’t think I’d care if you did use it.”

Incredulous, Nick shook his head. “I’m not going to use a word that insults you, Carrots.”

“And yet the nickname you just used started off as an insult, and look where we are now.” She
offered him a smile. “You’re my mate, and if you were a buck, you’d have free rein to use it
whenever you wanted. I don’t see the harm in you saying it, because I know you don’t mean it in a derogatory or condescending way.”

“Fluff…” Nick started to protest.

Realising she wasn’t getting through Nick’s thick skull, Judy shifted and straddled his lap. “Okay, let’s try something else.” Reaching out she brushed her fingers across his muzzle. The momentary surprise on Nick’s face as he suddenly had a lap full of bunny almost made Judy laugh. However, she held back on it, knowing this was a serious conversation. She was unsure how Nick would take her idea, but she dropped her voice to a murmur and ran her thumb over his lips. “My sly fox.”

Nick had expected to be insulted by Judy’s use of the adjective, but instead, it didn’t bother him like it did when other mammals used it. Giving himself a moment, the tod rationalized that it probably had something to do with her being his mate, that he knew she trusted him, and that she didn’t mean it with cruel intent. It was teasing, a show of their bond. Understanding crept up on him, and the small bob of Judy’s head in encouragement had him returning the rabbit equivalent. “My cute bunny.”

Judy offered him a reassuring smile. “See, I’m not bothered. Did that bother you?” she questioned, hoping she hadn’t accidentally hurt her fox in her attempt to make her point. The shake of Nick’s head had Judy turning to scritch his snout. “Just be careful when you use it, okay? While I’m not bothered by it, I can imagine a lot of my siblings might be if they hear you say it.”

“Yeah, I don’t need them chasing me with flaming torches and pitchforks. I doubt I’ll use it often anyway, Fluff.” Nick appreciated being given permission to use the word, and he wouldn’t dare abuse that.

The vision of her family chasing after Nick with pitchforks made the doe scowl. She had a feeling it would never happen, most of her family adored her fox and those who didn’t were slowly being brought around by Julian. It didn’t make the picture in her mind any less worrying, though. “I don’t want you thinking any word is off limits to me or worrying that you’re going to accidentally offend me.”

“You know the same applies in return, right?” Nick didn’t want Judy thinking she might end up hurting him. Her little exercise had proven that he took no offense to the usual slurs thrown at foxes when his mate spoke them. Watching as Judy nodded, Nick accepted the chaste kiss she pressed to his lips. The tod wanted a little more, their separation having weighed heavy on his heart, but he was distantly aware of the fact they didn’t have long until they had to head to his mom’s place. If Judy started being enticing now, they’d end up late.

As Judy pulled back from their kiss, Nick found the violet eyes he loved so much, holding her gaze. An overwhelming feeling of love washed over him as the rabbit in his lap offered him a soft smile. She’d been so patient, helping him through his issues, never thinking it was too much and leaving him to deal with it on his own. It was that which had spurred him into asking Friedkin to find Bandit’s number for him, and though the tod had ended up calling the hospital, the arctic fox had passed along his private number and his home address. They’d exchanged some letters and calls since Nick’s last trip home, and together they’d been working through a few more of the tod’s issues. While Judy was doing an incredible job at helping him, he didn’t want to depend on her entirely, didn’t want to keep weighing her down with his problems.

Nick had contemplated seeing a psychologist, but he’d shot the idea down quickly. He wasn’t ready for that intense level of intervention, and he didn’t want to talk to a complete stranger who would probably pity him. Bandit was the next best option, and though he didn’t know the arctic fox very well, if Judy were willing to trust him then Nick would too. The other tod had a good
understanding of his relationship with Judy and their situation, and his medical background had proved useful on more than one occasion.

Nick had even been able to use the time to speak to the arctic fox about his positive association therapy with Judy. Their distance had made keeping up with it hard, but they’d decided that each week when Nick called, Judy would fill the bath with ice water and slowly submerge more of her body into it, all the while Nick distracted her by talking about the goings on at the academy. It wasn’t as effective as their trips to Tundratown, and some weeks Judy had made zero progress, but she was able to sit in waist high ice water now, which was something.

Bandit had opened Nick’s eyes to some of the more negative results of his issues. The tod had still had Finnick watching over Judy for him, even though Catstro and his gang were gone. When Bandit had informed him that it was a possible indicator of Nick’s lack of trust in Judy’s ability to look after herself, the red fox had immediately called Finnick and told him to abandon his watch. He needed to start trusting Judy and her judgment, especially as they were going to be partners once he’d graduated.

“I’m sorry about being so difficult,” Nick whispered, breaking the silence. As well as coming up with new ways to tackle his issues, Nick and Bandit had spoken at length about the way Nick had acted towards his rabbit when they’d first met. They’d come to the conclusion that he’d been jealous and had been lashing out at her for it. How could a rabbit become a cop when a fox was left to hustle? They were both seen as incapable of achieving much, so Judy having achieved something had frustrated him. That, and the fact she’d out-hustled him. They joked about it now, and Nick saw the funny side, but for him, it had been his income and his talent, and a little country bunny had bested him.

Confusion clouded Judy’s features as she tried to work out where his apology had come from. “You’re not difficult, Nick.”

“I beg to differ, but I’m talking about the missing mammal's case. I didn’t take it seriously; I was treating it like some game and had no regards for your feelings or you, until Bogo wanted your badge. It hit me then how genuine it all was, and how much it all meant to you.” He hadn’t been lying when he’d told her that seeing her fail had made him feel better about his life, but when it came down to the wire he’d realized how his petty jealousy could’ve led to Judy giving up her dream. He knew how heartbreaking that was, and Judy had grown on him a little during their time together, so he’d felt compelled to mammal up and stop being a thorn in her side.

“Which is why you stepped in,” the doe had spent some time once she’d handed in her badge and returned to Bunnyburrow going over the events leading up to the press conference, from the moment she’d taken on the missing mammal’s case. It hadn’t taken her long to come to the conclusion that the street hustler had disliked the fact she’d become a cop, and had purposefully tried to slow her down and cause her as much grief as possible. With a shrug, Judy knew the past was in the past. They couldn’t change it, but they’d managed to make something better of it. They’d made up, solved the case properly, and Nick was now in the final stage of joining her at the ZPD. “It’s okay, Slick. I blackmailed you into helping anyway. It wasn’t like I was expecting you to cooperate.”

Shaking his head, the tod frowned. “And I hustled you, even though you’re a cop.” At the time he hadn’t cared, and even now he found it amusing, but he could see how much of a stupid move it had been. It was one thing to hustle an unsuspecting member of the public out of cash but to con a cop who could arrest you in a second? Not a good idea.

“I was a dumb bunny and fell for it,” Judy pointed out. Nick wasn’t to blame; he’d just been trying
to make ends meet. He’d spotted an opportunity, and he’d taken it, she couldn’t fault him for that.

Reaching out, Nick brushed a clawed finger across Judy’s cheek. “You’re not a dumb bunny, Carrots. Please don’t think about yourself that way.” He hated hearing her put herself down. Figuring they were in the midst of a deep conversation, the tod had something he wanted to talk about, but he knew it was a bit of a topic leap. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“Slick, I think we’re way past personal now,” Judy snorted. There wasn’t anything they couldn’t talk about.

Nodding, Nick phrased his question in a way to not sound accusatory. “Why did you feel the need to be on suppressants?” It had been bugging him ever since he’d found the little container of pills in the kitchen all those months ago.

Having not expected that to be Nick’s question, Judy bit the inside of her lip. “We rabbits have high drives. I didn’t want to jump into anything right away, and I didn’t want to force you into any awkward situations.”

“I wouldn’t have objected, Fluff.” If anything, the tod would’ve relished the opportunity to get his paws on Judy sooner, but he didn’t want her to have any regrets, which is why he was happy to wait and take it at a pace she was comfortable with.

Judy shook her head. Nick’s offer was sweet and all, but she had her own reason for not wanting to subject him to her raging hormones. “That’s not the point, I didn’t want you to feel like it was something you had to do for me, like it was an obligation.”

Sensing there was more to Judy’s comment than she was letting on, the tod pushed a little more. “I guess bucks have a high drive too. Has it ever felt like an obligation for you?” The fox only knew a little about Judy’s past love life, but there were still some blanks he wanted to be filled in.

Judy considered lying, not wanting Nick to know how lacking she was in comparison to him, but they’d promised to be honest with one another, and it wouldn’t do their relationship good for her to lie. “In the past, yes. When I was a teenager I dated two bucks, but I didn’t love either of them, and they didn’t love me. It wasn’t even something that crossed their minds; they were only after one thing. I was so afraid of being left out, I was already seen as strange for wanting to be a cop and move to the city, so I did things I didn’t really want to, but felt obligated to do, to fit in.”

“That’s not how its supposed to be.” Nick’s jaw clenched at the thought of those bucks using Judy like that. She shouldn’t have felt pressured by them or her peers into doing things she wasn’t completely on board with.

“We were teenagers, Slick. I didn’t want to be seen as more of an outcast than I already was, and it wasn’t like bucks were falling over themselves to date me. They always preferred Jasmine.” Judy had taken what she could, wanting to at least gain some experience before becoming an adult. When she thought about it that way, she’d used the bucks in return.

Judy had seemed pretty confident in what she’d been doing the last time he’d been home, but curiosity still had Nick firmly in its grasp. “What did you do with them?”

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“Everything you and I have done,” the doe admitted.

Concerned that Judy might see the intimacy between them as a duty or that she may feel she has to push herself to do more than she’s comfortable with, Nick gave her an out. “You know we can slow down, right? I’m not going anywhere, so there’s no rush.”
It didn’t take a genius to figure out why Nick had made such an offer, and Judy’s heart swelled at how much he cared. “It’s not like that between us, Nick,” she clarified. “I’ve never thought that. Whatever we do together isn’t an obligation; I don’t feel like it’s my duty. I want to do it because I love you. I want to share everything with you.”

“I just thought, considering how shy you were at the beginning last time…” Nick trailed off. Judy was a confident bunny, but she’d been a little apprehensive to strip off in front of him.

Smoothing down her ears, the doe tried to hide her blush. “It’s different when you’re with the mammal you love.” She hadn’t stripped off in front of the two bucks she’d dated in her teens, hadn’t wanted to expose herself to them. She hadn’t loved them, so they hadn’t gotten to see her so vulnerable. Nick, though…

“Yeah, I can understand that. I’ve not exactly been celibate. Like you said though, I never loved any of them. They knew that from the get go. I never wanted them to think there was anything more.” Nick felt like he needed to make that clear. He and his past lovers had simply used one another for stress relief.

Curiosity piqued, the doe stopped playing with her ears. “How many?”

“Six.” Nick could remember them all, his first being the most memorable. “All vixens.” He wasn’t sure if that mattered, but he offered the information anyway. Interspecies dating hadn’t been something he’d ever considered until he had met Judy.

The number of partners her fox had had made the doe feel a little lacking, but she had the comfort of knowing that he hadn’t loved any of them, that she was the first in that regard. His experience would also come in useful. “Do you still talk to any of them?” The last thing Judy wanted was to be caught off-guard if they were out and approached by a vixen that seemed a little too friendly with Nick.

“No, and they probably wouldn’t recognize me now anyway. Don’t worry.” He offered Judy a reassuring smile. “I’m more than happy to answer any other questions.” He left the door open in case his rabbit had anything else playing on her mind.

Not wanting or needing to know more, for the time being, Judy shook her head. “I don’t have any, it’s okay.” She couldn’t ignore the pang of jealousy she’d felt hearing that six vixens had got to have Nick before her, but knowing that the relationship the two were sharing now was more intimate and meaningful had eased her mind.

Gently grasping at Judy’s waist, he grinned as the doe reached out to touch him in return, her small paws losing themselves in the fluffy fur peeking out from the collar of his shirt. “Back to suppressants though. You’re off them now?” he double-checked.

“I’ve moved onto Bun-Provera. I have to go back every month for my jab. The ones for other species last longer, but given that we don’t have a mating season and we have a high drive, we need to be topped up regularly.” There were a wide variety of options available to her species, but most of her sisters were on Bun-Provera and hadn’t had any sort of problems with it. Judy had figured that if it was good enough for her sisters, then it was good enough for her. “Regarding having kits, I’d just stop going for my jabs every month, if they’re something you want one day…” she trailed off, unsure.

The tod tried to phrase his answer in a way that wouldn’t put pressure on Judy. He wanted kits, but he had a feeling Judy was trying to break away from the stereotype of does having hundreds of kits by the time they were thirty. “I wouldn’t mind having them one day, but I’m more than happy with
“Slick,” Judy shook her head, finding it endearing how he never wanted to force her into anything. “Yes or no. Do you want kits?”

“Yes.” Though Nick was a little afraid of what kind of father he’d be, the urge to have kits was strong. He wasn’t sure whether it was the season that made him want them so badly, because he was already in his early thirties and kitless, or because the idea of Judy being their mother was very appealing.

Judy didn’t bother hiding her smile, the thought of Nick as a father too sweet to ignore. “Then we’re on the same page. I can’t say for sure when I want kits, but I know I do.” Now wasn’t the best time for them to add a kit to the mix. Nick was about to graduate and start his first honest job, and Judy wanted to spend a few years building up her career before taking time out to start a family.

“My lack of internet access means I haven’t been able to do much research, is it even possible?” That was the million-dollar question. While they could discuss kits until the end of time, it would all be for nothing if they couldn’t conceive.

Remembering the meeting she’d had with a nurse before being given her first jab, Judy nodded. “It’s possible. The nurse told me she’d never heard of a case between a fox and a rabbit before, but interspecies couples can usually have kits. It’s not as common because of the stigma, which is why you don’t see many mixed kits around.”

Hearing they could have their own kits should they desire made the tod relax, shoulders slumping. Spotting an opportunity for a joke, he took it. “Well, then I’m glad we’re taking precautions, so we don’t end up with an unexpected bun in the oven.” The hefty punch to his shoulder caught the fox off guard, and he lifted a paw to rub at the sore spot. “Okay okay, that was bad. I deserved it.”

Laughing, Judy shook her head. “No more rabbit jokes, Wilde.” She wagged a finger at him, violet eyes catching sight of the clock on the wall behind Nick. Gasping, she shot up off his lap. “Oh my goodness we have to go in ten minutes, your mom is expecting us!”

Arriving at Marian’s, Nick was carrying the briefcase with his mom’s half of the deposit box cash. He had no idea what her reaction would be, but he knew that this time he had to be as honest as possible about where it had come from. If his mom thought he’d stolen it, she’d never take it. It would be a lot for her to handle, and she’d need to put it into her bank account tomorrow morning before leaving for Bunnyburrow. While the neighborhood he had grown up in was safe, Nick didn’t like the idea of $150,000 lying around. Fox homes were notorious for being burgled as most times the cops turned a blind eye to it, an issue that Nick was hoping to tackle head-on when he graduated. Standing beside Judy, he waited with her for his mom to open the door, the doe having knocked for them. It didn’t take long for Marian to let them in.

“Nicky, Judy, I’ve missed you both.” Marian cooed, pulling the rabbit into a warm embrace before she turned her attention to her son. The briefcase in her kit’s paw confused her, but it didn’t stop her from wrapping him up in her arms. The last time he had visited, it hadn’t been pleasant, and it had taken numerous phone calls and deep conversations between them for Marian to understand the true extent to which Nick had gone to keep her safe and to pay off the debt he owed. The vixen was still struggling to come to terms with it completely, but she was trying her hardest to offer Nick support and create an environment where he could tell her anything and everything. The fact he’d felt the need to hide the information from her for over ten years had hurt the most. She understood he hadn’t wanted to worry her, but she could’ve shouldered some of the weight with him.
Ushering both mammals inside and to the living room, Marian went to the kitchen to get them some water. “What’s with the briefcase?” she asked as she returned, placing the two glasses down on the coffee table.

Nervousness had Nick licking his lips, but as Judy’s paw grasped his, he found the courage to get the ball rolling. They didn’t intend to stick around for long, it was late night shopping in the city, and they needed to pick up a few decorations for their home and some last minute presents, so he’d take the bull by the horns. “We need to talk to you about its contents.”

Pausing, Marian felt her heart start to pound. Surely they’d talked about everything? “Nicky, the last time you said something similar, you dropped one heck of a bombshell on me.”

Wincing, Nick shuffled on the spot. “I think I’m about to drop another on you.”

Taking a deep breath, Marian sat down in the armchair, letting Nick and Judy take the couch. Paw rising to rub at her ears, the vixen chewed on her lower lip, watching her son as he fidgeted in his seat. “Go on then,” she sighed, bracing herself for another horrible confession.

Glancing to Judy, who nodded in encouragement, Nick passed the briefcase to his mom. “The code is my birthday.”

Shaky paws took the case, and the vixen let it rest in her lap. Inputting her kits birthday, the latches clicked free. Swallowing, Marian lifted the lid enough to peek inside, and immediately slammed it shut. “Nicholas, where did you get this?” she demanded, wide, panicked eyes finding emerald.

“Remember the loan caracal?” Nick knew it was painful to bring it up, but he wanted to be honest with his mom. Marian’s sharp nod had him moving on quickly. “He died, and someone found his stash of money and the book he used to keep track of those paying him. They returned this money to me, along with the cash that belonged to other mammals that had died and had no next of kin. I worked for it over the last twenty years.”

Confusion clouded the vixen’s features as she stared at her son. “Who returned it to you?”

As much as Nick didn’t want to lie to his mom, she didn’t need to know about his connections to the mob. The fewer people who knew that he and Judy were friends with Mr. Big and Fru Fru the better. “I don’t know.” He slipped back on his old con-mammal persona, feeling strangely uncomfortable adopting it now.

“Nicholas, a mammal doesn’t just willingly return $150,000 to another mammal.” Marian had been around a while and had come into contact with a lot of different animals in her line of work. She’d never come across one who’d willingly hand back a life-changing sum of money to a stranger, especially a fox.

Needing to stop her asking any more questions, the tod put his hind paw down. “Mom, in all honesty, I’m not questioning it. The bulk of it I worked for, so it’s mine, and the rest was gifted.” He shrugged. No one would come asking for the money, of that he was certain, but his mom needed that reassurance.

“What’re you doing to do with it?” The vixen looked down at the briefcase on her lap. There was so much Nick and Judy could do. They could buy a house, go traveling, and start up a savings fund for their future kits.

Knowing his next answer had the possibility of causing a whole heap of trouble, Nick spared a glance sideways, catching Judy’s gaze. She’d been silent so far, a pillar of strength and
reassurance, and Nick reached out for her. Holding her paw, he turned his focus back to his mom. “It’s yours.”

“Nicky, no. Don’t be ridiculous. I’m fine, you need this money.” Marian couldn’t believe what she was hearing. There was no way on the planet she was going to take such a vast sum from her kit.

“There’s the same amount sat in a deposit box at the bank for Judy and me,” Nick admitted, not wanting his mom to worry. Between the deposit box and their wages, he and Judy would be comfortable.

Jaw dropping; Marian sank back into her chair. She couldn’t believe that Nick had made so much money on the streets. Surely with that amount, he’d cleared the debt he’d incurred paying off the mortgage? “I can’t take it,” she decided, closing the latches on the case before she offered it out to Nick and Judy. Her kit had already been through enough for her, and she didn’t want him in any more financial difficulty. He deserved a large nest egg. It would never be sufficient to compensate him for all he’d done to keep her safe, but hopefully, it would let him buy and experience all the things he had missed out on.

Neither Nick nor Judy made a move, instead shaking their heads. “We don’t need it,” the tod stated, getting the feeling that his mom was about to protest and be difficult.

“Please, Nicky. You’ve done enough for me, paying off the mortgage, working to pay back the loan, being hurt to keep me safe. I can’t and won’t take this money from you,” Marian insisted, holding the case out a little further towards them.

Sighing, the tod offered his mom a warm smile. He knew she was stubborn, but he’d never believed her to be this stubborn. “You’re not taking it, we’re giving it to you.”

Sensing she wasn’t getting anywhere with her son, Marian turned her attention to the sweet rabbit by his side, offering out the case. “You take it and give it to your parents, please. They need it more with hundreds of kits” she worked a different angle. It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate what her son was doing for her, but knowing how much he’d already done made Marian wary of taking anything else from him. Besides, Bonnie and Stu would be able to treat themselves for once with the cash.

“Mom and dad don’t need it. We want you to have it.” Judy didn’t know how many more times they could tell the vixen that it was for her. As Marian went to open her mouth again, Judy interrupted. “Sure you don’t have a mortgage anymore, sure you make enough to pay the bills and put food on the table, but you don’t have much left at the end of each month to do the things you like to do, Marian. That’s what this money is for. Isn’t there something you want to do that you couldn’t before because you didn’t have the money?”

Judy made a valid point, and it gave Marian pause. There was one idea in particular that stuck out, something she’d wanted to do for a very long time but hadn’t had the cash for. The amount in the briefcase would be more than enough. Feeling overwhelmed and touched that her favorite kits wanted her to have the money, and wanted her to follow her dreams with it, the vixen sniffled as she put the case down on the floor. “I still can’t take it,” she protested weakly.

Letting go of Judy’s paw, Nick rose from the couch, crossing to his mom so he could crouch on the floor beside the chair. Reaching for her, he took her paw in his own. “Carrots and I are fine, we don’t need it. Seriously. We both have jobs we love that make us enough to be comfortable, and the rest in the deposit box is rainy day money. I know your job is wearing on you, even though you like it, but with this, you could quit and take a few years out – go travel, relax, do everything you’ve wanted.”
Pursing her lips, the vixen thought on it some more. The opportunity to quit her job was tempting, even if she did like the work she was doing, but what Nick was offering was a lot of money. She could take it and save it, leave it to her kit in her will, so he would eventually get it back. Marian pushed aside that thought. That wasn’t what he was giving it to her for, and it would be insulting for her not to use it when he so obviously wanted her to. He wanted her to fulfill some of her wishes. Reaching out with her free paw, Marian stroked Nick’s cheek, finding the emerald eyes that matched her own. “You know, when the doctor said that I was with kit, I was so excited. Your daddy cried when I told him. We felt like the luckiest mammals on the planet. When you were born and the midwife put you on my chest, this teeny tiny little bundle, I knew then that you were the most precious being in my life. As much as I love Robert, nothing will ever come close to the bond we share. Whatever I did to deserve such a compassionate, strong, and handsome kit I’ll never know.” Leaning down, Marian pressed a gentle kiss to her son’s forehead. She could feel the vibrations as he purred, and the sound of his tail happily thumping the floor made her smile as she pulled back. “Would it make you happy for me to take this?”

Nodding earnestly, the tod squeezed his mom’s paw. “I want you to be comfortable, I want you to be happy and not have to worry about anything.”

Making up her mind, the vixen gave Nick’s paw a squeeze in return. “Then I’ll take it on the condition that you help me with what I want to spend it on.”

“What are you thinking?” Nick raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued.

Scrutching under her kit’s muzzle, Marian laughed softly as he tipped his head back, giving her more access. “I’ll tell you after graduation. You have more important things to focus on now.”

“You know by saying that, it’s going to play on the back of my mind. It could distract me.” Nick tried to get the information out of his mom, offering her an innocent smile.

Not falling for her boy’s game, Marian shook her head. “Oh, I’m sure my idea wouldn’t be what distracts you.” Her gaze flicked to the quiet rabbit sat on the couch and Marian did her best to suppress her smile as she looked back at her kit.

Eyes widening, the inside of Nick’s ears went red with his blush as they flattened against his head. The embarrassment that his mom knew he and Judy were intimate caught him off guard. The rational side of Nick’s mind pointed out that of course his mom would know, she had one heck of a sense of smell and they weren’t exactly hiding it, but it was still awkward for him. They’d been pretty open about most things over the years, but Nick had never talked to her about his partners.

Enjoying her son’s embarrassment a little more than she probably should, Marian couldn’t resist tormenting him. “Oh don’t be such a prude. You know, before you were born, and after come to think of it, your father and I wou-“

“Stop!” Nick lifted his paws, begging. “I love you and dad, but Judy and I don’t need to know that,” he insisted.

Still sat on the couch, having been more of an observer during the conversation this time too, Judy snickered. She wasn’t at all bothered with whatever Marian had been about to say. Her parents talked about being intimate all the time. It was hard not to when you had hundreds of kits, all of whom needed educating on the subject once they asked the inevitable “where do kits come from?” question.

“Oh Nicky, you’re still so easy to embarrass,” Marian chuckled, pinching his cheeks as she smiled at him fondly. It would take her some time to emotionally work through the money he’d just gifted
her, and there were moments where she felt overwhelming guilt for everything her son had been through. Sometimes she stayed awake into the early hours of the morning wondering if she could have done better, if there had been another way. Yet, the vixen was learning that her stubborn kit, so much like his father, would always find a way to try and help her.

For Marian, things were looking up. Though the news Nick had delivered last time had driven a momentary wedge between them, it had since brought them closer together. Her kit had a good home and job, and a loving mate by his side. He was filling out, a lot more talkative and animated than before, and he was financially stable. There were no longer any major secrets between them, and Marian felt like she finally had her baby back.
A/N Hi my loves. I'm so, so sorry for the delay in updating! As some of you know, I started a new job about two weeks ago, and its been kicking my butt ever since. It's a lot tougher than I anticipated and most nights when I get home all I want to do is eat and sleep. I'm hoping with time that I'll be able to find a work/life balance as my personal life has suffered greatly since starting. My brain is just a mess of information at the moment, so I feel like my writing isn't that great. Fingers crossed that things will change soon.

Once again, major love to my favourite Italian for the chapter title and for helping me out with the ending. What would I do without you?

Staring out of the train carriage, Marian watched the countryside fly past. It was dusk, and the world around them looked even more mesmerizing as the sun started to set. With the holiday season in full swing, there had been chaos on the train lines, and their morning train had been pushed back to an evening one. Marian had never left the city before, had never had the means to do so or anywhere to go once she did. Now, though, she had enough money for hundreds of train tickets and a vast warren of rabbits was waiting to welcome her. The vixen couldn’t deny the fact that she was nervous about meeting Judy’s siblings. Bonnie and Stu had taken to her quickly, and Marian hoped the rest of the Hopps family would follow suit.

Catching movement from the corner of her eye, Marian shifted her gaze to the two mammals sat on the bench seat opposite her. Judy had taken the window seat, which meant Nick had taken the aisle. Though the arm he had thrown around her shoulders along the back of the seat seemed casual, Marian knew it was also a protective posture. They were lost in conversation, talking about things Marian had no idea about, throwing around names the vixen couldn’t put faces to, but none of it bothered her, none of it had her focus. Instead, she concentrated on the lazy grin her son wore and the way Judy’s wide violet eyes looked up at him, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips as she chattered away happily. If someone had told her a year ago that her kit would fall in love with a determined country bunny, she would’ve laughed. Yet here they were.

“Now approaching: Bunnyburrow. Please mind the gap between the train and the platform.” The PA system announced, prompting a flurry of activity in their carriage as mammals stood up to gather their belongings. Nick and Judy rose from the bench, stretching.

“Ready, mom?” Nick asked, reaching up to grab their cases from the rack above their heads. He’d take the suitcases belonging to himself and his mom, while Judy would carry her own and the one filled with Christmas presents. The tod wanted to be a gentlemammal and take his mates case too, but with only two paws he was stuck. His mom was carrying gifts for Bonnie and Stu, the vixen having insisted on taking flowers and some elderflower wine with them.

Moving through the carriage as best as possible with their luggage, Nick led the way to the doors. As the train pulled to a stop, the tod allowed several families to disembark before them. Stepping off the train, he used his height to his advantage as he looked over the array of rabbits gathered on the platform. His mom and Judy disembarked behind him, the platform starting to empty as
mammals rushed to get home. The fresh air was a welcome relief from the stifling carriage and the overwhelming scent of his mate. With winter firmly set in, the tod’s body was rebelling, demanding he claim her, but he refused to until Judy gave it the okay. In the meantime, he’d take a lot of cold showers.

“MISTER NICK!” The girlish squeal broke him from his thoughts, and a grin crossed his lips as he put the bags down to the sound of rushing hind paws heading his way. Crouching he opened his arms, and through the few remaining rabbits on the platform, his favorite baby bunny came hurtling towards him. With a light thud, Sasha threw herself into his arms, burying her face in his chest.

Wrapping her up in his embrace, Nick chuckled. “Hey Cinnamon.” He stroked her back as his tail wagged. He’d kept in contact with the small rabbit while away at the academy, but everyone had agreed not to tell her that he would be visiting for Christmas so that he could surprise her.

Nose buried in Nick’s fur, Sasha clung to her favorite fox. She’d kept his tie safe since his last visit, though the doe was sad that she would now have to give it back. “You’re here!” She exclaimed, pulling back just enough so she could look at him properly. Excited, she bounced on the spot.

“Did you think I’d turn down the opportunity to see my favorite bunny?” Nick shook his head, trying not to chuckle at the sight of Sasha’s excitement. She’d grown a bit since he’d last seen her, and the tod could tell that she’d be breaking some hearts once she hit her teens. Stu would probably have to chase away a few bucks with his shotgun.

Clearing her throat, Judy lifted an eyebrow at her mate. Folding her arms over her chest, she tapped her hind paw on the ground. In truth, the doe was only jesting. She didn’t mind Nick laying plenty of fuss and attention on her little sister, but the opportunity to tease her fox was too good to miss.

At the sound of Judy clearing her throat, Nick tipped his head to look up at her, a cheeky grin on his face. “My second favorite bunny?” He corrected, his comment pulling a sad noise and a pout from Sasha. Turning back to the baby rabbit, the tod lowered his voice to a stage whisper. “I have to say that Ju-Ju is my favorite, or she’ll make me do everything at work.”

Scowling, the small rabbit glanced up at her sister. “That’s mean Ju-Ju. Mister Nick shouldn’t have to do all the work.” She scolded.

The tod only just held in his laughter, but he was unable to suppress his grin. “Yeah, that’s really mean, Ju-Ju.”

Marian had remained silent since stepping off the train, watching the scene unfold before her. She’d heard about Sasha from both Nick and Judy, and had been told countless stories about the baby bunny. Now that she could witness Nick and Sasha together, the vixen could see how the rabbit had Nick wrapped around her little finger. “Oh if you ever have a daughter, Nicky, she’ll be daddy’s little princess.”

Jasmine had decided to stay back, to remain at the entrance and watch the reunion from afar. It had been easy to keep track of Sasha as she’d weaved through the crowds, her unique fur pattern standing out. Now, with the platform empty, she had an unobstructed view of the goings-on. Brown eyes moved to the vixen and Jasmine gave her the once-over. Her parents had spoken highly of her and trusted her so Jasmine would follow suit. After all, Marian had raised Nick, and the tod wasn’t a bad mammal. The pencil skirt and blouse that Marian was wearing reminded Jasmine of her high school teachers and the pearls around her neck only furthered her wholesome image.
Though the baby bunny had been distracted by the return of her favorite fox, it didn’t take her long to notice the vixen stood behind him. Wide brown eyes looked up, blinking. Sudden shyness had the doe lifting a paw to put her thumb in her mouth. She didn’t know the lady or why she was with Nick.

Judy gently took the items Marian had been carrying, and the vixen crouched down next to her son, offering the little rabbit a soft smile. “Hi sweetheart, I’m Marian.” She introduced herself.

Still staring at Marian, the baby bunny tipped her head sideways, one large ear flopping over. The vixen looked a little like Nick. “Are you Mister Nick’s mommy?” Sasha asked around her thumb.

“I am. What’s your name?” Marian tried to get the kit to talk some more, reaching out to gently pry her thumb from her mouth. It had been a long time since the vixen had been around little ones, but her motherly instinct was still there. Even though Nick was an adult now and more than capable of taking care of himself, he would always be her kit.

Trusting the vixen because she was Nick’s mom, the doe offered her a toothy smile. “Sasha. Ju-Ju is my big sister. I’m five.” She proudly declared. Her mom had always told her it was rude to ask an adult their age, so Sasha picked a different question. “Are you staying for Christmas, Missus Marian?”

Sasha’s confidence and sweetness were endearing, and Marian understood now why Nick had taken to her so quickly. “I am. Nicky and Judy asked me to join you all.”

“I don’t know about you, Ju, but I don’t want to be late home and worry mom,” Jasmine called out, knowing they needed to get moving. It was getting late and the doe didn’t want to drive home in the dark.

Rising back to his full height, Nick helped his mom up. The vixen took back the flowers and wine from Judy, and the group of mammals walked together towards the train entrance. When they reached Jasmine, Judy took over. “Marian, this is my littermate, Jasmine.” The doe started. “Jasmine, this is Nick’s mom, Marian.” She watched as the vixen transferred everything to one paw, enabling her and Jasmine to shake. With their introduction done, the group headed out to the truck.

The logistics of getting five mammals home when the cab of the truck could only hold two led to an unusual arrangement. Marian, Nick, and Sasha all sat in the truck bed. The vixen had wanted to be out in the fresh air and had Nick refusing to leave her side. In turn, Sasha had refused to leave Nick's side. With all their bags in the bed, there wasn’t much room for them to sit, leaving Nick to perch Sasha on his lap. Judy and Jasmine sat in the cab, the latter driving.

“Mister Nick, why are you so fluffy?” Sasha asked, small paws reaching out to touch the thick fur around his neck as the truck started to rumble down the lanes of Bunnyburrow.

Not thinking it was appropriate to tell the baby bunny about mating season, Nick instead settled on a different explanation. “It’s winter now so it’s much colder. My thick fur keeps me warm.”

“Why don’t rabbits have thick fur in winter?” Sasha didn’t understand why it was something only Nick’s species was allowed to have. She wanted thicker fur too.

Remembering one of his phone calls with Judy, the tod settled on an answer that sounded reasonable. “You rabbits sleep in a fluffle, so when you’re huddled together with your siblings, you don’t lose too much body heat, as you’re all sharing your warmth with one another. We foxes tend to live alone, and we don’t like huddling together, so instead, our fur gets much thicker.” He
explained.

Nick’s explanation made sense to the bunny, but it still made her wish she had a winter coat. Rummaging in the pocket of her dress, Sasha pulled out Cloudy, lifting it to her mouth so she could chew.

“You still have Cloudy,” Nick commented. Lifting a paw, he gently smoothed down the rabbit’s ears.

Nodding as she nibbled, Sasha pulled the toy away from her mouth a moment later, the edge of it now covered in saliva. “I still have your tie too, Mister Nick. Do you want it back when we get home?”

Chuckling, the tod shook his head. “You can keep it, Cinnamon.” He offered her a smile as she snuggled back into his chest, continuing to chew on her toy.

Having watched the whole exchange, Marian had to hold back her coo. Instead, she turned to look out over the countryside. Her night vision enabled her to see more clearly in the fading light. Green fields trundled past them, and the rolling hills on the horizon were covered in tall trees. There wasn’t a skyscraper in sight, and Marian savored the fresh breeze as it rustled through her fur. The wind carried with it the scent of crops, and though it was Christmas the weather was mild, and the vixen could see rain clouds on the horizon.

The vixen found herself wishing that she and Robert had visited the countryside when he’d been alive, perhaps even brought Nick out to play in the fields and fill his lungs with the fresh air. Her husband had always liked going for long walks in the park, and Marian was confident he would’ve loved learning how to grow crops. He’d always been good at crafts that involved his paws. Marian was also certain that he would’ve loved to meet the family of the mammal his son was involved with. Thinking about her husband made the vixen smile with nostalgia.

Though only a kit, Sasha had always been in tune with the emotions of those around her, and as she saw the expression on Marian’s face she left the safety of Nick’s lap, ears pinging up as she crawled across the truck bed to sit in the vixen’s lap. “Why are you sad, Missus Marian?” The doe blinked up at Nick’s mom.

Amused by the little rabbit’s courage, Marian lifted a paw to gently smooth down Sasha’s ears in a move that mirrored her sons. “Oh, I’m not sad, sweetheart.” The vixen reassured the baby bunny.

“Your mouth was down, like this.” Sasha made a sad face, sticking out her lower lip for added effect.

Chuckling at Sasha’s impression, Marian shook her head. “I was just thinking about how much Nicky’s daddy would’ve loved it out here.”

Frowning, Sasha wondered why Nick’s dad wasn’t with them. Surely her mother and father would’ve invited them both? Unless his parents weren’t married anymore. That had happened to one of her school friends. “Where is he now?”

Lifting the paw she’d been using to stroke down the silky fur on Sasha’s ears, Marian pointed up to the sky. “He’s up there.”

Sasha tipped her head all the way back, staring up at the sky. Thinking, she tipped her head back down, catching Marian’s gaze. “Momma says that’s where Gram-Gram is too. Do you think Gram-Gram and Mister Nick’s daddy are friends?”
Knowing little about the Hopps family as a whole, the vixen had been unaware that Sasha’s grandmother had passed, and though she wasn’t sure how long ago it was, she still tried to offer the baby bunny some comfort. “I think they might be.”

Pleased with the answer, Sasha gave Marian a toothy smile before she twisted to face her favorite fox. “Mister Nick?”

Having been listening to the conversation between his mom and Sasha, Nick had tried his hardest to stay out of it. Though there had been lots of deep conversations between him and Marian, they were yet to touch on the subject of his father’s death. The tod had a feeling it would be a long and painful conversation. “Yes, Cinnamon?”

“What was your daddy called?” Big brown eyes blinked at Nick.

Though the tod was apprehensive to talk about his father he offered the bunny a small smile. “Robert, but everyone called him Robin.”

Gasping, Sasha’s eyes widened. “Like the character in the bedtime story you told us last time!” Turning her head to Marian, the baby bunny excitedly bounced in her lap. “Mister Nick was telling us a story about Robin Hood and Maid Marian. Did you actually play badminton with your lady in waiting?”

Rolling her eyes at the tales her son told, the vixen decided to play along. She didn’t want to break little Sasha’s heart. “Every weekend without fail.”

“How about I teach you how to play, please?” Sasha asked as she snuggled against Marian, noticing that the vixen was a little fluffy too.

Cradling the rabbit with one of her arms, Marian smiled down at the small ball of brown fluff. “I’d be more than happy too, sweetheart.” The vixen was careful to watch her terms of endearment. Nick had kindly pointed out to her that rabbits hated being called cute, and Marian had been distraught when she’d remembered calling Judy that the first time they’d met. Her son had soon soothed her though, telling her that it was fine.

Sasha’s lack of fear made Marian’s heart swell. The little rabbit hadn’t known her thirty minutes, and yet she felt comfortable enough to snuggle against a mammal that was supposed to be her enemy. Gaze lifting from Sasha, Marian found Nick watching them, and she offered out her free paw to her son. Nick took it without a moment’s hesitation, giving it a gentle squeeze as they turned their focus back to the world around them.

As the truck rounded a corner, Marian gasped. A huge, looming building had come into view. The structure was much bigger than anything she’d seen in the city and was painted a bright cherry red, reminding her of her front door. The structure was protruding from a large mound of earth with a sprawling front porch wrapped around it. As they drew closer, the vixen could see several windows embedded in the side of the mound. However, the feature that caught her attention the most was the cladding on the front of the building – it was shaped like giant rabbit ears.

As the vehicle came to a stop beside the front porch, Nick smiled at his mom’s reaction. “You think this is impressive, wait until we get inside. The communal space is in the mound, but all the bedrooms are underground.” Nick parroted the information Judy had given him when she’d first brought him home. Sasha clambered off of Marian’s lap, dropping down to the ground, and Nick followed behind her. Once he was steady on his hind paws, he helped his mom out of the truck bed before he reached in to start unloading their bags.
Getting out of the cab, Judy circled the truck, giving Marian back the wine and flowers before she helped Nick with their bags, taking two while he took the other two. As a group they moved towards the front door, little Sasha leading them, Cloudy clutched in her paw.

Captivated by her surroundings, Marian couldn’t stop looking at everything as they entered the house. They weaved through hallways, passing many family rooms, playrooms, and a library all decked out in Christmas decorations. The vixen could see and hear kits in the rooms, and as they passed, the baby rabbits would stop playing, curiosity leading them to abandon their toys and books to follow her through the house instead. She could hear the fluffle behind her, and though it made her a little nervous, she was too engrossed in the beauty of her surroundings. The house was filled with life and love, from the rabbits behind her to the kit drawings in frames on the walls. It was the kind of home Marian would’ve loved if she’d had more than one baby.

As they moved deeper into the house, they came to a large white door. Marian watched as Jasmine gave it a shove, unprepared for the cacophony of noise that assaulted her eardrums as the doors opened. Ears flattening to try and block out some of the sound, the smell of food cooking made the vixen’s mouth water. Marian looked around the kitchen, in awe at the sheer scale of it and all of the gadgets on the counters. The vixen had always loved cooking, and she’d kill for a kitchen like the one she was currently stood in.

“Oh, you’re here!” Bonnie’s large ears swiveled at the sound of mammals entering her kitchen, and she quickly wiped her paws on her apron, abandoning the dough she’d been rolling out on one of the counters, ready to make Christmas cookies. Bustling around the counter, the Hopps matriarch greeted her guests. Hugging Judy and Nick first, the doe then turned her attention to Marian while Sasha disappeared to find the drawings she’d made for Nick, and Jasmine left to inform her dad of their guest's arrivals.

Offering out the wine and flowers, Marian gave her friend a fond smile. “Just a little something.” She explained. It had taken the vixen some time to pick out what to take, unsure as to what was customary in Bunnyburrow. Thankfully, her son had thrown her a lifeline by informing her of the importance of flowers to rabbits, so Marian had bought a bouquet of Alstroemeria, as they represented friendship.

Cooing at the sweet gesture, Bonnie took the items from Marian, lifting the flowers so she could smell them. They were beautiful and smelt delicious, and Bonnie couldn’t wait to put them in a vase on her dresser. “You’re too kind Marian, thank you.” She placed both items down on a clear bit of counter, embracing the vixen. “Whatever you want or need during your stay, please let us know.” Bonnie insisted, pulling back from their embrace. “I hope the guest room just down the hall from Nick and Judy will be okay?”

“It’ll be absolutely fine Bon, please don’t worry,” Marian reassured her, grateful to have even been invited in the first place. She was a laid back guest and didn’t want to cause a fuss. Whatever room Bonnie had set aside for her would be perfect.

Still dragging their bags, Judy couldn’t wait to be rid of them. “We’ll show you where it is.” She offered, tipping her head in the direction of the staircase down to the dining area. The doe led the way, Marian following, and Nick taking up the rear. Judy kept their pace leisurely, giving the vixen time to look around as they descended the stairs and headed towards one of the many corridors leading to the bedrooms.

Rationally, Marian had known that Bonnie and Stu would need a large home to house all their kits, but she’d never imagined a dwelling as large as this. The dining area was decked out with Christmas decorations, just like the communal areas they’d passed on their way to the kitchen,
Marian noted that there were several massive Christmas trees in the space too, all of which had presents under them. Following Judy down one of the corridors, they descended further underground, twisting and turning along corridors until they came to one which ended with a dead end. “Nick and I will be here if you need anything.” Marian’s ears flicked towards Judy as the doe spoke, catching Judy gesturing with her chin to a white door with ‘Ju’ written on it. They continued past it, finally stopping outside the brown door of one of the many guest rooms.

Releasing one of the bags, Judy opened the door for Marian. It wasn’t huge, but it was comfortable. The walls were duck-egg blue, the floor wooden, and a large double bed sat to the left of the room. It had been made up with cream bedding and duck-egg throw cushions. Her mom had put a vase of fresh flowers on the dresser, and clean towels on the bed. There was a wooden wardrobe too and a door that led to an en-suite. When her parents had been building the guest rooms they’d deemed it unfair to expect their visitors to have to use the same bathrooms as the hundreds of Hopps kits.

As Nick was carrying Marian’s bag, the doe let her mate put it down first before speaking again. “We’ll let you freshen up, then when you’re done just knock on our door and we’ll head back upstairs.” Though Judy reasoned that Marian’s sense of smell was just as good as Nick’s, she didn’t want to risk the vixen getting lost in the maze of rooms and corridors in the warren. After Marian offered them her thanks, Judy led the way back out of the room, Nick close behind her.

Pulling the remaining three bags behind them, Nick and Judy made their way to the latter’s bedroom, taking the few small steps down into the room once they’d crossed the threshold. Nothing had changed since the last time they’d visited, except for the fact that Nick was now stuck in a closed room that had no windows, with his mate, during mating season. Her scent was stronger with the lack of ventilation, and Nick’s keen sense of smell made it hard to ignore the heady aroma. Needing something to distract him, the tod lifted their bags onto the bed, starting to unpack his case. There was space in the wardrobe for him to hang his clothes, and the drawers were empty save for a few of Judy’s summer clothes.

Observing Nick’s body language, the doe knew it would be difficult for him to restrain himself. She didn’t want him to feel like he couldn’t reach out to her though, that he couldn’t touch her whenever he needed too because he was concerned about others finding out about them. “We should tell my parents this evening.” She decided. It would make any physical contact between them easier and would enable Nick to soothe his mating season urges whenever they crept up on him. “Mom sends you care packages and dad pretty much sang your praise after you chased off George and Billy last time so I can’t see them having a problem with us.” She swallowed, feeling a little nervous. Though she was her own mammal now and had cut the apron strings, her parent’s opinion was still important.

Nick listened as he continued to unpack, unable to stop the agitated swishing of his tail. As Judy became nervous, her scent spiked, and Nick had to bite down on his tongue to stop himself from acting on his impulses. In the past, the season hadn’t been too bad for him, the urge more like a frustrating itch that needed scratching, but now that Judy was his mate he was battling his body’s natural instinct to claim her.

Unable to stand seeing Nick so on edge, Judy reached out, grasping his paws to stop him from removing anything else from his suitcase. “Nick.” She whispered, pulling him away from the case so they could stand facing one another. Letting go of one of his paws she reached up to cup his muzzle, violet finding emerald. “How bad is it?”

“It’s okay, I can handle it.” The lie rolled off his tongue, but it tasted foul.

Not believing him, and feeling disappointed that he felt he had to lie, Judy shook her head, moving
her paw to cup his cheek. “Please don’t lie to me.” She murmured, sensing how tense her fox was.

“The small space makes your scent stronger,” Nick explained with a sigh, hating that he wasn’t able to stop it from getting to him.

Knowing they would be spending a lot of time underground in confined spaces, Judy decided to do something about it. “What do you need?”

Mulling it over, the tod came up with something he hoped would help. “This.” He moved to embrace his bunny, pulling her small frame close, pressing their bodies together. His tail stopped swishing, instead moving to curl around Judy’s ankles. Holding her close, he rubbed his muzzle across her face and neck, smothering her in his scent. It wasn’t exactly subtle, but his possessive instincts were heightened and shy of claiming Judy, this was the next best option. A low rumble started in his chest as his doe let him mark her, and the tod tightened his hold. The urge to bite was strong, but Nick forced himself to keep his mouth shut, not wanting to hurt Judy accidentally.

Bringing Nick’s snout to her throat, Judy tipped her head sideways to reveal more of it. “It’s okay.” Swallowing, the fox screwed his eyes shut. “I can’t. We’re not…” he trailed off. A bite now would be meaningless as they weren’t in the midst of love-making.

“It might help.” Judy reasoned. She wasn’t afraid of Nick’s bite. Instead, a shiver of anticipation swept down her spine.

Apprehensive, it took Judy whispering words of encouragement to push Nick into action. Pulling back a little from their embrace, the tod crashed his lips against Judy’s, the low rumble in his chest turning into a growl.

Licking across the seam of Judy’s lips, the tod demanded entry as he took a few steps forward, pushing Judy until her back hit the wall. Picking her up with ease, he lost himself in their kiss, vaguely feeling his doe wrap her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck as he gave himself over to his instincts.

Swept away by Nick’s kiss, Judy mewled against his lips, paws grasping at thick fur. “Nick.” She managed to whine as his jaws locked around her soothed his instincts, and after a minute he pulled back, feeling calmer and more centered now that Judy carried his scent and his mark, albeit temporary.

“Better?” Judy whispered, lust-blown violet eyes searching Nick’s face. His eyes were still closed, but she could feel that the tension had drained from his body, and instead his tail was swishing happily.

Nodding, the tod opened his eyes. Emerald met violet and Nick smiled. “I love you.” He declared, grateful that his doe was so understanding.

“I love you too.” Judy pressed a kiss to the side of Nick’s muzzle, feeling a slight twinge in her neck. The discomfort was worth it though to know that Nick was feeling more relaxed. “If it gets too much again, please let me know.”

“I will. Thank you, Fluff.” Nick captured her lips in a gentle kiss, rubbing his muzzle across her cheek once more when they pulled back. A light knock at the door had Nick putting Judy down,
the pair of them smoothing out their clothes and fur. The tod grabbed the suitcase with the presents in, figuring they might as well take it up with them. Together they moved to the door, and Judy opened it to reveal Marian. The vixen had brushed out her fur and changed clothes.

The three of them made their way back through the maze of corridors, emerging into the dining area. Steering the group towards the Christmas tree's, Judy led them towards the correct one. The Hopps family broke down the trees by letters; so only certain litters put presents under them. There were six trees in total separated into A-D, E-H, I-L, M-P, Q-T, and U-W. Her parents were yet to have another litter that would push them into the X’s and beyond. Kneeling before the I-L tree, Judy unzipped the case with their presents in and started to stack them underneath. When the job was done, the doe left the bag by the tree for her and Nick to take back to their room later. Judy’s present for Nick was still in her room. Standing, Judy led the three of them back up the stairs to the kitchen. Bonnie wasn’t alone, and what little space had been available on the counter was now covered in baked goods. Judy smiled as she realized who their guest was. “Hey, Gid!”

Turning at the sound of his name, the portly fox grinned at the gray rabbit. “H-hey there, Judy.” He caught sight of the other tod stood with her. “Nick, I heard ya were coming to town so I brought you more of them blueberry pies you like.” He’d sent several care packages of baked goods to the fox while he’d been at the academy.

“You spoil me.” Nick grinned, inhaling the sweet smells of the warm goods.

Spotting the vixen stood just behind Nick and Judy, Gideon turned his attention to her, offering her a smile as he held out a paw. “H-howdy Ma’am. I’m Gideon Grey, pleased to meet ya.”

Marian recognized the name, recalling Judy’s story about being clawed as a kit, and as much as she wanted to scold the fox opposite her, she instead plastered on a smile as she shook his paw. Judy seemed okay with him now, and so did Nick. “Marian Wilde.” She introduced herself, taking her paw back.

“I-is there anything, in particular, you like Mrs. Wilde? I’d be happy to bring you some.” Gideon gestured to the counter laden with food. He hadn’t been made aware of the fact the vixen was coming too, so he’d focused most of his efforts on making treats that he knew Nick and Judy liked.

Stealing a glance at her kit, Marian caught his nod. “I do enjoy lemon meringue pie.” The vixen offered Gideon a small smile.

“Well I ain’t ever made a lemon meringue pie before, but I’ll give it a go for you!” The opportunity to branch out and try something new excited the tod.

Glad she hadn’t come across as too demanding, Marian nodded. “Thank you, Gideon.”

“Well I-I best be heading back to my shop now. But you enjoy them treats and let me know if you want anymore. I’ll try and get a lemon meringue pie to you soon Mrs. Wilde, but if I don’t see you ‘fore, have a good Christmas.” Gideon offered his well wishes to all the mammals in the room, who said their goodbyes too before he left through the back door, heading towards his truck.

Glancing to her pans on the stove, Bonnie reasoned that dinner would be ready in five minutes. “Okay, go and wash paws and take your seats.” She instructed, gesturing with a thumb towards the kitchen sinks.

“Do you need a paw, Bonnie?” Marian offered, uncomfortable with idly sitting by while the doe worked away.
Shooing her guests away, Bonnie shook her head. She was used to cooking for her hundreds of kits, adding a few more mouths to feed was a piece of cake. “No no Marian, please go and sit. I’ve got this.”

Ushered away, the vixen followed Nick and Judy down the stairs to the dining area. Her son and his mate led her to one of the long tables, and the vixen sat with Nick to her left and Judy to his left. Taking some more time to look around her, a small rumbling sound started to get louder and closer, and Marian frowned.

“Brace yourself for the fluffle.” Nick whispered to his mom, grinning. He couldn’t wait to see how she would react to the multitude of bunnies that were heading towards them. If the way they’d responded to him when he’d first arrived was anything to go by, then his mom was in for a treat.

From the corridors leading to the bedrooms came hundreds of baby bunnies, chasing after one another, tumbling into the room in a maelstrom of noise that had Marian’s ears flattening. Some of the rabbits broke off to find their seats, but a significant portion made a beeline for Marian, Nick, and Judy. The vixen was well aware of the size of Judy’s family, but seeing so many kits together, all eyes locked on her, was daunting. Amongst the fluffle she found Sasha, her fur pattern unique compared to her siblings. It didn’t take long before Marian was surrounded, kits crowded around her, clambering onto the seat and table to get closer to her.

“What do you actually wear a fancy headdress?”

“Is your lady in waiting really an old goat?”

“What has Robin Hood taught you how to use a bow and arrow?”

“Gee, you’re very beautiful.”

“Are you and Robin Hood sweethearts?”

“Do you live in a castle?”

“Did Robin Hood come here with you?”

The plethora of questions was overwhelming, and Marian silently cursed her son and his tall tales. Nick had always had an overactive imagination, and the vixen wanted to hear the full story her son had told before she gave any concrete answers. The ones about Robin being with her, though, made her smile falter. The kits were so excited at the idea of him being around, bouncing on their hind paws, eyes wide, and grins fixed firmly in place. She didn’t have the heart to tell them that her beloved husband had passed away, yet they needed to know, if only so they’d stop asking.

“Robin Hood is with Gram-Gram.” Sasha broke through the cacophony, her siblings falling silent. The little doe had perfected the art of silently observing mammals around her, and using their body language as cues. The hush that fell over her siblings told her that they understood, and as a unit they all moved in, grabbing onto whatever part of Marian they could reach to cuddle her, being mindful of her tail. Sasha had reached for Marian’s paw with one of her own and was now holding it while her siblings hugged the vixen.

“Alright kits, give our guests room to breathe.” Stu had arrived just as his offspring had swarmed Marian and had started bombarding her with questions. His large ears had honed in on the conversation, and he felt it was time to step in before Marian became too emotional. Shooing away his kits, who all scrambled to get to their seats, the buck offered Marian, Nick, and Judy a warm smile. “Hey Marian, Nick, Judy. Sorry I couldn’t greet you when you first arrived, the tractor isn’t
going to fix itself!” He tugged on the straps of his dirty overalls.

Laughing, Marian brushed aside Stu’s apology. “It’s fine, honestly. We understand that you have a lot of work to do as you prepare for next season.” She’d picked up a few books from the library on her way home from work over the past few weeks, curiosity prompting her to read up about agriculture.

“If you need a paw with anything Stu, I’m happy to help.” Nick offered. He didn’t know the first thing about fixing tractors, but he’d helped Finnick repair his van several times, and the tod figured a tractor couldn’t be too different.

Large ears turning at the sound of a commotion on the other side of the room, Stu shot Nick a smile. “I might just take you up on that offer, son.” He glanced over to the other side of the room, sighing when he saw some of his kits fighting over their seats. “I better go and deal with this lot before they kill one another. I’ll catch up with you later!” He waved his goodbyes, striding across the room to deal with his unruly kits.

Spotting that Sasha hadn’t run off with her siblings, Marian offered the baby rabbit a smile, noting that she was holding a few pieces of paper in her paws. “Hey sweetheart, what’ve you got there?”

“Drawings,” Sasha answered, playing with the edges of the paper. She’d mentioned in one of her letters to Nick that she’d been running low on drawing paper and would have to get more soon, and with Nick’s response had been $20 – enough to buy a new sketch pad and some pretty coloring pencils. The doe had decided to draw a few things for Nick first, as a thank you. “I drew them for Mister Nick.”

Hearing that they were for him, Nick twisted in his seat and opened up his arms, helping Sasha clamber onto his lap. She smoothed out the pile of drawings on the table and started to talk through them, only to be interrupted a moment later by the arrival of Jasmine and Julian, who sat opposite. After Julian and Marian had been introduced, Sasha continued with her explanation. There were drawings of Nick and Judy out on patrol and of them in their apartment, amongst others. Sasha reached the final one in the pile and grinned. “And here’s you and Ju-Ju with your kits.”

The whole group froze, Nick and Judy’s eyes widening while Marian tried to stifle her laugh, going so far as to lift a paw to her mouth to hide her smile. Jasmine and Julian blinked in surprise before they shared a look, and the littermates leaned towards Nick and Judy in sync, not wanting to miss anything. They’d had their suspicions, but now they wanted confirmation.

Nick was first to speak, trying to hide behind his con-mammal mask but finding it hard to do so around the baby bunny. “Remember when I told you Ju-Ju was my girl friend, with a space in the middle, a girl who’s a friend?” The tod figured it wasn’t wise for Sasha to know about their relationship status yet. The whole warren would know by the end of dinner, and that wasn’t how he and Judy wanted Bonnie and Stu to find out.

Scowling, the young doe shook her head. She hated that because she was a kit, adults assumed that she didn’t understand. “Nu-uh. You and Ju-Ju smelled like one another when you last came to visit, and it’s even stronger now. Momma and daddy smell just as strong and they’re married, so that must mean you two are getting married soon and are going to have lots of kits.” She rationalized.

The whole room fell silent, eyes and ears turning towards them.

Marian tried so hard to stifle her laughter, biting on her lower lip. She’d adored Sasha before, but the little rabbit had climbed even higher in her ranking of favorite mammals, all because of her
ability to embarrass her son.

Nudging Judy’s hind paw under the table, Nick sought her cooperation. “We live together and work together, that’s all.” He tried to backtrack, hiding his wince as he saw that Sasha didn’t believe him.

“Shared living means we carry one another’s scent like you carry your littermates scent.” Judy stepped in, turning to look around the room and scowl at her siblings, prompting them to return their attention, and their ears, to the conversations on their own tables.

Curious, Julian inhaled deeply, nostrils flaring. Sasha was right; they did smell more like one another now. Nick’s scent was especially strong on his sister. Eyes narrowing, the buck’s mind started to work through the limited information he’d been able to pry from Gideon about fox’s after Nick and Judy’s last visit. “You muzzled her.” He whispered. Gideon had been forthcoming about the fox equivalent of chinning when Julian had pushed. “You two are together.” Not bothering to wait for an answer, he looked to Marian, seeking clarification. He wouldn’t put it past Nick and Judy to try and lie again.

“I’ve known for a while.” Marian let the cat out of the bag with a shrug. They were Judy’s siblings, and the vixen was sure they wouldn't go running off to Bonnie and Stu and ruin it for her kit and Judy. Besides, Bonnie and Stu already secretly knew anyway.

Folding her arms over her chest, Sasha pouted. “I was right!” She kept her voice down, figuring that if the grown-ups were whispering, then she should too. Eyes finding Judy, the baby rabbit tipped her head sideways as she noticed something odd. “What’s that?” She asked, leaning over to prod at the indent in Judy’s neck, her fur having flattened and parted when Nick had bitten her.

Curious, Marian shifted so she could see better, eyebrows rising as she realized what Sasha was pointing at. Nostrils flaring, she thankfully couldn’t scent blood. Her kit shrank down, tail flicking nervously behind him, and Marian sighed softly as it all made sense. Mating season no longer had much of an effect on her – she’d found her mate, though he was now gone, and they’d had a kit together. Her body was satisfied with what she had, so it no longer drove her crazy when the colder months rolled around. For Nick, though, with a new mate and still in his prime, his hormones were driving him crazy. Reaching out, she brushed a paw over one of Nick’s ears, scratching behind it in a show of understanding.

“Are those teeth marks?” Julian hissed, leaning over the table to get as close as possible to his sister.

Before Julian could grab the wrong end of the stick and all hell broke loose, Marian interrupted. “It’s how we claim our mates.” She clarified, guessing that the buck didn’t know much about fox customs.

“By biting them?” Jasmine asked, horrified.

Figuring showing them would have a greater impact; Marian moved the collar of her shirt, revealing her claim mark. Small patches of fur that no longer grew where her husband’s teeth had broken skin. “It’s very common.” She moved her shirt back over the area, concealing it once again.

“And you’re okay with this?” Jasmine asked her sister, concerned for her safety. Sure she trusted Nick, but he was still a predator, and he was biting his prey mate…

Judy beat down her anger at her sister’s question. Jasmine didn’t know better and was being an overbearing and protective sister, thinking the worst. “It’s fine, honestly.” She reassured her
sibling. Judy watched as Julian and Jasmine shared a look, and though the doe had grown up with the two mammals opposite her, she couldn’t decipher what the look meant. Had she really been away from home so long that she’d forgotten how to take part in her litter’s silent conversations? She didn’t have time to dwell on it before both Jasmine and Julian were nodding, sitting back in their seats, seemingly satisfied with her answer.

Swallowing, Nick spared a moment to think about how strange his customs must be to Judy’s family. She’d adapted to his species a lot, but he was yet to take on more of her customs. Nick silently vowed to change that. Turning his attention to the quiet baby bunny in his arms, Nick offered her a gentle smile “Cinnamon, sweetheart. You know I don’t ask much of you, but please promise me you won’t tell anyone else about this. Ju-Ju and I need to speak to your mom and dad alone about it, and we don’t want them hearing it from anyone other than us.”

“I promise Mister Nick,” Sasha vowed, sensing it was serious by Nick’s tone. She didn’t want to accidentally upset him.

Kissing the kits forehead, Nick’s shoulders dropped in relief, and from the corner of his eye, he could see Judy do the same. “Thank you, princess.”

“How long?” Jasmine demanded, wanting all the details. She spotted her mom coming down the stairs with some dishes and figured conversation would soon have to cease. She wanted as much information as possible between now and then.

“Since their last visit here.” Marian chimed; taking a sip of water from one of the many glasses that had been laid out.

Astounded, Julian blinked. “You’ve been keeping it a secret for that long?” The buck felt a pang of hurt this his littermate hadn’t felt comfortable coming to him with the information, though he understood she could have doubts given his reaction to Nick during their last visit. How could she have kept such information from their parents, though?

“We wanted to tell mom and dad face to face, and this is the first opportunity that’s come up. That, and being apart while Nick’s been at the academy has been difficult for us. We didn’t want to add the stress of having to tell others,” Judy explained, sparing a glance to her mate. Thankfully, their time apart was in the past now. Nick would only have to go back for a week to sit his exams, and then they wouldn’t have to be separated again for any length of time. “Way to sound co-dependent, Judy.”

Jasmine and Julian exchanged a glance, and the buck nodded towards Nick and Judy. “We won’t say anything.” He vowed, realizing how important the reveal was to his sister. The rabbit knew his parents would be okay with it, they adored Nick, but telling a parent that you were seriously involved with someone was a big deal, even more so when it was interspecies.

Both doe and tod sighed in relief, offering Jasmine and Julian smiles as Bonnie started to put down plates of food at the far end of their table. “Okay Sasha, you need to take your seat now.” Judy tried to make her little sister move so that Nick would be able to eat without her perched on his lap, but the baby bunny refused. Instead, she clung to the fox.

“I don’t wanna go.” She whined, lower lip wobbling.

Knowing it probably made her seem like the evil big sister, Judy shook her head. “There’s no space for you here, Sasha. You can’t sit on Nick’s lap while we eat.” She tried to be gentle, to coerce her sister into agreeing with her.
Watching the conversation, Marian knew she’d have more time with Nick once he’d passed his exams, and the amount of time he’d get to spend in Bunnyburrow would decrease. Making a decision, the vixen looked over to Jasmine and Julian, gesturing to the space between them. “Think you have room for an old vixen on your side of the table?”

As Marian was their guest, Judy didn’t want her to feel like she had to move to placate Sasha. Opening her mouth to say as much, the vixen cut her off.

“It’s fine, Judy, really. I’m happy to move.” Marian shrugged, not at all bothered. Sasha offered her a toothy grin, and as the vixen moved to the other side of the table, the baby bunny took her seat.

“Thank you, Missus Marian.” The little doe kicked her legs where she sat, grin still in place as Marian took her seat opposite Nick.

Picking up Sasha’s drawings, Judy folded them neatly, putting them in her pocket for safekeeping. They had space on their fridge, and she was sure Nick would stick them there.

As Bonnie reached them, the Hopps matriarch started to set down their meals. Judy had sent her an email with some recipes appropriate for Nick and Marian ahead of time, and her mom had dipped into them for dinner. The doe became a silent observer to the scene around her, watching Nick and Marian interact with her family, brain stuck on Sasha’s drawings and the bite on her neck. Mind whirring, Judy came to an important decision. It was time.

Once dinner was over, and the plates had been cleared away, Marian was elected as the bedtime story teller, and the vixen led a giant fluffle of baby bunnies towards one of the upstairs common rooms. She had a few stories in mind to tell the kits, fox tales that she’d told her son during his youth.

“I think your mom handled that like a champ.” Judy commented as the room emptied, turning in her seat so that she could face her fox. During dinner Marian had maintained conversation with them and Judy’s siblings, speaking to any rabbit that had approached her and introduced themselves. Hazel had come up mid-way through dinner, keen to meet the mammal who’s clothing she loved. Judy had been sending her photos regularly of the outfits the vixen had made for her. The two had chatted away for some time, and when Hazel had left, she'd been wearing a broad grin.

Reaching down, Nick grabbed Judy’s legs, bringing them up so they crossed his lap and she sat sideways on the bench seat. Paw stroking the silky fur on Judy’s calf; Nick shrugged while wearing a smile. “She’s used to kits, she had me, and I was a pawful.”

“Some things never change.” Judy teased, unable to resist.

Chuckling, Nick gave Judy’s leg a gentle squeeze. “Always wounding me.” The tod spared a glance around the room, spotting Bonnie and Stu nearby. “Bonnie, Stu.” He called out to them, gesturing for them to come over. Nick watched as the doe and buck shared a look before they moved to join them. “Judy and I were wondering if we could perhaps steal a moment of your time. We have something we’d like to talk to you about.” The fox kept his reasoning vague, but he still swallowed nervously.

Bonnie and Stu hid their smiles, and both mammals bobbed their heads in agreement. “Sure Nick, give us five minutes to make sure that Marian is okay with the kits and then we’ll join you on the
back porch.” Bonnie offered, wanting to drag this out a little longer and torment them.

Agreeing, Nick and Judy waited for them to leave the room before they made to move. They’d decided to tell her parents soon, and she didn’t want her fox suffering anymore, feeling like he couldn’t touch her or kiss her in the public areas of the warren. Now was as good as any time to bring them up to speed. Once her parents knew, it wouldn’t be long until all of her siblings found out and they’d face a litany of questions. Swinging her legs from Nick’s lap, Judy stood, offering out her paw to her fox. He took it without hesitation, and they headed towards the back door, exiting the warren.

The cool evening air ruffled Judy’s fur, and the doe gave her arms a quick rub to warm up. She’d forgotten how chilly it could get in Bunnyburrow during the winter. “How do you want to approach this?” She asked as she stood at the porch railings, looking out over the fields. Her night vision was poor compared to Nick’s, but she knew the land so well that she could picture the trees in the distance. From the corner of her eye she spotted the support beam Nick had pressed her against last time they’d been here, when they’d finally shared their feelings and first kiss. The memory made her smile.

“They’re your parents, you know them better.” Nick moved the ball back to Judy’s court, tail swishing with nervousness. He could feel the urge to stand close to Judy again, to reach out and touch her, kiss her and love her. He settled for standing by her side at the railing, tail flicking to wrap around her ankles.

Thinking it over, Judy decided on the best approach. Her parents were no-nonsense and didn’t like being led on some wild chase for the truth. “We just have to be honest and come out with it.”

“Come out with what?” Stu asked, having caught the end of Nick and Judy’s conversation as he and Bonnie had stepped out onto the porch. Marian was settled with the kits, all of them enthralled with her story, so he and his wife had exchanged a knowing look before stepping outside.

Eyes widening, Judy spun on the spot, aware of Nick’s tail and being careful not to step on it. “Oh, um, hi.” The doe winced at how awkward she sounded, spotting the small movement of Nick’s shoulders in her peripheral as he quietly snickered.

“What’s bothering you, Judy?” Bonnie settled for the concerned mother act, taking the few steps towards her daughter and the tod so she could place a paw on Judy’s shoulder, just as Nick turned to face her and her husband too.

Shaking her head, the corner of Judy’s lips quirked upwards at how her mom automatically assumed something was wrong. “Nothing’s bothering me.” She reassured the other doe. Judy had to actively stop herself from thumping one of her hind paws. Though she was an adult, Judy felt like a kit now that she was faced with the prospect of telling her parents about her first serious relationship.

Tail still curled around Judy’s ankles, Nick remained quiet, leaning back against the porch railing. He’d been the one to break the news to his mom; it was Judy’s turn to break it to her parents. The tod wasn’t completely heartless, though, and he reached out to grasp one of Judy’s paws in his own, giving it a gentle squeeze. Violet eyes turned to find him, and Nick offered his mate a reassuring smile. He watched as she took a deep breath, never breaking away from his gaze.

Judy found comfort from Nick’s touch, and courage from his gaze. “Nick and I are together.” She declared, offering her fox a soft smile. If her parents objected she would fight for them, and if it made them uncomfortable then the doe was ready to leave and head back to the city. She loved her parents, and though she respected their opinion, she knew, deep down, that being with Nick was
right. They were meant to be together.

“We know.” Stu blurted out, earning himself a sharp thump to the chest from his wife.

Shaking her head, Bonnie tutted. “We were going to drag it out, Stu, and make them squirm!” She scolded lightly, turning her attention back to Nick and Judy, finding her daughter staring at them with slightly widened eyes and a slack jaw.

Nick wasn’t overly surprised, he’d come clean to Bonnie and Stu about his feelings for Judy all those months ago in this very spot, but he hadn’t kept them updated as to how his conversation with Judy had gone. He hadn’t told them that they were dating or given them any indication that the conversation had gone well.

“You knew?” Judy turned to look at her parents, seeking clarification, wondering why they hadn’t said anything before.

Nodding her head, Bonnie chuckled. “Of course we did, why do you think we kept pushing you two together?”

Judy blinked as everything started to make sense. “You were setting us up.”

“Marian was in on it too, and so was Jasmine,” Stu added, trying to spread the blame.

“You sent us back here to watch the house on purpose.” Judy breathed, turning her attention to Nick. Her fox looked a little guilty. “Were you in on that too?”

A nervous smile crossed the tod’s muzzle, “Last time we came to visit, after I panicked and before you came out here to speak with me, they found me out here.” Nick admitted. “I told them about my feelings for you then, and they suggested I find an opportune moment to tell you…”

Scowling, the doe folded her arms over her chest. “Which just so happened to be when the fireworks went off?”

“I mean, it was kind of romantic if I do say so myself.” Nick joked. He couldn’t have timed it better if he’d tried.

Features softening, Judy couldn’t be mad at her fox. Her parents, on the other paw… “Why didn’t you say anything?” She turned her attention to them, lifting an eyebrow as the corners of her lips curved downwards.

Bonnie took the lead, not wanting her husband to put his hind paw in it again. “We just didn’t want to be pushy.” She explained. Judy was an adult, and though she still needed guiding every now and then, they tried to let her find her own way most of the time.

“Like that’s stopped you before.” The retort was out before Judy could stop it, and the does eyes widened as she realized how rude her comment was. Time away from her family and dealing with her boisterous coworkers had resulted in the doe learning to be a little sassier.

“Judith, don’t get snippy with your mother. All we wanted to do was help.” Stu scolded, noting that Judy’s ears drooped as she apologized. Though his daughter was a grown mammal, she was still his kit, and he was well within his rights to tell her when she was overstepping the mark.

Sighing, Judy’s shoulders dropped. While she appreciated that her parents had wanted to get her and Nick together, their way of going about it still made her uncomfortable. "I know... It's just frustrating that you guys went behind my back."
“Bun-bun, if we hadn’t of set you up and forced you two to talk, you would’ve continued to dance around the issue and would’ve driven us all crazy in the process. I think it all worked out for the best in the end though, no?” Bonnie pointed out. While watching Nick and Judy try to navigate their feelings for one another had been endearing, it had also been frustrating. There had been many times when all Bonnie had wanted to do was smack their heads together and demand they kiss and get it over with.

Turning to look at her fox, violet found emerald and Judy’s featured softened as she offered him a gentle smile. Head tilted to the side a little, the doe reached out for him with a paw, and Nick took it without a moment’s hesitation. Her mom was right, they’d needed that little extra push, that small dose of courage, to get them to finally come clean with one another. Giving Nick’s paw a squeeze, the doe took a step closer to him, letting him pull her into an embrace, her head resting against his chest as she tucked herself under his muzzle. “Yes. Yes it did.”
Chapter Notes

Hey my loves, I'm back! I'm so sorry for the delay but real life ran away with me, and work is still kicking my butt. I'm not abandoning this story though, especially when we're not too far from the end! Updates might be slow, but they're coming :)

Thank you for all the comments, kudos, favorites, and follows - they mean the world to me! I'm grateful for you all ^_^

Love to Cimar and Uomo for helping me out with this chapter and giving me some amazing ideas. Couldn't have done it without you two!

Judy had forgotten what it was like to live in a warren, where there was no sunlight streaming in through the window to wake her each morning. Blinking, Judy woke feeling warm and comfortable, snuggled up with Nick in her small bed. Her mate had curled around her, long fluffy tail cocooning her, the tip close to her face. A smile wove across her lips as his reddish-orange fur fanned out every time she exhaled.

Snuggling back, Judy yawned, contemplating whether it was worth trying to fall back asleep. The clock on her nightstand read 7am, and the doe knew that soon the warren would come alive with the sound of her siblings anxious for their presents. She had other plans, though. Before bed, Judy had managed to grab a quiet moment with her mom to ask her if she and Nick could be a little late in joining them. Bonnie had frowned, confused, but when Judy had clarified that she wanted to give Nick his present in private, Bonnie had been more than understanding.

Now, the doe lay staring at her bag, discarded on the floor when she and Nick had made it back to her room last night. They'd been too tired to bother unpacking, and Judy's focus had been otherwise occupied on ensuring her fox was comfortable and wasn't struggling too much due to the season.

Feeling her mate shift behind her and hearing his heartbeat change, Judy reached out, her small fingers brushing through his soft tail fur. A deep purr reverberated through the still air, and the tip of Nick’s tail flicked slowly every time she lightly ran her fingers across it. “Good morning.” She broke the silence, voice a whisper as Nick’s arm tightened around her.

“Morning, Carrots.” Nick’s eyes remained closed, and the tod stifled a yawn. He didn’t particularly want to leave the comfort of Judy’s kithood bed, but he knew that today he didn’t stand a chance of being lazy. A warren full of hyperactive baby rabbits ready to open their presents awaited them.

Turning over, the doe buried her nose in Nick’s extra fluffy fur. “Mom’s given us an hour; she’s pushing my litter a little further down the present opening queue.”

Paws coming up to stroke down Judy’s back, the tod frowned. “Why?” Given how family-oriented the Hopps family was, he’d figured their presence during present opening would be mandatory.

Pulling back just enough so she could tip her head and look up at her fox, Judy offered him a soft smile. “So I can give you your present away from prying eyes.”
“Now you have me curious.” Nick tried to play off his worry with a chuckle, but he still swallowed thickly. What did Judy have planned? Though his gifts for her were personal, he wasn’t worried about her opening them in front of others. What had she got him?

Paws running through reddish-orange fur, Judy shook her head. “Don’t be; it’s fine.” She felt the nerves creep up on her, but she stomped them down. What she’d bought Nick was perfect, and though it had been a nightmare to get hold of she knew it would be well received.

“Who wants to go first, then?” Nick stole a glance at the clock. Given how emotional his bunny was, the tod had a feeling she’d probably end up crying when he gave her his gift, and she’d need time to pull herself together before they ventured out of the room to spend time with her family.

Slowly extracting herself from the bed, Judy crossed to her bag. “I’ll go first.” She bit the bullet. Chewing on the inside of her lip as she found the neatly wrapped package in her luggage, Judy felt the weight of it in her paw. Turning back, she strode towards the bed, clambering up with ease to find Nick sat up, sheets pooled around his waist. Offering out the gold package, the doe smoothed down her ears once Nick had taken it from her.

Curious, the tod spent a moment feeling the item in his paws. There was a little weight to it but not much, and it was rectangular. It had been wrapped with care, decorated with a gold ribbon and a large bow. The little gold carrot tag on it made Nick smile, and he flipped it over to read the short message from his mate. With a claw, he cut the ribbon, and it fell away effortlessly, leaving him to struggle to get through the paper. “How much tape did you put on this?” He whined, prying it open.

“Enough to frustrate a fox.” Judy shot back, hiding her grin. As Nick removed the paper, she watched him frown as he turned over the blank black box. The doe had purposefully placed the item in another container, not wanting to give too much away when it was initially unwrapped.

Turning the item over in his paws, it finally came to rest right way up, and Nick lifted the lid slowly.

He hadn’t been expecting what was inside.

Jaw slackening, the tod blinked. Sat inside the box was a silver bracelet, similar to the one around Judy’s wrist though more masculine in design, with two little charms on it.

“I know males don’t wear them, but I wanted to get you one so that you know how serious I am about us. I wanted you to know for a fact that you’re it for me, that I love you and I want to bond with you.” Judy took a deep breath. She’d had a little script in her head for this moment, but the look on Nick’s face as he lifted his gaze to find her eyes made the doe throw her rehearsed words away. “I hope that it might help alleviate your panic, too. Mine has helped me countless times.” Subconsciously her paw moved to touch the silver around her wrist. “I know the charms are meant to represent how we met, but you already covered that. So instead, I changed it a little.”

Moving a paw to touch the two charms, Nick’s head tipped sideways with curiosity. How had Judy managed to convince Mr. Jackson to make a bracelet and go against tradition with the charms? “What do they mean?” He breathed, swallowing as he tried to push back the unexpected tears gathering in the corner of his eyes.

“The blueberry represents the moment I figured out that you love me. I was standing at Gid’s stand with all the blueberry pies, and you were helping my dad. Gid brought up bonding, and the pieces all fell into place. It’s also a reminder that I love you more than you love blueberries.” Judy teased, earning a snort of amusement from her fox. “The fireworks are pretty self-explanatory.”
Though still in shock that Judy had gifted him a bonding bracelet, Nick wasn’t able to let the opportunity to make his mate squirm pass him by. “I don’t think they are.”

Judy could feel her cheeks growing warm. Her reason for picking the fireworks had been corny. “The fireworks from the closing ceremony were going off during our first kiss.” She mumbled, playing with the end of one of her ears.

Feeling his heart swell, Nick abandoned his gift, blinking away his tears as he reached out to grab Judy. Their difference in size, and the fact he caught her off guard, enabled him to pick her up with ease, bringing her to rest in his lap. Paws cupping her cheeks, the tod pressed their lips together, pouring all of his love, affection, and his pent-up feelings from the season into their kiss.

He knew Judy loved him, knew it like he knew the sun would rise every morning, but this was a physical representation of it, something he could look at every day. Never in a million years had the tod thought that Judy would do something like this for him, but he couldn’t deny that it was the most meaningful thing anyone had ever done for him. It added more weight to the decision he’d made on their way to Bunnyburrow.

Judy’s scent flooded Nick’s nostrils as he kissed her, and a low rumble started in his chest as his doe wiggled in his lap, her small paws grasping at him. The taste of her drove him crazy, tugged at the primal part of him that wanted nothing more than to throw her down on the bed and claim her, but he battled back the need, not willing to let the season ruin the moment.

Caught up in their kiss, Judy lost track of time. The world narrowed until all she could focus on was her fox. She’d guessed that her gift would pull a strong response from him, but she hadn’t expected to see him almost cry over it.

“Thank you, Fluff,” Nick whispered as he pulled back, both mammals trying to regain their breath. Paws smoothing down Judy’s sides, Nick followed the curvature of her frame until he reached her hips. Squeezing gently, the tod offered his mate an affectionate smile. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

Small paws holding Nick’s muzzle, the doe traced his lips. “I ask myself the same question every day. I never thought I’d love a mammal as much as I love you.”

“I’m not exactly the best catch in the world, Carrots.” Nick shook his head, snorting. Their relationship had been through a lot of ups and downs, mostly due to the skeletons in his closet. Most mammals would’ve left at the first sign of trouble, they would’ve given him a wide berth and ghosted him out of their life. Judy had stuck with him, though, and had helped him turn his life around.

Disagreeing, Judy stopped tracing his lips and instead held his muzzle firmly, forcing him to meet her gaze. It still hurt her heart to hear him speak so lowly of himself, but she knew that it would take a lot more than a few months and some sweet words from her to change his opinion. All Judy could do was stand by his side, reassure him when he needed it, and remind him just how much she loved him. She hoped, with time, it would help change how he saw himself. The world had beaten him down, and she was trying her hardest to rebuild him. They’d already made immense progress, but there was still a long road ahead. “To me you are.”

“Didn’t your mom ever tell you it’s rude to lie?” Nick quipped, uncomfortable with the compliment.

Refraining from rolling her eyes at Nick’s deflection, Judy shook her head. “Didn’t yours ever tell you that it’s rude to steal?”
Frowning, Nick felt a stab of pain in his chest. Judy knew his story, and the tod thought she’d understood why he’d turned out the way he had. “I did what I had to do to survive.”

“No, that, dumb fox.” Judy quickly interjected, never wanting her mate to believe she thought badly of him for the things he’d done. Reaching out for one of his large paws, she brought it to rest on her chest, the steady thump of her heart beneath it. “This.”

Nick’s shoulders dropped, and his features softened, the flare of pain in his chest disappearing with his rabbit’s words. He should’ve known she’d never make a jibe about his past, especially given the present she’d just handed him. “Oh Fluff, that’s so sappy.” He teased, earning himself a bashful shrug from his mate. Closing the small distance between them, he pressed a soft kiss to her forehead, lips lingering for a moment as he enjoyed their closeness and the feel of her heartbeat skittering beneath his paw. Her scent was incredible – sweet and strong – and Nick had to force down his urge to bite her and claim her and make her his in every sense of the word. “Emotional bunny.” He whispered as he pulled back, needing to put some distance between them, his paw leaving Judy’s chest as he reached for his bracelet.

“You don’t have to wear it. It’s more a keepsake than anything.” Judy wouldn’t be offended, and she didn’t want Nick to be tormented by their peers and other members of society for going against the grain and wearing it.

Snorting in disbelief, Nick shook his head as he tried to fasten it around his wrist. “I know what goes into making one of these, Carrots. Of course, I’m going to wear it.” He grunted, struggling to get the bracelet to fasten. Giving in, he offered it out to Judy, ignoring her amused expression as she took it from him, securing it around his wrist.

“You’re not worried that someone might say something?” Judy double-checked as she finished fastening it, taking a moment to admire the blue of the blueberry and the red and gold of the firework. Mr. Jackson had outdone himself.

Brushing aside Judy’s concerns, Nick knew any comments would be like water off a ducks back. “Not at all.” He was used to mammals making snide comments and giving him funny looks. He’d wear his bonding bracelet with pride. “You know, your present neatly leads into mine.”

“It does?” Judy frowned, eyebrows drawing down and together. What had Nick bought her?

Humming his confirmation, Nick looked over the bracelet now around his wrist. It didn’t weigh much, but it was enough for him to notice, and it gave him a strange sense of comfort. Gaze moving to Judy, he lifted her up, placing her down on the bed before he left the confines of the sheets, making his way to his bag. Rummaging through it, he produced two gifts – one medium-sized and the other small. Both were wrapped in purple paper, and the curious expression on Judy’s face as Nick handed them to her had the tod shrugging, ears flattening a little with embarrassment. “I know it’s not very Christmassy, but it reminded me of your eyes.”

Cooing as she took the presents, Judy gave Nick a moment to clamber back into bed before she spoke. “Now who’s the sappy one?” She teased, weighing up the two packages. “Any particular order?”

“The bigger one first.” Nick decided, believing the smaller present would pull the strongest reaction from his doe.

Judy gave the larger gift a gentle squeeze, and whatever was inside gave way underneath her paw. She spared a moment to try and work out what Nick could’ve possibly got her. He hadn’t been home enough to see if she needed anything. Removing the decorative silver bow, Judy couldn’t
resist leaning over to smack the sticky side of it to Nick’s bare chest, snickering as her mate stared down at it like it was poisonous. Returning her attention to the present, the doe undid the tape, noting that Nick wasn’t as heavy-pawed with it as she was. Distracted, she missed Nick removing the bow from his chest. Destroying the last piece of tape, Judy tore at the paper to reveal a lilac colored jumper, with a scoop neck and a raised pattern of loops and interlocking geometric shapes on it.

“Mom has your size, so I borrowed it. I worked out the pattern myself, though.” Nick explained, lifting a paw to tug nervously at one of his ears, scratching at it a moment later.

Blinking in surprise, Judy inhaled sharply as she put it all together. Gaze moving from the jumper to her slightly embarrassed looking mate, the corners of her lips started to curve upwards. “You made this?” She breathed, watching as Nick nodded. Looking down at the jumper in her lap, Judy ran her paws over it, enjoying the softness of the material and the fact that her fox had made this for her with his own two paws. He came from a family of tailors, so it shouldn’t have surprised Judy, but she knew that it hadn’t been his thing since his father had died. “It’s beautiful.” Judy could feel tears starting to gather in the corner of her eyes. Sure Gram Gram had knitted her jumpers when she’d been a kit, and Marian made her new clothes all the time now, but this wasn’t Nick’s strong suit, and it held a lot of painful memories for him. Memories he’d pushed aside for her. Moving the jumper so as not to crumple it, the doe reached out for her mate, pulling him into a strong hug, pressing herself as close to him as possible. “Thank you, Slick.”

“It’s not much.” Nick protested, giving himself over to Judy’s embrace, wrapping his arms around her to hold her tightly.

Shaking her head as best she could, Judy disagreed. “It’s everything.” She pulled back from their embrace enough so that she could press their lips together in a tender kiss, the doe trying to convey just how much the jumper meant to her. Sitting back, she removed her nightshirt, rolling her eyes at Nick’s rumble of appreciation as she gave him an eyeful, before she pulled the jumper on, violet eyes closing in bliss at the softness of the garment.

Nick had thought it couldn’t get better than seeing his mate in the clothes his mom had made, but seeing her in something he’d made? His paws clenched at the bed sheets, claws catching the fabric as he battled back his lust. The urge to reach out and touch her was intense.

In tune with her fox, Judy’s eyes opened to find him struggling. Reaching out, she stroked the back of her fingers across his cheek, offering him a soft smile. Taking one of his paws with her free one, she brought it to her waist, hoping the physical contact would help soothe Nick. As his shoulders dropped with relief, Judy picked up the smaller gift, feeling her mate start to gently stroke her side. It didn’t take her long to undo the wrapping, and she refrained from sticking the bow to Nick again. This time, when the paper fell away, she was met with a black box similar to the one Nick’s bracelet had been in. Head tipping sideways in curiosity, her ears flopped over. Pushing the lid up, Judy gasped as she caught sight of the item inside, ears drooping. “Oh, Nick…”

“I know you’re not a big jewelry person, but I thought this might be better.” The tod shrugged, nerves clawing at his insides. It felt like nothing compared to the moment he’d given her the bonding bracelet, but it was still enough to make him bite down on his lower lip, his paw on her waist tightening.

Nick’s wording confused the doe, and she pulled her gaze from the silver necklace inside the box long enough to find the emerald eyes of the mammal she loved. “Better?”

Paw leaving Judy’s side, Nick ran his fingers over the bracelet around her wrist. “I know you’ve
received a lot of abuse because of this, and I know that it’s essentially me marking you as mine. We’re working on my possessiveness, though, and I don’t want you to have to listen to any more slurs.” With his other paw, he touched the pendant in the box. “This is simply a token of my affection; there are no possessive connotations to it.”

“I’m not taking my bracelet off. I don’t care about mammals throwing slurs at me; I don’t care if people stare. It’s part of your culture. I love it, and I love you.” Judy put her hind paw down. She couldn’t imagine being without her bracelet. Looking down at her gift, she sniffled, feeling the tears threatening again. “I love this too, and I love what it represents, how far you’ve come.”

“How far we’ve come.” Nick corrected. Both of them had grown since they’d met.

Agreeing, Judy spent a moment admiring the shape of the pendant. “How did you find this?” She whispered, paw moving to stroke the cold metal.

“Well, you see, I intend to bond with this amazing rabbit. She’s got these beautiful violet eyes, likes to see the good in every mammal, oh and she likes to do her homework…a trait which might be rubbing off on me.” Nick could sense that tears were imminent, so he pitched for humor instead. His attempt was futile as tears started to roll down Judy’s cheeks, falling and splashing on her gift. “Emotional bunny.” He teased, wiping away her tears.

Snort laughing; Judy sniffled as she let Nick wipe away her tears. The pendant in her lap was shaped like a heart, but engraved on it was a looping pattern that continued from its shape to form another smaller heart, that in turn interlocked with a smaller rounded upside down heart – an old rabbit symbol for ‘mate.’ It hadn't been used much since they’d become a civilized species, but every rabbit was taught about it in their high school history classes. Removing the necklace from the box, she offered it out to Nick, her ears pricking upright. As her fox fastened it around her neck, their noses booped together, making Judy laugh. The pendant came to rest between her collarbones and the cold metal contrasted with her warm fur. Before Nick could pull away, the doe stole another kiss. “I love it. I love them both. I love you,” she whispered against his lips.

Nick melted. His rabbit was playing with his heart like it was putty, and it felt incredible. He looked at her for a short while, imprinting the moment to his memory, to call upon should things ever get rough. He couldn’t get enough of her soft smile, filled with love and gratitude, or her button nose, wiggling with emotion, and her wide violet eyes, sparkling with unshed tears of appreciation. It would never cease to amaze him how many times he could fall in love with her again every day.

Leaning forward, Nick stole yet another kiss from her. It started slow, just their lips connecting with each other, but soon both mammals began pushing for more. Judy licked Nick's lips with her small tongue, seeking his larger and rougher one to deepen their kiss. She didn't have to wait long; Nick opened his mouth almost instantaneously. His already touch-starved body, coupled with the seasonal hormones, made it impossible for him to deny her. At the same time, the fox started caressing Judy's thighs, wanting to feel as much of the doe as he could.

A small shiver ran down Judy's spine as Nick's claws brushed her fur and teased her flesh, making her release a soft moan into her mate's mouth.

That did him in. Moving his paws to her rear, Nick brought her back onto his lap, focusing his ministrations on her butt and her short, fluffy tail. Not one to be outdone, Judy moved one paw behind Nick's head to scratch lightly behind his ears, while the other slowly caressed his chest, blunt claws running through coarse fur.

A familiar low rumble started in Nick's throat, and he deepened their kiss even more. Judy wouldn't
believe it possible if she wasn't experiencing it right that moment. His tongue fought for domination over hers, and he started raking her back with his claws, causing the doe to shiver under them. Nick's nostrils flared when the unmistakable scent of arousal started coming from his rabbit.

However, the doe couldn't be blamed. Who wouldn't be excited by their mate hitting almost every sweet spot they had? It wasn't like Nick was fairing much better either. From where Judy was sat on his lap, she was in very close contact with his groin, and a familiar bulge was starting to make its presence known.

Judy knew this couldn't go in the direction they both desperately wanted it to. Present opening was about to start, and if they didn't show up her family would ask questions she didn't want to answer. Regretfully pulling away, she heard Nick whine as she broke their kiss. “We should go and join the others.” Judy didn't want to leave their little bubble; she was far too content to spend the day in bed with her fox.

Nick knew it would be rude for them to ignore Judy’s family. “You’re right.” He huffed, nostrils flaring as he savored the sweet smell of his mate. Begrudgingly he moved Judy from his lap and rolled out of bed, stretching as he stood. Judy joined him, and the pair dressed slowly, enjoying their last few minutes of bliss together before they faced the fluffle.

“Ahh, here they are.” Marian couldn’t help but announce loudly as her kit and Judy tried to slip quietly into one of the many living rooms in the warren. When Bonnie had told her that the two of them had wanted some time alone this morning the vixen had snickered, hiding her smile behind her paw.

“Ju-Ju! Mister Nick!” Sasha abandoned her position on the floor by her littermates, rushing across the room to throw herself at her sister and her favorite fox.

Reactions sharpened from the academy; Nick opened his arms in time to catch Sasha, scooping her up and swinging her around. The baby bunny shrieked happily, hind paws kicking through the air as Nick turned her around until he finally put her down. “Hey Cinnamon.” He cooed, smoothing down her ears.

“Look what Susie got me!” Sasha grabbed Nick’s paw, dragging him through the crowd of rabbits and towards the tree. Her littermate had bought her some coloring books, filled with images of all her favorite princesses. “This is Moolan, and this is Rabunzel, oh and this is my absolute favorite princess, Mareida!” Sasha chattered away happily, showing Nick the pictures in her coloring book.

Marian watched from her spot on the floor as her kit was dragged across the room, hiding her amusement. As Nick took the coloring book from Sasha, his sleeve slid up, and Marian caught a flash of silver around his wrist. The vixen barely contained her gasp, eyes widening. Finding Judy amongst her siblings, Marian noted the necklace around her neck. The vixen had been tasked with picking up the item from Mr. Jackson, so was very familiar with it. Nick and Judy had exchanged gifts in private, and Judy had bought her son a bonding bracelet?

“Are you okay, Marian?” Sat next to Marian, Jasmine had heard her small inhale. Concern was etched on her face as she looked over the vixen, making sure she wasn’t physically hurt in any way. The question had everyone in the room turning to look at them, including Nick and Judy.

Uncomfortable now that she was the center of attention, Marian shook her head, composing
herself. “I’m okay, just sat on my hind paw funny.” She brushed aside the doe’s concern, offering an apologetic smile to everyone in the room. Nick caught her gaze though, and the small tilt of his head made the vixen feel momentarily sorry for lying, but he was soon pulled back into the conversation about princesses and Marian’s shoulders slumped with relief. She’d have to get Nick alone later and ask him about the bracelet.

It took two hours for the remaining presents to be opened, and by the end of it, every mammal in the warren had a small pile of goodies. Bonnie and Stu had gone out to purchase a few gifts for Marian and Nick, not wanting them to miss out and only have gifts from each other and Judy. Now that the warren was filled with scraps of wrapping paper and the sound of kits playing with their new toys, Bonnie turned her attention to their guests. “Nick, dear, how are you in the kitchen?” She quizzed, hoping he’d be able to partake in one of the Hopps Christmas traditions. In her peripheral, the matriarch caught sight of Judy shaking her head.

“Okay, I guess. Still learning.” Nick opted for an honest answer, feeling a weight settle in his gut. What did Bonnie have planned?

“Oh, that’s perfect then! You see, there’s this tradition whereby any guest we have at Christmas is to be my sous chef…” The doe watched Nick closely, hiding her smile as she saw him swallow, a flicker of fear crossing his face.

Unable to resist another chance to tease her kit, Marian laughed. “Do you have warren insurance, Bon?”

Unamused, Nick scowled at his mom while she and Bonnie chuckled together. “I’m an acceptable cook.” He protested, turning his gaze to Judy. “Right, Fluff?”

“The few times you’ve cooked for me, it’s been great.” Judy conceded, figuring it was best to flatter her fox to get him into the kitchen. She didn’t dare mention the mess he’d left behind in his wake, though.

Standing, Bonnie helped Marian up before she turned her attention to Nick. “I’ll be the judge of that. Come on.” She instructed, leading the way through the maze of hallways to the warren’s huge kitchen, each mammal bringing their little pile of gifts with them. Stashing their presents in the corner of the kitchen, all eyes swung to Bonnie as she took control, putting on her apron. “Okay Nick, here’s your apron.” She grabbed for Stu’s, knowing her husband's slightly rounded figure meant the apron was a little larger than intended for a rabbit.

“Do I really need to wear it?” Nick eyed the item suspiciously.

“Do you want food all over your shirt?” Bonnie asked in return, quirking an eyebrow.

Pursing his lips together in contemplation, Nick could feel his mom and Judy staring at him, the two ladies having taken up positions on the other side of the island counter to watch him work.

Spotting a way to ensure her fox would put on the apron, and provide her and Marian with a chuckle, Judy spoke up. “I bought you that shirt.”

Glancing down at the Pawaiian shirt he had on, Nick grumbled under his breath. Judy was right. He couldn’t let it get dirty when she’d lovingly picked it out for him. “Fine, I’ll wear the apron.” He conceded, holding out his paw for the offending item.

Bonnie suppressed her smile as Nick took the apron from her, watching as he passed it over his head and tied the strings at the back. His size difference to Stu meant the item was a little tight, and
the matriarch felt a bit guilty for making the tod wear it, but the look of amusement she could see on her daughters face eradicated all of that guilt.

“So most of the food has been prepared – I like to do things ahead of time – but there are a few things I’ll need your help with.” Bonnie reached for the notepad she kept next to the stove, flicking through her scribbles. “We have potato and sweet potato dauphinoise left to make.” She put down her notepad and pen on the island counter as she moved to the fridge to gather the ingredients.

Completely lost, Nick stood at the stove, where Bonnie had left him, and looked over his shoulder to catch the violet eyes he loved so much. “Dauphinoise?” He mouthed, baffled. At least Bonnie had given him a clue that the dish somehow involved potatoes.

Though the grey bunny was well aware of what dauphinoise was, she shrugged, pretending not to know. It was a traditional rule that the sous chef wasn’t allowed outside help, and as much as Judy loved her fox, she loved not having her tail whacked with her moms cooking spoon even more. Reaching for her mom's notepad and pen once Nick had returned his attention to the stove and the pile of ingredients her mom had put down, the doe scribbled a quick note to Marian, informing her of the rule.

Glancing down at the note slid across to her, Marian bit down on her lower lip. Her son was well out of his depth, and the vixen knew it would be difficult to hold back on offering assistance.

Taking the vegetable peeler that Bonnie offered him; Nick started to peel the potatoes, making sure that he removed all of the skin. The task was more time consuming than he’d anticipated, but as a kit, he’d watched his mom perform this task hundreds of time, so he was quick to pick it up and find a rhythm. Once the regular potatoes were done, he turned his attention to the sweet potatoes, finding them a little more challenging to peel. From the corner of his eye, he saw Bonnie put a colander down next to him, and he paused his peeling to put the potatoes in it, adding the sweet potatoes as he worked, until the colander was full.

Putting down the peeler, he carried the colander to one of the sinks, figuring they’d need to be rinsed. The tod was winging it, trying to emulate his mom, and she’d always been keen on washing fruit and veg. Giving the potatoes a quick rinse, the tod returned to his place at the counter, finding a chopping board and a knife where he’d left his peeler and the potato skins.

“You’re better at this than you give yourself credit for.” The Hopps matriarch complimented as she watched Nick remove a few potatoes from the colander, putting them down on the chopping board before he picked up the knife.

Snorting, the tod stared at the potatoes, unsure how he was meant to cut them. “All you have me doing is prepping vegetables, Bonnie. It’s not like I could mess that up too much.” He turned the potato on the chopping board over, biting the inside of his lip.

“You don’t forget to make the layers nice and even because we need to make sure the milk and cream fills all the gaps.” The doe threw Nick a small lifeline, knowing he was smart and would pick up on it.

Connecting the dots, Nick started to cut the potato into thin slices, stacking them on the counter ready to layer in a dish. He could feel the weight of Judy’s gaze on his back, and his ears honed in on the conversation between his mom and Bonnie. The two ladies were discussing plans for the rest of the day. Focusing his attention back on his work, he kept chopping, wanting to make sure every slice was the same thickness. He was mid-chop when a shriek from the dining room pierced the air.
The sudden noise made Nick jump, and the knife clipped his finger. A sharp yip of pain slipped from between his lips as he shoved his finger into his mouth, hoping to stem the blood flow from the small cut.

Hearing Nick’s noise of pain, Judy was up and out of her seat, rushing around the island counter to her mate. “Careful Slick, you need your fingers.” She reached up to pry his fingers from his mouth, checking the wound.

The sight of his mate tending to his injury had a low rumble starting in the tod’s chest, a wave of lust barreling through him. “Damn straight I do.” His voice dropped an octave, emerald finding violet as Judy looked up at him in surprise.

Clearing her throat, Bonnie stared at Judy and Nick. The matriarch wasn’t a prude, not in any sense of the word, but an opportunity to tease her daughter and Nick was worth taking.

Nick’s eyes widened at the sound from Bonnie, reminding him of where he was. “For writing up tickets for bad mammals, and driving, and holding my tranq gun, and…”

“Scratching Judy’s itches.” Bonnie cut him off.

Mortified, Judy’s ears dropped in time with her jaw. “Mom!” She hissed, stealing a quick glance around the room to make sure none of her younger siblings were around. The last thing she wanted to do was have to explain to them what their mom meant.

“We can smell you two a mile off.” Marian chipped in, having been doodling on the notepad once she’d been confident that Judy was taking care of her son’s injury. Her maternal instincts had wanted her to move and tend to him herself, but she knew he was old enough to cope with a cut, and Judy would probably be able to offer him more comfort.

Pulling her ears over her eyes to hide her blush, Judy groaned. “Not helping.”

Wafting a hand through the air, Bonnie brushed aside Judy’s protest as she moved to one of the many cupboards to collect a dish. “It’s a mother’s prerogative to embarrass her kit. Besides, it’s nothing your father and I haven’t-“

“MOM!” Judy interrupted, ears springing up as she held out her paws in a stop gesture, violet eyes wide. The doe was comfortable with the topic, she had to be in such a large household, but she didn’t need to know the more delicate details of her parent’s intimacy. She could hear Nick chuckling behind her, and she let the tod grasp one of her paws in his.

“What haven’t we done, Bon?” Stu quizzed, having caught his wife’s comment as he’d come through the back door. He’d had to leave just before the end of the present opening to head across town and pick up Pop Pop. Last night, once everyone had gone to bed, he and Bonnie had stayed up late talking about the best way to keep Pop Pop away from Nick and Marian. The old rabbit still held onto his prejudices and they hadn’t wanted their guests to feel uncomfortable. In the end, they’d agreed to quickly introduce them and then lead Pop Pop away, where he’d be distracted by his grandkits. At lunch, he’d be seated as far away from the Wilde family as possible.

Leaning heavily on his walking stick, Pop Pop shuffled into the kitchen. “What’s all the ruckus?” He demanded, old eyes narrowing behind his glasses as he scanned the room. The elderly rabbit scowled as he noticed the two predators in the kitchen. “What on earth are they doin’ here? You know they eat us!”

“Used to. We live in harmony now.” Bonnie sighed, putting down the dish she’d collected from
Shaking his walking stick in the direction of the two predators, Pop Pop disagreed. “They’re designed to kill us. You know, foxes are red because they’re made by the devil!”

“We’re not even religious, so I don’t know why you keep bringing up the devil.” Bonnie rolled her eyes, aware that they needed to get rid of Pop Pop now. Giving her husband the stink eye, she gestured with her chin towards the dining area.

Grabbing the elderly rabbits elbow, Stu attempted to guide him away from the kitchen. He knew following his wife’s wishes would make everything more comfortable for their guests, but Pop Pop was defiant.

“I ain’t done here, Stuart.” Pop Pop objected, and though he was old and a little frail, he moved his elbow out of Stu’s grasp.

Marian had experienced her fair share of verbal abuse in the past, you didn’t campaign for pred rights and marry their poster mammal without having a few slurs thrown your way, but she’d never expected a member of Judy’s family to have such a strong adverse reaction to her and her kit. Surprised by Pop Pop’s outburst, the vixen was frozen in her seat.

Instinct had Judy moving between Pop Pop and Nick, taking up position right in front of her mate, as the old rabbit’s eyes found her fox. Standing defiant, the grey bunny felt Nick’s tail brush against her ankles, and she watched as her grandfather looked between them, eyes hardening when he saw their joined paws.

“You better not be rolling around in them barns with a fox, Judith. Surely you’d rather be with a nice buck. Say, I know a couple that would be great.” The old buck shook his walking stick at his granddaughter. She’d always been too out there and always wanted more than a rabbit was meant to have.

Giving Nick’s paw a squeeze, the doe found strength from his presence behind her. She loved Pop Pop, but his old views were harmful and wrong. Opening her mouth to speak, Judy was cut off by her mate.

“Judy deserves better than a barn to roll around in, Sir.” Nick kept his tone as polite as possible, though under the surface he was itching to be sarcastic and snide.

Raising a paw, Pop Pop pointed a finger at the fox stood behind his granddaughter. “Judith deserves better than a fox, too.”

“You’re probably right.” Nick shrugged, noticing that Judy had turned her head to look at him, lips parted in surprise. However, he kept his gaze on the old rabbit. “But she’s an adult, with her own thoughts and opinions, and she’s able to make her own decisions. I might not be the best mate in your opinion, or anyone else’s for that matter, but Judy’s decided that I am. I’m not going to question her decision because I trust her and her ability to weigh up the pros and cons and decide what’s right for her. You have every right to be concerned about her, she’s your granddaughter and you love her, and you only want the best for her, but you have to trust her. To you the best for her might be some young buck, but would Judy think that’s the best for her? Would that make her happy?”

Shaking her head, Judy looked away from her mate, finding Pop Pop observing them, a look in his eyes that she’d never seen before. “It wouldn’t make me happy. I can’t think of anything worse than being tied down to a buck. He’d probably want me to give up the job I love, move back from
the city, and spend the rest of my days carrying his kits. There’s nothing inherently wrong with
that, it’s just not me. It’s not what I want from life.”

Tightening his grip on Judy’s paw, the tip of Nick’s tail flicked, brushing over her hind paws.
“She’s not a kit who can’t make up her own mind. Sure at times she can be reckless and make snap
decisions, but I also know that she does her homework. Judy knew exactly what she was getting
herself into with me and she’s not run away, she’s not abandoned me, and even if you make my
time here hell, even if you continue to insult my species, I’m not abandoning her. She’s too
important to me. She means too much to me.” Nick made his stance known, cutting off the old
rabbit before he could say anything else.

“These old notions you have are harmful, Pop Pop,” Judy spoke up, slowly letting go of Nick’s
paw so she could take a few steps towards her grandfather. “Things have changed, we’ve all
changed. I thought Zootopia was this perfect place where no bad could happen, and I only ever saw
the good in mammals. Nick taught me that isn’t always the case, and that we’re all capable of
doing bad things, even if we don’t mean to. That’s part of life. We grow and we learn from our
mistakes. We pick ourselves back up and we try again.” Judy’s mind flashed back to the press
conference, to the subconscious prejudice she’d had.

Taking a few steps forward, Nick came to a stop behind Judy, sliding an arm around her waist as
he spoke to her grandfather. “I was the lowest rung on the ladder, the very bottom of the totem
pole, until Judy crashed into my life and made me realize that all it takes is one mammal to believe
in you for you to change your life. She taught me to believe in myself, made me see that I’m
enough, that I deserve to be treated just like any other mammal. I may have taught Judy a thing or
two, but I’ve learned a lot from her in return.”

“I never thought I’d have a family again,” Marian spoke up, having been silent since Pop Pop’s
arrival, too shocked and then too worried to say anything. “After my husband passed and it was just
Nicky and me, I thought that would be my family until the end, that my kit would be alone once
I’m gone.” The vixen shook her head. “Until they both showed up on my doorstep, until I saw the
way they look after one another, support one another, and love one another.” Marian’s gaze moved
from Pop Pop to her kit and his mate. “When Nicky brought Judy home, he wasn’t just bringing
her home, he was bringing all of you too.” Marian spared a glance around the room at Bonnie and
Stu, and even to Pop Pop. “You’re my family now, species be damned.”

Pop Pop’s gaze moved between Nick and Marian. While it seemed most of his family had taken to
them, the old buck had heard too many tales about savage predators in his youth, especially the
dangers of foxes, to be won over yet. “I still ain’t too sure. You talk a good game, but I don’t know
if you can walk the walk too.”

“I’ll vouch for them.” Julian appeared at the top of the stairs that led down to the dining area. He’d
heard the shriek of one of his siblings and had come to check out the noise, several others in tow,
and then he’d heard Pop Pop’s arrival. Given the keenness of rabbit and fox hearing, the buck had
remained silent, instructing his siblings to do the same, while they’d listened in on the
conversation.

Taking the final step up to join her littermate in the kitchen, Jasmine stood by Julian’s side. “Me
too. Nick and Marian have been wonderful towards us.”

“And me.” Hazel reached the top step with Sasha in her arms. The young doe had spent the
previous evening with Marian. She’d shown her all of the clothes she’d been working on, and the
two ladies had talked well into the night. Marian had taught her some new sewing techniques and
had written down a few tips for her too.
Squirming in her sister’s arms, Sasha scowled at Pop Pop. “I like Mister Nick and Missus Marian. Lots of us do.”

“Nick and Marian don’t have to prove anything to you, Pop Pop,” Stu commented. “Marian has been nothing but gracious and kind, looking after our Jude in the city, making sure she’s eating well and sleepin’ properly, and keeping her in beautiful clothes. As for Nick, he loves Jude and she loves him. Couldn’t ask for better than that. Whatever goes on between them is between them; it’s not our place to get involved. They’re not hurting anyone and they’re happy. Isn’t that what we all want for Jude? Nick’s already proven himself over and over again, so cut the boy some slack. You may be her grandfather, but I’m her father, and I couldn’t think of a better mammal for our Jude to be with.” Stu tugged at the straps of his overalls, rocking on the balls of his hind paws as he spared a glance to the tod.

Still unconvinced, but seeing that he was outnumbered, the old rabbit shook his head, turning his focus towards the stairs. “We’ll see.” He muttered, shuffling forwards, reaching out for the handrail with his free paw.

Though both a little frustrated with their grandfather, Jasmine and Julian didn’t want to risk him falling down the stairs and hurting himself, so the littermates went to his aid, helping him down to the dining room. Hazel and Sasha followed behind them, ready to start gathering their siblings for lunch.

Once Pop Pop was out of sight, Nick’s shoulder’s dropped, and the tod let out a small sigh. “Thank you, Stu.” He offered the buck a smile while he tightened his hold around Judy’s waist, pulling her back flush to his front.

“Anytime, son.” The term of endearment slipped off Stu’s tongue with ease, and the buck reached out to pat Nick on the shoulder as he passed him, heading towards the family rooms to check on some of his kits. The warren had been uncharacteristically quiet for a while, and that usually meant trouble.

Marian’s ears pricked at Stu’s comment, and the vixen blinked in surprise. She’d known that Nick and Stu got along well, had heard from both of them that they enjoyed one another’s company, but to hear Stu call her kit ‘son brought a smile to her face. Since his father’s passing, Nick had been without a strong male role model in his life. Stu was now filling that gap, and Marian couldn’t be more grateful that the buck had taken her boy under his wing. She’d tried to raise a well-rounded tod, but some things could only be learned from a father-like figure.

Turning his attention back to the kitchen and the work he’d been doing, Nick went to resume when Bonnie shook her head, batting his paws away from the utensils before she started to undo the ribbon at the back of his apron.

“I’ve got this.” Bonnie insisted as the apron straps came loose.

Having no choice but to wiggle out of the apron as Bonnie pulled it over his head, Nick frowned. “But it’s tradition.” He was perfectly capable of carrying on with his work. He wasn’t that bad of a sous chef.

“One that can be broken this year. Go and relax in one of the family rooms, please.” Bonnie shooed Nick, Judy, and Marian from the kitchen. They probably all needed a moment, and the doe wanted an opportunity to speak to her husband alone once he returned. Though they loved Pop Pop, they needed a better plan. They wouldn’t force the old rabbit into liking Nick and Marian, but at the same time, they didn’t want him making their guests uncomfortable. Perhaps a sit-down discussion with him once all the kits were in bed was the way forward, so long as he didn’t fall asleep from all
the food and elderflower wine first.

Grabbing Nick’s paw as they left the kitchen, Judy pulled him to a stop. “Little doe’s rooms, I’ll be right back.” She pushed up onto the balls of her hind paws to plant a kiss on his muzzle before she disappeared down another corridor.

Mother and son left alone, they made their way into one of the family rooms, finding it surprisingly vacant. Taking his seat on one of the couches, Nick sank back into the soft fabric, eyes closing.

“Nicky.” Marian took the spot next to her son, reaching out with a paw to touch his shoulder.

Emerald eyes opening, the tod looked to his mom, a frown crossing his features a moment later as he saw concern etched across her face. “It’s okay, mom, I’m used to it.” Nick shrugged, not wanting her to worry about the things Pop Pop had said. After spending most of his life on the street, there were very few insults the tod hadn’t heard.

The vixen shook her head, moving her paw to take her son’s wrist. “What’s this about?” She brushed a thumb over the bracelet, noting the charms. She knew the story of how her kit and Judy had become a couple, so they came as no surprise to her. “It’s not very traditional.”

Quirking an eyebrow, Nick wondered where his mom was going with this. She’d been one of the biggest cheerleaders of his relationship with Judy. “Carrots and I aren’t very traditional anyway.” He pointed out, knowing that their pred/prey pairing made them an oddity.

“True.” Marian agreed, moving to take Nick’s paw in her own. Emerald met emerald and the vixen offered her son a small smile. “What if other mammals say something when they see it?” She couldn’t shake the fear that her son would be targeted like her husband had been.

Though the tod understood his mom’s concern and knew it stemmed from her fear, the thought of mammal’s saying something didn’t bother him. They’d always talk and would always find something cruel to say. “Like they’ve been saying things to Judy?”

The vixen couldn’t argue with that. She’d heard several stories about Judy receiving verbal abuse from mammals on the street because of her decision to wear her bonding bracelet. “You’re right. I guess I was just caught off guard, that’s all.”

“What do you mean?” Nick couldn’t hide the confusion from his voice, eyebrows drawing together. What was there to be caught off guard about?

Letting go of her kit’s paw, Marian examined the bracelet a little more closely. She could see that Judy had put considerable thought into the design. “Mr. Jackson wouldn’t have made this for her without some serious convincing, you know how stubborn that mammal is. Whatever she told him, it must have been impressive.”

“It’s a conversation I would’ve liked to see.” Nick snorted, shaking his head. Mr. Jackson was a stubborn old mammal, but his bunny could be just as determined. Once his exams were over and he’d been sworn in as an officer, Nick would pay him a visit and try to get the story out of him.

Chuckling, Marian agreed. Bonding bracelets were so important to their species, and Judy was well aware of that, so the fact she’d gifted Nick one made the vixen excited for the future. There was only one logical step forward. “Things are getting quite serious, eh?”

“I think things were serious the moment I gave her her bracelet.” Nick deadpanned.

Unable to argue with that again, Marian nodded. Lifting a paw to cup her kit’s muzzle, she had to
tamper down her grin. “Just, don’t make me wait too long for grandkits, okay?”

Letting out a long-suffering sigh, Nick was used to his mom pestering him now. He knew she meant well, but he and Judy weren’t ready for that yet. “I want to claim her first, and bond with her, and marry her.”

Wafting her free paw through the air, Marian let go of Nick’s muzzle. “Details, details.” She brushed his concerns aside with a smile.

“What details?” Judy entered the family room, catching the tail end of the conversation. She’d been gone a little longer than intended, as on her way back from the bathroom she’d been accosted by Jasmine. Her sister had informed her that she’d positioned Pop Pop as far away as possible from her, Nick, and Marian for lunch.

Before Marian could respond, Sasha came bowling into the room, shoving past Judy. “Lunch is ready! Mister Nick, can I sit next to you pretty please?” The baby rabbit bounced on the spot, large eyes focused on her favorite fox. Since she and Nick had become friends, her siblings had started to include her more during playtime, and she was feeling a lot more confident about her art.

Relieved that he and his mom didn’t have to lie to Judy, Nick silently thanked Sasha for her impeccable timing. “Sure Cinnamon, so long as I can have Ju-Ju on my other side.” He bargained, wanting to make sure his mate was with him for their first Christmas lunch together.

“She’s always by your side, so there’s no change there.” Sasha rolled her eyes, a bad habit she was picking up from Julian, and crossed the room to grab one of Nick’s paws. Giving it a tug, she tried to haul him off of the couch.

Nick went willingly, letting the small rabbit tug him off the sofa and out of the room, and through the labyrinth of corridors. Behind him, he could hear Judy and Marian’s pawsteps and their combined laughter. The tod didn’t bother to hide his grin as he was dragged towards the kitchen and dining room.
Hey my dears,

I'm so so sorry for the delay in this chapter! I wanted to get it out within the month but a major project I've been doing at work reached a critical phase, and then there was chaos as the team I was working with messed up big time. I've spent the last two weeks fixing the mistakes, so this, unfortunately, took a back seat.

I had a few people contact me about this fic disappearing from this site - A03 and I had a disagreement regarding something in their T&C's and they pulled my story for a short while. It's all fine now though, and this story shouldn't be pulled again.

Hope you enjoy this one, I had fun writing it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fork coming to rest on his plate, Nick licked his lips. He had to give it to Bonnie; she knew how to cook a feast. Though most of the food at the table had been vegetarian, the Hopps matriarch had ensured there was a selection of bug and fish dishes for Nick and his mom. The tod had appreciated her kindness and, with his food issues slowly fading, he'd been able to enjoy Christmas lunch for the first time in years. He'd savored everything and hadn't worried that it would be taken from him or that his next meal would be days away. There was plenty of food on the table, and Nick knew there would always be plenty of food in the kitchen cupboards back home.

Sparing a glance around the crowded dining room, the tod could see that everyone was starting to put down their cutlery. “Good, Cinnamon?” Nick turned his attention to the baby bunny by his side, reaching for his napkin to wipe the remnants of chocolate cake from her muzzle.

“Mhm.” The doe hummed, licking her lips before Nick could wipe away and waste any chocolate cake. She only put up a weak fight as the fox gently grasped her muzzle, removing whatever cake her tongue hadn't been able to reach.

Having finished her dessert, Marian watched as Nick wiped away the chocolate from Sasha's face, and a wave of nostalgia rolled over her. She could remember when he'd been that young, stuffing his maw with jam sandwiches, the sticky filling clinging to the fur of his muzzle. He'd been a messy kit.

“Didn’t think you were a jewelry type of mammal.” The comment broke Nick away from his task, and he looked across the table to Jasmine, following her gaze to the bracelet around his wrist.

Sparing a glance to his side as Judy put down her cutlery, Nick shrugged. “We’ve morphed into one of those matchy-matchy couples.” He joked, earning a chuckle from Jasmine. His comment, however, made the whole room fall silent.

“I told you they were together!” The shout from the other side of the dining room set off a tidal wave of noise, and the vast array of rabbits made it difficult to pinpoint where the chaos had started.
Nick and Judy were swamped, hundreds of rabbits crowding around them at the table, all of them shouting questions and demanding answers. Overwhelmed, the two mammals shared a panicked glance.

“Enough! Back to your tables.” Stu’s booming voice echoed through the large space, and the kits that had been crowding Nick and Judy retreated at a fair pace back to their respective tables.

Feeling the weight of hundreds of pairs of eyes still on them, Nick let out a nervous laugh. “Well, I guess everyone knows now.” He offered Judy a meek smile, which she half-heartedly returned, her attention still on the rest of the room. Nick’s sharp hearing enabled him to pick up on a few disgruntled Hopps kits, and he bit his tongue to stop himself from offering a snarky response. The vast majority of her siblings seemed okay with them though, and that was enough to make the tod relax.

“You’ve never been much of a jewelry mammal either, Ju.” Jasmine brought the conversation back on track, tapping between her collarbones. “Looks like someone did their homework.” She aimed the comment at Nick, enjoying the way his ears flattened back with embarrassment. The doe had been pleasantly surprised when she’d spotted the symbol around her sister’s neck during present opening. Though she’d already liked Nick, her respect for him had grown tenfold, knowing he’d cared enough to look into their customs and history.

Paw reaching up for the pendant around her neck, Judy ran her fingers over the cold metal, grounding herself as she felt the number of eyes on them start to diminish. “You’re right; I wasn’t. Not until Nick, anyway.” The doe spared a glance at her mate, watching as his features softened. Judy had always been practical and had found jewelry too much hassle – it could catch on something while chasing a perp, or if it jangled as she was trying to sneak up on a mammal, then they’d be alerted to her presence. Now, though, with her bonding bracelet around her wrist and her new pendant, she found she couldn’t care less about being heard or getting caught on something. They were gifts from her mate, and there was no way on earth she would take them off.

“Why don’t I get any jewelry?” Sasha interrupted, frowning. Judy’s necklace was pretty, and the baby bunny wanted one too.

Offering Sasha a soft smile, Marian leaned across the table to give the doe’s cheek a gentle pinch. “You have to find a nice mammal one day; then they’ll buy you jewelry.”

“Or work hard and buy it yourself.” Julian shook his head, looking from Marian to his little sister. “No boys.” He insisted. Though a traditional buck, Julian had seen Judy flourish in the city on her own, working a job that any other rabbit wouldn’t even think of taking on. If she could do it, then so could Sasha and his other younger siblings when they grew up.

Rolling her eyes, Sasha scowled at her brother. “Boys have cooties.”

“Good, keep believing that for the rest of your life.” The buck winced as Jasmine thumped his side, his littermate letting out an exasperated sigh. Julian couldn’t help that he wanted his siblings to stay as young as possible for as long as they could.

Snickering, Nick winced as he too received a thump on his side, courtesy of Judy. Clearing his throat, he forced away his amusement, instead turning his attention to a tradition that had made him curious ever since he’d read about it. “Where’s the giant carrot? I didn’t see it when we arrived.” He directed his question to Jasmine and Julian, noting how his mom tuned in to listen, having been momentarily lost in conversation with Hazel, who’d taken the seat beside her.

Spotting an opportunity to mess with the tod, the corner of Julian’s lips quirked upwards. “It’s back
in the center of town, being guarded.”

“Guarded?” Nick quirked an eyebrow, confused. He’d read up about the giant carrot that the residents of Bunnyburrow put together every year, ready to burn on Christmas day, but he hadn’t heard anything about it being guarded.

Catching her littermate’s train of thought, Jasmine hid her smile as she joined in. “Mhm, guarded. You see, every year someone tries to burn it down before it’s meant to be set alight. It’s become a tradition of sorts, and now we have to guard it to ensure it stays in one piece.” She explained.

“We’ve had the tradition for forty years, and of those, it’s only survived twelve times.” Hazel chimed in, paying attention to the conversation while also helping one of her younger siblings wipe their muzzle.

Nodding, Jasmine put on a sad expression, dropping her shoulders. “Those who guard it have a tough job on their paws. A lot of the kits get so upset when it’s burned ahead of time.”

Realising where her siblings were going with the conversation, Judy bit down on her lower lip, lifting a paw to cover her mouth and hide her smile. Catching Marian’s gaze, the doe tipped her head a little in Nick’s direction, watching as the vixen caught on.

“It’s still standing now though, which is a miracle. Mammals really up their efforts the closer it gets to 6 pm.” Judy chimed in, noting the way her mate’s tail started to swish in agitation behind him. He was a smart fox, and the doe had no doubt he was starting to put the pieces together.

“You know, as our esteemed male guest it’s your job to take the last guard shift.” Julian dropped the proverbial bombshell, barely containing his laughter as Nick’s face fell, emerald eyes widening as his worst fears were confirmed.

Shaking his head, the tod objected. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’ve never done the job before, and I’d hate for something to happen and for the kits to be upset.” He looked at Sasha and her happy smile, flashbacks of her crying on the train platform during his last visit playing through his mind. He couldn’t be the reason for her tears again.

“You would break a long-standing tradition, Nicky?” Marian played along, shaking her head in disappointment. She knew his kit, knew he’d take the bait, and she knew he’d do everything in his power to try and stop the carrot statue from burning ahead of schedule.

Groaning, Nick had no choice but to accept the job now that his mom was questioning him. “Fine. What do I have to do?”

“Stand outside and make sure no mammal’s jump the fence and get close to the statue.” Judy made it sound so simple, hoping that it would ease Nick’s concerns. While she enjoyed watching her fox sweat, she didn’t want to stress him out. The last thing she wanted was for him to panic.

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“Will someone else be with me?” Nick directed his question at the rabbits around him, and all of them shook their head. A ball of dread started to build in the pit of the tod’s stomach, but he forced himself to remain calm. “Okay, I can do it.”

Reaching out for her mate, Judy placed a paw on his arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. “You sure, Slick?” As much as she wanted him to partake in the guarding tradition, and as much as she wanted to see him sweat a little if it were too much for her fox, then she’d put her hind paw down and insist on someone else taking the final shift.

Sitting up a little taller, Nick nodded. “I’m sure, Fluff. Now, how do I get to the carrot?” He tried
not to snort at the absurdity of his question.

Though the weather in Bunnyburrow was mild for the time of year, Nick had still decided to wear the thickest jumper he owned, hoping that and his winter coat would be enough to keep him warm as he stood outside on guard. “I never thought I’d find myself guarding a giant carrot statue.” He muttered, rubbing his paws together to put some warmth into them.

Once the dinner table had been cleared, Judy and Sasha had led him out to one of the many fields in the district. The giant carrot statue had stood in the middle, with flimsy metal site fencing boxing it in. Sasha had given him a good luck hug while Judy had stolen a kiss, and the two does had disappeared and left him to it. Now, the fox wished he’d borrowed a book from the Hopps library to entertain himself. Though there was a lot of fencing to patrol, his sharp hearing and sense of smell would alert him to any trespassers and potential arsonists.

Turning on the spot, Nick observed the giant carrot statue for what felt like the hundredth time. It was thirteen meters tall, 7 meters long, and Nick didn’t want to make any guess as to how heavy it would be. Painted a garish orange, the tod’s eyes started to hurt if he stared at it long enough. It was impossible to miss amongst the dark green of the field. On the walk over, Judy had told him that the districts kits all worked together every year to make it, dedicating some of their school time and weekends.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” The smooth voice behind Nick had the tod sighing, mentally kicking himself. He’d been so lost in his thoughts he’d missed the sound of another mammal approaching.

Turning his head, Nick caught sight of an albino hare with blood red eyes. “Gerald Grimsby the Third.” Nick forced himself to offer the buck a smile. Judy had used some of their journey to the statue to fill him in on a few residents of the district who might try to get close. This particular individual had been mentioned, and Sasha had taken great pleasure in sing-singing his name, substituting ‘third’ for ‘turd.’ Though Judy had reprimanded her, the baby bunny had pointed out she was merely repeating the name Judy usually used for him. “It certainly is, the kits did a wonderful job with it.” Nick turned his focus back to the statue, making sure to keep Gerald in his peripheral. The buck didn’t look like he’d try to burn it down, but Nick wasn’t willing to risk it.

Chuckling, a self-satisfied smile crossed the hare’s lips. “They wouldn’t have been able to make sure a wonderful statue without my considerable donation.” He brushed some lint from his coat, missing Nick’s eye roll.

“And a rich ass,” Nick recalled Judy’s description of the buck, finding that she’d hit the nail on the head. “There wouldn’t be such a wonderful statue if it weren’t for the kits willingly sacrificing their time to make it.” Nick retorted, not willing to let the hare take the credit for it.

“You know, I don’t remember ever meeting you before, and I know everyone.” Gerald turned his attention to the strange fox. He was a little too preened to be a country jewelry like Gideon.

Biting his tongue to stop his comment about that being his line, Nick instead offered the hare a fake smile. “I’m not from around here.” He pointed out the obvious, barely refraining from rolling his eyes. “Are Sasha’s habits rubbing off on you, Wilde?”

“Ah, so you’re from the city, then. Not many of us here speak with you city folk; you never venture this far out. We don’t get many strangers around here.” Gerald gave Nick a curious look and weighed him up, taking in his thick jumper and the collar of his Pawaiian shirt that poked out the top.
Offering out a paw to be polite, Nick was tempted to slip back behind his con-mammal mask. It had been too long, though, for it to come naturally to him now. It felt uncomfortable and awkward. “Nick Wilde.” He introduced himself. “Now I’m not a stranger.”

Looking down at the paw offered to him, the hare dismissed it. “Gerald Grimsby the Third.” He stood a bit taller, adjusting the lapels of his coat. “Your name has been banded around this district for a while, usually when the Hopps cop is mentioned.”

“If by Hopps cop you mean Judy, then that’s understandable.” Nick let his paw fall back to his side, eyes narrowing. The tod wasn’t a stickler for manners, but when offered a paw one always shook it. “We’re partners.”

Eyebrow lifting, Gerald snorted. “They let you be a cop?” The thought of a fox as an officer of the law was highly amusing to the hare. “As if anyone would trust a fox.” He mused.

“They did.” Nick enjoyed bursting Gerald’s bubble, watching as the other male scowled at the information. “It was all Judy’s idea.” He couldn't help but praise his mate. He was proud of her and grateful that she’d pushed him down this path.

Spotting an opportunity to get back to a topic he enjoyed, and rile up the fox, Gerald dropped his voice just a little. “Tell me, is she still as frigid as when she was a teenager?” The look of surprise on Nick’s face nearly made the hare laugh, and the frown he saw forming only prompted him to carry on. “Yes, she wasn’t very welcoming of my advances, which is quite ridiculous really. Her sisters, on the other paw…”

Anger spread through the tod and he only just held back on his need to throttle the albino hare. Amongst the frustration was a sliver of smugness that Judy had turned him down, but that didn’t make it acceptable for him to have tried to sleep with half of her family. “Made a bad decision.” Nick finished the hare’s sentence, enjoying the way Gerald’s smile dropped with his barb.

“Not as bad as the one Judith has made.” Red eyes narrowing, the hare dared Nick to challenge him. The other Hopps sisters had been more than willing to spend quality time with him over the years.

“She’s a grown doe and perfectly capable of deciding what’s best for her.” The tod was growing tired of having to repeat the sentence over and over, but most of the mammals in Bunnyburrow seemed to operate on some sort of pack mentality, whereby everyone else decided what was good for them. “Why are you here, anyway?” Nick questioned. Surely Gerald had been shown the statue before it went on display, given his considerable donation.

Knowing how the statue was often burned down before the scheduled time, Gerald had wanted to make sure it was well guarded, and that his money hadn’t gone to waste. He wanted the whole district to be gathered around it when it was set alight. “Just admiring what my money bought.” He responded, turning his focus back to the giant carrot.

“Which'll soon be set alight and burned to the ground.” Nick couldn’t resist the jibe, only just containing his smile as he saw Gerald scowl.

Unamused by Nick’s comment, Gerald smoothed his paws along his coat before he looked the fox up and down. “Sooner rather than later if you’ve been left in charge of guarding it.” He gave a parting shot, turning sharply on his hind paws before he strode off.

Watching the retreating form of the hare, Nick shook his head. He’d met plenty of characters during his time on the streets, but none of them had been like Gerald. Curiosity still ate away at
him though as to how Judy had come into contact with such an arrogant mammal.

Nick had hoped for a few moments to himself, but the universe had conspired against him. With an unusually strong breeze came a scent that almost made the fox gag. There were only one species on the planet that gave off such an odor. Following his nose, Nick prowled around the perimeter, coming to a stop as he saw a middle-aged skunk trying to climb over the fence. He paused for a moment, watching the mammal struggle before he cleared his throat loudly. The sudden sound caught the skunk off guard, and he tumbled to the ground, hitting the dirt with a loud thud and a groan.

“Not cool, fox.” The buck’s words were slurred, his movements uncoordinated as he tried to roll over and stand.

With a sigh, Nick took pity on the smelly mammal, and though he was sure he’d regret it later, he offered out a paw and helped the inebriated skunk up. “Dare I ask what you were trying to do?” He took his paw back, surreptitiously wiping it on his jumper.

“What’s it look like I was trying to do? Wanted to get closer to the carrot. I’m a reporter. Name’s Valdeon Lepeu.” The skunk introduced himself, patting at his pockets as he searched for his reporter's pad and pen.

“Lepeu? As in, rainforest district Lepeu?” Nick clarified, knowing the surname belonged to a group of hitmammals in the rainforest district. This skunk certainly wasn’t part of their team as the only thing he’d seemingly been hitting was the bottle.

Pausing in his search to frown at the tod, Valdeon shook his head. “God no, awful district. Have you seen my pen?”

Head tipping sideways, Nick’s eyebrows drew together, lips pursing. “No, why do you need it?”

“To write about this.” He gestured wildly at the statue. “And how they put a pred in charge of looking after it.” From his pocket he produced his notepad, making a small noise of triumph. “Who’re you anyway?” Valdeon flipped through his notes, not recalling having met the fox before. He’d come across Gideon Grey as he’d been sampling some of Bunnyburrow’s wares, but foxes were few and far between in the populated rabbit district.

Plastering on an easy smile, Nick shrugged, not wanting any focus on him. “Who I am isn’t important, I’m just here for the next few hours. If you want to write about something interesting, you should interview the kits who built this statue.” He deflected the attention, figuring a story involving youngsters would probably earn Valdeon more credit with his boss than writing about a former con-mammal.

“You trying to tell me how to do my job?” The skunk snapped, eyes narrowing at the cheek of the predator. He’d always hated how they often talked down to him like he was incapable of doing as well as them.

Seeing the shift in Valdeon’s demeanor, Nick raised his paws to show he meant no harm. “Not at all, you’re the professional.” He aimed to diffuse the situation, but the fire in the other mammal’s eyes was hard to ignore. He had a chip on his shoulder and combined with the alcohol it created a potent mix.

“Of course I am, and I worked damn hard to get here. I wasn’t handed anything on a silver platter.” The buck sneered. His colleagues had used him to climb their way to the top, ditching him as soon as they’d received a promotion, and often took credit for his work. Though both predators and prey
were guilty of using him, it was predators who were the worst. Valdeon almost wished it were acceptable to spray them and then remove all the Musk Mask from the office.

“Never said you were, Valdeon.” Nick guessed that he’d have to watch his tongue around the skunk. The other mammal seemed to find ways to twist his words. “Getting to write about the statue is a big deal, though.”

Snorting, the skunk knew Nick was just trying to be polite, and that frustrated him further. “Out here in this country hovel sure, but back in the city? No one’s interested, hence why the story was given to me.” After he’d been assigned the Bunnyburrow statue story, the other journalists had drawn straws for the more interesting ones.

“Then you need to make them interested.” The tod suggested with a shrug. Before he’d been invited out for Christmas, he’d never heard of the carrot statue tradition, so it stood to reason that most residents of the city hadn’t either.

Regrettably, the buck could feel the effects of the copious amounts of moonshine he’d consumed starting to wear off now that the conversation had switched to work. “How exactly do you propose I do that? It’s not exactly a new thing, nor is it a fascinating spectacle.”

“Embellish the story.” Nick offered, the answer having been evident to him. During his many years on the streets, he’d been forced to come up with a multitude of tales to keep his targets interested long enough for him to hustle them. At first, his stories had been far too elaborate, the lies challenging to keep track of, but over the years he’d learned to tone them down, to pull mostly from his own experiences and then tweak them ever so slightly. It had been second nature to him by the time Judy had strolled into his life.

Catching on, Valdeon frowned. “You want me to lie?” In amongst the world of reporters all pushing their own agenda, he’d always prided himself on telling the complete truth and giving both sides to a story. It was probably why he hadn’t been promoted when most of his co-workers had.

“I never said that.” The fox pointed out, having purposefully not used the term.

Trying his hardest not to roll his eyes, Valdeon’s frown turned into a scowl. “You implied it.”

“Look, if you’re the only one sent out here to report on this giant carrot statue, and the paper is only published in the city, who’s going to know if you throw a bit of extra detail in?” Nick didn’t know why he was trying so hard to help the skunk, especially as he hadn’t been the politest mammal he’d met so far on his visit back to Bunnyburrow.

Mulling over the suggestion, Valdeon couldn’t deny that Nick’s idea was ingenious. “That could work.” He conceded though his eyes narrowed a moment later. “Why are you helping me, what’s in it for you?” He questioned. No mammal ever helped him out of the goodness of his or her heart, that wasn’t the way of the world anymore.

Valdeon’s question gave Nick pause, and he spent a moment thinking of a suitable response. “Nothing’s in it for me, just giving another mammal a boost.” It was partly the truth, but mostly just a way to get the skunk to leave. The sooner his questions were answered, the sooner he’d go and leave Nick in peace, and the tod could focus on protecting the statue. During their conversation he’d kept one ear turned towards the effigy, moving to stand downwind to catch any strange scents.

Still skeptical about Nick’s real motive, the skunk gestured towards the statue. “I’ll be back later when this thing is burning.” His paws fell into his pockets, and he searched for his pen and notepad.
again, wanting to write down Nick’s advice before he hit the moonshine. “Thanks for the advice, I guess.” He hated having to offer the fox praise, but he knew what it was like to have another mammal take his idea and not provide a word of thanks. Turning, the buck started to wander off back towards the town and civilization.

Watching Valdeon leave, the tod let out a long sigh, shoulders slumping as he shook his head. “All I ask is for no one else to bother me.” He muttered, heading back towards the makeshift entrance to the fenced prison. Taking a seat on the cold ground, he wrapped his tail around himself for extra warmth, rubbing his paws together.

As the sky grew darker and the wind picked up, changing direction, Nick had to stop relying on his keen sense of smell. Instead, he kept his eyes focused on the horizon, turning every now and then to keep an eye on the rolling fields around him, ears twisting to try and pick up on the sounds of other mammals under the steady rush of the wind.

“Mister Fox!” The greeting broke Nick’s concentration, and he turned to locate the sound, keen vision picking up on a small group of kits approaching him. As they drew closer, he was able to pick out a few of Judy’s siblings, but the otter pup, the goat billy, and the lamb were all new faces.

Figuring the kits would be the most trouble; Nick braced himself, pushing up against the fence to stand on his hind paws. “Hey there Tony, Rupert.” He greeted Judy’s younger siblings as they came to a stop before him. “Who’re your friends?” He spared a glance at the other youngsters, a ball of dread building in the pit of his stomach as he fought back the urge to ask them to leave.

“This here’s Martha,” Tony gestured to the lamb. “This is Mark,” He tipped his head towards the billy. “And this is Eleanor.” He finished by introducing the otter. All three of the new mammals gave Nick a quick nod but refused to move out from behind Tony and Rupert.

Offering them a nod in return, Nick focused his attention on Judy’s siblings. He’d heard a few stories about them in the letters that Sasha had sent to him during his time at the academy, so he was well aware of the fact that they liked to cause trouble. “What brings you out here? Thought mammals wouldn’t start gathering for another half an hour or so.” He played it cool, not letting them see that he was suspicious.

“We wanted to get the best view,” Rupert spoke up, bobbing his head, encouraging his friends to do the same.

“We wanted to ask you some questions, too.” Martha chipped in, wringing her hooves together.

Eyebrow lifting at the lamb’s statement, Nick crossed his arms over his chest as his tail flicked behind him with curiosity. His sense of dread hadn’t left, and he wasn’t entirely sure where they were going with the conversation. “You do? Well ask away, let’s see if I can answer them for you.” The tod played along.

The kits shared a look before Eleanor started with the first question. “I heard that you live with Judy. Isn’t it strange to live with a prey mammal?” The fellow predator questioned. While her social circle consisted of prey, she couldn’t imagine the trials of living with one another.

With the cat was out of the bag, and knowing how quickly information spread in Bunnyburrow, Nick shrugged. “Judy and I are together, so it’s only natural for us to live with one another. Besides, we accommodate each other’s needs. It’s really not as hard as society wants you to think it is.” His tail flicked, still on edge about the kits sudden curiosity. Large ears swiveled as he scanned their surroundings.
“But she’s so tiny, and you’re not. Aren’t you afraid you’ll accidentally hurt her?” Martha questioned, thinking fast to come up with something that would keep the fox’s attention. She figured that talking about Judy would be a good distraction.

Martha’s voice broke the tod out of his surroundings check. Suppressing his smile at the fact the ladies wanted to talk relationships, Nick shook his head. “Carrots is a tough bunny. I’m a little more careful perhaps, but nothing drastic.” The tod looked down at his neatly filed claws. Whenever they got a little too long or sharp, he filed them down, having earned some playful ribbing from his fellow cadets at the academy. Now that he was back home, he’d continue the same trend. Judy would ask questions, and though the fox was happy to communicate and open up to her, he didn’t think telling her ‘your mom told me to file them down before we get intimate’ was a good idea. “What’s with the sudden interest in my relationship? You kits going through something similar?”

Wide eyes stared at the fox as all the kits shook their heads. “No Sir, we’re just curious. Judy left for the big city, first one of us to do that, and we hear all these stories about the things she gets up to.” Mark spoke up, hoping to leave enough breadcrumbs to make Nick curious. Keeping his attention was difficult, and the billy couldn’t help but feel nervous around the fox. He knew it was silly, that society had advanced to the point where the predator wouldn’t eat him, but his presence still unnerved him.

“You’re the most popular story.” Tony tacked on, bobbing his head.

Arching an eyebrow, Nick wasn’t overly surprised that he’d been the talk of the town. Many of Bunnyburrow’s residents probably hadn’t seen a city mammal before. “There are stories about me?” He questioned, wondering how much information he’d be able to glean from the chatty youngsters.

Rupert made sure to keep his gaze on the fox, though he couldn’t avoid noticing his friends behind the predator, climbing the fence now that Nick was distracted. “Mhm. Especially after the first time you visited.” He continued. The Hopps warren had been brimming with stories after Nick and Judy had left last time, each kit having seen and heard little snippets, which they’d weaved together to create a multitude of sometimes greatly exaggerated and inaccurate stories.

Lost in thought, curious as to the types of stories that had been told about him, Nick only just saw a brief flicker of amber light in his peripheral. Turning quickly, emerald eyes caught a group of kits trying desperately to light a large stick, the end wrapped in cloth. His heart felt like it stopped for the briefest of moments and Nick was frozen to the spot. The franticness of the kits as they desperately tried to get the lighter working to set the cloth on fire pushed the tod into action. Abandoning his post, Nick’s hind paws thumped the grassy ground as he sprinted towards the trouble.

“Should’ve trusted my gut. Those kits were a distraction.” He mentally beat himself up, vowing to have words with Tony and Rupert later on.

Drawing closer to the two kits that’d managed to climb the perimeter fence when his back had been turned, Nick could hear the sound of their comrades following behind him. One of the kits up ahead was still struggling with the lighter, while the other berated him for being so slow. “Hey!” The tod shouted as the two kits finally managed to set the cloth on fire. Catching the youngsters out with his yell, Nick gained a few precious extra seconds, which was just enough for him to swoop in and snatch the torch, along with the lighter, away from the troublemakers. Holding the torch aloft he tucked the lighter into the
breast pocket of his shirt, panting as he tried to regain his breath, adrenaline coursing through his body and his heart pounding.

“Give them back!” One of the kits shouted, jumping to try and reach it. They’d been so close to setting the carrot on fire and winning the bet. The fox was too tall for the young doe though, and no matter how much she stretched she couldn’t reach the torch. Her companion, a buck, also had little luck in trying to grab it.

Nick didn’t have any time to be relieved that he’d saved the statue, as the kits who’d distracted him began to crowd around, all of them now trying to jump for the torch and giving one another boosts. With one of his paws occupied, and not wanting to accidentally scratch one of the youngsters with the claws on his other paw, the tod relied on his tail. Using the fluffy appendage to his advantage he gently pushed the kits back, flicking it out at them in warning, making them spring out of its way. Able to clear a path, he strode back to the entrance gap in the fence, ready to put out the torch. However, an old Mangalitsa pig, with thick brown, grey, white, and black wool, blocked his path.

“Fire demon!” The pig shouted, pointing at Nick. Walter Graham couldn’t see very well, his old age not helping, but the flames gave off enough light to show him the silhouette of the fire demon that was here to cause trouble and destroy their precious giant carrot. The only weapon the mammal had to hoof was his cane, and so he raised the object, slashing it through the air in the direction of the mysterious being.

His years on the streets had taught Nick a thing or two about fighting, especially when it wasn’t fair, and right now he had a distinct advantage over the blind pig. Using that, and his ability to stay light on his hind paws, the tod dodged the cane as it sliced through the air. Being careful not to drop the torch, and aware of the kits that had followed him and were now trying to use the situation to their advantage, Nick split his attention between the two. First, he needed the elderly mammal to stop attacking him. “Sir, I’m not a demon.” Nick protested, narrowly missing another swing as the mammal took a shaky step forward.

Assessing the situation, Tony figured they could play on Mr. Graham’s beliefs. “Give us the torch, demon, before you set fire to the statue.” He demanded, hoping to rile up Walter some more. If Nick was focused on dodging the cane, Tony and his friends could quickly steal back the torch. Usually calm and collected, Nick was starting to feel a little overwhelmed. Mammals had begun to arrive to watch the carrot burn and had now gathered around to witness him trying to fend off the pig and kits. With an audience, he didn’t want to accidentally hurt anyone and be chased out of Bunnyburrow by its residents, and he didn’t want to be assertive to stop the situation in case it was taken the wrong way, and he was accused of being cruel. Heard mentality was a genuine phenomenon in the countryside, and the tod had a severe aversion to pitchforks. The kits were starting to grab at his clothes, pulling to try and drag him down. As he turned to push them back, to move away, Mr. Graham’s cane came down with a sharp whack, connecting with the tod’s lower back. His yowl of pain echoed around the field, and the mammal’s surrounding him froze.

Judy had been walking across the field with her family, ready to watch the statue burn. She’d had complete confidence in her mate, and though her siblings had teased her mercilessly about leaving him out alone in the cold, Judy had stuck by her belief that he’d be okay. However, the yowl of pain that broke through the still night air make her gasp, icy fear coursing through her veins. She knew that sound. “Nick.” Deserting her family, Judy took off in a sprint, shoving her way through the crowds, uncaring if she hurt any of them. Her mate needed her. Pushing to the front, she caught sight of her fox, surrounded on all sides, Mr. Graham’s cane still resting on his lower back.

Anger flooded her system as she saw the pain and distress on Nick’s handsome face.
Bunnyburrow’s residents hadn’t bothered to step in and help and had instead left her fox to fend for himself. Disgusted with the mammal’s she’d grown up with, Judy dashed in, putting herself between Nick and Walter, shoving the old pig’s cane out of the way. “Mr. Graham, how dare you hit my mate with your cane.” The doe adopted her officer voice, refusing to let go of the cane as Walter tried to pull it away.

“Judith Hopps.” The pig put a name to the voice. The young rabbit was often the subject of many conversations in Bunnyburrow since she’d abandoned the countryside for the fast-paced and cruel city. “He’s a fire demon!”

Knowing patience was needed when speaking to the senile mammal, Judy contained her huff of annoyance. “His name is Nick, and you were hurting him.” She pointed out, wanting nothing more than to turn and comfort her mate, but not willing to risk Walter lashing out again.

Relived by Judy’s presence, and the fact he no longer had to fend off Walter, Nick relaxed. Everything would be fine now that his mate was here. Shoulders slumping, the tod let his guard down for just a moment, but it was that moment that proved fatal. Before the tod could react, the torch was snatched from his paw. “No!” The sharp exclamation slipped from between his lips as he turned, watching in horror as the kits that’d tried to cause trouble earlier finally set fire to the bottom of the statue.

Amber flames licked their way up the giant carrot, and the fox watched on in disbelief, a feeling of shame washing over him. He’d failed in protecting the statue, and in doing so had let down his mate and the district. “I’m sorry, Fluff.” He muttered, the reflection of the flames dancing in his emerald eyes.

Having finally convinced Mr. Graham that Nick wasn’t a fire demon, the doe was free to attend to her mate. Hearing his voice she turned, violet eyes finding the burning statue before she caught the sad look on her mates face. Moving to his side, she let a paw rest on his arm, stroking his fluffy fur. “You didn’t fail, Slick.”

“I was meant to keep it safe.” The tod protested, unable to tear his gaze away from the burning effigy.

Shaking her head, the doe had to stop herself from teasing her fox. He was clearly frustrated, and the fact he placed so much importance on keeping the dumb statue safe warmed Judy’s heart. “Until 6pm.” She pointed out, reaching for her phone in her pocket. “It’s 6:02pm.”

Head lifting quickly, Nick looked first at his mate before his gaze dropped to her phone. The screen was illuminated, the time clear. “I kept it safe?” He clarified, emerald eyes finding violet as a slow smile began to spread across his lips.

“You did,” Judy confirmed, pocketing the device. She could feel the heat from the statue and knew that soon they’d have to move unless they wanted burning material to rain down on their heads.

Feeling accomplished, Nick stood a little taller, chest puffed. “Wasn’t too difficult.” He played it cool, his smile now a grin. “Do I get a reward?” He tried his luck, waggling his eyebrows.

Containing her snicker and eye roll, Judy instead offered her mate an indulgent smile. “What reward does the hero want?” She stroked his ego, figuring there wasn’t anything wrong with letting her mate revel in his achievement.

“Doesn’t he always want the girl?” Nick shot back, moving to stand a little closer to his bunny. The burning carrot had captured the attention of the crowd, and though he knew mammals with
incredible hearing surrounded him, Nick found himself not caring. He’d spent most of the afternoon and early evening out in the cold, protecting the statue, and now he wanted his prize.

This time Judy didn’t bother to contain her eye roll, though the upwards quirk of the corner of her lips was enough proof that she was amused by her fox’s question. “You already have me, Slick.” The doe pointed out.

Feeling the stirrings of lust, the tod tried to trample down the feelings. The season wasn’t helping, and Nick was well aware that they were in public. “Then I’ll settle for this.” He reached out to pull Judy close before he dipped her down, ignoring the twinge in his lower back as he stole a sweet kiss, the warmth from the burning statue chasing away the chill of the night air around them.

“Missus Marian, will you read the bedtime story, please?” Sasha batted her eyelashes, trying to be as sweet as possible. She’d seen some of her older sisters using this method to get what they wanted, and it always worked.

They’d spent the last hour outside watching the carrot statue burn and then enjoying a firework show. Marian had been put in charge of a fluffle of bunnies and had successfully navigated them back to the Hopps warren while Sasha had stuck by her side, chattering away happily. Now, Marian offered the baby bunny a soft smile, holding in her chuckle as she opened the front door. The doe certainly knew how to play up the cute factor. “Adorable, Marian. They don’t like being called cute.” She mentally chastised herself.

The burning of the effigy had been quite the spectacle, and though Marian had been concerned about Nick being left out in the cold to guard it, she had to admit that she was impressed he’d managed to keep it standing. “Of course I’ll read the bedtime story.” The vixen racked her brain for a bunny-friendly story as the fluffle lead her into one of the large family rooms.

All of the rabbits started to settle down, grabbing pillows and blankets, getting comfortable in big cozy piles on the floor. Marian removed her coat and took a seat in the plush armchair positioned by the fire, watching with thinly veiled amusement as the fluffle bickered amongst themselves for the best spots. Seeing Nick and Judy at the doorway, Marian offered the pair a smile, gesturing to an empty place close to her.

“What story are you going to tell, Missus Marian?” One of the rabbits piped up, having found a comfortable spot.

As Judy went to take a step into the living room, Nick grabbed her paw, bringing her to a stop. Wide violet eyes looked up at him, and the tod swallowed nervously. “I’m just going to head to the little tod’s room, I’ll be right back.” He offered her a gentle smile, feeling bad for lying but knowing it was the only way to stop her from asking too many questions. “Save me a spot?”

Nodding, Judy pushed up onto the balls of her hind paws, pressing a kiss to her mate’s muzzle before she entered the living room, taking the vacant space Marian had gestured to. The doe was still concerned about her fox and whether he was in pain after being clobbered by Mr. Graham’s cane, but she didn’t want to fuss too much and make him uncomfortable.

“Once upon a time there were four little rabbits, and their names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail, and Peter.” Marian started her story when all the kits were settled, gesturing with a paw to four bunnies in the crowd, selecting them as the characters in her story. “They lived with their mother in a sandbank, underneath the root of a very big fir-tree.” Moving her paw to Judy as she spoke of the mother, Marian withheld her chuckle as Judy playfully rolled her eyes. The vixen’s choice of story looked like it would be well received.
Knowing the key to keeping Judy where she was meant involving her more in the story, Marian pressed on. She had her suspicions as to what Nicky was up to, and he would need more time. Removing the scarf she’d kept on after shedding her coat, she leaned over, wrapping it around Judy as a headscarf; similar to the style her grandmother had once worn. “Now my dears,” said old Mrs. Rabbit one morning, “you may go into the fields or down the lane, but don’t go into Mr. McGregor’s garden: your father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor. Now run along, and don’t get into mischief. I am going out.” Marian changed the tone of her voice when speaking as the mother, enjoying how Judy’s eyes narrowed as she was forced to wear the scarf and have her siblings snicker at her.

“Then old Mrs. Rabbit took a basket and her umbrella and went through the woods to the bakers. She bought a loaf of brown bread and five currant buns. Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail, who were good little bunnies, went down the lane to gather blackberries. But Peter, who was very naughty, ran straight away to Mr. McGregor’s garden, and squeezed under the gate!” Marian switched back to her storytelling tone, once again gesturing to the four rabbits she’d picked out earlier when she spoke of the characters. “First he ate some lettuces and some French beans, and then he ate some radishes. And then, feeling rather sick, he went to look for some parsley. But round the end of a cucumber frame, whom should he meet but Mr. McGregor!”

Following his nose, Nick pushed open the kitchen door, interrupting Bonnie and Stu. The couple had been locked in a discussion, the topic one that Nick hadn't heard.

“Nick, my son, good job on guarding the statue this evening.” Stu had heard the fox’s approach, and he turned to offer the tod a warm smile as he entered the kitchen. He’d been impressed with Nick’s ability to keep the statue standing for so long, though Stu knew he’d have to give Rupert and Tony a stern talking to. It wasn’t fair of them to have tricked their guest.

“Thanks, Stu.” Nick offered the Hopps patriarch a meek smile as he closed the kitchen door behind him, taking a moment to compose himself.

Bonnie’s motherly intuition immediately informed her that something was the matter. Catching her husband’s gaze, she gestured with her chin in the direction of the back door and out to the porch. A lot of important conversations had happened out there, and the doe felt like this was about to be another one. “I need a little more fresh air, why don’t you come and join us on the porch?” Bonnie lied with practiced ease, used to conning her younger kits into believing just about anything.

Relieved that there would be a little more distance between him and the rest of Judy’s family, and their big ears, the tod nodded in relief, following Bonnie and Stu out to the back porch. The night air was still fresh, and Nick was grateful for his fluffy pelt. Crossing to the banister, he leaned against it. The last time he’d stood out here had been when he’d confessed his love to Judy, and now...

“What’s bothering you, son?” Stu tugged at the straps of his overalls, taking in Nick’s posture. Nick's tail was swishing behind him, his ears pinned back, and his body taut. The buck wasn’t entirely sure if he wanted to delve into whatever had Nick so tense.

Back in the family room, Judy frowned, surreptitiously trying to steal a glance at the grandfather clock in the corner. Nick had been gone for a while already, much longer than it would’ve taken for him to visit the bathroom and come back.

“Mr. McGregor was on his hands and knees planting out young cabbages, but he jumped up and ran after Peter, waving a rake and calling out, ‘Stop thief!’ Peter was most dreadfully frightened; he rushed all over the garden, for he had forgotten the way back to the gate.” Marian continued her tale, caught up in the memories of telling the same story to Nick when he’d been a kit. While he’d
enjoyed this story, The Tale of Mr. Tod had always been his favorite.

Sensing Judy’s attention waning, the vixen upped her involvement. Reaching down she grabbed Judy’s bare feet, snapping the doe out of her funk and pulling her back into the story. Judy’s squeal of surprise made her siblings laugh. “He lost one of his shoes among the cabbages and the other shoe amongst the potatoes. After losing them, he ran on four legs and went faster, so that I think he might have got away altogether if he had not, unfortunately, run into a gooseberry net, and got caught by the large buttons on his jacket.”

Outside, Nick spent a moment looking out over the rolling fields and hills of Bunnyburrow. It was peaceful in the countryside, his mind much clearer now he was away from the chaos of the city. Taking a deep breath, Nick let it out slowly. Turning so he could face Bonnie and Stu, the tod reached up to scratch nervously behind one of his ears, his tail swishing behind him, thumping against the railings.

Concerned, Bonnie took a step forward, reaching out to put a paw on Nick’s arm. “Whatever it is, it’s okay.” The worst scenario’s imaginable ran through the doe’s mind, and the suspense set her heart racing. Nothing Nick could tell them would change her opinion of the fox, of that she was sure. Letting her paw fall from Nick’s arm, she kept her gaze on the agitated tod.

“I love Judy so much that at times it frightens me. I love that she believes in me, that she pushes me to be the best I can be. I love the way she thumps her hind paws when she's thinking, and how her ears droop when something sweet happens. I love that she saw something in me when no one else did, that she see's the best in everyone.” Nick could prattle on all evening about how much he loved Judy and all her little quirks, but he forced himself to stop before he went off on a tangent and lost sight of his goal.

Though Stu was pleased to hear how much Nick loved his daughter, the buck wore a frown, paws tugging at his overalls once again. “Where’s this heading, Nick?”

Rubbing his muzzle, the tod snorted. This wasn’t going quite as he’d planned. “Usually it’s the vixen who has to ask the tod’s parents, so forgive me for not being entirely sure how to do this.” He implored. Though Nick had spent some time researching, a habit of Judy’s he was picking up, nothing could truly prepare him for this.

It took a moment for the pieces to fall into place, but as it all clicked in her mind Bonnie gasped, paw shooting out to grab Nick’s arm once again. “Please tell me you’re trying to ask what I think you’re trying to ask.”

Sighing, Nick glanced between Bonnie and Stu, the corners of his lips curving upwards into a small smile as his tail swished once again. A quick bob of his head confirmed it. “I know Judy’s it for me, and she’s said the same thing about me. I would like her to be my mate in every sense of the word, but I know how much she loves you both and how much your opinion matters to her.” Emerald eyes focused on Stu, and the fox offered the rabbit a fond smile. “Remember when we were last out here? You asked me if I was asking for permission to date Judy, or marry her. Back then I was asking the former.” Looking between his mate’s parent’s, Nick took another deep breath. “I would like to marry Judy, and I’d like your blessing to do so, please.”

Bonnie and Stu remained silent, having been through this conversation countless times before with their older kits. The quick look they shared was all that was needed. After decades of marriage, they knew exactly how the other thought. The Hopps patriarch was tempted to tease the fox, to drag this out and make him sweat, but he swiftly brushed that idea aside. This was a big deal, and Nick was naturally anxious. The last thing the buck wanted was to cause him unnecessary stress. Stu wasn’t surprised by the request though; he’d anticipated it ever since Judy had brought Nick
Bonnie tried her hardest to hold back her smile and squeal of delight. She wanted nothing more than for her kit to tie the knot with Nick. “You know that we already consider you part of the family, Nick.”

“Promise to always look after our kit?” The buck questioned, lifting an eyebrow. Judy’s happiness was paramount, and though she was happy at the moment, life in the city could be unpredictable and much crueler than living in the country. His daughter was still quite naïve, and though she’d already learned a great deal since meeting Nick, he’d still need to have her back and guide her.

Emerald eyes found the buck, and Nick spoke with complete conviction. “With my life, Stu.”

The seriousness of Nick’s tone didn’t surprise the Hopps patriarch, but it did worry him. Though he wanted nothing more than for Nick to look out for his daughter, if anything happened to the fox then Stu knew that Judy would fall apart. Switching to a more playful tone, the buck shifted back to the big question. “Well don’t go dying on us, okay? Judy needs you around to keep her grounded, and she’s going to need you up at that alter.”

Heart pounding, the tod’s eyes widening as Stu’s words sank in. “Is that…?”

“Yes, you have our blessing,” Bonnie confirmed, an uncontrollable grin on her face as she clutched onto her husband’s arm.

The tod was grateful for the railings behind him as his whole body went lax, relief coursing through his veins as his grin matched Bonnie’s. “Thank you, both of you.” Nick looked between them; feeling like a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders. Now that he had their blessing, he had to figure out how to pull off the proposal.

Having been in Nick’s position before, the buck was familiar with the current look on the tod’s face. “Just make sure you have the ring on you.” He advised, remembering that he’d been so caught up in the moment that he’d proposed to Bonnie right in the middle of the cabbage field, her ring still tucked away in his nightstand back at the warren.

Paw diving into the pocket of his pants, Nick pulled out a small black box. “I’ve been carrying it around for days.” He admitted with a sheepish smile. “I’m going to wait a little while. I have a tentative plan, but if the right moment strikes in the meantime, at least I’ll have it to paw.” He elaborated.

“I had mom go to the same jeweler who made Judy’s bracelet and necklace. He didn’t want to make it at first, but mom can be very persuasive.” Nick chuckled; remembering the call he’d received from Mr. Jackson shortly after his mom had gone into his shop. The mammal had insisted on being sent ‘the damn design’ if only to get Marian off his back.

“Now that’s something I would’ve paid good money to see.” Stu laughed, his wife snickering by his side. “You should head back inside. Jude will be worried about where you’ve been.” The buck gestured with his chin to the back door.

Surprising Bonnie and Stu, Nick embraced them, offering his thanks once again before he slipped back inside. The two rabbits on the back porch shared a look, the corners of their lips curving upwards. “He’ll propose within the month.” Stu wagered.

“Two months.” Bonnie countered, wondering what they were betting. Knowing her husband, even if she lost she’d still win.
Silently entering the family room, Nick tip-toed past the kits who’d fallen asleep and over towards his mate. Sitting in the vacant spot next to her, the tod listened to his mom as she began to bring her story to a close.

“You were gone a while,” Judy whispered in a non-accusatory tone as she leaned towards her fox. Curious violet eyes looked him over to make sure he was okay, and her nose twitched as she picked up her parent’s scent on him.

“You parents asked me to help with a few things in the kitchen, don’t worry.” He whispered back, pulling her close so he could press a kiss to her forehead. Over the top of the doe’s head, Nick caught his mother’s gaze. Using a code they’d had since he’d been a kit, Nick flicked his left ear, only just suppressing his smile as Marian’s paws clenched in silent triumph.

Chapter End Notes

Big thank you to my patrons for coming up with a range of OC's for me to use in this chapter, it's always a joy to add your creations to my work :)


Hello my dears, I'm not dead! It's been a while since I last updated tho.

Sorry it's taken me so long to get this next chapter out. I had about 80% of it done a month ago but at the very end there's some smut (gasp) and my muse didn't want to cooperate at all. I forced her back into line this weekend though and we're ready to go! Pls be gentle, this is a bit more than I'm used to writing on that subject.

The clean version of this chapter can be found on FF.net. I will say now that in places this chapter teeters on the edge of explicit, but I tried as much as possible to keep it in the mature camp.

Thank you for all the love/kudos/comments/follows/favorites in my absence, it means the absolute world to me! I love seeing existing readers re-reading this fic, and new readers joining our little family! :)

Leaving her family behind was tough, and this time was no different. Stood on the platform at Bunnyburrow station, Judy pulled Jasmine into a tight hug. Christmas Day had been three days ago, and it was time for her to return to the city with Nick and Marian. Her fox needed to study for his exams, the chaos of the Hopps warren would make that neigh-on impossible, and Judy could sense that Marian was aching to return home too. Though the vixen had enjoyed her time in the countryside and the chance to dote on Judy’s younger siblings, the doe knew that Marian was a city fox at heart and that she was starting to miss the bright lights and bustling streets.

“You’ll come back and see us soon, right?” Jasmine whispered in her sister’s ear, holding her close. Though they Muzzletimed regularly and sent one another care packages, nothing could compare to having her littermate by her side.

Pulling back from her sister just enough so she could catch her gaze, Judy gave a sharp nod, her large ears smoothed down as she tried not to get emotional. In truth, there wasn’t that much physical distance between them – just a few hours on the train – but with Judy’s grueling work schedule and with Nick soon joining her at the precinct, it would be a while until they’d be able to book time off and travel to the countryside again. Glancing over her sister’s shoulder, the doe watched Nick work his way through his own goodbyes.

Crouched down, the tod held onto the baby bunny in his arms, her little nose buried in the fluffy fur on his neck. Since waking this morning, Sasha had followed him around the warren like a small shadow, mirroring his every move.

“Will you keep sending me letters please, Mister Nick?” Sasha murmured, snuggling closer to the fox, still wholly unafraid of him. She’d kept every letter the tod had sent her so far and had tucked away safely in a box under her bed. Though Nick would only be returning to the academy briefly to take his exams, Sasha couldn’t imagine not receiving any more notes from him.

Holding back his chuckle, Nick didn’t dare hide his smile. “Sure, Cinnamon.” It was no issue for the tod to continue sending her letters, but he hoped that Bonnie and Stu would start giving her
greater access to their phones and one of the warren’s many computers. Though Nick enjoyed handwritten letters, he had a feeling that his first few months at the precinct would give him little time to sit and compose something. Texts and emails were much quicker, and he could send them on the go.

“You better pass your exams so you can be Officer Mister Nick.” Sasha insisted, pulling back from Nick so she could look into his eyes, trying to convey her seriousness. It didn’t take a smart bunny to figure out that sometimes Nick didn’t fully believe in himself or his abilities, so Sasha was more than content to believe it for him.

Lifting a paw he crossed his heart, vowing that he would pass his exams. The tod was a little terrified of them, of what his future would look like if he failed. However, he had one advantage over his fellow cadets. Hearing the sound of Judy’s approach, the fox turned to offer her a smile. With her by his side, how could he fail?

“Ready, Slick?” Judy glanced back to the small gathering of family members behind them, watching as Marian said her final goodbyes to Bonnie and Stu. The three of them would no doubt keep in touch, but with Marian’s work schedule it would probably be a while before she could escape to the countryside again too. The break had done the vixen some good though, and Judy loved how her family had taken to Marian so quickly.

Rising up to his full height, Nick ruffled the fur on the top of Sasha’s head, earning himself an eye roll and a fond smile from the baby bunny. “Born ready, Fluff.” He swallowed the lump in his throat, seeing the wetsness start to gather in Sasha’s eyes. He didn’t want a repeat of last time when she’d sobbed uncontrollably as he’d left, but Nick didn’t have anything to give her again as a reminder that he’d be back soon. Paw moving, Nick pulled Sasha close, pressing a reassuring kiss to the top of her head. “I’ll come back again soon, and in the meantime, we can write to one another and use MuzzleTime.” He bargained, knowing it was falling on deaf ears as Sasha’s arms wrapped around his waist, the little doe clinging to him.

Having said her farewells, Marian made to join her son and Judy, but seeing Sasha clutching at her boy made her pause. Nick had impacted the lives of all those in the Hopps warren whether he’d intended to or not, and he’d very quickly become a member of the family. Now that their trip was over, the vixen felt like she was part of the family too. Keeping her approach slow so as not to startle Sasha, Marian crouched down beside the crying bunny, reaching out to gently smooth down her large ears. “Nicky will be back soon, I promise.” She soothed as the memories of the first day she’d dropped her son off at nursery played through her mind. The separation anxiety had made him cry too.

“I know.” Sasha sniffled, feeling a little silly for getting so emotional, especially with her family watching. She couldn’t help it though. Nick had bolstered her confidence and encouraged her passion for drawing. It was hard to say goodbye to a mammal who’d done so much for her, even if it was only for a short time.

An idea struck the tod, and he offered a grin down to the little doe. “I have an extra seat at graduation.” He started, remembering Major Friedkin informing them that they each had four seats for the ceremony. With his mom and Judy taking two, he had some to spare. “Why don’t you come?” The fox offered. Graduation was only a few short weeks away, and it would give Sasha something to look forward to.

Lifting her head to look up at Nick, the baby bunny’s eyes widened at the offer. “I can come to your graduation?” She asked, seeking clarification. She hadn’t been able to attend Judy’s as her siblings had all snatched the tickets before she could get to them.
“Sure, I don’t see why not. One of your siblings will have to come with you though.” The tod shrugged. He didn’t want the doe catching the train by herself, trying to make her way through the crowds at the academy without supervision. “Be sure to ask them nicely.” He tacked on, not entirely sure what method of persuasion the baby bunny was cooking up.

Head whipping around, Sasha found Jasmine amongst her siblings, and she offered her older sister a toothy grin. She was confident that Judy’s littermate would take her.

“The train now approaching Platform 2 is the 09:25 Zootopia Express. Please mind the gap between the train and the platform.” The PA system announced, leading to a flurry of activity as the Hopps family members got in their final hugs and goodbyes, making Judy, Nick, and Marian promise to keep in touch and visit soon. Once they’d boarded and their luggage had been stowed, Nick found a cluster of four seats near a window. Looking out, he spotted little Sasha in the crowd. Rather than crying, though, the baby bunny was bouncing on the spot, paw waving madly. Offering her the chance to be at his graduation in a few weeks was no skin off his nose, and it gave Sasha something to look forward to. Deep down, the tod was also thrilled at the idea of having Judy’s family – his family – there for the important day.

As the train lurched to life, Judy lifted a paw to wave at her family. She was happy to be heading back to the city, to her job and their apartment, but she already missed Bunnyburrow. The train started its journey back to the city, and once her family was out of sight the doe relaxed back into her seat with a heavy sigh, brows drawn down.

“I’m sure you’ll see them soon.” Marian reached across the small gap between them to place a paw on Judy’s knee, giving it a reassuring squeeze. The vixen could remember when she’d first left home, and even now she still felt a wave of sadness after she visited her family for a few days. No matter how old a mammal was, it was always tough.

Lifting her gaze, Judy’s brow smoothed out, and a small smile crossed her lips. “I know.” She placed a paw down on Marian’s, silently thanking her for the comfort. “How did you find it?” She changed topic. Though Marian had been a little overwhelmed initially, Judy had noticed how quickly she’d adapted to always being surrounded by demanding kits.

“I had a wonderful time.” Marian smiled, her words nothing but the truth. Though she’d been prepared to spend Christmas alone, figuring Nick would be with Judy, the chance to meet the rest of the does family had been better than anything she could’ve imagined. The vixen had gained hundreds of new family members over the last few days, and she was certain she’d be seeing several of Judy’s siblings and her parents more frequently. Gaze moving from the bunny to her son, Marian extended her free paw to him. Though she would live and die by the idea of it being the two of them against the world, she couldn’t deny that knowing Nick now had a large soon to be in-law family soothed her old bones. It had always been her greatest fear that once she was gone, Nick would be alone.

Taking his mother’s paw, the tod gave it a gentle squeeze. He couldn’t have asked for a better vacation with those he loved.

“Are you sure she’ll be okay?” Judy nibbled on her lower lip, waving her paw as the taxi pulled away from Savannah Central.
Paw dropping to his side now that the taxi was out of sight, Nick chuckled, reaching for the remaining bags. “My mom has done more dangerous things in her time than getting a taxi, Fluff.” He shook his head fondly, starting to head towards the metro station.

Keeping pace with her mate, Judy resisted the urge to thump his arm. He was being a gentlemammal and carrying their bags, after all. “I know, but that devil seemed a little aggressive.” She pointed out, not overly comfortable with the vixen’s marsupial driver.

“Is my little bunny being speciest?” Nick teased, heading down the steps to the metro platform. Thankfully the trains were pretty frequent, and they’d be home soon. The tod had plans for this afternoon, and they were making good time. As soon as he’d told his mom of his plans the day after Christmas, she’d offered to take a taxi home, not wanting to slow them down.

This time Judy did thump Nick’s arm, but she had the courtesy to wait until he’d put their bags down on the platform. “More like listening to my cop intuition.” She corrected, gaze lifting to find the emerald eyes she loved so much.

“Ah, that old chestnut.” The tod’s intuition was more in line with survival, having been honed during his years on the streets. He knew which mammals to trust and which not to, those that would cause a problem and those that would flee at the first sign of danger. His street smarts and Judy’s textbook smarts would make them a formidable team on the beat. “I hate to say this, but I do need to put some study time in this evening.” The fox admitted. He hadn’t packed a single textbook for their trip, wanting to enjoy his time in Bunnyburrow, but he knew now that he’d have to cram.

Feeling the breeze of the approaching train, Judy took a small hop back, moving a little closer to Nick. The turbulent air for a mammal her size could be a significant problem. “That’s fine, we can put in a few hours this afternoon.” The doe glanced at her watch, noting it was only lunchtime.

“This evening. We have plans this afternoon.” Nick let the tidbit slip, picking up their bags as the metro train came to a halt; doors sliding open to let them on. They didn’t have many stops to go, so the tod was content to stand with their luggage for the trip. He ensured Judy managed to grab a seat next to him, though.

Once she’d taken her seat, ensuring there wasn’t a mammal more in need of it, the doe turned her violet eyes to her mate. “We do?” She blinked, brows drawing together again as she frowned, racking her brain for anything she’d missed. They hadn’t planned anything other than their Bunnyburrow trip since Nick had returned from the academy. Judy had plenty of free time now though, having stopped working for Mr. Otterton after the Christmas rush deliveries had been dealt with, and she no longer offered her kitsitting services.

“Yup.” Nick popped the ‘p’, offering Judy a sly grin as the metro train pulled away from the platform, hurtling through the underground tunnels towards their stop. “You’re good to go as you are.” He added, taking in Judy’s attire. She’d put on a simple pair of jeans and the jumper he’d made for her, and though she’d worn it a few times since he’d gifted it to her, the tod still felt his heart skip a beat. It was beyond satisfying to see his mate in something he’d made. Warmth rushed over him as he eyed her, and Nick surreptitiously lifted a paw to tug at the collar of his shirt, claws scratching through fluffy fur a moment later. Restraining himself had been hard work while they’d been away, and though their spaces they’d occupied in the warren. Now, back in the city, the tod was hopeful that his urges wouldn’t be so prominent. His body wanted to rebel, his sensitive nose picking up on the fact that his scent was a lot weaker on Judy now, smothered by the smells of her family.

The metro train stopped at several stations before the PA system announced that the next stop was
theirs, and Nick offered out a paw to help Judy stand. The doe gracingly took it, rising to her small height. “If you need an itch scratching…” Judy dropped her voice to a whisper, concern in her eyes as she watched Nick pick up their bags and shuffle towards the train door. He might’ve thought that he was subtle, but the bunny could sense Nick’s discomfort. It hadn’t helped that during their time away they hadn’t been as pawsy as they’d wanted to be, aware of the hundreds of pairs of eyes and ears focused on their every move since news of their relationship had whipped around the warren.

“My scent isn’t as strong on you anymore.” The tod responded, not wanting to confess in public that he was struggling with his winter urges. He winced at how pathetic he sounded though, the sight of Judy’s secret smile in his peripheral not helping. He hoped that with the bonding bracelet firmly around his wrist he’d battle through the last of his extreme possessiveness, but with winter heightening his feelings and urges he doubted there would be any difference until spring.

Unable to respond as the train pulled to a stop and they were forced to disembark, the doe kept quiet until they reached the surface, weaving through the crowds to an empty side street that would lead them home. “I need to wash the travel grime off me when we get in.” She started, dropping a few proverbial breadcrumbs as they turned a corner, the steps leading down to their apartment coming into view.

“While you do that I’ll start unpacking and put a laundry load on. Our swimwear is in serious need of a clean.” Nick made a mental list of things to do while Judy showered. Mundane tasks would take his mind off the mental images his brain was concocting. They’d continued with Judy’s exposure to cold water while they’d been away, using one of the warrens many bathtubs before venturing outside to a local lake. However, they hadn’t wanted to arouse suspicion, so they hadn’t added their swimwear to the warren’s laundry pile. His doe had managed to overcome her fear enough to let the water lap around her shoulders, but getting her to dunk her head under was proving more challenging than Nick had anticipated.

Scowling at the back of her fox as he descended the stairs to their apartment, Judy huffed. “No, Slick.” She put her hind paw down as Nick pulled his keys from his pocket, pausing at Judy’s rebuttal. “That was a hint for you to join me.” The doe shook her head, wondering how her fox had missed it. She could wash away her family’s scent and take care of her mate at the same time, and she was pretty sure once she was dry afterward Nick would make quick work of smothering his scent all over her.

Emerald eyes focused on his mate and Nick blinked, stupefied. He’d never missed a hint before. “You want me to join you in the shower?” He clarified, hoping he’d heard her right. Swallowing, he tampered down on a surge of lust.

Plucking the key from Nick’s paw, Judy opened the front door, bending down to scoop up the small pile of mail that had formed behind it. Once she was upright, she nodded, stepping inside as she flicked through the post. “It’s a very big shower, and I’m a very small bunny. It gets lonely.” She teased. Judy’s shriek filled the air a moment later as she was scooped up from behind, the mail falling to the ground with a light thud as Nick lifted her. The tod had abandoned their luggage just inside the apartment, and he kicked the door shut behind him as he adjusted his hold on his mate, moving her so that she was draped over one of his shoulders. Her small weight was nothing compared to the loads he’d had to lift at the academy, and the fox started to take long strides towards the bathroom.

“What are we, cavemammals?” The doe lightly thumped Nick’s back, trusting that he wouldn’t drop her. Though she protested, Judy didn’t put much heart into it. After all, this was exactly what
Dried, dressed, and smelling distinctly like her fox, Judy smoothed down the fur on her ears as she watched Nick pull on a clean shirt. Their shower had taken a little longer than anticipated, and the doe moved her paw to her shoulder, feeling the slight indentation marks of her fox’s bite. He hadn't broken the skin, but it was still a little sore.

“Ready?” Nick asked as he finished doing up the last button of his shirt, slipping his phone and wallet into his pockets. Turning, he caught his rabbit with her paw on her shoulder. A flash of guilt coursed through him. “I can get you some painkillers?” He offered, not wanting his mate to suffer. He hadn’t intended on biting her, but when Judy had pushed his muzzle towards her shoulder, it had been like a red rag to a bull.

Shaking her head, Judy’s paw slipped from her shoulder, and the rabbit reached for her handbag, slinging it over the other shoulder. “I’m fine.” She reassured Nick, offering out a paw to him. Once he’d taken it, Judy led him towards the front door, picking up his keys as they passed the small table in the hallway. “Where are we going?” She questioned as they stepped outside, letting go of Nick’s paw long enough to lock the door.

“Nu-uh, it’s a surprise.” The fox took his key from Judy, slipping it into his pocket before he took her paw, heading up the stairs to street level. They could walk to where they were heading, and the tod set off down the street, Judy falling into step beside him. It had taken a few calls to organize their afternoon activity, and Nick had cashed in a favor with a former street mammal that’d managed to turn his life around.

Knowing she wouldn’t get any more from her fox, Judy let the subject drop, trusting him. Casting her gaze around them, the doe tried to work out where they were going from their surroundings. The streets were quiet, almost too quiet, as most mammals were still at home with their families. Though Judy felt terrible for ditching Marian at the station, she relished the opportunity to finally be alone with her fox.

They strolled for a while, paws interlocked, swinging together between them until Nick brought them to a stop at the entrance to a side street. “Remember on your birthday, when you told me all the places you liked to visit?” He asked, earning a nod from his mate. “Remember during the closing ceremony, on the back porch, when I promised you two more dates?” He watched as realization dawned on Judy’s face, her violet eyes widening and lips parting in surprise. “I’m sure there’ll be plenty more dates in our future, but I figured it’s time to act on my promise.” The fox gave Judy’s paw a gentle tug, turning the pair of them down the side street. “See the narrow building?” He pointed with his free paw at a short building, only two stories high compared to the six-story apartment blocks around it.

Violet eyes following the line of buildings, Judy found the small house Nick had gestured to. It was light cream in color, contrasting the brick red of the buildings either side, and the domed roof featured an ornate spire. The rabbit had never ventured to this part of the city before, even when she’d been walking the beat with Wolford. Such a beautiful building would’ve looked more at home in the opulence of Sahara Square rather than the modern metropolis of Savannah Central.

Leading Judy to towards the building, Nick slowed their pace to give her the opportunity to admire it. A stroke of luck had seen one of his friends take ownership of it. Desmond had been squatting in the abandoned building for over fifteen years, having found himself on the streets after his divorce, and the dhole had started to repair the crumbling building over time, investing some of his hustling money. After ten years without the buildings rightful owner coming forward, the city courts had handed the aging predator the deed to the property. Since then, Desmond had utterly transformed
“It’s a bookstore.” Judy breathed as they drew closer, her wide eyes taking in the window displays and the name painted above the door. “Desmond’s Den.” She read aloud, her mind providing her with images of a warm and cozy store, filled to the brim with all sorts of novels.

Taking the small step up to the store door, Nick offered his doe a smug smile. “It’s an independent bookstore.” He mentally patted himself on the back, remembering his rabbit’s love for them along with museums and galleries. Pausing just before he pushed the door open, Nick let Judy’s paw drop as he turned to fully face her, blocking the view through the glass panes of the door. “Close your eyes.” He instructed, tail swishing behind him in a mixture of anticipation and nervousness. “Trust me, please.” He tacked on at Judy’s raised eyebrow. As the doe obliged and closed her eyes, Nick wafted a paw in front of her face, checking that she couldn’t see. Satisfied, he took her paws in his own, shuffling backward to open the door with his butt. As the heavy wooden door swung open the bell above it chimed.

At the sound of the door opening, the dhole behind the counter slipped a bookmark into the page he’d been reading, closing it and putting it aside. Standing, he watched as the fox led the rabbit into his store. Rubbing at the greying fur on his muzzle, the predator held in his chuckle. When Nicholas had called him last week and asked to cash in his favor, Desmond had been curious as to what the young fox had wanted from him. The predator had initially thought he’d heard Nicholas wrong when the fox had asked him to close his store for the afternoon so he could enjoy a date with his mate. He’d even considered getting his hearing checked after the tod had informed him of his mate’s species.

Hearing the chime of the bell, Judy put all her trust in her fox as he walked her into the store. Large ears turned as she heard crackling, and her nose twitched as she inhaled, catching the scent of burning wood. “A fireplace.” She decided, tuning her senses to the rest of the room. Sniffing again, the doe relished the scent of old books, the light scent of hundreds of mammals lingered in the air, presumably customers, yet one stood out stronger than the rest. “Predator.” Her mind supplied. In the past that would’ve been enough to have the rabbit opening her eyes, not willing to be so vulnerable, but with Nick holding her paws she trusted that she was in no danger.

Spotting Desmond behind the desk, Nick offered the mammal a grin, continuing to lead Judy into the store. He wanted her to open her eyes near the center of the store, the most spectacular spot. “Nearly there Fluff.” He reassured her, giving her paws a squeeze. Continuing to take a few more steps back, Nick finally stopped. “Keep them closed.” He instructed, letting go of Judy’s paws so he could move aside, not wanting to miss her reaction. Nervous butterflies erupted in his gut, and the tod silently prayed that he’d picked the right place.

“Now can I open them?” Judy questioned, paws falling as Nick let them go. She brought them together in front of her, wringing them together. What was inside this bookstore that had led Nick to ask for her to close her eyes?

Unable to delay it any longer, and knowing just how impatient his bunny could be, Nick gave a quick nod of his head as he swallowed the lump in his throat. “Alright, now.”

Opening her eyes, the doe gasped she could finally see the inside of the store. Never in her life had she seen somewhere so beautiful. Right in front of her stood a grand staircase, climbing up and up until it split into two, curving around and leading to the first floor. It was made of solid wood, and a red carpet covered each step. Substantial wooden bookshelves lined the walls, shelves bowing under the weight of the books filling them. Sturdy tables littered the floor, stacked high with more books, and just off to the side sat a crackling fireplace with plush armchairs and sofas around it.
“I’ve never seen so many books in my life.” She breathed in awe. While Bunnyburrow had a library, it was small and lacking, and Judy had struggled to find anything worth reading.

“You like it?” Nick grinned, emerald eyes watching as his doe gaped at the room, taking in every detail with kit-like wonder. He’d thought her reactions to the paintings at the gallery during their first date had been mesmerizing, but it didn’t hold a candle to watching her look around now.

Wanting to see more the doe took several steps towards the nearest table, lifting a paw to skim her fingers over the thick covers of the stacked books on it. “It’s wonderful.”

“It’s ours for the afternoon.” The fox explained, silently grateful for Desmond’s cooperativeness when he’d called in his favor. He wasn’t exactly sure what mammals did on bookshop dates, and his brief internet search hadn’t brought up much, but he was content to follow Judy’s lead.

Touched by her fox’s kindness, and the fact he’d remembered all of her favorite places, the doe took the few steps back to Nick before she pushed up onto the balls of her hind paws, pressing a kiss to his muzzle. “Thank you so much.” She whispered, unable to stop herself from stealing a chaste kiss.

As Judy’s lips met his, the fox flattened his ears back, trying to hide the blush he swore he could feel starting. He caught the faint sound of Desmond approaching, and while Nick had no problem with public displays of affection, he wasn’t entirely sure how the old dhole would take to seeing it. He’d met the other predator while on the streets, and the fellow canine had been somewhat of a knowledge touch-point over the years, guiding him through rough patches and showing him creative ways of making cash. Desmond had bailed him out a few times too when he’d had skirmishes with the law.

Having locked the shop door to ensure no one would interrupt them, the owner shuffled his way towards the lovers. “I’m glad you like it, young lady.” He drew close, his wooden cane tapping against the floor with every step, steadying him. The canine had spent most of his life on the streets, having married and divorced young. She’d taken the house and his heart, and he’d been left with nothing more than the clothes on his back and $50 in his wallet. Spending his nights sleeping in doorways and trudging the streets in the day had taken its toll on his body, and by the time he’d found the abandoned bookstore to squat in it had been too late to try and fix most of the damage.

Turning in the direction of the voice, Judy offered the other mammal a small smile. He stood a little taller than Nick, though his shoulders were hunched as he shuffled forward with his cane. His fur was russet, flecked with grey, and his kind eyes had turned blue-grey with age. It was clear that he was part of the canine family, but the doe couldn’t quite work out exactly what he was. “I never would’ve thought this was here.” She admitted, violet eyes looking around the room again.

“Judy, this is my old friend Desmond.” Nick started the introductions, slipping an arm around Judy’s waist to hold her close to his side. Desmond wasn’t a threat, but the tod still felt the natural instinct to stake his claim. “Desmond, this is my mate, Judy.”

Offering out his free paw, the dhole shook Judy’s. As her sleeve rode up the canine spotted the silver bracelet around her wrist, and he suppressed his smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet the mammal who’s tamed young Nicholas here.”

Laughing as their paws dropped, the doe turned her gaze to her fox. “I wouldn’t exactly call Nick young.” She teased fondly.

Free paw rising to his chest, the fox placed it over his heart, gasping in mock hurt. “Back to wounding me, after all the effort I’ve gone to.” He played along, the upward quirk of his lips
conveying his amusement.

As Nick brought his paw to his chest, Desmond caught the flash of silver around his wrist too, and the dhole’s curiosity peeked. He held his tongue though, knowing it wasn’t the right moment to question the fox and his relationship. Deciding it would be best to leave them to enjoy their date, the old mammal smiled. “I’ll leave you two mammals in peace. Read whatever you like. I’ve left some refreshments near the fire, and if you need anything just shout.” He tipped his head in the direction of the back room, letting them know where they could find him. Cane in paw, Desmond set a steady pace, heading to the office he’d motioned towards. He’d fitted it out with a comfortable reclining sofa for his afternoon naps, and right now he could do with a rest.

As Desmond disappeared from view, the rabbit turned her focus back to the room. There were so many books that she wasn’t sure where to start. Nibbling on her lip, the doe settled on exploring the store, and hopefully, something would catch her attention. Heading towards the grand staircase, she placed a paw on the smooth wooden banister, keeping hold of it as she began to climb. The carpet was plush under her hind paws, and the afternoon light flooded in from the windows on the domed roof.

The upper level was just as beautiful as the ground floor, with ornately carved wooden banisters and bookcases stacked high with novels. Massive columns protruded from halfway up the walls, reaching up to support the ceiling. Ambient lighting and plush red curtains created a cozy atmosphere, and as the doe continued to climb, she realized that the stairs formed a bridge over the opening down to the ground floor. Pausing as the staircase split, she looked left and then right, unsure which way to go. Deciding to head right first, she finished her climb. The staircase delivered her to the ‘G’ section of the store, and Judy began to peruse the shelves. Fingers trailing over the book spines, the rabbit smiled as she came across J.K. Growling, her mind filling with fond memories of reading her novels with Jasmine during their kithood.

Following Judy up the stairs, the tod watched her lose herself in the shelves of books. Her tail bobbed as she walked, and it didn’t take long for the fox to pick up on her tell. Each time a book piqued her interest she flicked her tail – whether the action was subconscious or not, Nick didn’t know, but it made him smile. Reading hadn’t been a past time of his since he’d left home, the long hours of hustling leaving him exhausted by the time he’d managed to crawl back to wherever he’d been staying that week. Living with Judy, the tod had a funny feeling it would become a favorite pastime in their home. Perusing the rows and rows of books, Nick plucked one from the shelf, turning it over to look at the cover. “George R. R. Meowtin.”

Looking down the line of shelves, Judy grabbed a rolling ladder, moving it to the right position before she began to climb, violet eyes focused on a book she’d spotted high up.

Returning the book to its space on the shelf, Nick turned in time to see Judy clambering up the ladder. With a quickened pace he reached the bottom of it, putting a hind paw on the lower rung to stop it from potentially moving. “What kind of things do you like to read?” He asked, gaze lifting. Emerald eyes found Judy’s butt, and with a small sideways tilt of his head, Nick admired the view. “A variety of things really. Far off places, daring swordfights, magic spells, a prince in disguise…” Judy rattled off, feeling Nick’s eyes on her. She’d let him stare. Now much taller, Judy reached out with one paw, the other clutching the ladder tightly. Prying the book she wanted from the shelf, she grinned. Judy had wanted to read this particular novel for years, but the library in Bunnyburrow hadn’t had it, and the few bookstores in the district specialized more in farming books. Clutching it, she began to carefully climb down.

Watching as his mate maneuvered her way down the ladder, the fox waited until she was safely on
the ground, keeping his hind paw on the lower rung, not wanting to risk her falling and hurting
herself. The paw she rested lightly against his chest in thanks brought a smile to his face. As she
headed back towards the staircase, drawn to the cozy fireplace, Nick watched as she opened up the
book in her paws to the first page, starting to read as she padded her way downstairs.

Shaking his head in amusement, Nick followed, finding her curled up on the couch in front of the
fire. Taking a seat beside her he used his size and strength to his advantage, rearranging their
position so that Judy’s head came to rest in his lap. Prying the book from her paws, ignoring her
weak protests, Nick flicked back to the beginning. Clearing his throat, he held the book in one paw,
the other coming to rest on Judy’s stomach. “The Mole had been working very hard all the
morning, spring-cleaning his little home. First with brooms, then with dusters; then on ladders and
steps and chairs, with a brush and a pail of whitewash; till he had dust in his throat and eyes, and
splashes of whitewash all over his black fur, and an aching back and weary arms. Spring was
moving in the air above and in the earth below and around him, penetrating even his dark and
lowly little house with its spirit of divine discontent and longing…”

Settling, Judy’s eyes closed at the comforting sound of Nick’s voice, and the doe moved her paws
to cover his on her belly. The real world felt miles away as Nick continued to read, his tone rising
and falling as he adopted the voices of the various characters in the tale, and the weight of his paw
was a warm reminder of his love.

They spent a few hours by the fire in one another’s company; the tod continuing to read aloud even
when it seemed like Judy was falling asleep. Contentment and happiness flowed between them,
and the fox never wanted the moment to end. However, he was aware of the time and the building
pressure to study for his final exams, so with heavy reluctance, he brought his reading to a close as
he reached the middle of the book. Though Judy had picked the tale out, Nick had unexpectedly
come to enjoy it. “You’ll have to wait until tomorrow for the second half.” He decided, knowing
he would be purchasing it.

Playing with Nick’s paw on her belly, Judy playfully whined in protest, her large ears smoothed
down as she slowly began to sit up, not wanting to stand too quickly and become dizzy. Eyeing the
cookies and water set out for them, she reached for a treat, picking up a chocolate one. Bringing it
to her mouth, she spoke before taking a bite. “If your cop career fails you could always be a
professional storyteller.” She announced, finishing the treat in a few bites before she dusted her
fingers off on her pants. Her mother would’ve smacked her tail with her cooking spoon if she had
witnessed her action.

“Probably more money in hustling.” The fox made a mental note of the page number as he closed
the book, not wanting to fold the corner of the page. His father had hated when mammals had done
that.

With her cookie finished, Judy picked up a glass of water, taking a few sips before she set it back
down. “More chance of me cuffing you in hustling.”

“Kinky.” The tod grinned, unable to help it.

Judy’s shoulders sagged, and she shook her head, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips.
Lifting a paw she landed a light punch on Nick’s arm, rising from the sofa as he moved to rub the
spot she’d thwacked. While Nick had been reading to her, Judy’s mind had wandered, and the doe
had started to question whether Desmond had her favorite book in stock. She’d left her copy in
Bunnyburrow when she’d moved to the city, and she’d forgotten to pack it before they’d left this
morning.

As Judy started to wander off, Nick rose from the couch, tucking the book under his arm as he
began to follow her, his curiosity piqued.

Stopping at the ‘C’ section, Judy tipped her head back to look at all of the shelves on the giant bookcase. There, on the twelfth shelf up, sat the book she was after. Excitement had the doe bouncing on her hind paws, and she grabbed the nearest rolling ladder. With ease, she climbed up until she was in line with the shelf. Holding on with one paw, Judy reached out with the other, fingertips brushing the spine of the novel as she pushed herself just that little bit further.

It felt like slow motion to Nick, watching as Judy reached for a book, small fingers grasping the spine and pulling it from the shelf, just before she lost her balance and started to plummet towards the ground. Book falling from under his arm, the fox’s heart pounded as he raced to stand beneath Judy’s falling body, and if it weren’t for his honed reaction time and speed he wouldn’t have made it.

With a thump the doe landed in his arms, startled by her fall yet still clutching the book she’d been after. “Please don’t die for a book.” Nick forced the words out, swallowing thickly as he tried to mask his terror with humor. He could feel his arms shaking as he gently set Judy down, checking her over for any injuries. Other than looking a little surprised, she was okay. Scooping up the book he’d dropped, Nick tucked it back under his arm.

“Thanks, Slick.” Judy offered quietly before she cleared her throat, moving her attention to the book in her paws. She’d fallen from many heights during her training and even while on duty, but it wasn’t a sensation a small mammal like her would ever get used to. “This isn’t just any book.” She protested. Nick’s raised eyebrow had her turning the book around to show him the cover. “It’s Hans Christian Purrson.” She turned it back, carefully opening it to the first page, treasuring the new book smell. As she started to read the familiar words, she silently mouthed along, unable to stop herself from bouncing on the spot in excitement.

Watching his mate’s body language, Nick found himself almost wishing he could pull the book from her paws and start reading it, to find out what was drawing such a strong reaction from her. A few pages later she turned the book again, this time to point at a paragraph. “Oh, isn’t this amazing? It’s my favorite part because you see, here’s where she meets Prince Charming, but she won’t discover that it’s him ‘til chapter three!”

Seeing how much Judy loved the book, and the twinkle in her eyes as she read it, Nick knew he had to get it for her. Crossing over to the old till, he set the book under his arm down on to the counter before he pulled his wallet from his back pocket, counting out enough for Judy’s book and the one they’d been reading together on the couch.

“You don’t need to buy it for me, Slick. I’ve read it countless times, and I can get mom to send me the copy I have in Bunnyburrow.” Judy’s focus had shifted from the page as Nick had walked away, and she’d felt a flash of guilt as she’d watched him pull out his wallet. She already had a copy; he didn’t need to be wasting his money on another.

Tucking his wallet back into his pocket, the tod shrugged, switching his focus to Judy. “I haven’t read it yet.” He stated, moving back to stand in front of her, gently prying the book from her paws so he could flip through it.

“You want to read Hans Christian Purrson?” Judy couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

Humming his confirmation, Nick closed the book, offering it back out to Judy. From what little he’d skim read, it didn’t seem like something he’d hate. “Dad used to say that you can tell a lot about a mammal from their favorite book and that you can find pieces of them in the pages. I already know a lot about you, but I’m curious as to what other pieces I might find.” He shrugged.
Realising how sappy it sounded the fox cleared his throat, moving on. "If you’re ready then we should probably head back, this fox has to study at some point."

Hiding her smile at how adorable her mate was Judy nodded her head in agreement. Though she would’ve loved to spend another few hours in the bookstore, the real world was calling. "Should we wake Desmond?" She questioned, looking over at the back of the store. The doe had checked in on him regularly, tuning her ears into the sound of his heartbeat and snoring. He hadn’t stirred since he’d sat down after leaving them.

Emerald eyes quickly looked over the counter near the till and Nick found what he was looking for. Lifting up the key to the shop, he shook his head. Grabbing the book they’d read by the fire Nick handed it to Judy, and the two mammals silently made their exit, locking the shop up behind them before Nick dropped the key back through the letterbox. He’d call the dhole tomorrow and thank him again for lending them his shop.

Using one paw to clutch the two books to her chest, Judy slipped the other into Nick’s paw, lacing their fingers together. “Thanks, Nick.” She looked up her fox, offering him a soft smile. She hadn’t expected such a thoughtful date.

Glancing down at the doe by his side, the fox offered her a wink as he gently swung their paws, counting their afternoon as a win. “Anytime Carrots, anytime.”

“How am I meant to remember all of this?” Nick groaned, slamming the textbook shut as he dropped down onto the couch, jostling his mate. He’d been unsuccessfully trying for the last hour to memorize the first chapter, and all he had to show for it was a bunch of pencil scribbles on the pages. “I barely made it through high school.”

Having heard Nick’s approach, Judy had already put down her book, making a mental note of the page number. As the fox came to sit with her on the couch, the doe turned so she could face him. “You just need the right motivation.”

“Motivation? Fluff, I am motivated, trust me. There’s nothing I want more than being a cop.” Nick sighed, tipping his head back until it thunked against the couch. He was more of a practical mammal, something that had come in useful at the academy when 75% of their training had involved physical activity. Now faced with a thick textbook and four exams, he was stumped.

Well aware of how much Nick wanted to be a cop, the rabbit hid her smile. “Are you sure?” She quizzed. She’d anticipated that he would struggle, and it hadn’t taken her long to come up with an idea as to how to help him.

“Yes?” The fox’s answer was uncertain, Judy’s question having thrown him. Emerald eyes narrowed as he took in Judy’s expression – amusement and mischief combined. “I don’t like that look you’re wearing.”

Schooling her features, the doe leaned into Nick’s space. “You like making deals, right?”

“Usually for favors, yes,” Nick responded, unsure where the conversation was going.

Shuffling towards her mate, Judy dropped her voice an octave. “Then I’ll do you a favor. I’ll quiz you to find out what you already know, and what we need to work on.” She laid down the foundations of her plan.
Nodding, Nick reasoned that was a good idea. It would cut down on the amount he needed to study. However, Judy’s body language and the tone of her voice didn’t match up with her innocent offer, and Nick scowled as he tried to work out what exactly his little rabbit was up to.

“Once we know what you need to work on, we need to ensure it becomes long-term memory. Short-term memories can become long-term memory through meaningful association.” Judy continued, lifting a paw to smooth down her ears. It was one of the flimsiest explanations she’d ever come up with, and she hoped Nick would overlook that. She was determined to get her fox to study and help with his winter urges.

Still a little confused, Nick smoothed out his scowl and tipped his head sideways, the end of his tail flicking. “I’m not sure I’m completely following. What do you get out of this deal?” So far it sounded like Nick was the only one winning.

“You’re more likely to remember things if there’s a positive emotional association with it. So, I’m going to ask you ten questions about each subject you’re unsure about. For every one you get right, you get a kiss.” Judy explained. “If you get 8 out of 10 questions correct in a subject…” The doe reached for the hem of her jumper and removed it in one smooth move, tossing it onto Nick’s lap, leaving her in a thin t-shirt. “I get to lose a piece.”

As Judy’s words sank in, Nick’s eyes widening and he swallowed. The fox played with the soft fabric in his lap as he mulled over Judy’s offer. It was tempting, and certainly not what he’d expected from his rabbit. “It’s winter. That’s not a good idea.” He protested, torn.

Having anticipated that Nick would be uncertain about her idea, the doe reached out, small paws gently grabbing his muzzle. “I trusted you when you wanted me to get into the ice water, so please trust me with this.” Judy dropped a kiss to his muzzle. “You should also stop fighting your biology. You won’t break me. I trust you.” Violet eyes lifted to find emerald ones, and Judy held Nick’s gaze. She didn’t want to force the issue, or him, but the longer he fought his instincts, the more frustrated he’d become, and that wasn’t the right frame of mind for him to be in for his exams.

Judy’s offer was tempting, and though a small part of the fox was terrified that he could potentially hurt her, he trusted that his doe would let him know if things got too intense. With a small nod, he agreed, watching as Judy moved away from him, pulling on her jumper as she took the textbook and pencil with her. She dove right in, asking questions to determine his level of knowledge. They rattled through all of the topics in the book and compiled a small list of areas he needed to improve on.

Closing the book, Judy placed it down on the coffee table, just out of Nick’s reach. Deciding on her first topic, she picked the first question. “Alright Slick, who issues a warrant and what types are there?”

“A court usually issues them, and there are search warrants, arrest warrants, and…” Nick paused, racking his brain. He could faintly remember the classroom session with Major Friedkin when they’d gone over this subject. “Execution warrants.” He answered, offering Judy a grin. Lifting a paw as he turned his head ever so slightly, he tapped a finger against his cheek. He’d answered the question correctly, and he wanted his reward.

Obliging, Judy leaned across the small space between them, pressing a light kiss to her mate’s cheek. She had a feeling she’d be doling out a lot more of them over the course of the evening. Sitting back, she decided on her second question. “What’s a search warrant?”

Knowing that Judy would go through all the different types, the tod rolled his eyes at her question. It had to be the easiest one she could’ve asked, but it would earn him a kiss. “It authorizes law
enforcement to conduct a search of a person, location, or vehicle, for evidence of a crime and to confiscate any evidence they find.”

Nodding as Nick answered correctly, the doe planted a quick kiss on the side of his muzzle before swiftly moving on. “How about an arrest warrant?”

“It authorizes the arrest and detention of an individual or the search and seizure of an individual’s property.” The fox rattled off the definition with ease.

Giving him another kiss, it wasn’t like it was a hardship for Judy to show her mate some affection. “Finally, what about an execution warrant?” She’d saved the hardest one for last.

Pausing, the tod gave it a moment of thought. The name of the warrant offered him some idea, but he wasn’t entirely sure. Bringing a paw up to his muzzle, he rubbed it in contemplation. “It authorizes law enforcement to use deadly force when bringing down a perp?” He answered, grimacing.

Shoulders dropping, the doe shook her head. “That’s a licence to kill. An execution warrant authorises capital punishment on an individual.” She reached for the textbook and pencil, scribbling a quick note for them to look over the topic again. Execution warrants were exceedingly rare, with judges preferring alternative solutions that didn’t spell death for the perp, but it was still written in law and therefore something Nick had to know.

“Damn it,” Nick growled, frustrated that he’d messed up. He’d been on a winning streak, and now that had gone to hell.

“It’s okay, we still have a few more to go.” The rabbit reassured her mate, kicking out one of her hind paws so she could nudge the fox. Returning her attention to the textbook, they rattled through the remaining six questions and by the time they’d finished the topic, Nick had answered nine out of ten correct. Proud of him, Judy stood, gesturing with her paws to her outfit. “Nine out of ten, Slick. Pick a layer.”

Looking Judy up and down, the tod contemplated which layer he wanted her to remove first. He could go for her pants, which the fox found a very tempting idea, or he could pick her jumper and keep the game going, giving him a better chance at actually learning something and driving them both a little crazy. Making his choice, the tod reached up to scratch at the fluffy fur on his neck, reining in his lust. “Jumper.”

Surprised by Nick’s choice, it took Judy a moment to get her tail in gear and remove the garment he’d selected. She wasn’t above lifting it a little slower than usual though. Down to her t-shirt, Judy took her seat back on the couch, picking up the textbook. “Topic number two…” They carried on, working their way through trials, sentences, health and safety laws, and standard forensic procedures. Nick had managed to achieve 8 out of 10 in trials and forensics procedures, leaving Judy now sat on the couch in her underwear.

The rabbit was trying her hardest to not look at her fox. His gaze was hungry, predatory, and she could hear the slight quickening of his heartbeat. A tinge of concern passed through her at the thought that maybe she was playing with fire, being almost naked in front of her tod during mating season, but she trusted him, which led to her powering on. “Topic six, property law.”

Not overly confident in the area, Nick tried to hide his wince. He was so close to having Judy naked, and she had to throw this topic at him? His responses were slower as he worked his way through the questions, not wanting to risk getting anything wrong, so giving himself a little time to think. By the time he’d answered the seventh question, he’d only got one wrong.
“Question eight, what is bailment?” Judy continued to scribble notes, circling things they would need to go over again tomorrow. While Nick had insisted that he wasn’t book smart, he wasn’t doing too poorly.

Nick had to stop himself from letting slip a yip of excitement as Judy asked the one question he could answer in his sleep. “It’s where physical possession of personal property is transferred from one mammal to another, who then subsequently has possession of the property. It usually arises when a mammal gives the property to another for safekeeping.” His father had transferred ownership of their home to his mother a few months before he’d been murdered, and though he’d only been a kit, Nick could remember hearing them talking about it late at night. Once he’d learned that his father’s death hadn’t been an accident, the fox had found it suspicious that ownership of the house had been passed solely to his mother, as if his father had known something would happen. Pulled from memory lane by the kiss planted on his muzzle, the tod focused on the next question, not wanting to dwell on the past.

Turning the page of the textbook, Judy picked her next question. “How many years must a squatter have lived in a property before they can apply for ownership?”

“10.” Nick’s answer rolled off his tongue with ease as he recalled Desmond’s battle for the bookshop. His knowledge earned him another kiss.

Realising that her fox had now answered eight out of nine questions correctly, the doe couldn’t help but wonder which item Nick would pick next. “If a mammal drops their gold bracelet in the street, and another mammal picks it up and brings it to the police station as lost property, how long is the wait before the mammal who found it can legally claim it as theirs should the original owner not come forward?”

Pausing, the tod hid his wince. It wasn’t like he’d ever handed lost property over to the police before – it was finders keepers on the streets – and he couldn’t for the life of him remember the lecture when Major Friedkin had gone over this. “Three weeks?” He tried.

Shaking her head, the rabbit offered her mate a sympathetic smile. “Two months.” She corrected, hearing her fox curse. “8 out of 10 though, Slick.” She tried to brighten his mood, but the nervousness crept up on her, and she had to make a conscious effort not to thump her hind paw. “Make your choice.”

Faced with the decision, Nick’s paws clenched. He’d been in some discomfort for a while now, his instincts screaming at him to take his mate, but he’d used that discomforted and had channeled it into their game, knowing the result would be worth it. Leaning forward Nick inhaled, drowning in his rabbit’s scent. Unfurling a paw, he reached out slowly, a clawed finger hooking around the strap of Judy’s bra to ping the fabric. “This.” He rasped.

Swallowing, Judy reached behind her, small paws finding the hooks of the garment as Nick pulled his paw back. Violet found emerald and with practiced ease Judy undid the hooks. Steeling herself, she began to remove the item, sliding it down her arms. Though she’d been confident when they’d stepped into the shower together in the past, and when she’d taken care of her fox back in Bunnyburrow, it felt different this time. The air was charged, tensions high, and there would only be one outcome to this evening.

Forcing himself to be a gentlemammal for at least a few seconds, the tod held the doe’s gaze, and only once she’d let the garment fall to the floor did his eyes wander, admiring her for a moment before he looked up. The temptation to reach out and touch her was indescribable, so to keep his paws busy Nick tugged at the collar of his shirt, suddenly feeling much warmer than he had a few minutes ago.
Though Nick had seen her naked before, they’d been on an even playing field then. Now, with him fully clothed, Judy felt a little self-conscious. She was out in the open and vulnerable, a state no mammal liked to be in. Wrapping her arms around her body, the doe tried to hide as much of her fur as possible. Logically, she’d known their little game would bring them to this moment, but that didn’t offer her any comfort. “It probably wasn’t wise of you, Jude. It’s winter, his instincts are probably screaming at him, and you’re stood here basically naked.”

Noticing how his rabbit tried to hide from his gaze, the fox abandoned his shirt collar, instead gently grasping one of Judy’s paws in his own to pry it slowly from her body. “Please don’t hide from me.” He whispered, making sure to hold her gaze as he removed her other arm from around her frame. He never wanted her to feel uncomfortable around him. Deciding to take Judy’s advice and stop fighting his biology, Nick chose to give in.

Abandoning his position on the couch, the fox stood to tower over the rabbit, and he brought both paws up to cup her face. Judy relaxed into his touch, her paws rising to cover his. “You have no idea how much I want you.” He reassured her as his tail swished behind him, thumping the couch. Giving in to his temptation to touch, he slid his paws down her body, smoothing them over the slight curvature of her waist. His actions weren’t driven by lust, no matter what his body wanted. Love drove them.

“Then take me.” The doe insisted, her words a little shaky with her nerves. She was tired of waiting, tired of having to tread carefully because it was winter. She wanted her fox, and he wanted her.

Permission was all he needed, and in one smooth move Nick scooped up his bunny, mammal-handling her. Carrying her through their apartment with ease, he kicked open the door of their bedroom with a hind paw, striding in before placing her down carefully on the end of the bed. As Nick went to take a step back, the fox halted in his tracks. Small paws were working at the buttons of his shirt, and as Judy tipped her head back to look up at him, the tod couldn’t resist stealing a kiss as he nudged his way to stand in the ‘v’ of her legs.

Slackening Nick’s tie, Judy made quick work of removing it, casting it aside. Paws moving to work at the buttons of his shirt, the doe finally managed to undo the last one, but to get the offending garment off of her fox she was forced to reluctantly break their kiss. As the tod pulled her close again fur met fur, and butterflies erupted in Judy’s stomach, but whether they were from anticipation, nervousness, or both, the doe couldn’t tell.

Finding the button of Nick’s pants, Judy struggled to get it undone, her mind focused instead on the insistent lips pressed to hers and the large paws holding on to her. She let her fox take the lead, surrendering to him as he tasted her, his kiss a promise of what was to come. When Judy’s fumbling fingers finally freed the button, Nick’s pants hit the floor with a dull thud, and he stepped out of them quickly, kicking them aside. Judy used the opportunity to break their kiss, needing a moment to catch her breath.

Nick, however, had other ideas. Lips trailing across Judy’s fur, the fox didn’t stop until he found her throat and the indents he’d made earlier in the day. Peppering kisses to them, he smiled at the sound of his mate tooth purring, her small paws grasping his thick fur. Remembering how much his rabbit enjoyed the feel of his canines on her throat, the tod bit down gently, applying just enough pressure to pull a mewl of desire from her.

Gasping at her mate’s bite, Judy clung to her fox, her small body pressed tightly against his. She wanted, no needed, more. “I want you to claim me.” She demanded, entirely sure of her choice.

Through the haze of lust that had threatened to overtake him, Judy’s demand caught Nick off
guard, and the fox blinked in surprise. Letting go of her throat, the tod moved to find her gaze, emerald meeting violet. His body and mind were at war with one another. Though he wanted nothing more than to give in to what they both wanted, the thought of possibly hurting her put him off the idea. “I don’t want to hurt you.” He swallowed. It was one thing to leave a light mark behind, but to bite her enough to break the skin? “And once we reach a certain point, it’s impossible for us to part.” The nerves that he’d worked so hard to subdue started to raise their ugly heads. Sure he’d thought of claiming her countless times, but doing it? Wide emerald eyes watched as Judy took his paws in her own, linking their fingers together.

Giving Nick’s paws a gently squeeze, Judy offered him a reassuring smile. “If you don’t want this…” She didn’t want him to feel like this was something he had to do just to appease her.

“No! No.” Nick was quick to reassure her, tightening his hold on her paws as his tail subconsciously moved to wrap around one of her ankles, trying to keep her where she sat. “I want it. You.” The fox stumbled over his words, feeling like a blundering teenager again. Actions spoke louder than words though, so the tod slowly clambered onto the bed, forcing Judy to back up towards the middle, violet eyes watching his every move.

Agile fingers wrapped around one of Judy’s ankles, halting her movement and sending a thrill of excitement through the fox as her nose twitched. With her right where he wanted her, Nick’s paw skinned up her leg, soft grey fur sliding between his fingers until he met cotton. The gentle upward curvature of his doe’s lips was all the encouragement Nick needed. Easing off the last garment of clothing his mate had on, the tod’s tail thwacked impatiently against the bedsheets, and the heady combination of their scents hung heavy in the air. With Judy finally divested of every scrap of clothing, Nick finally looked his fill. Gaze trailing over the expanse of grey fur presented to him, Nick was at a loss with where to begin, and his body screamed at him to make a move.

Exposed, it took every ounce of Judy’s will to not shrink back from her mate’s intense gaze. “You’re overdressed.” She stated feebly, trying to deflect some of the attention back to her fox. With nowhere to go, the rabbit stayed still as Nick prowled forward, coming to hover above her, strong arms supporting most of his weight and his thighs trapping her legs. The new position granted Judy the ability to reach down between them, finding the elastic of his underwear. With some tugging and a little assistance, Judy finally freed him from the cotton confines.

The aching tension between them built as Nick settled his weight, moving to rest on his forearms as he pressed their bodies together, suffocating any space that had been between them. As much as his body was screaming at him to take the doe beneath him, he refused to let it control him. She deserved better than that.

For a moment they were still, the room quiet save for the gentle puffs of their breath, until Judy finally made the first move, lifting her head a few centimeters to brush her lips against Nick’s in a soft caress. His scent overwhelmed her, strong and intoxicating, making her press for more. He’d purposefully waited for Judy to make the first move, though the few beats it had taken for her to kiss him had terrified him. Now, with her lips pressed against his, the world fell away. It was slow and soft, comforting in ways that words alone could never be. One paw moving, the tod kept his balance as he cradled her cheek, clawed thumb sweeping over silky grey fur. At first, her paws sweeping down his spine didn’t register in his addled mind, but as she hauled him impossibly closer, back arching to bring their chests together, he could finally feel the frantic beating of her heart.

The pace quickened, their slow and soft kiss taking a sharp turn as Judy rolled her tongue forward, demanding more. Her fox was happy to comply. Rolling them over, he gave her control of the
situation. The small laugh that slipped from between her lips as he flipped them made him feel disturbingly giddy.

No longer needing to support his weight, Nick was free to roam the vast expanse of grey fur on show, and he wasted no time in reaching for Judy’s hips. Paw curling around the curve of Judy’s body, Nick was reminded just how small she was. The size difference did wicked and wonderful things to him.

Though their lips had parted as they’d rolled over, Judy was quick to kiss her fox once again, desperate to taste him. His paws on her hips made her heart pound, and as he gave them a gentle squeeze her lips parted, a low gasp slipping between them, granting Nick just enough access to deepen their kiss.

Though distracted by the thorough kiss she was receiving from her mate, lips brushing together, sliding and parting, tongues meeting and exploring, Judy could still feel the heat emanating from her tod, and one of his large paws reaching down to grasp at her butt. Whining at the contact, Judy pushed back into his touch, hips rolling.

Dragging her mouth from his, the doe began to scatter kisses down his throat, peppering them across the planes of his chest as she moved further down. His scent grew stronger as she planted light pecks to his stomach, and when she finally reached her destination she risked a glance up. Lust-blown emerald eyes were watching her. Moving down the last few centimeters, the rabbit ghosted her lips over the tip of his length.

A low whine slipped from between Nick’s lips, and Judy felt a shiver of excitement at having her fox at her mercy. Giving an experimental lick, she inhaled sharply as a massive paw grabbed the short fur on the top of her head. Small tongue rolling forward again, the doe relaxed, giving herself over to the moment. The last time they’d been in this situation her mate had been tense, wound tighter than a coil, and afraid he would hurt her. That no longer seemed to be the case. “Look at me.” She demanded, knowing how much of a visual creature her fox was. She wanted his entire focus on her, on what she was doing, and Judy held his gaze as she pressed barely there kisses down his length, dragging her lips over the slightly swollen ridge of his knot.

Nick gave a harsh grunt, head falling back against the sheets as his rabbit’s small paws joined her lips, her touch confident as she wrapped her fingers around him. Hips stuttering, his eyes slid shut, and he swallowed hard at the first feel of soft lips drawing him in. It was all he could focus on, and the bold caress of Judy’s tongue coupled with the smooth strokes of her paw had him panting, the claws on his free paw snagging the bedsheets as he clenched, a low rumble of pleasure vibrating through his chest. Hips lifting as Judy found just the right spot, bold tongue tasting him, the fox whined as his knot throbbed.

Though reluctant to pull his mate away from her task, the fox knew if he didn’t get her mouth off him soon they wouldn’t make it to the main event. “Fluff.” The tod warned, relaxing the paw that had been clutching the short fur on the top of her head. As Judy broke away for a moment to catch her breath at the sound of her name, small paw continuing to stroke, Nick seized his opportunity. Capturing her chin with his paw, he led her back up his body, her paw falling from him as he pressed their lips together in a fierce kiss.

Nick’s attempt to roll them again, to pin his rabbit underneath him, wasn’t as smooth as he’d hoped. Their limbs tangled and the fox had to scoot them over to stop them from falling off the side of the bed. However, before his doe could comment on his less than slick moves, the fox buried his snout against her throat, canines dragging over sensitive skin as he traced his previous bite mark. When the moment arose, he’d have to break her skin, and Judy would have to do the
same to him. It sent a thrill of anticipation through him to finally get to claim another mammal, to give himself wholly to another and have that dedication returned.

Lips sliding down, the fox followed the curve of her collarbone, breathtakingly aware of her skittering heartbeat as he left a trail of soft bites down her sternum, laving his tongue over her fur to soothe the sting of his nips. The small bite on her stomach made Judy laugh, the sound like music to Nick’s ears, but her laughter soon turned to a quiet moan as Nick settled between her legs, dropping a smattering of kisses to the fur on her inner-thigh. Her scent drove him crazy and as his eyes slid shut the tod inhaled deeply, savouring the smell. Soft lips met delicate skin, mouth parting a moment later as Nick gave a slow, long lick. The taste of her on his tongue brought forth a low growl, and the vibrations caused Judy to gasp, her hips bucking as one paw grasped the bedsheets tightly.

Senses assaulted by the taste, smell, and sound of his doe in the throes of passion, Nick found himself enjoying the act. In the past, he hadn’t cared much for it, but the reactions he was pulling from Judy were intoxicating, tugging at the primal part of him that wanted nothing more than to please his mate. Stroking fingers matched that of his tongue, and the long moan that slipped from between Judy’s lips as she tipped her head back urged him on.

Free paw finding the top of Nick’s head, Judy pulled him in closer, hips rolling and back arching. Her brain wouldn’t focus, her body at the mercy of the predator between her thighs. Clever paws continued to tease her, making her shudder and gasp, coaxing her to abandon. Every nerve in her body was alight, her earlier shyness blown away by her fox’s love. “Nick.” She breathed his name, paws flexing in the sheets as she glanced down, wanting to see the emerald eyes she loved so much.

The soft sound of his name had the tod looking up, his actions never faltering. His mate’s violet eyes were wide, lust-blown, and pleading with him to give her what she so desperately wanted. Nick had never been one to disappoint, and it was the least he could do for the mammal that loved him unconditionally. Though he had a vivid imagination, it couldn’t compare to seeing the real thing. Judy’s fur had been tousled from his touch, her chest rising and falling as she desperately tried to control her breathing, and her thighs quivered either side of his head. She was beautiful, uninhibited, and it had been his paws and mouth that had brought her to this point.

Slowing his assault on her body, the fox felt a tidal wave of love for the bunny that’d turned his life upside down. A deep rumble of contentment rolled through him, making Judy’s eyes fall shut, teeth sinking into her lower lip as she teetered on the edge. She freed her lower lip a moment later to beg him for release, and the sound of her plea was like music to the tod’s ears. Unrelenting, Nick let instinct guide him as his lips and tongue worked together in perfect harmony. The crooking of his fingers was Judy’s final undoing, and her cry of release rang out through the room.

Having balanced on the edge for a while, the pleasure that finally consumed the doe as she tipped over the edge had her back arching, paws clenching as she cried out. Nick continued to work her through the waves of her release until she collapsed, spent. Panting as she tried to regain her breath, Judy’s eyes opened to the sight of her fox licking his lips, prowling up the length of her body until he could settle atop her, careful to keep his weight off of her. A giant paw ran over her lax body, following the curves and contours, making her gasp as he squeezed her hip. She felt like jelly, putty in his paws as her fox dragged their lips together. Reaching up, Judy cupped his muzzle, eyes closing as she gave herself over to him.

Though swept away in the moment, Nick broke their kiss long enough to capture his rabbit’s gaze, silently asking one last time if she was sure. The soft smile he received and the gentle caress of her paw across his cheek made his head spin, heart thudding as he reached between them. The
unmistakable itch of the season was stronger than before, the anticipation driving him wild. He pushed forward slowly, not wanting to cause his mate any pain. The tensing of Judy’s body and the slight scrunch of her nose as she closed her eyes made him stop, and the fox fought back his urge to continue. “Fluff…” Though it would drive him crazy to stop now, his mate was more important, and if it were too much for her, then he’d call it a night.

“It’s okay.” Judy insisted, forcing herself to take deep breaths through her nose to relax. The intrusion, though not unwanted, was foreign to her and she needed a moment to adjust. Eyes shut, she missed the flash of concern that crossed her fox’s face, but she couldn’t miss the feeling of light kisses being peppered across her cheeks, or lips capturing hers in a tender kiss. With her mind focused on the love she felt from her mate, Judy’s body went lax, and Nick used the distraction to his advantage, pushing forward just enough to finally feel some pressure on his knot.

Inhaling sharply at the stretch, Judy broke their kiss, arching her back to better accept him, pressing their chests together to finally find a comfortable fit. Small paws clung to his shoulders, blunt claws digging into fluffy reddish-orange fur, and though there was little room left between their bodies, the doe gave an experimental roll of her hips. Lust barrelled through her at the sound of the low grunt the action pulled from her.

Nick’s nostrils flared as the sweet scent he so desperately craved assaulted his nose, and his low grunt turned to a growl, paw grasping at her hip. He wanted to smother her in his scent, mark her with a bite, claim her and bond with her, and let every mammal walking know that the smart, beautiful doe beneath him was his. His mind was at war with his body over pace as he set a steady rhythm, urged on by Judy as she grabbed at him, pulling him closer, the rhythm of her hips desperately trying to match his.

The discomfort started to fade away, the burn of the stretch a distant memory now for Judy as Nick picked up the pace, body surging into hers, and she could feel the tension building. A particularly well-angled thrust made her whine, head tipping back, exposing her throat. The coil of desire inside of her started to tighten, and though her fox was giving her his all, she needed just that little bit more. Managing to work a paw between them, she went for the apex of her thighs, the back of her fingers brushing against Nick’s length with every roll of his hips as she found her sweet spot. A breathy moan slipped from between her lips at the added stimulation.

Paw abandoning her hip, Nick batted Judy’s fingers away. He could take care of her. Emerald eyes focusing on her exposed throat, it called out to him, and the indentations from their afternoon shower were just begging to be made permanent. Knot now catching with each roll of his hips, he chased his release. He wanted Judy to fall over the edge first, to be so lost in the moment that she wouldn’t feel his bite, but knowing his mate it would take a bite to push her over. Laving soft kisses to the grey fur on her throat, the fox found the most suitable spot near her collarbone to leave his mark. Taking a deep breath, he bit down, hard.

The coil snapped, the sensory overload pushing Judy over the edge. Body shaking, hips stuttering, the doe scrambled for purchase on her fox, crying out in a mixture of pain and pleasure as she felt his bite break skin. She tried to re-find their rhythm, but it was hopeless. Instead, she completed the claiming, mind on autopilot as she picked a spot on Nick’s shoulder closest to her, sinking her teeth in. The feel of skin giving wasn’t pleasant, nor was the mouthful of fur, but it was what her mate needed, and what they both wanted.

Nick’s low rumble turned to a possessive growl, hips pushing home frantically one last time before a loud, high-pitched whine escaped him as Judy bit down. Knot throbbing, locking them together, the fox tipped over the edge, jaw tightening as he held Judy in place, hips faltering. As the shudders subsided, the tod let go of Judy’s collar, prying his mouth away. He didn’t dare open his
eyes and look at the mess he’d probably made of her skin. Instead, he started to gently lick the wound, overcome by a deep sense of completion as he felt Judy copy his actions. Though the love he’d felt for the small grey bunny had been indescribable before, it was all consuming now. Heart pounding as Nick tried to steady his breathing, his tail thumped against the bed. She was his, and he was hers, and it was right.

As the side effects of her release wore off, the doe became acutely aware of the pain in her shoulder. Though Nick’s tongue soothed some of the sting, the rabbit knew she’d be popping painkillers for a few days. Slowing her licks, she pulled back from the wound on his shoulder; head thumping against the bedsheets as she closed her eyes, exhausted.

As Judy ceased her licking, so did Nick, but that didn’t stop the tod from pressing his nose to her throat, warm breath fanning over matted fur as he huffed, pulling in more of her scent. It was different now, carrying a more prominent layer of his smell. Pulling back enough so he could look down at his mate, emerald eyes opened to find closed violet ones, and the fox used the moment to his advantage to press a tender kiss to her lips. It would be some time yet before they would be able to separate and clean up.

Smiling against Nick’s lips, the doe brought a paw up to cup his muzzle. “I love you.” She whispered as they parted briefly for air. Opening her eyes, she watched as Nick’s whole face lit up, and she did her best to ignore the fact that her blood had tinged the fur around his mouth.

Tail still thwacking against the bed; Nick’s entire focus was on the mammal beneath him, the pain in his shoulder from her bite playing second fiddle. “I love you.” He reiterated, voice hoarse. Tipping his muzzle, he pressed a light kiss to her forehead, lips lingering a little longer than necessary. With Judy beneath him, having given him the most sought-after gift, he felt at ease, finally content, like a piece of him he hadn’t known had been missing had finally come home.

Moving them so that they could lay on their sides, the tod pulled Judy's body snug to his, the pair of them enjoying the silence of their surroundings. Paws wandered slowly over damp fur, the two mammals exchanged soft kisses and sweet words, cementing the bond they had just created.
When Chief Bogo had asked Judy to give the commencement speech at the graduation ceremony, she'd been terrified. The last time she'd spoken in public, she'd incited a whole host of problems in Zootopia. Besides, it wasn't like this would be any graduation – this would be Nick's. After the Chief had asked her to give a speech, Judy had set to work trying to come up with something profound to say, but she'd purposefully not told Nick, wanting it to be a surprise. The doe had written her speech out countless times, tweaked it, edited it, and had then wholly re-written it. After two weeks, she'd finally been satisfied.

Judy had been forced to tell Marian when the pair had gone shopping a week before the ceremony. The vixen had enlisted Judy's help in picking out an outfit, and when she'd tried to get Judy into a dress, the rabbit had admitted that she would be wearing her blues. Judy had been given little choice but to come clean. Marian had promised not to tell Nick, and the two had returned to their shopping.

Now, Judy stood backstage, hind paws thumping nervously against the wooden floor of the stage that had been erected for the ceremony. The academy field was beautiful in the sunshine, and Judy had no doubt that Nick would be wearing his aviators. Even the smallest bit of sun had the fox reaching for them.

The doe had travelled to the ceremony with Marian, meeting up with Jasmine and Sasha at the station. Her little sister had been full of energy, bouncing on the spot, keen to see Nick and his mom. Judy had entrusted Marian's care to her littermate before disappearing once they'd made it to the field, and Jasmine had silently sworn to look after the vixen.

It had made Marian smile, the way the Hopps daughters fussed over her. In an ideal world, the vixen would've had another kit, a little sister for Nicky to dote on. Life had not been so kind, though. Now, the vixen sat in the audience waiting for her son to receive his badge, and she couldn't wait to give Nicky his last present from his father. It was tucked away safely in her handbag, along with a handwritten note. Robert had left it to Nick in his will, insisting that Marian only give it to him at a significant moment in their son's future. The thought had plagued her ever since. However, Marian had followed her husband's request and had kept it safe, waiting for the right moment. When she'd received the invitation to Nick's graduation ceremony, a certainty had settled over her. It was time.

Backstage, Judy pulled the piece of paper with her speech on from her pocket, looking at it one last time. "Good afternoon, Hopps." Chief Bogo's shadow fell over her, forcing the doe to abandon her reading and look up at her boss.

"Hi, Chief. You ready?" Judy folded the paper back up, sliding it into her pocket so she wouldn't lose it.

"I'm always ready." Bogo deadpanned. Reaching into his own pocket, he produced a small wooden box, offering it down to the bunny. "Here, you should have the honor."

Pushing up on the balls of her hind paws to close the distance, Judy took the box from her boss. Opening it, she saw Nick's badge sat inside, the plaque beneath it inscribed with his name. Her
breath caught in her throat. "You're going to badge Wilde." She heard Bogo explain.

Judy's head shot up, eyes finding the Chief. "But Sir, that's your job."

Bogo crossed his arms over his broad chest, shaking his head. "Hopps, it's not every day that a new recruit solves our biggest case to date, and then convinces another mammal to join the force. You deserve to badge your partner."

Judy looked down at the item in her paws. Bogo had a point. Getting to badge Nick would be an honor, and the perfect way to start their work partnership. One of her paws moved to brush the smooth metal. "Thanks, Chief." Judy smiled.

Bogo played it off, shrugging his shoulders. Truth be told, he knew how significant the relationship between partners was, and that a stable foundation was vital. Back in the day, he'd joined the force to prove a point to his family and three years into his career he'd been forced to arrest his own father. It had been his second worst day on the force, eclipsed only by the loss of his partner of seven years. He'd taken the position of Chief afterward when he'd been unable to face being in the field without Marty by his side. The zebra and the buffalo – they had been unstoppable. Now Bogo tried his hardest to protect all of his officers, his family, to ensure that they would always have one another's backs. He never wanted to lose another mammal he cared for.

The partnership between Nick and Judy was already strong, both in and out of the precinct. Though Bogo would always be a little hard on the pair – for he could never openly show favoritism – he had no doubt that they would be the best partnership on his force.

"You're up, Chief Bogo." An impala appeared beside them, ushering Bogo on to the stage to open the ceremony. Judy's nerves were back as she closed the box containing Nick's badge. Her pockets weren't big enough for it, so she held it in her paws. Staying behind the backdrop curtain, Judy listened as Bogo welcomed everyone, congratulating the new recruits.

The impala returned, offering Judy a smile. "You're up after, Officer Hopps."

Judy took a deep breath, bracing herself. She could still remember Nick's advice from the press conference, and the look on his face when she'd presented him with the application form and her carrot pen. Bogo had given her the pen back a few days before Nick had come home for Christmas, and after wiping it clean and recording a message of encouragement on it, the doe had presented it to her fox at Savannah Central as a parting gift before his exams. Their contact had been sporadic while he'd sat the final tests, but when results had been published the rabbit had been the first mammal he'd called. Nick had done exceptionally well – he hadn't made valedictorian like her, but he was graduating in the top 10% of his year's recruits. She was exceptionally proud of him.

"Now, to deliver the commencement speech, please welcome Officer Judith Hopps to the stage." Chief Bogo ended, introducing the rabbit.

The clapping of the crowd gave Judy her cue. Standing tall, she moved from behind the curtain, circling on to the stage and up to the podium, offering the Chief a nod as she climbed up the three little steps that had been set up for her, allowing her to reach the top of the lectern and the microphone. Placing the box with Nick's badge on the surface along with her written speech, she gave the crowd a quick glance, spotting Nick easily.

When Chief Bogo had introduced Judy to the stage, Nick hadn't been able to hold back a quiet chuckle, shaking his head. Of course, Judy would be the one to give the commencement speech at his graduation. Randon's massive paw had connected with the fox's back, giving him a light shove. When the tod had returned to the academy bearing Judy's mark, his circle of friends had taken great
joy in teasing him about being whipped.

Capturing Judy's gaze as she looked around, Nick offered her a playful smile. "Sly bunny." He mouthed to her, knowing the hearing of some of his fellow graduates was so acute they'd pick up on his teasing if he spoke aloud. He hadn't seen Judy in a few weeks, and he'd missed her terribly, but her care package containing a considerable supply of Hopp's Family Farm blueberries had helped him with the push towards the finish line and had reminded him that he would see her soon. He'd get to go home this evening and sleep in their bed, wake up to Judy singing along to some awful Kitty Purry song on the radio while making breakfast.

Pulling her gaze from Nick, Judy cleared her throat. "Thank you, Chief Bogo." The doe glanced at her boss before she looked out over the crowd once more. "When Chief Bogo asked me to make the commencement speech I immediately said yes, then I went to look up what commencement meant." A ripple of laughter filled the air. "It would have been easier had I had a dictionary, but most of the books in our house serve a better purpose as step stools." This time the laughter was louder, and the rabbit smiled as it took the crowd a moment to settle.

"On a more serious note, I'm honored to be here, to welcome the new graduates to the ZPD. Being a cop isn't easy, regardless of what any mammal says, and some days you question why you're here, why you're doing what you're doing, why you're risking your life day in and day out for mammals you don't know. I've had days like that, I'm sure my fellow officers have too, I'd even hazard a guess that Chief Bogo has – just don't quote me on that." She spared a quick glance to her boss, suppressing her smile at the crowd's laughter and Bogo's unamused expression. Turning back to her audience, the doe continued. "But what makes it worthwhile is knowing that, with every little action, with every case and investigation, with every criminal behind bars, we're making the world a better place. A better place for us, for the future, for our kits and our grandkits."

Though the piece of paper with her speech lay on the lectern in front of her, now that she was stood before the crowds Judy deviated, letting her words flow freely.

"I was born and raised in Bunnyburrow, and when I was eight I had hundreds of siblings. Mom and dad gave us their all, gave us the same amount of attention, took care of us all the same way, but I felt different. While my siblings were fine with things staying the same, with helping to work on the farm, I wanted to do something to make a name for myself. My parents tried to encourage me to join the family business, to settle and be safe, but that was never what I wanted. I wanted to change how mammals saw one another, but that change had to start with me. For me, that meant becoming the first bunny cop, regardless of the fear and danger. So many of us choose our path out of fear disguised as practicality. My dad could have been a great politician, negotiating has always been one of his strong points, but he didn't believe that was possible for him, and so he made a conservative choice. Instead, he got a safe job as a carrot farmer." Though her parents weren't in attendance to hear her words, Judy sought out Jasmine and Sasha in the crowd, knowing her siblings would rely everything to Bonnie and Stu. They'd done right by her and had raised her well, but there was nothing they could've done to stop her from wanting more, to prevent her from being a cop.

Eyes moving over the crowd, Judy took in all the different species gathered together, predators and prey untied to celebrate. "I came to Zootopia wanting to be something more, something better. On my first day with the ZPD I was assigned parking duty, which is probably one step up from cleaning the precinct toilets," the comment earned her a ripple of laughter. "But it was during that day that I met a mammal who would not only help me solve my first case, a case I'd staked my badge on, but who would also open my eyes to the wider world. I'm ashamed to admit that I was a little naive and that it gave him the perfect opportunity to hustle me, but it's okay, I think I've finally got him back." Judy found Nick once more and held his gaze "Prepare yourself for
mountains of paperwork, Slick. It's not all slapping cuffs on criminals and offering witty comebacks." Nick's smile faltered at the mention of paperwork. "It's called a hustle, sweetheart." Judy chuckled as Nick's smile reappeared. No one else in the audience understood the significance of Judy's words even though they laughed, but that was okay. It was their little joke after all.

Judy continued. "When I was a kit, I thought Zootopia was this perfect place where everyone got along and anyone could be anything. Turns out, real life is a little bit more complicated than a slogan on a bumper sticker. Real life is messy. We all have limitations. We all make mistakes. Which means — hey, glass half full — we all have a lot in common. And the more we try to understand one another, the more exceptional each of us will be. But we have to try. So no matter what type of mammal you are, from the biggest elephant," Judy gestured to Horton, "to our first fox," she gestured to Nick, "I implore you to try. Try to make the world a better place. Look inside yourself and recognize that change starts with you. It starts with me. It starts with all of us."

"This city, this crazy and beautiful city, with its multiple districts and millions of mammals, deserves our very best, it deserves for us to come together, to make it better, to make the future better, to build a city we're proud of and proud to serve." One of Judy's paws came to rest on the box containing Nick's badge, knowing the moment she'd pin it to his uniform was drawing ever closer.

"So, with that in mind, I'd like to welcome Chief Bogo back on to the stage to badge our new recruits and formally welcome them to the ZPD family." Judy gave way for the Chief, earning herself a loud round of applause. Her large ears even caught the sound of Nick's whistle as she stepped down, taking the wooden box with her.

Returning to the lectern, Chief Bogo offered Judy a nod as they crossed paths. Her speech had been inspiring and had thankfully gone down a lot better than her one at the press conference. Once the crowd settled, the cape buffalo spoke. "Thank you, Officer Hopps. It's with great honor that we now welcome this year's recruits to the ZPD by presenting them with their badges." Bogo sat his glasses on his snout, glancing down at the list of new recruits. The impala that had brought him onstage stood beside him, holding the boxes containing the recruit's badges. One by one Bogo called them forward, pinning their badges to their uniforms before he saluted them, the new recruits mirroring his actions. Nick was the last one without his badge. "Nicholas Wilde," Bogo called out. Horton took Nick's sunglasses for safekeeping and as Nick started to climb the stairs to the platform, Judy stepped forward, the wooden box in her paws.

Reaching the top step, Nick paused as he saw the little box in Judy's paws. Bogo had badged all of the other recruits but Judy would be badging him? His eyes softened as he took the final few steps to stand before his partner. Violet and emerald met as Judy lifted the lid on the wooden box, extracting Nick's badge. Letting the impala take the box, for the time being, Judy took a small step forward, pinning the metal shield to Nick's uniform. After spending the last few weeks apart being this close again made all the tension in Judy's body to melt away. She'd missed him, missed seeing him, and gosh did he look great in his uniform. "Don't you dare have those thoughts right now Judy!"

Judy may have spent a second or two longer than necessary straightening Nick's badge, but she eventually took a step back, lifting her left paw to salute him. A playful smile passed over Nick's face before he stood tall, offering his own salute. The new recruits cheered, throwing their hats into the air. Judy's paw fell moment's later, Nick's mirroring. "Ready to make the world a better place, Officer Wilde?"

Hearing Judy use his new title made Nick's chest swell with pride. Officer Wilde. Nick felt the weight of his badge on his chest, knew the responsibility that came with wearing it, but with Judy
by his side, it didn't feel like such a colossal task. "I'm more than ready to kick tail and take names, Officer Hopps."

Though he didn't want to interrupt their moment, knowing it was a special occasion, Bogo was keenly aware that the press would want photographs of Nick – being the first fox on the force would propel him into the spotlight, just like it'd done for Judy. "Wilde, the press is going to want photos." He interrupted, gesturing over his shoulder to the gathering crowd with cameras. Nick had blanked them out, oblivious to any photos they'd taken while Judy had been presenting him with his badge, but he knew there would be talk around the city about the ZPD taking on its first fox. Zootopia had been buzzing with gossip when Judy had been given her badge.

"Go get 'em, Slick." Judy gave Nick's shoulder a light punch, moving aside to give her partner space. From her position on stage, Judy watched as the Chief and Nick posed for photos, similar to the ones she'd had taken with Mayor Lionheart. Zootopia's new mayor, Mayor Hoofman, had given the ZPD full autonomy over the graduation ceremony. He was less of an attention seeker than Mayor Lionheart, preferring to actually run the city than focus on PR.

Though Nick had no problem with having his photo taken with Bogo, there was someone more important he wanted in the photos with him. "Carrots," He glanced to Judy, beckoning her with a paw to join him.

Judy shook her head. This was Nick's moment and he deserved all of the attention. He'd worked incredibly hard at the academy. With a quick maneuver, Nick moved away from the Chief, crossing the stage to Judy. Grasping her paw in his he pulled her with him back to the center of the stage, ignoring her futile protests.

"This is your moment, Nick." Judy tried to get out of the situation, but the tod wasn't listening. Chief Bogo moved aside, failing miserably to hide his amusement as the fox cajoled the rabbit.

"And I want to share it with you. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. We're a team. Now, show them those pearly whites." Nick brought them to a stop, letting go of Judy's paw to throw his arm over her shoulder, pulling her to his side. It wasn't the standard, official pose, but it was them. Sliding a paw around Nick's back, Judy grasped at his waist, leaning into him. The press went crazy, and Judy swore that amongst the camera flashes she saw her siblings and Marian taking photos too.

The fuss died down eventually, the other newly badged officers getting to have their photos taken too, and the Chief led Nick and Judy from the stage. The impala handed Judy the box Nick's badge had been in, and Judy offered it to her mate. Nick clutched it like a lifeline in one paw, the other finding Judy's to lead her through the crowd and towards the last spot he'd seen his mom, Jasmine, and Sasha.

"Nicky!" Marian cooed as her son approached, weaving his way through the crowd.

As they drew closer, Judy dropped her tod's paw; prying the badge box from him so that when they reached Marian, he'd be able to embrace her. When the distance between them had been closed, the fox did just that, pulling his mother into a firm embrace, both of their tails wagging.

Marian sniffled, overcome with emotion. Her little boy was now an officer of the law. Now he had an honest job, a good home, and Judy by his side. She wished Robert could be with them, to see his son flourish, but even though he wasn't physically present Marian knew he was there in spirit. "Your dad would be so proud of you, Nicky. I'm so proud of you." Marian whispered, paws tightening around Nick, stroking his back.
Nick nuzzled against his mother, heart swelling as she told him how proud she was. "Thanks, mom."

Judy gave Nick and Marian their moment, distracting her siblings who'd been standing nearby with questions about the goings on at home. Jasmine and Sasha had quickly filled her in on the events back in Bunnyburrow before the conversation had returned to the ceremony.

"Your speech was lovely, Jude." Jasmine complimented. The doe had been aware that her littermate would be speaking at the event but had been sworn to secrecy.

"That it was Carrots, but we'll have to get you some proper step stools." Nick and Marian had broken apart and turned their attention to the cluster of rabbits. Nick was unable to stop himself from slinging an arm over Judy's shoulders again, keeping her close as he teased her. While their apartment had been built with small mammals in mind, Judy still struggled to reach the top shelves of the kitchen cupboards and bookcase.

"Oh please, I'll just ask you to reach items for me, or give me a boost." Judy leaned against Nick, one of her arms wrapping around his waist as she looked up at him.

Snorting in amusement, the fox shook his head, his tail brushing against the back of Judy's legs. "And here I was thinking you wanted to live together because you love me when really you're using me for my height."

"That, and when I'm cold, I can use your tail as a blanket." Judy teased, rocking on the spot to knock her hip against the tod's.

"Oh Carrots, you wound me," Nick feigned hurt, grinning down at the bunny tucked against his side. He'd happily help her reach anything, and he was more than okay with wrapping her up in his tail.

The flash of a camera broke their moment. Emerald and violet eyes turned to find Marian with a camera in her paws and a grin on her face. "Picture time!" The vixen would never confess that she'd snapped the moment because Nick and Judy had been so lost in one another and it had been a beautifully candid moment.

Holding out her paw, Judy took the camera and used it to take a few photos of Nick and Marian. The look of pride on both of their faces warmed Judy's heart, and she made sure to snap as many pictures as possible, knowing there were only a few images of the two of them together since Nick had left home as a teen.

Marian encouraged Judy to join them for a few photos. Selfishly, the vixen wanted to hang a few on the wall of the three of them. Nick had claimed the little grey bunny; she was part of the family. Though Judy protested at being in more pictures, Jasmine pushed her sister forward, snatching the camera from her. Once Jasmine had taken a few more, an elderly tiger offered to take some photos of the five of them together, and once they were done Judy thought their impromptu photo-shoot was over. She was wrong.

"Ohhh, now I want a few of you and Judy, Nicky." Marian took the camera back from the elderly tiger, thanking her for taking the photos.

"We've already had a load of photos taken, mom. I'm sure one will be in the paper, can't you use that one?" Nick really had no objections to having more photos taken with Judy, but the afternoon was wearing on and he wanted to head home, change out of his blues, and spend a little time with Judy.
"I think a few more photos would be lovely, Marian." Jasmine agreed, nodding enthusiastically. She loved Judy, but the look of silent fury on her sister's face as she was forced to pose for more pictures was too good of an opportunity to miss. Even Sasha found amusement at Judy's pain, hiding her smile behind one of her paws.

Indulging them, Nick and Judy posed for a few more photos. By the time they were finished the crowds were thinning out, new recruits and their families heading back to the city. Judy had managed to secure a booking at Embers, a popular restaurant downtown. The wait list had been long when she'd called to book after Nick had returned to the academy, but with some sweet talking to the owner and the mention of the occasion they were celebrating, she'd managed to secure a table for 7p.m for her, Nick, and Marian. The owner had been keen to accommodate two of the city's cops, especially ones with high profiles. They would have to return home first to change, and Judy wanted to give Nick his graduation present in private.

"We should probably get going Slick, we need to change for dinner." Judy took her mate's paw, giving it a squeeze. The doe was also aware of the fact that Jasmine and Sasha would need to head back to Bunnyburrow. The train back to Zootopia would take them an hour. Nick and Judy would take a Zuber back to their apartment, while Marian would head back to her home to freshen up.

"Change for dinner?" Nick looked at his mother, out of the loop. With all of the stress of his final exams, Judy hadn't bothered him with the details about their dinner. Besides, she wanted it to be a surprise. Marian nodded her head in Judy's direction and Nick turned to look at his mate.

A little embarrassed, Judy smoothed down her ears with her free paw. "I got a table for us at 7p.m., at Embers."

Emerald eyes widening, Nick couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Carrots, Embers is fancy and getting a table is nearly impossible." Though the tod had never had the means to eat at the restaurant, he'd walked past it enough times to know the sort of clientele it served, and he'd overheard enough mammal's lamenting the wait list too.

Judy shrugged, picking up the box Nick's badge had been in. She'd placed it down on Marian's chair while they'd had all their photos taken. It wasn't like anyone was going to steal it at a police event. "The blueberry pie there is famous, and I think my favorite blueberry connoisseur deserves a treat."

Giving Judy's paw a gentle squeeze, a soft smile crossed the tod's face. "Thanks, Carrots."

"Any time, Slick."

The train ride back to Zootopia passed in a blur of conversation, other graduates and their families chatting away to Nick, Judy, and Marian. They'd parted ways with Jasmine and Sasha on the platform, the two rabbits promising to come and visit them in the city soon. Sasha had struggled to say goodbye to Nick, but this time there thankfully hadn't been any tears. Instead, the young doe had asked if Nick would come back to Bunnyburrow to speak at her school on Career Day. The tod had promised to run the idea past Bogo.

As the train finally pulled into Savannah Central, Judy stepped aside to call two Zuber's, giving Marian the perfect opportunity. "Nicky, a moment?" Marian placed a paw on her son's arm, gesturing to a quiet corner of the platform with a tip of her head. Robert's gift and letter felt heavy in her bag, and she wanted to give them to Nick now. Something told her it would be better for her kit to open them before dinner.
Nick swallowed, the serious tone of his mom's voice worrying him. "Sure, mom." He let her lead him towards an empty bench, a little scared about what she wanted to talk about.

The vixen sat, ankles crossed and bag on her lap, her body turned inwards a little so she could see her son better. Nick sat beside her, his paws going out to rest on his mom's. "Is everything okay?" he searched her eyes, concerned.

Marian freed one of her paws from Nick's grasp, lifting it to rest it against her boy's cheek. Instinctively, Nick leaned into her touch, soothed by his mother's paw. "I'm so proud of you Nicky. Look at you, an officer of the law." Marian sniffled, feeling the tears threatening to fall again. She'd already used up two out of her three tissue packets drying away her tears. "You've come so far. I'm so happy for you. You have a wonderful job and a lovely home. Let's not forget Judy, too." Marian smoothed her paw over her boy's cheek, noting how his ears instinctively pricked up at the mention of Judy. "Your dad would be so, so proud," Nick whined quietly at the mention of his father, at the reminder that his dad couldn't be with them on this important day. "Shh Nicky, I know." Marian cooed.

Taking her paw from Nick's cheek, Marian opened her bag. From it, she produced a small wrapped box and a letter, yellowed with age. "Your dad left these in his will for you. He left me a note instructing me to give them to you on a special day. I think today is that day." She offered them out to her kit.

Nick sat frozen, staring at the small wrapped box and the yellowed letter in his mother's paws. His dad's handwriting was visible on the outside of the letter – 'Nickster.' Nick took a shuddering breath, his paws moving to rub his eyes as he tried to stop himself from getting upset. While his mom had called him Nicky from day one, his dad had called him Nickster. It was a nickname that had died when his father had. Paws shaking, he finally worked up the courage to pick up the two items.

"Perhaps open them once you get home?" Marian spoke softly, smoothing a paw over Nick's arm. She had no idea as to the contents of the letter and package – it hadn't been her place to open them – but she knew her son might become emotional and he would feel safer being more open with his feelings in the comfort of his own home. Robert had always had a way with words, and Marian was sure the words in his letter to their son would affect Nicky.

Clutching the small package and letter like his very life depended on it, Nick nodded numbly. "Yeah." He couldn't pull his gaze away from his fathers' handwriting.

Marian glanced around them, spotting Judy nearby. The young doe was keeping herself occupied talking to Tony and his parents, who'd joined them on the train home, though one of her large ears flicked around regularly towards Marian and Nick. The vixen had to smile; Judy's need to continually check on Nick warmed her heart. With her boy lost in his thoughts, she spoke in a whisper, having learned early on in her friendship with the bunny that her hearing was incredible.

"He needs you."

It was a matter of seconds before Judy appeared beside them, having managed to excuse herself from her conversation with Tony and his parents. Marian placed a paw on Judy's arm as she stood, offering her seat to the bunny. "I'll meet you at the restaurant." Marian dropped a kiss to the top of Judy's head, repeating the action with Nick. Her boy glanced up, eyes a little misty. "I love you." Marian made sure her son heard her.

"Love you too, mom." Nick's voice was hoarse, and he watched as his mom walked away, leaving Savannah Central. The feel of a small paw on his had Nick turning to look to his side. "Judy." The sight of his mate made the tod smile, pulling him away from his thoughts. "Hey, Carrots."
While Nick had been watching Marian leave, Judy had spared a quick glance to the items in his paws. The masculine scrawl on the letter told Judy it had not been written by the vixen – so it wasn't hard for her to guess that the letter was from his father. Who else would give Nick such an endearing nickname? "Hey Slick. You ready to go home?"

With a slow nod, Nick stood, keeping a tight hold on the package and letter. Judy held his badge box with one paw, using the other to lead her partner through the train station and out to the waiting Zuber.

Sat in the back seats of the taxi, Judy waited for their driver to start the journey before she spoke. "Excited for dinner, Slick?" She tried to pull Nick's thoughts away from the items in his paws, if only for the length of their journey home. "You'll have to dress up and wear something smart." She teased, thinking about the many new shirts she'd added to his wardrobe.

The mention of Nick dressing up was enough to distract the fox and his gaze moved from the parcel and letter to find Judy. "You know I hate formal wear, Fluff." He grimaced.

"But you'll wear it this evening, right? For me?" Judy batted her eyelashes, knocking her knee lightly against his.

Sighing, Nick conceded. His mate had gone out of her way to make sure his graduation would be appropriately celebrated, so the least he could do was dress up for the occasion. "You're a pain in my tail, Carrots." He teased.

"Yeah, but you wouldn't have me any other way." Judy shot back, moving to lean against her fox, forcing him to lift an arm and wrap it around her, the pair of them snuggling together.

Nick offered her a lazy smile, voice dropping to a soft tone. "Damn straight."

It wasn't long before the Zuber pulled up to the curb outside their apartment, and Judy passed the fare to the driver before she and Nick left the vehicle. Removing her keys from her pocket, Judy was first down to their front door, unlocking it and stepping inside. Throwing her keys on to the little table by the door, she stepped aside to let Nick in. Following behind her, the tod transferred the letter and package to one paw, using the other to fish his own keys from his pockets, placing them down beside Judy's.

Traipsing behind Judy into the living room, Nick's eyes skipped around the room, taking in the minimal changes since he'd last been home. Judy had tided in anticipation of his return, but her blanket was still slung over the side of the couch, and the few crumbs he spotted on the floor were a telltale sign that she'd been eating popcorn, probably while watching a movie. What caught his attention the most though was the small wrapped gift on the coffee table, the tod's name visible on the tag. "Oh Carrots."

Guessing that her mate would probably want to open the letter and parcel in his paw in peace, Judy gave the couch a quick pat. "I'm going to grab a shower before getting ready for dinner. I should be out in around 15 minutes if you want to shower after." She excused herself, giving her fox some warning as to how long she'd be gone for. Placing his badge box down on the coffee table next to the wrapped gift, she offered Nick a fond smile before making her exit, heading down the hallway to the bathroom.

Grateful for Judy's gesture, the tod took a seat on the couch, the letter and parcel heavy in his paws. He wouldn't be able to focus for the rest of the night without knowing the contents of them, but a part of him was frightened by what they held. Taking a deep breath, the tod placed the package down on the coffee table so he could start with the letter. Initially, he merely stared at his dad's
handwriting on the front, faintly aware of the sound of the shower turning on in the bathroom. Paw tracing over the script, the tod carefully opened the letter. Unfolding the yellowed paper, his nose took in the familiar old scent attached to it. "Dad."

Swallowing, he started to read.

"Hey, Nickster,

If you're reading this, then something has happened to me. Maybe I forgot to look both ways before crossing the road, perhaps I annoyed an elephant a little too much, or maybe something more sinister happened. I just hope that whatever it was you and your mother didn't witness it.

You remind me of your mother so much, and not just because you inherited her beautiful eyes. As I write this, you're sat with her on the couch, going over your homework. Maths – never my strong suit, but always your mother's. She can run rings around me let me tell you that.

Have I ever told you about the first time I met her? We were young, sixteen or so, and I loved magic. Silly I know, but stick with me here. I'd gone with some friends to a diner for lunch and your mom was there, sat on one of the barstools with her friends, fur immaculate and wearing a pretty white dress. She was a vision. She still is. Encouraged by my friends I tried to impress her with a card trick, but your mother was too smart, and instead of me tricking her, she fooled me. It was there, standing next to her in a little diner, surrounded by our friends, red in the face from being out-smartered, that I knew I wanted her as my mate. I've never regretted a moment since.

I asked your mother to give this letter to you on a special day in your life. I wonder what it is today that your mother feels is so special. Have you moved out and got your own home? Have you landed your first job? Are you getting married? Are you currently cradling your first kit? So many incredible moments in your life I won't get to see. I'm with you, though. I'll always be with you. Know that your mom and I love you very much and we could not be prouder of you. We're not perfect parents, but we have done our best to help you make your way through the problematic growing-up years and prepare for the future.

I remember the way your mother stood in the bathroom late that fateful night, cursing me for getting her pregnant, while at the same time excitedly gazing up at the moon, knowing she was about to bring you into the world. I remember the way she looked at me with such determination and told me, 'We can do this.'

You won't remember the way you looked at me after you were born, wide green eyes filled with curiosity when your mother let me cradle you close, the way I pulled you up next to my heart and smothered you in my scent.

You won't remember all the times I went to bed at night and felt such fear being your father: am I doing okay? Have I messed up? Can I be the kind of father he needs?

You won't remember the way my heart broke and grew a little bigger each time you passed a milestone, watching the sand fall through the hourglass of your life while feeling overjoyed witnessing you expand and grow.

You probably won't remember the way you made me laugh with all of the silly and kind things you did, and you probably won't remember the way I would brush the fur from your eyes when you'd look up at me.

You probably won't remember the way I would hold your little paws in mine, imagining how much bigger than my own they would one day grow, and how I would have to let you go.
You may not remember, but I do…and I’ll hold those memories in my heart for the both of us.

I've experienced a lot in my life, so please listen to your old fox and remember the following as you go through life:

Be true to yourself, always. There is no one else like you. You never need to change who you are for someone else. You are magnificent exactly as you are.

Live your own dreams. Figure out what makes you happy and pursue it. Follow a path of your own choosing – not mine, not your mothers, nor anyone else's.

Don’t be afraid to take risks. You can accomplish great things by taking risks. Get outside of your comfort zone. The more risks you take, the easier it becomes.

Love wholly and unconditionally. When I was a kit, I thought love was about red roses and expensive dinners. Truth is, love is giving her half your fries when she said she wasn't hungry. It's waking up at 4am to her stealing all the sheets and refraining from taking them back. It's talking in strange accents just to make one another laugh and trying to embarrass one another in public. It's going on adventures and making fun of each other. It's stupid fights and memorable make-ups. Love isn't always pretty and romantic. Love is stumbling through life with your best friend. Love them with all your heart. They will be your guiding light.

When I was a kit, my grandfather owned the item I’ve left for you. He would look at it once in the morning and once in the evening, but never in the time in-between. When he passed away, he left it to my father, and when he passed away, he gave it to me. Now, I'm passing it on to you, my son. I hope that one day in the future you will pass it on to your kits, and they'll pass it on to there's, and hundreds of years in the future our family will still live on.

Every time you look at it, every time you carry it with you, let it serve as a reminder that our lives are short and precious, that every second counts and there is no time like the present. Buy that item you've always wanted, eat the food you're craving, love whoever you want, be open with those around you, take risks, and lead a full, happy life.

Don't waste a second. Make every moment count.

I love you, my kit. From the moment you were born, until the end of time, to infinity and beyond.

Dad xx"
letter gave Judy some context as to what had caused her mate so much distress.

Gently she took the letter from Nick's shaking paws, setting it aside. Turning her focus back to her mate she began to chin him, smothering him with her scent, hoping it would pull him out of whatever memory he was trapped in. It took a few minutes until her fox finally responded, arms snaking around her waist as Nick pulled her close.

Judy held her tod for a while, letting him work through his emotions. Slowly his noises of distress died down, the tears stopped, and he started to pull back. Paws cupping his cheeks, Judy offered him a small smile. "I got you, Slick." She whispered as Nick lifted his own paws, gently wrapping them around Judy's wrists.

"Thanks, Carrots." Nick's voice was hoarse as he let go of her long enough to scrub at his face, trying to remove some of the dampness. Eyes opening, emerald met violet. Gazing dropping, Nick's mouth went dry. "Urm, Carrots?"

Confused for a moment, Judy glanced down. In her blind panic to get to Nick, she was just in her underwear. "Getting to you was more important than getting dressed. Besides, it's nothing you haven't seen before." The doe pointed out.

Her comment drew a chuckle from the tod, his sadness momentarily replaced with love for his mate. She really was one of a kind. As his laughter subsided, the weight of his father's letter settled over him once again. Seeing it on the coffee table, he took a deep breath. Now it was time to open the package. "I'm okay now, thank you. Could you give me a moment, please?" The fox felt terrible asking for his mate to leave, but he wanted some privacy to open the gift, though he was sure he would show Judy whatever it was as soon as she was back in the room.

Not at all offended by Nick's request, though wary about leaving him alone, the doe had no choice but to nod. She pressed a kiss to her fox's muzzle before exiting the living room, unable to get her mind off of what she'd just witnessed.

Once Judy was out of sight, Nick reached for the package, paws feeling a little clammy. The wrapping paper was worn, faded with time, and the ribbon holding it together had long ago lost its luster. Instead, it now bordered on scraggly. It still made Nick smile, though. His dad had always paid attention to the little details; it was what had made him such an exceptional tailor.

Deft fingers plucked at the ribbon, careful not to break it as Nick untied it. It came away surprisingly easily, and the tod turned his focus to the paper. Carefully he peeled at the sticky tape, working it away from the paper, not wanting to rip it. When the paper finally came off, Nick was left with a small black box, hinged on one side. The box was made of leather, a clasp keeping it shut. Paws undoing the clasp, Nick lifted the lid. Inside, nestled against a velvet inlay, sat the pocket watch. Nick could remember his father carrying it with him everywhere, teaching Nick how to tell the time using it, and kissing it for good luck before meetings with important mammals. The fox only just held on to his whine this time.

Removing it from the box, Nick let the weight settle in his paw. When he'd been a kit it had felt huge to hold. Now it sat comfortably in his palm. Gold in color, the cover over the watch was engraved with vines and flowers along the outer edge, the middle free of detail to show the face of the clock behind it. Old World numerals ran around the outside, counting off each hour. The chain was still sturdy, and with it wrapped around his paw Nick opened the cover. It looked exactly like he remembered, yet time had long since meant that the hands had stopped turning. His father had wound it daily, adjusting the time to match the one above the fireplace in their living room. Nick did the same now, the hands coming to life, moving as smoothly as they had many years ago. Satisfied, he closed the cover and turned it over, knowing what he would find engraved on the gold
Smoothing a paw over the engraving Nick smiled. As much as he wanted to sit and reminisce, to lose himself again in his father's words, he knew time was of the essence, and if he didn't shower now, they would be late for dinner. Leaving the note and pocket watch on the coffee table, for the time being, Nick made his way to the bathroom. He was careful to fold his new uniform once he'd removed it, leaving it by the bathroom door to take back to the bedroom once he was clean.

His shower only took five minutes, and it took another five for him to thoroughly dry and smooth down his fur. His coat was still a little thick due to the season, but he could feel it starting to thin out again. He couldn't wait to be rid of it – the extra fluff made his clothes a little more snug and made him feel too warm.

Picking up his uniform as he left the bathroom, Nick entered the bedroom, surprised to find Judy wasn't there. Though his hearing wasn't as good as his mate's, when he focused the tod picked up on the sound of his doe in the kitchen calling them a Zuber. Satisfied, the fox dressed quickly, picking out a pair of black slacks and a black shirt. The ensemble looked formal enough for Embers, but it was missing Nick's signature. Rummaging in the wardrobe, he soon emerged with a red tie, and with practiced ease, he fastened it around his neck with a Windsor knot.

Now dressed, Nick left his bedroom. Following Judy's scent, he found her in the living room rather than the kitchen. The tod froze when he clapped eyes on her, captivated by what he was seeing. Large ears having picked up on Nick's approach, Judy turned to look at her mate, eager to see him dressed in something a little fancier than usual. The way his shirt clung to his body should've been illegal. She knew she wasn't very subtle in checking out her fox, but she found herself uncaring. "Oh no, it's terrible isn't it? I told your mom it wouldn't suit me. I'll go find something else to wear..." She started to panic, paws moving to the red dress Marian had convinced her to buy as her ears dropped. It fell to mid-calf and had a sweetheart neckline, and was deep red in color. Marian had lent her a simple silver necklace with a single diamond hanging from it. It had been a present from Robert, and Judy had been honored that Marian had let her borrow it. The Hopps family had never had much money, and the ladies had never been one for jewelry.

"No." Nick barked, emerald eyes widening in panic at the thought of Judy changing out of her dress. "It's beautiful. Y-you're beautiful." Nick swallowed; admiring the way the red dress accentuated his mate's curves.

Ears springing back up at the compliment, the inside of them turned a light shade of pink as Judy blushed. The way Nick was looking at her made her flush. Never had another mammal looked at her in such a way before. "You don't scrub up too bad yourself, Slick." She offered in return, paws reaching for the little gift on the living room table. She'd purposefully ignored the letter and pocket watch when she'd entered the room, knowing it was none of her business and highly personal to her mate. He'd tell her about them when he was ready. "It's not much I'm afraid," she apologized, offering it to the tod. It hadn't been something she'd bought, but it would probably mean more to her fox than anything in any store.

Broken from his admiration of Judy, Nick took in the small gift she offered out to him. "Carrots..." He gently took it from her, not having expected anything. Sitting on the couch, he tore at the wrapping paper like a kit on Christmas morning as Judy took the seat beside him. Another black box greeted him and, curiosity piqued, the fox lifted the lid to find the gift inside.

If the letter and pocket watch had hit him like a truck, then the item inside the box he currently held hit him like a freight train. A familiar pair of cufflinks engraved with a compass greeted him,
ones that had long ago graced the sleeves of his father, and his grandfather before him. "Where did you find these?" The fox pushed out the words, swallowing back his emotions. He'd already cried enough for one day.

"When I went back to your family business. While gathering the photos, I came across them in your dad's desk drawer." Judy answered, violet eyes locked on her fox as she watched every emotion flit across his handsome face. Finnick had helped her have them restored to their former glory, and amongst the initials of previous Wilde gentle mammals engraved on the back, she'd had Nick's initials added too.

Deftly plucking them from the box, the doe attached them to the cuffs of Nick's shirt, grateful for the ZooTube video she'd watched showing how to go about it. Cufflinks had never been a staple in the Hopps household. The polished silver complimented her tod's black shirt perfectly. "There's one more thing, wait here." Judy rose from the couch, darting into their bedroom.

Judy returned a few moments later. In her paws she clutched his red Junior Ranger Scouts neckerchief, clean and pressed, folded into a square. Standing in the 'v' of Nick's legs, Judy slowly tucked it into the breast pocket of his shirt, making sure the red fabric peeked out over the top. Thankfully it matched his tie. "I think it's time this made a reappearance, especially now you're finally part of a pack."

Nick's heart pounded against his chest. His old neckerchief, the one he'd tied around Judy's injured leg nine months ago, had carried around with him every day since his mother had given it to him when he'd been a kit. Judy had held on to it.

Feeling her small paws on his chest, rearranging the red neckerchief, Nick was overwhelmed with love for his sweet bunny. She'd done so much for him and had never expected anything in return. The tod could hear his fathers words rattle around his head. "Don't waste a second. Make every moment count."

It was instinctive. Nick's arms encircled Judy, bringing her closer. Honeysuckle and violets and his own scent flooded his nostrils and his vision was filled solely with her. "Judy." He whispered. Lifting a paw he smoothed down her ears, watching as she tipped her head in curiosity, her small paws still resting on his chest, little nose twitching as she tried to work out what was going on. He thought he'd be scared, terrified even, but a certainty had settled over him, and the moment was too perfect. "Will you marry me?"

Time stopped. Judy's mind went blank. "What?"

'What' was the right question. Nick asked himself the exact same thing. What the hell was he doing blurting out such a question? He'd been planning a considerable proposal - a date to the art gallery, dinner in the rooftop garden, and dancing under the stars before he went down on one knee. He hadn't planned to blurt out his proposal in the middle of their living room, ring box in the bedroom, and no grand speech prepared.

Luckily, even though he hadn't hustled for nearly a year now and had left that life behind, he couldn't erase years of ingrained behavior. When the demand for a speech occurred, he was able to meet it. "You know my life story already Fluff, a poor fox who got into hustling because society is cruel and he had a debt to pay. It's a classic tearjerker. However, what you don't know is what I thought of it," he said before taking a breath.

"Most of the time I liked it. Sure it wasn't the best life, it certainly had its downsides, but it made me feel good about myself. Hustling all those mammals made me feel smarter than them, and all the money I was making made me feel even better. True that most of the cash ended up going to
Catstro, but I was so close to paying off the debt and then all that money would've been mine. I would've been rolling in it. I thought my life was perfect and had it all planned out." Nick shook his head, a small smile on his lips.

"But then a two-foot tall ball of fluff and optimism came crashing into my life, and she made me realize what a fool I was. She made me realize that my life wasn't perfect, that I could have more. That I could be more. And with her help, now my life truly is perfect. We have a home together; we've mated and bonded. I thought about waiting to ask, making some big grand gesture, but that's just not us." Once Nick started to speak he couldn't stop, and the words fled his lips before he dared silence them. 'You don't want to silence them, Wilde.'

Judy could hear Nick continuing to talk, but in her mind, his question played over and over in a continuous loop. Wide violet eyes stared at her fox's handsome face as he continued to talk, proclaiming his love. It was all too much. The sound of his voice, the thudding in her ears from the pounding of her heart. Her left paw shot out, grasping Nick's muzzle to clamp his jaw shut, silencing him. She needed a moment to get her thoughts straight.

Surprised at Judy silencing him, Nick blinked, but his shoulders soon slumped and his gaze fell to the floor. Blurting out the question had been foolish; he should've waited a little longer. Silently berating himself for his error, he missed the multitude of emotions crossing Judy's face as she worked through her shock.

It took a moment for the rabbit to compose herself, but when she was sure she wouldn't pass out from shock or squeal like a kit, she began to talk. "You know, when we first crossed paths all those months ago, I never would've guessed we'd end up here. In all honesty, I never thought I'd end up here. I always thought that work would be my only love, that I would be committed to the job and the job alone. But you just had to come along, with your awful shirts and your snarky comments, and shake all that up. We've had our ups and downs Slick, that's for sure, but I wouldn't change it for the world. The best thing about my life is getting to share it with you." The doe brought up her free paw to lightly scratch under Nick's chin, enjoying the way his eyes closed and the corners of his lips turned upwards.

"Remember on the back porch, when I told you everything that I love about you? I meant it then, and I still mean it now." Judy made sure to ever so slightly tighten her grip on Nick's muzzle, wanting to drive the point home. "I still love the way your ridiculously fluffy tail wags when you're happy. I still love the way you tip your head sideways when you're confused, or how your eyes widen when I surprise you. I love the way you hold me when we sleep, and how our scents are now combined. I still love your voice and your ridiculous shirts, and I love that we now carry one another's marks. You're it for me, Nick." Inhaling deeply, the doe finally loosened her grip on the tod's muzzle. She knew her answer, had known it since the moment they'd agreed to bond. "Yes."

With her final words, emerald eyes snapped open, locking onto violet ones. "Yes?" He double-checked, voice muffled by Judy's loose grip on his snout. The small bob of confirmation from his doe and the sweet smile that crossed her lips had the tod's heart racing. He couldn't believe it. "The ring!"

Making use of his academy training, Nick caught Judy off guard, scooping her up in his arms, dislodging her paw from his snout. Her squeal of surprise made him chuckle as he carried her to their bedroom, depositing her safely onto their bed. Moving to the nightstand on his side of the bed, the fox rummaged at the back of the bottom drawer, looking for the little black box. Finding it, he concealed it in his paw before he turned to see the quizzical expression on Judy's face. He closed the distance between them, before dropping to one knee, cracking open the black box. "Properly this time." A strange sense of nervousness swept over him. Judy had already said yes,
what was there to worry about? "Judith Laverne Hopps, will you marry me?"

Though the temptation was there to draw the moment out and to make her fox sweat a little, the doe was unable to stop the fierce nodding of her head and the broad grin that crossed her face. "Will I marry you? Why yes, yes I will."

Relief coursed through the tod's veins and, reaching for Judy's left paw, he slipped the silver band onto her finger. Mr. Jackson had followed his design to the letter. The ring was simple, a silver band with a beautiful solitary diamond, but he'd had the inside of it engraved with their pawprints, a private reminder of the journey they'd been on together so far. "I love you, Judy." Nick would happily tell her every day how much she meant to him. Ring firmly in place, the fox had expected his doe to spend more than a few seconds looking down at it, but instead, her attention was focused on him. Nick watched as Judy's whole face lit up at his words, her paws moving to grasp his muzzle once more, pulling him into a passionate kiss.

"I love you too, Nick." The doe whispered in return when she finally had to pull back for air. Her body was working on autopilot, brain unable to focus on anything other than her mate.

Tipping her head to look into the emerald eyes that were so familiar to her, Judy felt a wash of contentment roll over her. They were a team in every sense of the word; they'd kick tail and take names at work, make the world a better place, and come home to spend time in one another's arms.

They'd come a long way, from hustling one another to solving the ZPD's most high profile case, falling out and making up, to arresting Bellwether and Nick finally getting his badge. Somewhere along the way they'd fallen in love too, pulled together by fate or destiny, drawn to one another like a moth to a flame. The dumb fox and the sly bunny.

Chapter End Notes

And that's all folks! Oh my gosh this has been a rollercoaster of a journey, and it's been just over a year since I started this story and look at how it's grown. It's all down to you guys!! I couldn't be more touched by the amount of love and encouragement I've received from you all since the very beginning, and I don't think I can adequately put into words how I feel because I'm still in awe of it all, but from the bottom of my heart thank you so, so, so much!

This story has put me in contact with so many amazing and talented people in this fandom, I've met a few not so great ones too but we'll gloss over that, and it even led to me meeting my boyfriend. Crazy how much one little thing can change your life.

For those of you curious, I do have plans for a sequel in the future, but I'm not sure on when that'll be. We'll see what my muse decides!

Until next time.

With love,

~ Ophelia xx
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